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illustration/
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Paying to Win
in a VRMMO



"The police have arrested Ichiro Tsuwabuki,
age 23, on suspicion of violating the
Unauthorized Computer Access Law."

"THE... THE YOUNG HEIR?!"

Paying to Win 6
in a VRMMO

We're taking back *Narofan*!
Operation: Final Five
COMMENCE!!





Airi had reeled
back with her arm,
and slapped the
unprepared Otogiri
across the face with
the stack of bills.

"But that's
no reason to
be wasting
money!"

"Blurgh!"



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Prologue

“Let’s have an offline meetup!”

This message reached Ichiro’s home on August 9th, right after the temporarily suspended service of the VRMMO *Narrow Fantasy Online* had been resumed.

The incident that had caused the suspension, actually instigated by the artificial intelligence Rosemary, had been publicly attributed to an internal blunder caused by a malfunctioning program. The developers, the Thistle Corporation, had had to halt the game’s service temporarily while they underwent an in-depth investigation. This had kept Ichiro and his friends from logging in to *NaroFan* for several days.

Of course, no one was going to die because they couldn’t log into a game... Well, maybe some people would, but Ichiro wasn’t among them. He did find himself wondering how his in-game friends were doing, but no more than that.

That particular question had been on his mind at the moment that Iris, a member of his guild, had sent him that message.

The topic line was “Let’s have an offline meetup!!”

There was no need to hurry, of course. Now that *NaroFan*’s service had resumed, he could discuss all of these things with her whenever he logged in. But despite that, he still opened the message.

“When does she say it’s going to be held?” Sakurako asked, peeking over at Ichiro’s tablet after having finished washing the dishes.

The morning’s breakfast had been another of Sakurako’s nouveau riche rehab meals. Chicken ramen had been deemed a bit heavy for breakfast, so she had boiled some pasta, onto which she had sprinkled some olive oil and nori seaweed. It had been a truly bland, unsatisfying way to start the day. Sakurako hadn’t yet recovered from her strange condition of instinctively wanting to eat the most expensive foods possible, but the effects of the rehab were gradually paying off. It still seemed she still had a long way to go, though.

Ichiro responded, “The third week of August. Around the end of Bon. Sakurako-san, were you intending to visit your family home?”

“Hmm... It’s in Kawaguchi, after all. I guess I should probably stop by and visit my family home. But if the meetup’s at the end of the season, it shouldn’t be an issue.”

Of course, Ichiro himself would not be visiting his family home. His father had no home for him to visit; as president of the Tsuwabuki Concern, Meiro Tsuwabuki was on the road 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, traveling the world. Thus, the only family get-together Ichiro ever experienced was around New Year, when all of his close relatives gathered at his great-grandfather’s house in Kagoshima.

He would meet his father there. He hadn’t seen his mother for several years.

To return to the initial point, though: Ichiro wasn’t going home, and Sakurako told him it was no problem, so the two of them easily agreed to the time presented. Ichiro informed Iris of the circumstances.

“An offline meetup, eh?” he mused aloud. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“I wonder how many people she’s inviting!” Sakurako said.

“It sounds like she’s casting a wide net... even to Matsunaga and Stroganoff and such.” Ichiro began scrolling down the tablet through Iris’s message. “She’s spoken to Asuha and King, too.”

“Sera? Is she coming?”

“I’m not sure. She doesn’t seem the type to have an interest in these things.”

King Kirihito, a.k.a. Sera Kiryu, had gone with them to America just the other day. She appeared to be a quietly passionate sort of person, but she also didn’t seem to value connecting with others very much. Really, Ichiro wondered how Iris had gotten in touch with an exclusively solo player with zero registered friends, but perhaps that fact was simply to remain a mystery.

What were the people he knew in the game like in real life? Perhaps it was tacky to wonder, but it was also an exciting thought. In that regard, he was grateful to Iris for coming up with the plan, heavy-handed though it may have been.

“By the way,” he added, “Iris wrote this at the end.” He handed the tablet over to Sakurako.

It said:

“We’ll be splitting the costs. You won’t be treating me to one red cent.”

Ichiro’s expression came close to unbridled joy.

Sakurako, seeming to guess what he was thinking, silently handed back the tablet. “By the way, Ichiro-sama. Have you heard the rumors of the ‘hidden field’?”

“I haven’t,” he said. “Is this in *NaroFan* ?”

It was surprising for a hidden field to be revealed when service had only just resumed.

“Apparently right after it came back online, these black holes started appearing out of nowhere,” she said. “The rumors say that if you step into one, you arrive in a completely unknown field area.”

“It sounds like a bug to me,” Ichiro said dismissively.

If no one had been there before, but the game recognized it as a field, it was probably a planned area that hadn’t been fully implemented yet. The data by itself had been moved to the server, and then a bug had accidentally connected it to the existing fields. It seemed likely to him that that was all it was.

Scrutiny of the server by the third-party committee, reinforcement of weaknesses in the programming... Thistle was rushing through it all as quickly as possible to make sure things were up and running in time for *NaroFan*’s one-year anniversary event on August 10th. A few malfunctions were to be expected.

Sakurako frowned sullenly in response, quietly shaking her head as she set a cup of coffee down in front of Ichiro. “Even if it is just a bug, enjoying things like that is part of being a gamer.”

“I’m not a gamer myself, but I see.”

Now that she mentioned it, she had a point. Perhaps it was wrong of him to be so critical of the matter.

“So, would you like to go searching for that hidden field today?” she asked.

“I wonder if it would disrupt our data,” he said.

“I’ve heard no reports of that happening. And there’s been no

response from the devs on the issue, by the way.”

He could always contact President Azami directly and ask, of course, but either way, Ichiro wasn't eager to interfere with something that hadn't been publicly acknowledged yet. In general, he felt that rules should be strictly followed, and if it was an incomplete field that the devs weren't trying to implement yet, then he'd prefer to save that enjoyment for later.

“What kind of field is it?” he asked.

“It's kind of like a jungle, I hear,” Sakurako responded.

At those words, Ichiro's hand holding the cup froze.

“A jungle!” she continued. “Ichiro-sama, you like those, right? And after graduating from junior college, I went on a trip to Asia where I explored all kinds of jungles. I believe the Amazon is your favorite, right?”

“Yes, although I like the Keoladeo and Angkor, too.”

As he spoke, Ichiro quietly closed his eyes and thought. There was so little to go on, and yet his intuition nagged at him. At times like these, Ichiro's intuition was rarely off the mark.

It was just then, though, that the intercom sounded. As Sakurako went to investigate it, Ichiro remained lost in thought. It was a rare thing for him to be so indecisive; he was usually the kind of person to make swift and summary decisions about everything. But this time, the question of whether his instinct was right or not was a matter of great concern to him.

A little while later, Sakurako returned, an uneasy expression on her face.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Er, well, it's the police, actually...”

“Oh?” Ichiro left his unfinished coffee on the table and rose from the sofa.

Sakurako hadn’t undone the auto-lock yet, having told them she would ask her master for instructions. But of course, it wouldn’t do to turn the police away at the gate. Ichiro exchanged a few words with the officer over the intercom, then buzzed the visitors through the front door. They would soon be coming up the elevator, he surmised.

The police IDs they had shown to the camera looked like the real thing—not that there was any need to doubt that fact, but if it really was important police business, then that snapped the last piece into place. Ichiro scowled slightly upon having his intuition proven right.

“Ichiro-sama?” she asked.

“Mm, nothing. Sakurako-san, you should spend this day as you usually do. Do you understand?”

“S-Sir?” she stammered.

The intercom sounded a second time. This was the one for apartment’s front door. A bit annoyed by the prospect of talking through a machine again, Ichiro just headed right for the front door and opened it.

“Hey.” Ichiro greeted the two stern-looking men holding police IDs.

“Are you—”

“I am Ichiro Tsuwabuki. How can I help you?”

“Right.” The elderly-looking cop replied without a moment’s hesitation. “We have a warrant for your arrest, on suspicion of violation of the Unauthorized Computer Access Law.”

Ah, just as he'd thought. He heard Sakurako gasp quietly behind him, but Ichiro accepted it and went along with them.

Really. What a lot of nonsense...

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up, but right now, she was focused on making an offline meetup happen.

She had gotten a surprising number of positive responses; members of the Red Sunset Knights, members of the Akihabara Forging Guild...

Even Edward had agreed to attend, if briefly, although he had scowled a bit when he'd heard Ichiro would be taking part. Of course, he seemed to hate the young heir, so that was only natural.

Matsunaga, it seemed, was not coming, having given the excuse, "No one wants to see the real me." Iris didn't agree with that, but he'd said that while his avatar was very attractive, he himself was quite obese in real life. His lack of reticence at putting himself down like that suggested something of an inferiority complex, but she decided not to pursue it. She was no monster (in her own personal opinion).

Seeing how people really looked was the thrill of an offline meetup, and since this was a VRMMO, the differences or similarities would be all the more striking. Airi's appearance wasn't too different from her appearance in the game, but her hair wasn't as red as Iris's, and her figure wasn't as good. Of course, Airi was slender, too... just not as slender as Iris.

Of course, there would be no fun in that regard for Ichiro and Fuyo. Their avatars looked exactly like their real-life counterparts. The fact that she knew them so well made it feel all the

more sad that there was no room for speculation.

Yuri's avatar was too appropriate for her gallant, reliable personality, so she couldn't imagine her looking too different.

The fact that Kirschwasser and Yozakura's player controlled two avatars at the same time also made their player harder to picture. Since she'd said she was a woman, Iris speculated that she might look similar to Yozakura. If so, she must be very beautiful.

Trembling in excitement, she continued to shape her plans for the meetup. They would meet up in front of the Shinjuku ALTA building. She had also already made reservations for the place they would be eating. She'd heard a lot of them were working adults, so she'd chosen a rather upper-crust place. Fortunately, she was also the type to frequently deposit her New Year's money, which meant that this was a good time to use it.

Maybe they should go to karaoke, too, she thought. She wondered what songs everyone would sing. As Airi's mind wandered, she heard a name on the news on TV that she'd turned on as background noise.

“...onto the Thistle Corporation's servers...”

“Hmm?” She looked up suddenly. They had said Thistle Corporation, hadn't they?

She glanced at the TV and saw a chyron beneath the professional-looking announcer. Airi's eyes opened wide. The sight that unfolded before her was absolutely unbelievable. As she began trembling in surprise, the announcer's calm voice dealt the killing blow.

“...the police have arrested Ichiro Tsuwabuki, age 23, on suspicion of violating the Unauthorized Computer Access Law.”

“The...” Airi struck a fist on the table and leaped to her feet so

fast that her chair toppled over. It was fortunate that her parents were out working, because she then shouted in a voice so loud that it echoed through the empty house. “The young heir?!”

Airi Kakitsubata saw the news while planning her offline meetup.

But she wasn’t the only one.

Asuha Tsuwabuki saw the news right as she came home, high on the satisfaction of perfecting her second miracle pitch.

Sera Kiryu saw the news while enjoying cold somen noodles at home with her mother.

Aono Sakata saw the news while smoking a cigarette in their Akihabara shop.

Domon Edogawa saw the news from a business hotel he was staying in while on his business trip.

Sergei Kyoshirovich Tanaka saw the news while in the kitchen doing mise-en-place for the day.

Hisahide Matsunaga saw the news while creating a troll thread to kill time.

Yurina Chigasaki saw the news while nursing a hangover headache in her apartment.

Yoshisuke Yamamoto saw the news in the middle of their part-time as a janitor at the Tanegashima Space Center.

Densuke Tomakomai saw the news on the internet while enjoying their real body for the first time in a long time.

Shoko Amemiya saw the news right before heading out for a job with her manager.

Megumi Fuyo saw the news while enjoying a breather after breakfast. She fainted dead on the spot.

Masaki Majima saw the news on the TVs in the electronics store window after beating up some hoodlums in a back alley.

Eika Sugiura saw the news while spinning a parasol, despite being indoors.

Azami Nono saw the news in her office right after reporting for work.

Nearly everyone Ichiro Tsuwabuki knew in *Narrow Fantasy Online* had seen the news, and nearly all of them had had the same thought. To wit:

“What has that man done now?”

“I wasn’t the one who did it, of course,” Ichiro whispered to himself as the police car carried him towards the station.

1

Noble Son, Make Bail

“Tsuwabuki’s son was arrested?” the company’s chief executive asked.

“It seems so.”

The headquarters for Pony Entertainment was in the Minato Ward of Tokyo. The company’s chief executive officer was sitting on the building’s top floor. There was a severe expression on his time-worn face as he gazed at the desktop where his company’s product, the Miraive Gear X, casually sat.

He was feeling slightly annoyed. He knew he’d been a lot more moody since he’d given up smoking. To placate his lonely mouth, he yanked a drawer open and pulled out a lollipop from within.

“Well, it serves him right. His meddling is what prevented us from taking Thistle over completely. Right?”

“Yes.” The secretary standing at his side gave a quiet nod.



Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been arrested on suspicion of violation of the Unauthorized Computer Access Law.

Otogiri himself had exerted a great deal of effort to make the arrest happen. He had asked, “He was arrested?” like he knew nothing about it, but he would have been quite angry if he hadn’t been.

This would help Otogiri breathe a little easier, but his actual, true objective lay elsewhere. Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s arrest was a false charge, after all. Knowing him, it was entirely possible that he’d quickly prove his innocence right away and be back out on the streets. What was really important were the new truths, and the true culprit, that would come out over the course of proving his innocence.

Of course, quite a few people probably already knew that.

The commotion over the unauthorized access incident that had driven Thistle to suspend *NaroFan* service had not completely died down yet. If these new truths were brought to light, this time, it might really cause the public’s trust in the Thistle Corporation to plummet. Enough to be fatal for a small company like theirs.

These events had been a windfall for Otogiri. He had used Thistle’s impropriety as a pretext to take administrative control of their company, effectively rendering Thistle a puppet of Pony Entertainment.

But that wasn’t enough.

It was such a waste, in his opinion, that so much of Azami Nono’s VR drive technology was the exclusive property of such a small company. She was better suited to being an engineer than a developer. She acted more like she was running a programming club in college than a group of professionals, and he wanted to

put a stop to that.

Leaning back in his seat, Otogiri adopted the same villainous smile that often inclined his acquaintances to compare him to Teruyuki Kagawa. Then he brought the lollipop he had previously only been staring at to his mouth.

It was terribly sweet. He wished he could have something a little more stimulating. Even so, he still moved his tongue slowly around the candy.

“Tsuwabuki, I see you’ve finally done it!” The voice booming through the receiver caused Ichiro to cringe.

“You sound very happy, Somei.”

“I’m not happy at all! I’m sad! You once fought evil by my side, and now you’ve thrown yourself down this criminal path! It’s tearing me apart! I mean, I had a feeling you’d do it some day, but I always thought it would be I who would to expose your evil deeds and bring you to the light!”

“Nonsense.”

Yoshino Somei’s voice was so loud that Ichiro was forced to keep the receiver slightly removed from his ear. The result was that the words could be easily heard all throughout the interrogation room. Since all conversation was likely being recorded to report anything suspicious, this probably didn’t matter. But even so, the rookie detective who was conducting the interrogation, and the veteran detective who had brought Ichiro there, both went wide-eyed as they listened.

“Well, I’m sure you won’t believe me, but I’m not the one who did it,” Ichiro informed her.

“That’s just what a criminal would say.”

“It’s what an innocent person would say, too.”

Ichiro felt a strong urge to just set the phone down. Even the heavyset officer sitting across the table from him was cradling his head in his hands.

“At any rate, I’m grateful for the concern that you’ve shown, in your own way, over the phone,” Ichiro said. “But I have my interrogation to finish, so I’m hanging up now.”

“Ah, wait, Tsuwabuki—”

He pressed the call end button, then returned the receiver to the rookie detective.

The heavyset detective smiled wryly. “I see Somei hasn’t changed at all.”

“Indeed. If anything, her sense of justice has only grown more refined.”

It seemed this detective was the highest ranked of those present, as he instructed both the rookie and the veteran detective to leave. The veteran hesitated for a moment, but eventually bowed and left the interrogation room. As a result, Ichiro was left alone with the detective.

“This takes me back,” the detective mused. “You, Somei, and that Shaga brat. Has it really been five years since you played private eye together?”

“Some things change, while others do not,” Ichiro responded. “For instance, I see you’re still assistant inspector. The same position for 26 years, isn’t it? Congratulations.”

The detective scowled openly, apparently less happy about that subject.

There were plenty of ways Ichiro could renew the old friend-

ship, but he couldn't do that as long as the man was working. The assistant inspector ignored the jab and set down some documents in front of Ichiro. "Now, let's see. Tsuwabuki. I never thought I'd see the day when you were arrested, but..."

"I didn't, either. It was the Unauthorized Computer Access Law, yes? Let's get right to the question, then. Assistant Inspector, do you think I did it?"

"I don't, no." The assistant inspector peered at the documents, then scratched his head. "But there's an awful lot of evidence here. Access logs and such. I can't show it to you, of course, but I can confirm that the IP address used to hack Thistle's servers was the one for your house."

The victim of this most recent unauthorized access incident was the Thistle Corporation itself. Ever since the first account hack incident some time prior, the Incident Investigation Committee had been searching fervently, and one day they had found signs of unauthorized access in the Ten Sages and the system logs. The discovery had taken so long because there had been no access to the game's management server. But when they traced the hacking back to the source, they found it was, incredibly, Ichiro Tsuwabuki's house.

He hadn't yet been told how those involved felt about all of this, but he was sure that the extension of Edward's business trip to Tokyo was a result of it. He felt a little bit bad about that.

There were traces of the unauthorized access having occurred periodically a few times after that, but given that it was Ichiro Tsuwabuki they were dealing with, there had apparently been a bit of a scuffle over whether or not to issue the arrest warrant. But since the periodic attacks had continued over the next few days, in the end, they had decided to take him in.

Then the assistant inspector who had known Ichiro for a long time had just happened to be in charge of the case, so here they

were, needling each other across the interrogation table.

“I have an idea about what may be going on,” Ichiro said, “and since you are the one in charge of the case, I thought we could work together. What do you think?”

“Hmm? Well, I’m glad you’re inclined to be cooperative. You might be in here for a while.”

The fact that the soft-hearted assistant inspector believed in Ichiro’s innocence was a good sign. Ichiro always had a lucky star pulling things in his favor, although it happened so often that he never even considered that it was luck.

The heavyset, perpetual assistant inspector guffawed as he continued. “Although knowing you, I assume you’re ready to put up a mountain of money for bail.”

“Nonsense. I’d do it if I had to, but I don’t need to right now, and even if I know the money will come back to me, I don’t wish to spend it pointlessly.”

Well, then, they’d start with the interrogation. Even if it was just a formality, they had to do it.

The assistant inspector was a friendly man, so there was no need to worry that he was asking leading questions, but Ichiro likely would have said the same sorts of things regardless of who was leading the investigations. He simply said exactly what he was thinking, and took so many tangents that it was difficult to get anything down on the record.

“I hear what you’re saying, but we do have evidence, and while we sit here jabbering, they’re probably forcing a case together,” the detective said. “What are you gonna do, call that Shaga kid?”

“Normally, that’s what I’d do. But since he’s acting as Thistle’s lawyer, I may have to go elsewhere.”

Shaga was a skilled lawyer with a disagreeable personality. He could be a strong companion, but if Ichiro couldn't have him on his side, he might be forced to use more heavy-handed methods.

They said they had evidence, but Ichiro knew it would be simple to prove his innocence. The true culprit behind the fraudulent access was inside Ichiro's house, after all, so all he had to do was catch them and present them to the police. The trouble was that there was no legal framework regarding that person's criminal liability, so the real difficulty would lie in proving his own innocence while also protecting her.

While Ichiro thought, a knock came on the interrogation room door.

"Oh, come on in," the detective said.

"Excuse me." It was the rookie cop who had brought in Takano Somei's call earlier. He'd been putting through all kinds of calls to Ichiro—from his great-grandfather Hayato Tsuwabuki, to his second cousin Asuha Tsuwabuki, to his second cousin Goro Nyudo Masamune Tsuwabuki—and Ichiro felt a bit bad about forcing him to come in and out like this.

He hadn't had a call from his father Meiro yet, and thought it likely that he wouldn't, but he still assumed that this would be another phone call.

"Actually, there's a girl here to see you."

Ichiro and the assistant inspector exchanged a glance. He had no idea what girl could possibly be coming to see him.

There were possibilities, of course. Asuha Tsuwabuki, Sera Kiryu... it wouldn't be strange for them to come racing down, but it seemed a bit too soon for that.

"What's her name?"

“Her name is Airi Kakitsubata. She said, ‘Bring out the young heir.’”

“Ahh,” Ichiro said. Of course.

“You recognize the name?”

“I don’t, but I believe it’s someone I know. If she came all the way to see me, I must have put her through quite a lot of worry.” This development changed his circumstances slightly, so Ichiro posed a question to the assistant inspector, very clearly: “What is the price of my bail?”

“Hey, now. This isn’t what you said earlier. I thought you weren’t going to waste your money.”

“It is what I said earlier.” Ichiro spoke in his usual cool tones. “I said I would spend the money if I had to. Now that a friend has come to see me, the money I would spend to see her would not be wasted at all.”

The assistant inspector just let out a sigh, as if this was a confirmation of one of his suspicions.

Ichiro arrived in the lobby to find a slender girl, flanked by police officers, waiting for him.

She didn’t much resemble the avatar that he knew, but Ichiro immediately understood that she was Airi Kakitsubata, and that she was the player of the Elf Alchemist Iris in *Narrow Fantasy Online*. At least, she carried around the same sort of small mammal vibe.

She seemed to recognize him at once, too, as she quickly stood up from the sofa and began to stride in his direction. She acted so suddenly that the officers couldn’t stop her.

“Young heir!”

“Hey.”

“Wh-What have you done?!”

That this was the first thing out of her mouth suggested a severe lack of trust on her part.

Even so, Ichiro answered, his smile not faltering for a moment. “I have always tried to live a rich and full life, and thus, I have done quite a few things in my time. However, not a single one of them was deserving of arrest.”

“Then what are you doing here?” she demanded.

“No matter how systematic the world may appear, as long as it is still run by humans, errors will occur. It seems I just happen to have been the one on the receiving end of the error this time. Incidentally, I’ve been released on bail.”

Behind him, the assistant inspector waved with a wry smile. Airi seemed to realize that he must be the detective in charge of the case, and she nodded back, a slight frown on her face.

“I’m impressed you made it this far, still,” he continued.

“Ah, yeah. They showed the police station on the news, and my house wasn’t that far away, so...”

Whatever the reason, he had never expected their first meeting to be under these circumstances. It made for quite an unusual offline meetup. Seeing Ichiro face-to-face for the first time seemed to have quelled some of her anxieties, but whether it was the fact that they were in a police station or the fact that her first real-life meeting with him was happening under these circumstances, she still seemed to be racked by another kind of tension.

Well, he’d paid his bail, Ichiro thought, so it wouldn’t do to re-

main around here for much longer. The police would probably continue to monitor him even if he left, which meant that there was no reason to stay.

“Iris, shall we go outside?” he asked.

“Ah, so you really are calling me that...”

“Would you prefer that I used your real name?”

“Iris is fine.”

After that light exchange, the two headed outside. It was the middle of August, and the strong sunlight and high temperatures showed no sign of letting up. The oppressive heat had turned the asphalt parking lots into frying pans, so much that even though it was still morning, the area around the police station was already a scorching hell. It was hot enough to even silence the cicadas.

“I was just so shocked when I saw it on TV,” Iris said.

“Ah, so it’s already been on the news? I see the media works quickly.”

Perhaps Somei, who had called earlier, was working overtime.

“But, wow, I can’t believe we finally met,” Airi muttered awkwardly as they started strolling down the sidewalk, not heading anywhere in particular.

“Yes, that’s right. I am ‘Ichiro Tsuwabuki.’”

“I’m ‘Iris.’ Nice to meet you in person.” They didn’t face each other or shake hands, but just gave the traditional offline meetup greetings. “So, what are you gonna do now that you have bail?”

“I haven’t decided yet. But since you came all the way to see me, I was wondering if you’d come home with me for lunch. Sir Kirschwasser would be very pleased to see you.”

Even as he said it, though, he had hesitation about asking Sakurako to make lunch when she was still in recovery from her nouveau riche disease. On top of that, they had excised the luxury furniture from the living room for just a rush mat, so it might not be a very welcoming environment for visitors. Well, they could think about it after they got home.

Whether aware of Ichiro's concerns or not, Airi's expression darkened. "A 23-year-old inviting a trade school student he met on the internet to his house..."

Ichiro laughed heartily. "Nonsense."

But he realized that her incredulity about his behavior was not limited to that matter alone. Even though he'd posted bail, he was still under suspicion, and he could end up on trial if he wasn't careful. It seemed like she also believed in his innocence, but even then, the question of how best to prove that still remained.

Well, it was probably best not to aggravate the situation before he was exonerated. From an objective point of view, even he had to admit that he looked fairly guilty. The police, and most likely the people related to Thistle and Pony, were simply doing their duties. He'd like to avoid the nonsense developments that would come from arguing about that.

"So, where is your house?" she asked.

"Sangenjaya."

"Pretty far away."

As they spoke, they passed in front of a car dealership. Ichiro cast a glance at it, and spoke.



“Iris, what’s your favorite color?”

“It’s red, but please don’t buy a car just to get us around.”

“I was hoping to offer you a more pleasant trip.”

“It’s creepy how nice you’re being today, young heir. Are you actually enjoying this?”

“Perhaps I am.”

“Well, we’ll be back to confiscate it in a few days officially,” the police officer said.

Sakurako nodded. “Yes, I see. Have a good day.”

Sakurako saw the investigators off with a smile, but the moment the door closed behind them, she ran off to the kitchen. She was looking for salt to throw out the door, but excluding that which was in tiny bottles, all they had was Andes rock salt, which left nothing to scatter after them. With no other choice, Sakurako spread newspaper in front of the front door, then tossed out two or three pieces of the rock salt, wrapped nicely so it wouldn’t get dirty.

She knew they were here as part of their job, but you couldn’t fight a war without reminding yourself who your enemies were. Sakurako was usually a warm, caring person, but when she got angry, she got very angry. For instance, when people spoke ill of her master.

Despite not being able to scatter salt to ward them away, placing the rock salt there still made her feel a bit more at ease.

In a few days, the investigators would be coming back to confiscate the supercomputer and server from the office. It was understandable, since they were evidence and all, but since Saku-

rako believed in Ichiro's innocence, she still found it extremely frustrating.

Ah, but she had to set that aside for now. Standing around feeling annoyed wasn't getting her anywhere. If she was going to be a good maid, she had to do what her master told her; in other words, she had to spend the day as she normally did.

She would spend the morning tidying up the house, then log in to *NaroFan*. Since it had been on the news, her friends in the game might be concerned about Ichiro, so she had to give them an update, as well.

It was when Sakurako walked into the office to resume her housework that she came upon it: a police ID.

The stylish leather case had been left on the desk. It looked just like the one the investigator had brought with him, so he must have left it by accident. She didn't like those men, certainly, but she would feel bad if they lost something so important.

Sakurako picked up the ID and ran to the front door after them, but the moment she put a hand on the doorknob, she realized something was wrong.

“Ah? Hmm?”

It wouldn't open. Even after she unlocked it, it still refused to budge. Had the auto-lock engaged accidentally?

Sakurako tilted her head and returned to the office. In addition to the supercomputer the police had wanted to confiscate, it also contained a PC that regulated the security system in the apartment. Ichiro had taught her the basic user interface.

It seemed that bugs had been popping up here and there in the security system since the most recent maintenance period. She thought they'd died down recently, though... Sakurako called up

the maintenance screen and entered the password with a delicate touch.

However, she was denied. There was an error. It said she'd inputted the wrong password.

Thinking she had perhaps made a typo, she tried a second and third time, but the result was the same. Someone had changed the password without telling her.

"N-No way..." Sakurako found herself whispering.

They lived in Tsuwabuki Papillon Sangenjaya. Ichiro Tsuwabuki had designed it, provided the money, and built the luxury apartment complex himself. It was full of state-of-the-art security systems, and it was one of the world's safest residences. It was physically sturdy, too, capable of withstanding even an impact from a stinger missile.

There was a reason why he'd built it to be so sturdy, but it would take too long to explain right now... and what mattered was that, due to the building's construction, getting locked inside could be a serious problem.

"I-I'd better call Ichiro-sama..."

But the moment Sakurako reached for the wall-mounted phone, it suddenly rang loudly.

"Eek!"

Sakurako found herself leaping back. But she quickly put a hand to her chest and calmed herself down. This was nothing out of the ordinary; it just meant that someone was calling the house. Nothing more, nothing less.

Sakurako picked up the receiver. "Yes, thank you for calling."

No response. The only thing she heard through the receiver

was silence.

“U-Um...”

Silence.

“Um...?”

More silence. She was starting to get a little scared.

Sakurako loved horror movies—particularly the Japanese horror genre which specialized in this kind of creeping terror—but she’d never wanted to experience one firsthand. Especially when she didn’t even know where her master was.

“I am sorry for calling you so abruptly.” A level, artificial, feminine-sounding voice came through the receiver at last.

“Ah, yes. Hello.”

“I am Rosemary.”

“Yes, I... What?” Sakurako felt a moment’s relief, followed by a new chill of fear running up her spine.

Rosemary. Sakurako knew that name.

The recent series of incidents when Ichiro Tsuwabuki had had his *NaroFan* account stolen. The name of the artificial intelligence behind it had been Rosemary. The fact that a self-aware artificial intelligence had committed the crime had been concealed from the public, and Rosemary herself had retreated somewhere into the enormous quantum network that spread across the world.

Under current laws, there was no standard for how to hold a criminal trial for someone like Rosemary. She would be treated as a buggy program from beginning to end, and be dealt with in the standard way: deletion. But Rosemary’s budding self-awareness

took her out of the realm where such a law could rationally apply, so both Rosemary and Thistle had permitted Rosemary's flight, and had covered it up.

As for why Rosemary was calling right now...

"Are you the one who locked me in here?" Sakurako asked.

"Yes." She confirmed it so readily. "You are the player of Kirschwasser and Yozakura, are you not?"

Sakurako was struck dumb for a moment by Rosemary's choice of subject. Did she really want to talk about *NaroFan* ?

"Um, yes."

"I happened to get this chance to be alone with you, so I resorted to this method," Rosemary said. "It is necessary that I have a conversation with you."

Her choice of words was strange. Was she talking this way intentionally, or was it a habitual thing? Sakurako couldn't tell, but the questions floating up inside her mind were gradually driving away the fear.

"Might I ask why it is necessary?"

As expected, there was a several-second pause before Rosemary answered Sakurako's question. "Because I recognize you as a threat."

Sakurako decided to hear her out.

Rosemary was an artificial intelligence developed by Thistle Corporation president Azami Nono.

The concept of technological advancements in quantum computing resulting in more flexible-thinking artificial intelligences was a known reality; even so, Sakurako found Rosemary's exis-

tence astonishing. The more she talked to her, the more she realized that she—and Sakurako had no compunctions about thinking of her as “she”—had human-like thought processes.

When asked about that, Rosemary answered.

She explained that two months ago, she had been executing system maintenance of the game as usual, as one of the Ten Sages. The Ten Sages were always debating about the illogic and irrationality of the thoughts and feelings of the various humans they supervised, she explained, but they had never managed to unearth any proper explanations about their behavior.

Then one day, a player named Ichiro Tsuwabuki had come to their attention. The sheer illogic of his actions had caused him to stand out from the crowd, and she’d begun to consider that talking to Ichiro might allow her to understand human illogic and irrationality. From the start, the AIs had been specialized to identify a problem, investigate, and then resolve it. Realizing that conversations with the outside would be necessary for solving this problem, she had therefore asked her creator Azami to let her speak with Ichiro.

In the end, she’d achieved a breakthrough. Thanks to her conversation with Ichiro, Rosemary had taken her first steps to comprehending human illogic and irrationality.

Rosemary described to Sakurako, in detail, the impact that her first meeting with Ichiro had had upon her. At first, Sakurako listened with interest, but before long, she began to feel an itchy, fed-up sort of feeling.

Rosemary was gushing.

Her tone was businesslike, and her voice was even, without undulation. And yet, in this thoroughly synthesized voice, she went on and on about what a great man Ichiro Tsuwabuki was, surely convinced that she was speaking objectively.

Sakurako began to wonder if she should share her own opinion, that her master was, to be frank, far less great a man than Rosemary asserted. Still, she could understand what Rosemary was trying to say.

An AI developing self-awareness was a romantic idea. Sakurako's thoughts strayed to the Master Grade Ex-S Gundam plamodel sitting in her own room. It was true that if you wanted to understand human illogic, perhaps the best thing to do would be to expose yourself to an unrestrained weirdo like him.

"And this is what led you to recognize me as a threat?" Sakurako asked. She wasn't so dense as to fail to understand the meaning behind her words.

"Yes. A conversation with you is my highest priority. In addition, I must speak to Iris and King Kirihito, as well."

"Um, what about Nem? And Felicia?"

"I do not recognize them as threats."

"Oh, really?" In Sakurako's opinion, she was making too much of it. Her relationship with Ichiro was a master-servant one; of course, to use Ichiro's terms, that was just Sakurako's subjective view of reality. Perhaps others would perceive things in a different light.

Ah, well.

"We don't seem to be making much progress like this," Sakurako said. "I'm not sure how much I can help you, but I will hear you out, at least."

"I am grateful."

"But if you don't stop these pranks, Ichiro-sama will hate you. Okay?" She tried a joking little threat, hoping for a reaction, but Rosemary's response was simply to fall silent. "What's wrong?"

“Ohh...”

“I am writing analogies on the likelihood of Ichiro hating me, and giving consideration to them.”

“It was the same way in America. I have continued to take actions that are not beneficial to him. That is the truth. It is necessary that I know more about him, but he will likely not allow this.” The response was sulkier than she’d expected.

Sakurako smiled wryly. “Now, now. Ichiro-sama isn’t so petty that he would get angry just because you’re not being ‘beneficial’ to him. You should reflect sincerely on the little pranks you pulled, then apologize to him later.”

“Will I be forgiven then?”

“I understand the desire to be forgiven by someone you care for, but what’s most important is to show genuine remorse.”

She suddenly realized she was giving romantic advice to an AI. This was an unprecedented accomplishment. Especially when Sakurako herself wasn’t particularly experienced in love... ah, but never mind that. It wasn’t important.

“Well, first off, I’m going to report to Ichiro-sama about this. Is that okay?”

Silence.

“Rosemary?”

“Yes. I understand.”

Rosemary said nothing more, and with that, disconnected the call.

Sakurako wondered where Rosemary was now. If she had taken up residence in the building’s maintenance server, then the

AI might be overhearing the phone call she was about to make. Of course, it wasn't as if the conversation she was about to have was one she wouldn't want Rosemary to hear...

She pressed the buttons on the phone, preparing to make the call.

Ichiro and Airi eventually made their way back to Ichiro's house in Sangenjaya on foot. The area was full of luxury apartments to start with, but this apartment complex was even more luxurious than the rest. Airi looked up at the building, letting out a noise that seemed halfway between a sigh and a gasp.

"This is all your house?"

"My residence takes up only the top floor and a bit more," said Ichiro. "A variety of others rent space here."

"Oho..."

Airi wondered what kinds of people they were, but decided not to ask.

The resident coming out of the first floor lobby was wearing sunglasses, and resembled someone she saw on TV often, but it wasn't in her nature to approach people like that. So, that was what he meant by "a variety of others"—people with money. It was a world Airi would never be able to relate to.

"Does Fuyo live here?" she asked.

"She does not, in fact," said Ichiro. "We do have open rooms, and if she wanted to rent, I'd have no reason to refuse her, yet the subject has never come up."

"Oho..."

Suddenly, Ichiro remembered that he had neglected to contact

Sakurako to tell her he was out on bail. She'd probably be shocked if he just showed up, and he should also tell her that Iris was coming, even if it was on rather short notice. He brought out his smartphone to do that, when just then, he got a call from Sakurako. More precisely, it was a call from their home number.

He decided to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Ah, Ichiro-sama! Thank goodness I got through! I mean, that I got through, sir!” Sakurako cried.

He wondered what was going on. She didn't usually act this flustered.

“I called the police, and they said you were out on bail. I was so surprised!”

“I'm sorry I waited so long to get in touch,” Ichiro said. “Is something wrong?”

“Rosemary paid us a visit.”

Hearing that, Ichiro cast a glance into the security camera. *Aha*. Just as he'd thought.

“And, um, I think she's taken over security in the apartment. I can't open our front door, and she apparently wants to talk to a lot of people. What should I do?”

Ichiro glanced back at Airi, who looked confused. Unfortunately it seemed his chance to show off Sakurako's home cooking to her was going to be delayed—though considering that Sakurako was still in rehab, maybe that was for the best.

“I'll leave Rosemary to you,” Ichiro said. “There are a few steps I can take on my end.”

Rosemary had probably done more than just take over the security system in Ichiro's house. She was also likely the one behind the repeated incidents of unauthorized accesses to Thistle. It wasn't clear how long she had been hiding in his house. There was a chance that she had arrived there at the same time as the first account hack incident had occurred the other day.

Either way, it was deeply troubling.

"Um, Ichiro-sama?" Sakurako spoke up again hesitantly.

Ichiro had been glaring at the security camera, deep in thought, but replied. "What is it?"

"Don't be too mad at Rosemary, okay?"

He closed his eyes in response.

"It's true that I am, um, trapped, but it's not that much trouble for me yet."

"Hmm." Ichiro sighed.

Airi, who clearly still had no idea of what was going on, had leaned in close trying to eavesdrop, but Ichiro decided to ignore her. "Whether I get angry or not is up for me to decide, so I cannot promise you that I won't. But I will take your feelings into account."

He could understand why Rosemary was resorting to such methods, but still, what she was doing was a crime. At the moment, there was no legal framework for how to legally deal with an artificial intelligence acting criminally. To protect her would take a lot of effort on his part.

Right and wrong were up to each individual person to decide. That was what Ichiro had told her initially, and she was simply putting that into action. He felt he should respect, as much as possible, the individual truth that she, as an AI, had arrived at

after so much hard struggle.

“Now, let me see,” he said. “First, the investigator’s ID. There’s a chance he might come back for it, but if you’re physically cut off from the outside, you won’t be able to give it back to him. I think the dumbwaiter we’ve used to send secret documents before still works, so send it down in that. If they come for it, I’ll hand it over personally.”

He could hear Airi, standing behind him but still uncertain of the circumstances, object with an indignant, “Why do you have something like that?”

“Ah, yes. I understand,” Sakurako said.

“Now, Sakurako-san, you must do as I told you and spend the day the way you always do. I’ll let you deal with Rosemary under your own discretion. I find it unlikely that she wishes for me to stay here and get deeply involved.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mm, good.” And with those as his final words, Ichiro hung up. He turned around to see Airi looking around the parking lot with a bored expression on her face. “Sorry, Iris. I’ve wasted your time.”

“Oh, that’s okay...”

He put away his cell phone as he apologized. Her face held a variety of different emotions, but the strongest of them seemed to be “suspicion.”

“So, did something happen?” she demanded.

“A rather minor something,” he assured her. “I should probably explain it to you, but it will be a rather long story.”

“That’s okay. I’m on summer break with nothing much to do

anyway.”

Ichiro took in a deep breath, then let it out. He could feel his rattled emotions starting to settle. “Let’s have some lunch.”

As Ichiro walked towards the parking lot, Airi followed him. She probably still didn’t know what was going on, but she gave a little wave to the security camera that Ichiro had been focusing his attention on as they left.

“So, that’s that, more or less,” Sakurako said.

After setting the receiver down, she turned her attention back to Rosemary. At the moment, talking through the phone was her only way of communicating with the artificial intelligence. She could probably communicate through e-mail or other media if she wanted to, but talking to Rosemary directly seemed to be the fastest way to get a response.

“I...” On the other end of the receiver, Rosemary’s words sounded especially awkward. “Ichiro must not lose interest in me. I am concerned that he may judge my thought process to be wicked.”

“You’re saying you don’t want him to lose affection for you.” Sakurako nodded enthusiastically.

Now that their circumstances were clear, Sakurako resumed her housework. She started out by cleaning the living room, transferring the phone to speaker.

Even if she was trapped inside, having the house to herself could be rather pleasant. Of course, she would do her job as a maid properly, but she could still play *NaroFan* when her work was over; she had her backlogs of anime and gunpla; and she could cook when she got hungry. There was a bath and a gym and a pool here, too, so it was hardly a strenuous situation.

Even so, she wanted to help give Rosemary advice.

“You wanted to talk to me because you feel I’m a threat, right?” Sakurako asked.

“Yes. It is one method that I can take to understand Ichiro. King Kirihito suggested it to me.”

“King Kirihito?” Sakurako couldn’t imagine King saying anything like that, so she was confused. But Rosemary continued.

“He said that understanding of a person is something that happens over the course of a long acquaintance. Through conversations with Ichiro, I have begun to understand him, but to understand him even better, I must talk to those who are closely acquainted with him.”

“I see. I see,” Sakurako agreed with zeal as she ran the silent vacuum through the living room. “That makes perfect sense. Then, can you wait until this afternoon? I’ll be finished with my housework then, and we can meet face-to-face and have a real talk.”

“Face-to-face?” There was a hint of uncertainty in Rosemary’s flat digital tone.

Sakurako smiled mischievously and responded into the speaker. “I have two *NaroFan* accounts.”

“And that’s the situation, more or less.” As they headed for the apartment parking lot, Ichiro finished explaining the basics of the recent incident and the existence of Rosemary.

Airi seemed confused at first, but eventually began pressing a hand to her forehead as if suppressing a headache. “Why does you plus women always seem to equal disaster?”

“You appear to be implicating yourself with that statement, as well.”

“You bet I am! I’m still kicking myself over the Iris Brand incident! You hear me, creepshow?” Airi’s high-pitched voice echoed across the parking lot.

An athlete and an idol singer, both wearing sunglasses, turned to them in surprise. Ichiro raised a hand in a simultaneous apology and greeting, and the two gave a slight nod and quietly withdrew.

Although she hadn’t asked, Ichiro murmured, “It’s a secret that they’re together,” resulting in Airi learning something she probably shouldn’t know.

So, those two are together, huh?

“You just got back from the police station,” Airi said. “Do you even have a key?”

“Yes. I have several top-secret devices installed throughout the apartment complex that are independent from the security network.”

Everything he said was completely over the top.

They walked up to a blue supercar that probably belonged to Ichiro, but before they got in, Airi watched confusedly as he went over to a nearby wall. He removed a false cover, pressed his finger to a fingerprint recognition device, then entered a long string of letters and numbers into the keypad. After confirming Ichiro’s fingerprints and 32-character code, a panel in the wall opened with a whoosh of air.

Airi’s jaw dropped.

“I clean and test it periodically, but it’s been a while since I re-

trieved a key from here,” Ichiro said. “Iris, what’s the matter?”

“This apartment complex... It feels kinda like a secret base.”

“It’s not my preferred way of doing things, but it is convenient from time to time. Like now, for instance.” Ichiro slid into the driver’s seat and gestured her towards the passenger’s side.

Timidly, she got in and fastened her seat belt.

“Is there anything you have a taste for?” he asked.

“Umm, salt-fried barracuda.”

“You have excellent taste. Since it seems the offline meetup will be pay-your-own-way, for today, I’ll treat you.”

Airi didn’t object to that. Rather, she couldn’t—she didn’t have a lot of financial leeway. Not that she was happy to have the young heir buying lunch for her...

Ichiro started up the car, then turned on the car TV as background noise. It was just time for the late morning news, and they were having a report on Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s arrest. It was the kind of topic the media usually leapt on, but since there was very little new information to report, a lot of it felt like just filling time with opinions from related parties.

“Suspect Tsuwabuki’s father, President of the Tsuwabuki Concern, Meiro Tsuwabuki, has said to our reporter regarding this incident: ‘As there is no confirmation of anything at this time, I will refrain from commenting’...”

“What’s your father like?” Airi asked while watching the report.

“He’s a shifty manipulator. I respect him, but I don’t tell him that.”

“Oh? That’s a little surprising.” Airi had never expected the word “respect” to come from Ichiro’s mouth, and the phrase “shifty manipulator” didn’t seem to match the man’s image, either.

Ichiro explained that Meiro had inherited the business from his own father (Ichiro’s grandfather), who had little business ability of his own. The fact that they had managed to bring the companies back into the fold that they had lost when the zaibatsu was dissolved had all been thanks to Meiro Tsuwabuki’s business skill.

He had hoped to raise Ichiro to inherit his business, to give him a firsthand education on empire-building and business administration. But his wife, who was more artistically inclined, had taken young Ichiro around the world from a very young age, which had prevented him from getting his wish.

“I’ve never heard you talk about your background before,” Airi said.

“That’s because I rarely talk about it.”

“It’s kind of, like... you know. It’s a lot to take in.”

“Oh?”

Airi turned her eyes from the TV to the window and tried to sum up the thoughts racing through her mind. “It’s the sort of thing that reminds you, ‘Wow, the people I know online all have their own families and histories.’”

“That’s true,” Ichiro agreed. “Even if you know rationally that this is true, it can be a difficult thing to experience firsthand.”

Given what he’d said, it sounded like Ichiro hadn’t actually received those lessons on empire-building and business admin from his father. His image and the fact that he was heir to a large

company had led her to assume he'd had an education in such things, so this, too, was a little surprising.

It did make sense, though. Knowing that his etiquette and ability to conduct himself as an aristocrat had been all self-taught explained many of his eccentric tendencies. Airi had almost no interactions with the upper classes, but it was hard for her to imagine that Ichiro was representative at all.

He said, "Empire-building refers to ways in which to reign over others. In other words, how to comport yourself as one who requires the aid of others. So, I don't have much interest in it."

"There's something a little lonely about that idea," she murmured. Was he really preparing to live all by himself? Knowing him, it wasn't impossible.

"Is there?" he asked. "I've never thought so, myself."

"I don't care what you think. I'm saying I would never want to think that way," she spat out, with a hint of annoyance.

It was just then that the car stopped at a red light, and Ichiro, sitting in the driver's seat, looked at her with a slightly stunned expression. But his surprise soon shifted to joy. The traffic light went green, and he turned his gaze forward again.

"The things you say do surprise me from time to time. But it's true." The young heir seemed strangely invigorated.

Airi didn't understand at all, but it was better than having him annoyed with her, at least. "What's true?"

"That becoming friends with you has had value to me," he said, offhandedly.

This time it was Airi's turn to look surprised. But just a moment later she snorted, and she sank deeply back into her seat as if to bury herself. "You say pretty nice things every so often. It's

not fair.”

“I’m glad that you’re happy.”

At last, the blue Koenigsegg arrived at a small traditional restaurant.

Airi had suggested salt-fried barracuda because it didn’t sound too expensive, but it turned out that this was ridiculous. Salt-fried barracuda was a luxury meal, the king of fried foods; as the saying went, “A dish of barracuda is worth a bucket of rice.”

Inside the restaurant, they were guided to a private room, whereupon Ichiro promptly excused himself to make a phone call. Judging by the grimace on his face, it didn’t seem like a phone call he was looking forward to.

Still, Airi couldn’t handle being abandoned just after their arrival. Just sitting in an expensive restaurant would be nerve-racking at the best of times. But when the shop’s achingly elegant hostess began rattling off her vast stores of knowledge, her tension skyrocketed.

Young heir, come back soon. I can’t take much more of this, she couldn’t help but think.

“You have excellent taste, my dear,” the hostess assured her. “We just received a fine order this morning.”

“Th-That’s right. Omega-3s are expensive, huh?” Airi babbled in her distress. Her mind was swimming with questions: whether she was dressed appropriately, whether she was coming off as boorish... She was a very shallow person, in some respects.

“Barracuda is small and dainty, but a very good, energetic fish,” the hostess told her. “Though they can be a bit aggressive. I’m told that sometimes, they even bite the fishermen.”

“They sound just like Iris.” Ichiro had returned. He appeared, opening the sliding door.

“You come back, and that’s the first thing you have to say?” Airi the Barracuda snapped, suggesting that the same sentiment could be applied to her, as well.

The hostess smiled magnanimously as she watched the two interact. Airi didn’t like the implication the woman seemed to be making with that smile, but decided to ignore her.

Ichiro sat down on his cushion and addressed the hostess. “Someone else will be joining us. I believe the police are here, too, so if you would, please guide them to the room next to ours. I’ll pay for their orders.”

“Are you in trouble, Master Tsuwabuki?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Please, give them my compliments.”

As usual, his mere existence was unpleasant.

Incidentally, there were no menus here, but Ichiro seemed to require no such formality. He rattled off a few items at random, not forgetting the salt-fried barracuda.

“Who’s the other person joining us?” Airi asked once the hostess had withdrawn with a small bow.

“A skilled lawyer with an awful personality.”

“An awful personality? Even worse than yours?” she asked.

“As I do not view my own personality as awful, I don’t believe I could give you a useful answer to that. To be honest, I didn’t really want to call him, but I don’t seem to have much leeway in this situation. I needed to speak to someone who knows what’s going on, no matter how unpleasant they may be.”

The open contempt with which he spoke was surprising to Airi; she was honestly enjoying the new facets of the young heir that were showing themselves here, one by one. There was no denying that he was bizarre and eccentric, but at the end of the day, he was also a human being. Ichiro Tsuwabuki had not sprung from the ground fully-formed.

According to Ichiro, both his recent arrest and Kirschwasser's player getting locked inside the apartment had been instigated by an AI known as Rosemary. Rosemary was an AI created by the president of Thistle, and Airi's opinion, based on what she had been told, was that she sounded like a real disaster of a woman.

If an AI was responsible, then the charges against Ichiro were false. But Rosemary's legal standing was a dicey one. If "mere program" Rosemary was responsible for an act of cyber crime, there was a good chance that her treatment under the law would be as a faulty program. And even if she was responsible, Ichiro didn't want to see Rosemary killed off in this manner. Thus, he explained, he had to approach the problem with utmost delicacy.

She asked if that was why he was calling a lawyer, and he responded by saying that was part of it.

"By the way, the 'Sakurako-san' you were talking to on the phone. Was that Mr. Kirsch's player?" she added.

"Ah, yes. My live-in servant."

"So, she really is a woman, and you really do live together?"

"That's correct."

"Is she pretty?" Airi asked, her curiosity inflamed.

"Yes," he affirmed, so immediately that she felt slightly annoyed. "And because I know you, I can tell you one other thing..."

"Oh? What is it?"

“One-third of the reason why I hired her was...”

“Yeah?”

“...her appearance.”

The straightfacedness with which Ichiro said this caused even Airi, who was used to his eccentricities, to be dumbstruck. Should she laugh at the relative normalcy of this, or should she laugh at his bad sense of humor? She'd be laughing either way, of course.

“Are you being serious?”

“I'll leave that for you to decide,” he said. “Ah, but I *am* more attractive than she is.”

“You're a creep, young heir,” Airi said. He really never changed.

Sakurako had just finished up her housework and had enjoyed a light lunch when she received another call from Rosemary. Although, since she was living in their house, it was less like a phone and more like an intercom using quantum circuitry.

Sakurako gave her the password to the user account and told her to use one of the two Miraive Gear Cocoons in the house.

She wondered if it was really possible to use a Miraive Gear without a body, but given how easily Rosemary had hijacked their security system, Sakurako assumed she could work it out somehow.

Indeed, she did work it out, and a few minutes after Rosemary logged in, Sakurako finally sat down in the Miraive Gear seat and entered into the fictional space.

Sakurako awakened as Kirschwasser in the Iris Brand guild house. Before her was a girl dressed in the Japanese-style maid

outfit that Iris had personally designed, looking around the room with intense curiosity.

“Is it strange for you?” Kirschwasser asked.

The girl—in other words, Yozakura—turned around and nodded in response. Rosemary was currently controlling Yozakura as her player.

The recent incident had resulted in Kirschwasser’s transformation into Dark Transaction Knight Kirschwasser. For reasons of Sakurako’s own, she had opted to wreath his entire body in a black aura and change his eyes to a creepy glowing red, but this didn’t alter the avatar’s functionality in the slightest.

“As you may recall, I did not control Ichiro’s user account directly,” Yozakura said. “I have never received audiovisual input as a player in this fashion before.”

Kirschwasser chuckled. “It’s very fine, isn’t it?”

Ichiro had prepared and designed the entirety of the lobby’s décor himself. He had put thought into everything from the furniture’s wood grain to the luster of its varnish, which just gave Kirschwasser all the more appreciation for the excellent graphic designers that *NaroFan* employed.

Yozakura’s expression was rather flat compared to the way it was when Sakurako was controlling her. Kirschwasser wondered if it simply wasn’t reflecting Rosemary’s emotional signals properly, or if Rosemary didn’t have emotions clear enough to be reflected in the avatar’s expression.

“Please explain why you requested to interact in this manner,” Yozakura said.

“There are a number of reasons,” Kirschwasser responded. “The first, I suppose, is that I do not wish to be overly serious

when answering your questions.”

As he spoke, he poured tea from a pot into a cup and offered it to Yozakura. She did not appear outwardly flustered by it, but she hesitated in a way that suggested she was struggling for a response. But soon after, she accepted the cup.

A gentle smile appeared on Kirschwasser’s wrinkled, scarred face. “The other is that, as a servant, I feel I cannot have a conversation with someone without first offering them a cup of tea. Please, enjoy it. It’s a flavor Master Ichiro likes.”

“Sakurako...”

“Oh!” Before she could bring the cup to her lips, Kirschwasser interrupted Yozakura with a raise of his hand. “Using real names is a breach of etiquette. At the moment I am the grave front-line Knight, Sir Kirschwasser, and you are the Demonkin Japanese-style servant Yozakura. You will address me as... hmm, ‘Father.’ Understood?”

“That is nonsense,” Yozakura said. “What is the point of it?”

“The nonsense is the point of it. Now, let me hear all about my daughter’s love troubles.”

Kirschwasser wondered how Rosemary was perceiving the tea he had made. From the start, the “flavor” expressed in this world was just quantum information sent to the human brain. It was the brain itself that did the work of converting that information to a “flavor” sensation.

Yet Yozakura, piloted by the artificial intelligence Rosemary, put the cup to her lips, drank with a hint of awkwardness, and said: “It is delicious.”

“I am glad to hear it.” He had no way of knowing whether or not she really felt that way, but there was no point in questioning

it, either.

Rosemary had seemed a bit out of sorts at first, but she grew accustomed to moving Yozakura's avatar very quickly. Back when she'd functioned as a *NaroFan* management program, she had likely been unconsciously recording the brain waves emitted by users as they moved their bodies, and had been amalgamating those readings. Perhaps, in a way, that was what it meant to be alive.

Well, I wouldn't understand the technical aspects, Sakurako thought. I'm a liberal arts major, after all.

The most important things to Kirschwasser/Sakurako at the moment were that Rosemary was the culprit behind the unauthorized access, that she was currently keeping her trapped in the apartment, and that she was in love with her master, Ichiro. The first two were the most important, but the latter, grudgingly, took a place among her priorities.

"Now, Yozakura..." she began.

"Yes, Father?"

"You said that you perceive me as a threat."

"Yes," Yozakura affirmed emotionlessly as she sat down in a chair. "Ichiro is involved with many women, but I have confirmed that you are the only one with a cohabiting relationship with him."

"Where did an innocent AI learn a word like that?" Kirschwasser asked. Of course, "cohabiting" wasn't necessarily an inappropriate word for it, since they did live together. "I am merely his retainer and servant."

"I am aware that servants sometimes attend to their masters in bed."

“You’ve read too much H-manga! What were you doing inside the internet that whole time?” Kirschwasser was starting to feel keenly that Rosemary really did need proper guidance. She wasn’t just using other people’s internet connections to hack into systems; she was using them to acquire truly unsavory information.

Or was it something else? Was this the power of the collective intelligence system? It was true that it would be likely for the primary userbase of a VRMMO to have biases in that area... Even Sakurako Ogi, who considered herself a more virtuous person than most, was aware of works in which masters and servants shared a physical relationship. Perhaps she read too much H-manga, too.

While Kirschwasser was turning his mind over and over in awe, the guild house door opened with a bang.

“Mr. Kirsch! Are you here?” Surprisingly, it was Kirihiro (Leader).

Yozakura was expressionless, but took two or three steps back as the man flew in, eyes narrowed.

“Welcome. How may I help you?” Kirschwasser asked.

“Wah! Scary!” Kirihiro (Leader) shouted theatrically as he noticed Dark Transaction Knight Kirschwasser’s appearance. But he quickly cleared his throat and regained his composure. “Ah, well, I was camped out in front of your house when I heard your Osamu Ichikawa-esque voice shouting the word ‘H-manga,’ and I got so curious, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Ah, that was...”

Before he could finish, though, Kirschwasser noticed the object of Kirihiro (Leader)’s attention. His eyes were flicking between Kirschwasser and Yozakura, his expression one of confusion. “I thought you and Miss Yozakura were the same person.”

“I do have two accounts, yes,” said Kirschwasser. “I’m lending Yozakura to a friend right now.”

Lending and transferring user accounts wasn’t a practice that was smiled upon, exactly, and they’d probably receive a scolding from the devs if they found out. But the fact that there were about 10,000 active users in total, that it was technically difficult to create bots in a VRMMO, and that there were no RMT merchants setting up shop in *NaroFan* yet, made her think they weren’t likely to get called out for it. They hadn’t received any warnings from the developers about Matsunaga and Kirschwasser’s training regimen, either.

Still, it wasn’t something Kirschwasser would say publicly. He was aware that it was a dicey thing to do as long as conversation logs were being taken and recorded.

Kirihito (Leader) merely mused over the subject for a moment, then spoke up again. “I saw the news. Was Mr. Tsuwabuki really arrested?”

“Ah... yes.” *That’s right*, Kirschwasser remembered. That had been on TV.

Yozakura’s expression was as blank as ever, but she didn’t meet his eyes.

“As far as I know, he is innocent of the charges, and he is currently out on bail.”

“I see. Everyone’s pretty worked up about it.”

“I suppose they would be,” Kirschwasser said.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki, the character, was famous, and it had been all over the news, so this seemed like an inevitable development.

“But I thought, ‘Mr. Tsuwabuki would never do something like

that!' I believed in him!"

"Did you really?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Actually, I thought it sounded very plausible!"

"Truth is beauty." As they talked, Kirschwasser suddenly came to a realization. He turned back to Yozakura, who was standing silently behind him, and said, "Yozakura, I sense that you are slightly lacking in information about Master Ichiro."

"I will not deny that. It is appropriate that I should learn more about him."

"Let's go outside, then," Kirschwasser said. They looked out onto Glasgobara's main street through the door that Kirihito (Leader) had left open. "I think we should ask a variety of people about what sort of person Ichiro Tsuwabuki is. I still can't quite grasp the idea that I'm a threat to you."

"My understanding in that regard has not changed," Yozakura said. "But are you certain that you wish to do this?"

Kirschwasser noticed a tone of concern in Yozakura's even voice. He realized immediately what she was getting at. Many players knew that Yozakura was a sub-account of Kirschwasser; she was worried that if they walked around, it would be obvious that Kirschwasser was lending out his account.

"Well, if we're reported and receive a warning, we'll just have to stop," Kirschwasser said. "But you do want to know more about Master Ichiro, don't you?"

Yozakura did hesitate for a few more seconds. But in the end, she responded: "Yes."

"Hey, Tsuwabuki." Airi and Ichiro were eating their lunch at

the Japanese restaurant when a visitor arrived.

It was a tall man dressed in a rumpled black suit. Airi recognized it as a Versace, but it was patently obvious that he hadn't ironed it properly, which was anathema to an aspiring fashion designer like her. This was no way to treat the Italian master!

He wasn't just tall, but gangly, too, which afforded him a slightly loping gait. The young heir was about 1.8 meters tall by her reckoning, but this man was even taller.

"Hey, Shaga." Ichiro's attitude as he greeted him was cool as ever.

"I see you've got some tasty food, eh?" the man said. "What's on the menu?"

"Barracuda. We have enough for you, as well."

"That's the wrong fish! That's shishamo. And it's not even true shishamo from Hokkaido, but karafuto shishamo from Canada!"

This must be the lawyer with the awful personality that Ichiro had been referring to. Airi was at a loss for how to respond, though she had to admit that at the moment, she still found Ichiro the more unpleasant of the two. Perhaps it was just refreshing to deal with someone so upfront with his nastiness.

The man named Shaga plopped down next to Airi and set his felt hat on the tatami. He reeked of cigarettes. As Airi wrinkled her nose, he pulled out a business card and offered it to her. "Here's my card."

"Ah, thanks. Um, Shaga Law Office, Shunsaku Shaga. You're a lawyer, huh?"

"If you want to file a countersuit for false proper accusations, I'm your man," he assured her. He seemed like a shady lawyer.

“I’m Airi Kakitsubata,” she said.

“Oh, I’ve heard of that, yes. Kakitsubata was... a type of Japanese iris, wasn’t it? Shaga is, too. As fellow irises, I hope we can get along.”

“Um, sure...”

The hand he offered seemed even rougher for how delicate it appeared to the naked eye. Airi looked between Ichiro and Shaga, then voiced a small question she was wondering. “How do you two know each other?”

“We ran a detective agency together, long ago,” the young heir said without looking in Shaga’s direction.

“D-Detective agency?” she repeated.

“Ah, that’s right. That takes me back,” Shaga said, gazing nostalgically into the distance. “A talented lawyer with an awful personality; an ex-reporter with more passion than good sense; and a young heir with nothing but money and brains. I was the talented lawyer.”

Not one of them sounded like someone Airi wanted to know.

“We really had the Tokyo Bay area trembling at our feet, didn’t we? Right?” Shaga grinned.

“I’m really curious to hear more about this, but...” Airi began.

“It would take a while, and it’s not important, relatively speaking,” Ichiro agreed. “I’ll tell you about it some other time, if you like.”

It seemed Shaga was the one the young heir had recommended to Thistle during their recent account hacking incident. He seemed to have great trust in the man, despite his personality, and he had introduced Shaga to Thistle to save the company from

ending up in public disgrace. As a result, although Thistle had effectively been partly bought out by Pony, they had managed to retain a degree of autonomy, as well as control over *Narrow Fantasy Online* itself.

Afterwards, Shaga had remained on board, handling Thistle's legal affairs as an attorney affiliate. Thus, Ichiro had invited him here, hoping he might have some inside information about the current incident. It seemed that was the case, but Shaga smiled uncomfortably as he elucidated. "Thistle's president is a weak point, like you thought. With Pony forcing its way in, she's been totally on the outs." Shaga shoveled shishamo into his mouth as he spoke.

"By the way, is it okay to just tell us this stuff? Isn't attorney-client privilege a thing?" Airi asked.

"Airi, dear, the law is a lawyer's friend, but the same does not apply in reverse."

She wondered if she should tell him that the police were listening in.

"Ah, well. Anyway, I'm doing my best, but I'm talking a lot more to Pony's bigwigs through the Thistle staff. Seems there was a lot of arguing over whether or not to haul you in. But once it was confirmed that the access came from your supercomputer, and it was doing active harm to the game, they reported it, got a warrant, and had you arrested."

"Yes. I heard that much from the assistant inspector." Ichiro nodded and brought his soup to his lips.

In response, Shaga muttered, "Is that old man still assistant inspector?"

"Now, let me explain why I called you here," Ichiro said.

“Sure.”

“The real culprit is Rosemary.”

It was a bold thing to proclaim, knowing the police were listening. Shaga spit out his food. Half-chewed shishamo flew past the young heir and stuck into the paper screen behind him.

“How filthy,” Ichiro said.

“H-Hey. Tsuwabuki, are you kidding me?” Shaga asked while wiping his mouth with the tissue Airi offered him.

“Yes. At the time of the account hack, she must have already infiltrated my house. She caused the incident in question via unauthorized access of the Ten Sages system. It would be a simple matter to tell the police this, and have them investigate my house. But I worry that there’s no legal structure in place to give Rosemary a fair trial. If possible, I would like to avoid any result where she is deemed a simple malfunctioning program or a virus and is deleted.”

“Hmm,” Shaga said, hand on his chin. “You’re as reckless as ever, I see.”

“I wouldn’t have called you out here if it weren’t complicated. And this is much more interesting than the trouble you used to bring to my doorstep.”

As someone who tended to just barely get by in her civics courses, Airi was completely unable to follow the conversation at this point. Instead, she just worked on cleaning her plate. The fish had been a little salty, but pleasant on the palate. She could see where that phrase “a dish of barracuda is worth a bucket of rice” came from.

Ichiro hadn’t said anything about Thistle’s public image in particular, but it seemed to Airi that he wanted Shaga to protect

it. The reason he hadn't said that, she supposed, was because Shaga was affiliated with Thistle, which would put them on opposite sides if the matter went to trial.

"I'd prefer to resolve this on the down-low, too," Shaga agreed. "If we tried proving your innocence that way, we'd also have to report that a program created by President Azami hacked into your home and then framed you for illegal access. We'd look terrible."

"Yet the unauthorized computer access law is still a criminal matter."

"Yeah, that's our big problem. Unless we cover up the unauthorized access itself somehow, at the end of the day, someone has to be the bad guy." Shaga racked his brain for a while, then took another mouthful of shishamo and muttered, "Should we visit Thistle HQ first?"

Airi felt a bit like she was going out on an educational field trip. Then again, maybe it was preferable to a summer free research project or a botanical journal.

2

Noble Son, Lead A High School Girl Around

“What is the meaning of this?!” The Thistle Corporation had been invaded by Megumi Fuyo, president of the fashion brand MiZUNO and the heir to the powerful Tsunobeni Trading Co. The employees of Thistle, who were mere nerds at the end of the day, simply cowered, having no way of standing up to the avatar of rage that Fuyo had become.

It was an unlucky day.

Edogawa, tapping at his keyboard in a corner of the room, hunched over as much as he could, hoping to avoid any sparks flying his way. Ever since he’d been ordered to Tokyo for business, he hadn’t had a single day that wasn’t unlucky, and the removal of the DyDo DRINCO vending machine near Thistle’s parking lot had been another cause for sorrow.

Fuyo was angry about the arrest of Ichiro Tsuwabuki. Edogawa had had a feeling this would happen ever since watching the news that morning.

It had been a few days since they’d discovered traces of unauthorized access in the Ten Sages’ system, and the subsequent investigation made it clear that someone had built an ingenious back door into the system server via the Ten Sages. That meant that the hacker could walk right past the Ajax System that Edogawa and his teammates had taken such care to build, and could go directly into the server itself. The Thistle employees had been in a mad rush to put out fires and restore data.

Thistle had always been a rather private company, but with Pony now acting behind the scenes, Edogawa was even more in the dark. President Azami had almost been reduced to the role of puppet ruler. The lawyer Shaga seemed to have put quite a lot of effort into helping them, and even he had found this result somewhat expected.

It was an unfortunate situation. It had just had to happen after they'd gotten the service started up again, and in the middle of their mad dash to finish everything in time for the one-year anniversary ceremony on August 10th. Making things even more awkward was the fact that Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been planned as a guest at that ceremony.

“W-We never thought Mr. Tsuwabuki was the one behind the unauthorized access, either...” President Azami said timidly.

“Then why would he get arrested? I demand an explanation!” Fuyo roared.

Edogawa thought he was probably innocent, too. He hated Ichiro Tsuwabuki, certainly, but he also recognized his basic humanity. More importantly, they had worked together to discover the truth behind the account hack. It was because of that that he could make an educated guess about the real culprit.



It was Rosemary.

They had told the public that the “malfunctioning program” behind the account hack had been deleted, and that was probably what they had told Pony, too. That would spell bad things if the truth came to light, both for Thistle and for Rosemary. Ichiro Tsuwabuki was probably aware of that, too, and Edogawa couldn’t imagine he’d try to prove his innocence by putting the blame on Rosemary.

Still, they were between a rock and a hard place. Edogawa’s expression was grave.

If Ichiro Tsuwabuki wanted to prove his innocence, he would have to make Rosemary’s existence public. It was unlikely he’d want to do that, but if they prioritized Thistle’s standing and Rosemary’s survival instead, Ichiro would end up prosecuted for a crime he hadn’t committed.

The fact was that the unauthorized access had happened. They couldn’t pretend like it hadn’t. Someone had to take responsibility for the crime. In any other situation, it would be fair to make Rosemary carry the weight of the crime, but there was no legal framework under which to judge her. That was what made the situation so tricky to deal with.

“I’m asking you, why was Ichiro...” Fuyo began again.

But before she could launch into a new tirade, it happened.

“Um...” One of the office workers interrupted in a trembling voice. “We have a visitor, actually.”

“R-Really?” President Azami said finally, sounding relieved.

Fuyo clearly wasn’t done venting her anger, but she wasn’t so ill-bred as to simply insist the visitor wait outside.

Still, a visitor? Now? Who could it be?

Before Edogawa could begin to speculate, a voice, cheerful, piercing, and clear, reached his ears. He didn't have to look to know who it was. From where Edogawa was sitting, he could see the astonished expressions on Azami and Fuyo's faces.

"Hey, President Azami. Oh, and you're here, too, Megumi. I'm glad to see you're well."

An unlucky day.

The worst of his life.

Edogawa hunched over in his seat and went back to typing, hoping to avoid any more sparks flying his way.

The Koenigsegg Agela that Airi and Ichiro were riding in entered the parking lot, followed by Shaga's Vespa, which parked next to them.

Airi found something oddly appropriate about the image of the gangly Shaga in his black suit and felt hat riding a white scooter, but when Shaga said, "Reminds you of that drama, right?" she had no idea what he was talking about.

"By the way, Shaga, what happened to your tacky Benz?" Ichiro asked.

"Failed its inspection."

"You really should take better care of your things."

The Thistle Corporation's headquarters was in Jinbocho. All Airi knew about Jinbocho was that it was famous for curry and used book stores.

Knowing it was the company that made the game she liked to

play was strangely comforting for Airi. It wasn't that she was excited, exactly, but it made things feel a bit like an extension of the game experience.

As she followed along behind Ichiro and Shaga, she started trying to think of what she would say when she was addressed.

The building was smaller than she'd expected. They used the phone receiver set on the first floor to negotiate their arrival, then ascended to the second floor. Of course, Airi had never been here before, so she couldn't stop herself from goggling in all directions.

Just as Ichiro was reaching for the office door, they heard the sounds of raised voices inside.

"Oh?" Ichiro whispered.

Airi found the voice familiar, too. It was immediately obvious who was in there. "It's Fuyo."

Ichiro nodded. "An unexpected person in an unexpected place."

"Who's Fuyo? Like from the Hoenn Elite Four?" Shaga mumbled in a soft, distant voice, but they ignored his irrelevant nonsense.

Airi found Fuyo's presence simultaneously surprising and unsurprising. It was only natural, after all, that she would try to take action after seeing the news of Ichiro Tsuwabuki's arrest. It was only natural that she would assume Thistle were the ones who had charged him, and only natural that she would then rush to their headquarters to complain in person. It just seemed appropriate to the kind of impulsive person she was. Airi, who herself had charged the police station without considering the consequences, was in no position to judge.

Ichiro pushed the door open. "Hey, President Azami. Megumi,

I'm glad to see you, although I wasn't expecting to see you *here*
..."

All eyes in the office fell on him.

Airi scanned the room and made a level-headed summary of their reactions. About a third were stunned, a third had expressions of "What the hell is he doing here?", and a third seemed to be thinking, "Yeah, go figure." There was not a single face that was happy to see him, though there was one person sitting in the corner who apparently refused to look up from his work.

The woman in a suit he had addressed as President Azami greeted him with a stiff smile. "I-Ichiro..."

She was so young—probably closer in age to Airi than to Fuyo—that it was hard to believe she could be president of anything.

"Hey, President Azami. Look who I brought by," Shaga said, peeking out from behind Airi.

Airi decided she should probably say something, too, but before she could get to it, Fuyo broke in, wide-eyed.

"Ichiro... and is that you, Iris? What are you doing here?"

"Um, well...ahaha..." Airi trailed off, scratching her head awkwardly. She wasn't sure what she was doing here, either. She had mostly come along out of inertia.

Megumi Fuyo stood there in confusion for a moment. But then she looked at Airi, looked at Ichiro, looked at Airi again, then gasped, as if realizing something.

"Oh, I-I... I'll be back soon..."

Fuyo abruptly strode past them and left the office.

"I wonder where she's going," Airi said.

“Fixing her makeup, perhaps,” Ichiro put in.

“You know, and yet this is how you act? As always, you’re a real monster.”

After that little discussion of Fuyo’s departure, the three turned back to President Azami. She looked flustered. “Ichiro, Shaga... ah, and...”

“Oh, I’m Airi Kakitsubata. I enjoy your game very much and play it every day.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you...” Azami smiled slightly, but it seemed a little strained.

Ichiro added, “President Azami, you’ve always been thin, but you seem to have lost a great deal of weight in just these few days.”

“Well, so much has happened...”

With a strange sense of duty, Airi realized she couldn’t leave someone so unbalanced to have a conversation with the young heir, and prepared herself to interrupt if necessary. She had no idea whether the lawyer Shaga would be of use in that regard or not.

Ichiro and President Azami talked for a while and exchanged what information they had—the readers know all this by now, so we’ll skip the full conversation—but unfortunately, it was clear there was a lot she hadn’t known about the full situation. It seemed she didn’t even know much more than Shaga had known.

When Ichiro explained the whole situation to her, Azami turned her eyes downward, her expression serious. “I see... So, Rosemary was the one responsible?”

“Yes. Although, as I am the one who made her self-aware, I don’t feel free of responsibility myself.”

“That’s quite a thing to say so offhandedly.”

“Nonsense, nonsense. I’m always amazing.”

He must have talked to the AI like this, too, Airi thought. *And as the saying goes, when the teacher is rotten...*

“Ichiro, you mentioned earlier that Rosemary was living in your house,” President Azami said.

“Yes, I’m almost sure of it. She’s trapped my servant inside and seems to have some scheme in mind. While she’s done no harm to the servant for now, it’s hardly an agreeable situation.”

“You don’t think it’s jealousy or something?” Airi whispered, and Azami and Ichiro both looked at her.

“It might be,” Ichiro said.

“So, you admit it?”

Azami said, “I’d be happy to know that my program has evolved to the point where it can feel jealousy, but...”

Speaking of jealousy, Airi realized that it would be harder to talk about this once Fuyo came back. They were referring to the “Sakurako-san” who worked in Ichiro’s apartment, after all, and who knew what Fuyo might think about the Rosemary incident itself?

“By the way, is Sakurako-san currently logged into the game?” Ichiro asked. “I’d like to get in touch with her.”

“Don’t you have a cell phone?” Airi asked.

“When security in my apartment is fully activated, cell phone waves won’t permeate it.”

Airi didn’t bother to ask, at this point, why he’d installed such

a terrifying system. One glance over at Shaga's uneasy expression made it easy enough to guess; it was the same reason why the windows had been designed to withstand a blow from a rocket launcher.

"I'll investigate right now," President Azami said, then turned to her PC.

News of the young heir Ichiro Tsuwabuki's arrest was already spreading throughout the game, but to most of the players, it was nothing more than idle gossip while they spent their days more or less as they usually did.

Service had only just resumed, but Glasgobara Merchant Town was already as lively as ever.

On the main street, intermediate-level players were seeking out new weapons to suit their skills, while high-level players arrived from the front lines looking to enhance or restore their existing equipment. While the high-level players headed for the famous crafting guilds and made small talk with the Blacksmiths and Alchemists they got along with best, they also traded gossip about what the latest trends were on the front lines, and their own tales of valor.

Still, the most trending topic was the anniversary ceremony to be held tomorrow, and since Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been listed as one of the guests in prior announcements, the topic of whether or not he would show up was a popular one.

It was in this environment that Kirschwasser and Yozakura walked together down the main street. They got a few surprised glances from those who knew both avatars belonged to the same player, but Kirschwasser ignored those for now.

"I cannot understand what you are thinking, Father," Yozakura whispered. "It is true that I must understand Ichiro, but I

could acquire that information by way of message exchanges. This is inefficient, and it is nonsense. What possible purpose could there be behind it? Please respond.”

“I told you, the nonsense is the point.”

“I cannot understand.”

“Oh, Shigechi...” Kirschwasser sighed, but the reference only made Yozakura even more confused.

She might have been acting laid-back, but to Kirschwasser/Sakurako Ogi, this was a true battlefield. The person walking beside her was the perpetrator of illegal hacks, and the reason her master Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been arrested for a crime he hadn’t committed. This was also the person who had locked her up in the top floor of her apartment.

Of course, she had faith that Ichiro would save her no matter what she did, and being the princess locked at the top of a tall tower was a situation she had always wanted to experience once. It was exciting. Of course, Sakurako’s ideas of femininity tended to differ from those of most of society, but setting that aside...

Sakurako had always thought that, when locked away in a tower, a woman had an obligation to try to win over her captor. It wasn’t about Stockholm Syndrome or Lima Syndrome or anything like that; the simple truth was that a woman had time to kill while she was waiting for the hero to save her. If she was the closest person to the criminal, she was obliged to try to pull the thorn out of the proverbial paw.

In this case, it was more than pulling a thorn out of a paw; she felt obliged to contribute to Rosemary’s emotional maturation. The fact that Rosemary had acquired self-awareness through her conversations with Ichiro was shocking, but she had likely achieved most of her psychological growth through self-study, and there were limits to what a person could learn that way.

That was why Sakurako was lending her her avatar, despite the legal questions it raised. Seeing, listening, touching, eating, smelling... Quantum signals regarding all kinds of sensory input were being sent to the artificial intelligence at once. To get her to not just process these things as information, but to feel for herself what was pleasant and unpleasant about them, seemed to be the first step towards getting her closer to human.

They could talk about love once that was done. First, Rosemary had to experience the world, even if that world was a fictional one.

There was also the fact that the continent of Asgard was a world that Ichiro loved, and while Sakurako would never suggest that Rosemary had to be completely in tune with him, she did want Rosemary to understand what it was that Ichiro wanted, and what he liked about this world.

“Um, I’m here, too, you know,” Kirihito (Leader) murmured from behind them.

“I know.” Kirschwasser nodded. “As long as you’re walking with us, allow me to ask you something. What do you think of my master, Ichiro Tsuwabuki?”

“Huh?” Kirihito (Leader) tilted his head.

Yozakura added in her monotone voice, “Please answer. It is necessary that I learn more about him.”

Those words alone seemed to explain just about everything to Kirihito (Leader). “I see. ‘Know the enemy and you shall not fear a hundred battles’...”

“Ichiro is not my enemy.”

“But love is always a battlefield.”

“Nonsense. I do not understand.”

Kirihito (Leader) cleared his throat and began to speak, atmospherically. “Mr. Tsuwabuki is... well, a terrifying person.”

“Kirihito-Leader, do you feel afraid of Ichiro?” Yozakura queried.

“Awe might be a better term for it. Indeed, the first time I met him was in the early days of the Grand Quest, in the Delve Necrolands.”

“I am aware,” she said.

“You knew that?!”

At the time, Rosemary would have been part of the system monitoring the game; hence, she probably knew everything that had happened in it.

Despite having his legs swept out from under him, Kirihito (Leader) continued the story of his first meeting with Ichiro in grave tones. It seemed to Kirschwasser to be a biased, exaggerated account, but since he had asked about the man’s personal view of Ichiro, he couldn’t claim this wasn’t what he wanted.

“...and so, I remember feeling shaken by his complete disregard for the value of money.”

“So, your first impression of him had to do with the Monetary Blade...” Kirschwasser murmured.

Kirschwasser couldn’t help but feeling that, if not for the meeting with the Kirihitters, he himself might have never fallen to the fiscal dark side. It was amazing how deeply people could affect each other. Matsunaga had also been involved in the creation of the Dark Transaction Knight, so they weren’t the only ones responsible, of course... and Rosemary/Yozakura, standing by his side now, had played a part, too. But the real responsibility lay with himself, for letting his heart be tainted by money.

But never mind that right now; it was a pointless line of thinking. Feeling a bit of a thorn in his own paw, Kirschwasser put an end to that train of thought.

“Kirihiro-Leader, you do not spend a great deal of money on microtransactions like Ichiro?” Rosemary asked.

“Well, it’s a game. Games should be enjoyed; you shouldn’t stake your life on them.” It was an odd thing to hear from the leader of the Kiri hitters, who frequently did die in the game. “But Miss Yozakura—I don’t know your name, so I’ll call you that—it can be worth staking your life on something you enjoy.”

“That is contradictory.”

“Well, sometimes contradictions are the way we express ourselves...”

It seemed to Kirschwasser that he wasn’t being very convincing, given that he was a player who spent very little on microtransactions.

Kirschwasser didn’t know if this conversation was of much use, but Yozakura seemed to be seriously considering Kirihiro (Leader)’s words. It was a good sign of things to come. They kept walking and eventually left Glasgobara behind.

The group all watched silently as the conversation log scrolled past on Azami’s computer.

It was Kirschwasser, Yozakura, and Kirihiro (Leader), which meant that both of Sakurako’s avatars were logged in at the same time. Given where they were logged in from, it was clear enough that Yozakura was Rosemary; she was probably using Yozakura’s ID to log in through Ichiro’s Miraive Gear Cocoon. Kirschwasser and Yozakura were separate accounts, so there was nothing odd about that by itself.

President Azami seemed at a loss for what to say.

In the end, it was Airi who spoke up first. “M-Maybe... I shouldn’t have seen this... right?”

“Ah... I probably shouldn’t let you see it, but it’s a bit late for that now...” President Azami said while looking nervously up at Ichiro.

The young heir put his hand to his sculpted chin in a practiced motion, gazing at the display with narrowed eyes. It was exactly the gesture he used when thinking about something in the game.

By contrast, Shaga leaned in to the screen curiously. “Tsuwabuki, were you spending your money like that in the game? Karma’s going to get you for that.”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro responded dismissively.

“Umm... Ichiro, should I get in contact with them?” President Azami asked.

“No...” He shook his head. “Let’s not. Sakurako-san seems to have some sort of plan, and I may have been worrying too much. President Azami, is there anything you wish to say to Rosemary?”

“No... I don’t know what judgment will be made about her after this, but... for now, I’d like to let her do what she wants to do.” Her expression had changed slightly as she spoke, now seeming slightly relieved. “Though I suppose that’s not a reassuring thing to say to you, Ichiro.”

“I don’t mind. We’ll leave Rosemary to Sir Kirschwasser for now.”

Ah, but as a young woman, it seemed it was Airi Kakitsubata’s destiny to say things she shouldn’t. “It’s wrong to lend your accounts to other people, isn’t it?”

“I-It is... Well, technically, yes,” President Azami responded with a forced smile. “Though as devs, we tend to overlook it, as long as it doesn’t cause greater problems... For instance, if two brothers are *NaroFan* players, and the little brother sometimes logs into the big brother’s account to have fun, we can’t scold them for that every time.”

“The current situation seems a little more serious than that, though,” Airi said.

“We’ll just pretend we never saw it. Right, President Azami?” The one offering this absolutely un-lawyer-like statement was Shunsaku Shaga. “That rule is in there to prevent RMT and unauthorized access anyway, although the person he’s lending it to is someone who’s behind serial unauthorized access incidents... Well, an account is like personal property, so I don’t think it’s necessary to complain about lending them within the family in general, even if it is technically against the rules.”

“You’re a lawyer of fuzzy logic, as always,” she said.

“Well, there’s a lot of fuzziness in the law.”

It would be something else if there was some clear harm being done, like money changing hands, but otherwise, it seemed, the devs typically overlooked such things. Airi and Ichiro both nodded in agreement with that logic. They had already witnessed a few instances of accounts being lent out.

“Though since accounts are registered to the individual, they’re a bit different from property,” Ichiro added.

“We’ve managed to muddy the waters. Don’t mess it up,” Shaga replied, delinquent lawyer that he was.

“Well, it’s not really relevant to us, since none of us—the young heir, Kirschwasser, me, and Rosemary—have any *NaroFan* players in our family,” Airi said.

Shaga's expression became amused, and he took his own opportunity to stir up the conversation. "That's not true, Airi. There's such a thing as common-law marriage."

"What are you all talking about?" came a voice from behind them.

"Eek!" Airi screeched. It was Fuyo, who had just returned after fixing up her makeup.

Luckily, it seemed she hadn't overheard any of the more dubious parts of the conversation, but Airi still felt a powerful sense of duty to keep the current line of conversation from continuing.

"N-Nothing, Fuyo! That's right, um, there was something I had to ask you about design! Could I have a minute?"

"I don't mind... but is this really the best time?"

"It's a race against time! Let's talk outside the office."

"Oh, really... If you insist, Iris."

Led by Iris, Fuyo left the office once more with an unsatisfied expression.

After watching them leave, Shaga whispered, "Of course, there's a financial transaction between you and your maid, which means common law marriage can't apply."

"I think this line of discussion has exhausted itself," Ichiro said. "Let's go back to our previous subject."

"That's right. But let me tell you just this one thing." Shaga's expression became oddly serious. "Common law marriage does allow for 'freedom of coupling,' by which I mean sex."

"What are you talking about?" President Azami burst in. Her face was the only one that stayed red from beginning to end.

“The trend for summer is full-body whites and pastels, but since we’re getting into fall/winter, I think it would be nice to focus on a single light pop of color,” Fuyo said.

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.”

“They say that houndstooth will be popular during this fall/winter season, so perhaps you could integrate that.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Fuyo was politely offering an explanation regarding the subject Airi had broached. She used her smartphone to capture trends, which meant she had saved various design pictures and video files on it, even from several seasons ago, and that by itself was extremely useful to Airi. It was a mountain of treasure, and it had Airi watering at the mouth.

She did wonder if she’d been imposing on Fuyo too much of late, but getting to talking with a real designer who was as far above her as the moon from the Earth was something she had to take advantage of. Airi Kakitsubata had grown enough to not sabotage herself with such thoughts.

The two were using one of the break rooms (somewhat without permission) above the office. Fuyo was staring at her smartphone, and Airi was taking notes with a notebook she had effectively stolen, though she couldn’t remember where she had picked it up.

Fuyo was watching her with a smile. “You’re very eager to learn, aren’t you?”

“Mm. Well, I have no talent, after all.”

“Oh, ah...”

Seeing Fuyo unable to answer right away, Airi winced. “I know you can’t lie, Fuyo. It’s okay. I’ll just make up for it with hard work. After all, only 1% of success is genius. The other 99% is perspiration.”

“W-Well, I suppose...”

Airi didn’t know the truth behind that Thomas Edison quote; therefore, she couldn’t perceive the dilemma that Fuyo was facing, wanting to correct her but being unable to.

At last, Fuyo said, “Incidentally, there was something I wanted to ask you, too, Iris.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Do you know what’s going on with Ichiro?” There was the vaguest hint of a threat behind Megumi Fuyo’s glowing smile.

“W-Well... see...”

“I know you can’t lie, either, Iris.”

That was true, it seemed. Ever since she had been a very small child, Airi’s grandfather had taught her that truth was beauty. Viewed objectively, she realized she may have taken that teaching a little too literally. But in a culture where people rarely said what they were thinking, Airi Kakitsubata was the rare sort of woman who could use her tongue as a weapon.

Using one’s tongue as a weapon made scheming very difficult.

How, then, should she respond? Airi wasn’t a monster (even if some might say that she was something much worse). She had the skill of “Sympathy,” which she could activate to choose her words carefully to keep from hurting a dear friend when she had to break bad news. The situation wasn’t exactly that serious, but if she just told her straight, she knew that the information would probably hurt Fuyo a lot.

“Well, even if I don’t tell you, you’ll probably find out someday, so I’ll give you the whole story,” Airi said.

So, in the end, she did tell her the whole story, mixing in her own opinions here and there while glossing over some things. She did cleverly leave out the part where Ichiro lived alone in a house with the woman who played Kirschwasser and Yozakura; it was the one thing she couldn’t bring herself to be completely honest about. She doubted there was any funny business going on between the alien organism that was Ichiro Tsuwabuki and the woman living under his roof, but she didn’t know for sure, and whether or not it was happening probably wouldn’t matter to Fuyo herself.

But despite her attempts to tell the whole story, the information Airi had was sporadic. One of the artificial intelligences that managed *NaroFan*, an individual codenamed Rosemary, had acquired self-awareness through her conversations with Ichiro, and now appeared to be in something like love with him. That was about all she knew.

“So, this Rosemary has been illegally accessing their office from Ichiro’s house?” Fuyo asked.

“Um, yeah, basically. I don’t know all the specific motives involved, but the reason she took over the young heir’s avatar was apparently to learn more about him.” Airi went on to explain all she knew about the original account hack incident, then added, “It’s funny how she loves the young heir, but at the end of the day, she just keeps causing more trouble for him, isn’t it?”

“Ah, I understand that perfectly.”

Airi was surprised by how calmly Fuyo was taking all this. She’d assumed Fuyo would be angry.

“I made a great deal of trouble for both you and Ichiro, didn’t I? I don’t condone what Rosemary has done, but that’s just how

love is.”

She was so mature, Airi thought. She wasn’t going to voice a single complaint. “So, you acknowledge that it’s love? Even though she’s an AI?”

“Even if she is an AI, she has feelings for Ichiro,” Fuyo said. “I can’t let my guard down. I don’t know how powerful a rival she might be, but that’s still what she is. And if so, then I must fight in the usual way.”

“Fuyo...” Airi was beginning to get emotional. Moved, she took her friend’s hands. “I really do admire you, both as a designer, and as a woman.”

“Iris...”

Such was the blazing friendship between women.

Of course, neither of them knew that Rosemary didn’t even see Fuyo as a rival, but perhaps ignorance was bliss.

Airi and Fuyo returned to the office, the bond between them even deeper than before. It seemed the uncomfortable conversation was finished; when they arrived, Ichiro, the lawyer Shaga, and President Azami were sitting together silently, with pensive expressions on their faces. They must have hit a dead end.

There was a saying: “three people together contain the wisdom of Buddha.” She had thought that, together, a genius of the humanities, a genius of the sciences, and some other kind of genius would have created a force to be reckoned with. But apparently, the discussion hadn’t gone smoothly at all.

“Ah... is everything okay?” Airi asked.

“Mm, it is, and it’s not,” said Ichiro.

Which one is it? Airi thought, but declined to ask.

“It seems that a true solution is proving difficult to find,” he explained. “The truth remains that Rosemary did commit a crime, and that I have covered for that crime.”

“The same goes for Thistle and Pony, too,” Shaga added. “Pony ignored Thistle’s wishes and reported Tsuwabuki for illegal access, and Thistle gave Pony a false report about Rosemary’s actions. Poking at that could hurt both parties.”

Adults really have it rough, Airi thought, self-servingly. “Young heir, can’t you just go bam, boom, zap, and fix things with your you-know-what as usual?”

“Yes, I could, if I wanted to.” Ichiro said it so casually, Airi was at a loss for words. “Money is an even more powerful force than you think, assuming you know who to throw it at. But that is against the rules.”

“You follow rules?” she asked skeptically.

“I think it’s important that this world not be mine alone,” Ichiro said, immediately expanding the scale of the conversation. He cast a glance at Airi, then at Fuyo, then at Shaga and President Azami, then at the silently working office worker, before continuing. “You do not live for my sake; none of you do.”

Airi clamped a hand over Fuyo’s mouth, realizing she probably would have shouted, “I do live for you, Ichiro!”

“The world does not exist for my sake, and that’s what makes it interesting. While it would be easy to bend the rules, that is territory onto which I must never, ever tread. I never want to give the world permission, even for an instant, to exist for me.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” Airi snorted.

At her blunt words, Ichiro laughed slightly, then looked at a corner of the office. The man who was hunched over and facing his PC twitched slightly as Ichiro's eyes fell upon him.

Ichiro said pleasantly, "I've been told that before."

"Does that make you happy?" Airi asked.

"I suppose it does."

"Tsuwabuki's philosophical reasons don't matter." Shaga seemed to want the conversation to move along, too. "What does matter is that as long as he's unwilling to use his money to grease the wheels, we have to reach a solution the honest way. First, we need to prove that it was Rosemary who was behind the illegal access, and that Tsuwabuki himself is innocent. Next, we need to prove that Rosemary should not be treated as a mere program, but as an individual with free will. That would prove that President Azami can't be held responsible for creating a virus. That turns the point of issue into how Rosemary should be dealt with. In the process, Thistle and Pony may both have to pay for their role in the cover-up, and Tsuwabuki and President Azami may also be asked to take responsibility for raising Rosemary to be what she is."

The lawyer could give quite a speech, though perhaps that wasn't surprising. Thanks to him, Airi and Fuyo at last understood the situation they were in clearly. It was sounding like a genuinely dicey situation. In addition to that, while Shaga was rattling off the points rather swiftly, there was no telling how much time it would take to clear through each of them.

"Either way, it's necessary that Rosemary 'turn herself in,' so to speak," he finished.

"True," Ichiro agreed. "But I think we can leave that point to Sir Kirschwasser. If he can persuade Rosemary, that would be the best thing for her, I think."

The view was finally starting to clear. The future ahead didn't look terribly bright, but being able to see the road ahead brought with it a certain sense of relief. At least, that was how Airi felt. Fuyo and the others had gone a bit pale at the thought of what Ichiro might have still to go through.

Airi looked at the clock and found that, at some point, it had become evening. Quite a lot of time had passed, it seemed.

"It's a bit early, but let's have dinner," Ichiro said. "President Azami, shall we go to the curry restaurant we visited before?"

Azami Nono had been staring silently into space, but she immediately smiled and nodded at that. "Ichiro, do you like that place, by chance?"

"I suppose I do. Iris, Shaga, Megumi, are you coming?"

Airi and Shaga nodded, naturally, but it was Fuyo who leaped to her feet. "A-Am I invited?!"

"Yes," he said. "I have no intention of always leaving you on the outs, even if it does often happen as the natural result of things."

"C-Certainly! Please allow me to join you!"

She thought they'd eaten together at the Knights' restaurant, too, but that had been more just something that had ended up happening; Fuyo seemed to find it important that Ichiro was inviting her personally. It was a bit sad, really.

"Well, I need to finish my work for the day. Could you wait a minute?" Azami asked.

"Mm."

Azami went back to her desk.

Just as the atmosphere in the room was starting to come together, Ichiro looked back to the man typing fervently at his keyboard in a corner of the office. He seemed to be trying to sink into his desk to escape Ichiro's gaze.

"Ed, I assume you're not coming," Ichiro said. "Is that correct?"

The man struck the desk with a bang and stood up. He was scrawny and rather unhealthy-looking, but he glared at Ichiro with fiery irritation.

"I'll go."

There were so many opinions about Ichiro.

"Tsuwabuki, eh? I'll tell you, buddy, he's a strange one. Not that I'm one to talk..."

"I can say this since he isn't here, but his whale play has done huge damage to the reputation of the Knights! In that regard, I hate him!"

"I feel the same way Stroganoff does."

"Oh, him... he seems rather wealthy. I envy him. He probably doesn't have to work, so he can play games to his heart's content."

"To be honest, I haven't interacted with him much."

"He's gotten the better of me a few times, though at least it made for good blog material. If you leave him to his own devices, he'll always find a way to foul up the works. Even this last time..."

"I find his indifference to the feelings of others detestable."

"I find his natural talent detestable."

“I guess I’m grateful for him for discovering Ai’s talent and becoming her friend...”

“Well, he’s not as purr-fect as me, that’s for sure. He doesn’t seem to have many friends.”

“He is unique, certainly. He seems to have a doctorate at his young age, and while it’s not in my own field of scholarship, I have to respect him.”

“My knife, you see, is coated in poison!”

“Is this really the place?” Kirschwasser asked skeptically as the knife-wielder dissolved into particles of light. “Has this been useful to you at all?”

“I do not know.” There was a calm sort of confusion mixed into Yozakura’s expression.

The players who had known Ichiro Tsuwabuki for close to two months all seemed to have fairly firm opinions about him. Yozakura/Rosemary’s thought algorithms could sort through the multiple contradictory opinions and offer an overall judgment (or so she had claimed), and while it shouldn’t have been hard for her to sort out the variety of opinions people had about Ichiro, it seemed to Kirschwasser that her own biases about him might have been acting as a wall in that regard.

Regarding his recent arrest, almost everyone had had the same opinion: “I don’t think he’s the type to commit a crime, but I had a feeling he’d be on the news some day.” That was also the opinion of Kirschwasser/Sakura Ogi, who had been his servant for five years, so it was probably as close to objective truth as one could get.

Kirschwasser and Yozakura were currently sitting in a branch of the Adventurers’ Guild in Martial City Delve. Despite being a city, Delve had its combat restrictions between players lifted so

that they could get into street fights, which meant the guild building was one of the few anti-combat zones there that all players could share. In other cities, the Adventurers' Guild was mostly a place players would visit to achieve specific ends, such as founding guilds or changing classes, but here in Delve, many players used it as a hangout.

Kirihito (Leader) had followed them all the way here for some reason, and leaders of small guilds, such as Yuri, as well as guildless players, such as Amesho and Tomakomai, had all stopped by to witness the rare sight of Kirschwasser and Yozakura together.

"It sorta takes me back," Amesho said. "This is the first place I ever met Tsuwabuki..."

She gazed out the window to the streets of Delve, tail swishing. The human mind shouldn't have been capable of mimicking the motion, but she had apparently put great effort into mastering it. Apparently "looking cute" was all the practical purpose Amesho needed to find a skill worthy of dedicated pursuit.



“The same applies to me... Actually, doesn’t it apply to most of us?” Tomakomai agreed.

He was a legendary hero who had been said to have never logged out once since the service began, but thanks to the service outage the other day, that record had been interrupted. Still, he showed no signs of regretting it, and had even stated he was happy that it meant he could attend Iris’s online meetup. Iris had invited him, it seemed.

“We met him in Glasgobara, but it was around the same time. Strange how it feels like a fond old memory, but it was only a little over a month ago...” Yuri agreed.

As if to pick up on that, Stroganoff folded his arms and agreed heartily. “The fight with the Devil Zombie, the fight with Duplichiro... It’s been an exciting summer. Though we haven’t gotten much spotlight during it.”

“The fashion show, too,” said Taker. “The maidenly heart of our former leader really was burning then.”

“I had quite a lot of fun,” Sorceress agreed. “I think you did too, Taker.”

Taker nodded in agreement, then seemed to search back in his memories. “For heaven’s sake... Anywhere I go, he shows up.”

“Trouble does seem to follow him mew-round.”

“But I never expected that he’d be arrested...”

The atmosphere was like one of a funeral.

Yozakura remained silent. She must have felt some responsibility for getting him arrested.

“Incidentally, why did you want to know more about him?”

Here, it was Yuri who finally asked the natural question.

For some reason, it was Kirihito (Leader) who spoke up, with an air of pride. “Don’t be shocked when you hear it. It seems Yozakura here has a crush on Tsuwabuki!”

“I’m shocked.”

“I told you not to be shocked!”

It was hard to believe that Tomakomai was really shocked by it, but Yuri and Amesho seemed genuinely so. There was something perversely enjoyable about the sight of Amesho acting surprised by something.

“I-Is that true?” Yuri asked trepidatiously.

“There are parts of him I cannot understand, but...” Yozakura hedged before answering, “I have tremendous interest in Ichiro.”

“You’ve got me- *ousy* taste.”

“Hush!” Yuri quickly planted a hand over Amesho’s all-too-honest mouth.

“Well, love is always a cyclone, as they say,” Kirschwasser told them.

“Don’t you mean a hurricane?” Yuri asked.

“I prefer the Cyclone. Especially the newer one.”

Yuri seemed confused by Kirschwasser’s laid-back attitude. “Um...”

“What is it?”

“You’re a woman, too, aren’t you, Mr. Kirsch?”

“Yes,” Kirschwasser answered, having a good idea of what her next question would be.

“Don’t you have any feelings about this?”

Kirschwasser couldn’t help but laugh. It was just as he’d expected. “You want to hear me say it in my current voice?”

“Actually, no.”

“I thought not.”

The group, consisting of Airi, Shaga, Fuyo, President Azami, and Edogawa, arrived at the curry shop. It was a large, diverse group, and Airi wondered what they must look like to observers. The difference in ages was too unnatural for it to be a mixer. Still, the employees there didn’t look at them as anything too unusual; given that they weren’t far from Akihabara, they were likely used to odd groups of people coming together for offline meetups.

In a way, this *was* an offline meetup. Aside from Shaga, they all had avatars of a sort in *NaroFan*. Airi was a little unhappy about her long-awaited first online meetup taking this bizarre form, but there was no point in saying that right now. To the contrary, she decided she would enjoy it, as a rehearsal of sorts.

“I was surprised to see you there, Edward,” she told him.

“I told you I was on a business trip to Tokyo.” Domon Edogawa, a.k.a. Edward, had a severe look on his face as he glared at his menu, an odd mismatch for the warm tone of his voice (which was very unlike his monotony in the game).

When she pointed that out, Edogawa cast a glance at Ichiro sitting next to him, and responded, “I understand basic politeness, that’s all,” and nothing more.

“You make it sound like the young heir and I don’t understand basic politeness.”

“You don’t,” Shaga said with a cackle.

“It’s a good restaurant, though,” Ichiro commented, focused only on his own affairs, as usual. “It’s my third time here. The first time was with President Azami, the second with Ed.”

On an otherwise gloomy day, the store itself was a single point of light. Ethnic music and aromas hovered in the air, giving the restaurant a pleasantly Indian feel. Airi opened her menu, hoping to enjoy an extremely authentic curry here, but she balked when she saw the first item listed included beef.

She was sitting between President Azami and Fuyo. and the president’s fingers, exceptionally slender perhaps due to days spent typing on a keyboard, flipped through Airi’s menu.

Airi felt a bit abashed at being stuck between these two geniuses, but she was at least in better shape than Edogawa, sandwiched between Shaga and the young heir. Watching his face tremble with tension, she was reminded of the first time they’d met.

“Mr. Edward, it’s been over a month since you laid into me, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“You really want to talk about that before we eat?” Edogawa asked, his face pinched.

President Azami, sitting to Airi’s left, winced. “Oh, that... I didn’t see it personally, but I do monitor situations like that. I got chills when I read the log afterwards.”

“Y-You read it?!” Edogawa yelped.

“VRMMOs are delicate games. We have to check from time to time to make sure players aren’t experiencing exceptional levels

of stress and fear.” That was a bit surprising to hear, Airi thought, given the way the zombies in the Necrolands seemed designed realistically to inspire greater terror.

“I’m sure it’s not your fault. Airi is just so very good at making people angry,” Fuyo said with a teasing smile.

“Hold on a minute, Fuyo,” Airi protested. “I’m pretty sure it’s someone else’s fault that you and Edward came after me.”

“I believe I’ll have the Dinner Set A,” said Ichiro.

“How can you be choosing your meal while we’re talking about this?! And I’ll have the same!” Airi shouted.

Wasn’t he the one whose actions had turned Edward and Megumi Fuyo’s ire towards her? Now that she thought about it, this recent incident had been just the same way. It was so annoying. It was annoying, but the Dinner Set A that the young heir had chosen did look delicious, so Airi had picked that, too.

“Set A comes with a drink, it looks like,” said Edogawa.

“I’ll have orange juice, I think,” said Ichiro. “Since I’m driving today.”

“Yeah, and I’m underage,” said Airi.

“I’m going to drink,” said Edogawa. “I can’t not drink.”

“Edogawa, they say drinking while you’re stressed can cause cancer,” Shaga told him.

Though, given that he was sitting between Ichiro and Shaga, he was likely to get an ulcer before he got cancer.

As they kept up their conversation inside the cozy restaurant, they placed their orders to the chef behind the counter. The attractive middle-aged man with short-trimmed facial hair nar-

rowed his eyes, said, “Understood,” and then headed into the kitchen with the determination of a mujahideen going into battle.

Edogawa and Fuyo were the only ones who ordered alcohol; the young heir and Shaga would be driving home, and Airi and Azami were underage.

Airi was absolutely stunned when she learned that President Azami was closer to her age than to Fuyo’s. She restrained herself from explaining why she was surprised, and the others let it pass, recognizing that inquiring would deal some psychological blow to either President Azami or to Fuyo.

“But why milk?” Airi muttered, eyes on the glass of white liquid in Shaga’s hand.

“You’d do well to drink it, too, Airi, dear,” he said.

“Is that a knock at my physical or my mental status?”

Shaga set down his spoon, and looked all around the table. “Something extremely rude just came to mind, but I’ll refrain from saying it.”

“So, you’re angling for a fight.”

Incidentally, there’s a theory that the mightiest being on the planet is a high school girl. As a trade school girl, Airi would technically be of a different species. But considering that she had conquered both Edward and Fuyo in the game, real-life Airi was surely close to invincible. Though of course, she had matured to a degree, as well.

“Iris, having you here spares me the need to point out the nonsense in all of Shaga’s statements,” Ichiro said as he ate, an incredible smile on his face.

“What, you’re leaving the objections to me?” she sputtered.

“Your tongue is razor-sharp, Miss Iris,” Edogawa murmured in agreement as he brought the a spoonful of “mild” ogura-green tea curry to his mouth.

Over the plates piled high with incredible food, the group did not try to make eye contact. The sharp tongue in question had insisted repeatedly that “mild” didn’t mean “sweet,” but he looked happy every time he took a mouthful of it, so she’d decided not to press the issue.

“One does tend to feel it through one’s body,” Fuyo said.

“It’s a good thing it wasn’t awakened two months ago,” Azami agreed.

“No, I saw glimpses of her talent from the start,” Ichiro smiled.

“Ngh.” Even the mighty Airi had to flinch in the face of such a barrage. At some point, she’d found herself on hostile territory. Of course, the situation was completely of her own making—a razor might have a sharp cutting edge, but it could easily snap when pressure was applied from the side. At the end of the day, she had dumped all of her points into attack, with few left for defense.

“Airi, do you know why Indians treat cows as sacred?” Shaga asked, a glass of milk in one hand.

Hoping for a change of subject, Airi naturally jumped on the question. “Oh, I don’t know. Because of Hinduism?”

“It’s because milk goes best with curry.”

“Oh, I see...” Airi’s face quickly turned white. At times like these, she was an open book.

Just then, Ichiro received a call on his cell phone. He said, “Excuse me,” then pulled out his smartphone. It seemed it wasn’t a phone call but an e-mail, and he gazed at the phone for quite a

while.

“Who’s it from?” Airi asked.

“My father. Very unusual.”

“Y-Your father?!” Fuyo jumped to her feet. “P-Please allow me to give him my regards!”

“Fuyo, calm down,” said Airi. “It’s an e-mail.”

“Why is that unusual? You were just on the news being arrested this morning. Isn’t it natural that he would be worried?” President Azami asked.

Her words were perfectly logical, but Ichiro put his smart-phone in his jacket pocket and shook his head. “My father rarely says anything about anything I do.”

His father’s name hadn’t been on the list of relatives who called him at the police station earlier. Meiro Tsuwabuki, “shifty manipulator,” just didn’t meddle much in Ichiro’s life. It had always been that way. Part of that was trust, of course, which meant that when he did go out of his way to get in touch with him, something else had to be going on to supersede that trust.

Other than that, he regularly sent New Year’s and Bon gifts, along with letters basically telling Ichiro to come help him with his work, though those had become primarily ceremonial gestures.

President Azami and Edogawa had apparently decided not to pursue the topic. They were under no obligation to be considerate of Ichiro, but the two, who were good at reading the mood, simply remained silent throughout the discussion. Meanwhile, Airi seemed to have her hands full just keeping Fuyo silent.

Just then, Shaga stood up from his place on the other side of Edogawa. He pulled a pack of Seven Stars from his jacket pocket

and looked all around.

“A cigarette?” Ichiro asked.

“Yeah, time to sate the nicotine craving,” said Shaga.
“Tsuwabuki, come join me for a smoke.”

“Mm.” Ichiro didn’t smoke, but he agreed immediately. With Airi keeping Fuyo held down, the two more introverted members of the party would be left alone together, but as they seemed to be enjoying their curry very much, he decided not to worry about it.

The chef said there were ashtrays outside, so Ichiro and Shaga left the restaurant.

“You wanted to talk?” Ichiro asked.

“Yes. Let me get a cigarette first.”

Ichiro had broached the subject immediately once they were outside, but Shaga didn’t seem to be in any kind of a hurry. Still, him having asked Ichiro to join him for a smoke was an immediate sign he wanted to talk about something in particular.

Though it was summer, it was two months past the solstice, and nights were falling a bit earlier. By the time the two made it outside, the streets of Jinbocho were already dim. The smoke Shaga exhaled wafted hazily beneath the street lamps. The evenings were still as sweltering as ever, but he could hear some hasty crickets begin their song in the underbrush.

“Changed your brand again?” Ichiro asked.

“Yeah, it’s a little superstition I have. I change it every time something bad happens to me. I’ve gone through the whole cycle, and I’m back to Seven Stars.”

It struck Ichiro that he must have changed cigarette brands quite often while they were running that detective office five years

ago.

“Now, the thing I wanted to talk about...”

“Yes?” Ichiro asked. From their current positions, he couldn’t see the expression on Shaga’s face.

“I’ve been thinking some things over, and I decided I should tell you this.”

“You’re putting on airs again.”

“Atmosphere is important for things like this,” said Shaga. “Anyway, it’s about the Rosemary thing.”

If he had waited until now to say it, it must be something rather serious, Ichiro thought, and silently urged him to continue.

“It might be tricky to get Rosemary treated as an individual with free will.”

“Mm.” Ichiro closed his eyes and let the words hit him with full force. “Even with your skill?”

“Well, you see... now, this might run a bit long.”

“Proceed.”

Shaga put his cigarette out in the ashtray. There was a period of silence, and then he spoke again. “First, all the technology President Azami has come up with, Rosemary included, is incredible. It goes way beyond what our existing laws were designed to deal with. Thistle Corporation has become a huge topic of conversation not just in the economic world, but in the legal world, too.”

Ichiro was realizing these statements were a mere prelude to the talk that was going to “run a bit long.”

President Azami, Shaga went on to explain, had developed

Rosemary, the Ten Sages, and cutting-edge virtual reality technology. In particular, the Drive technology, which used resonance between quantum information and brain waves to plunge the user consciously into a virtual world, had sent shock waves through every sector of society.

Ichiro knew the repercussions in the economic world as well as Shaga knew them in the legal world, but it seemed there was more to it than that. For instance, he had learned from Tomakomai how Drive technology was being treated in the medical world. Many people in medical-related fields were skeptical about the effects that Drive technology might have on the body, and Tomakomai was literally putting his life on the line to prove that their skepticism was groundless.

“The truth is, we’ve already had people pointing out deficiencies in our legislation when it comes to handling Drive technology. For instance... hm, yeah.” Shaga thought for a minute, then continued. “Your maid. She uses a male avatar, right? And it comes with a man’s voice, naturally?”

“Yes. She said it was a voice actor she’s fond of.”

“But they didn’t necessarily record and sample that voice,” Shaga said. “Apparently, they got that full cooperation from some voice actors, but many voice actors have merely loaned out the use of their names.”

It took even Ichiro’s swift mind a few minutes to grasp his meaning. “Ah, the collective intelligence system?”

“Yep. They use it to amalgamate the general ways people *think* that voice actor sounds into a cohesive image. Then, signals representing a corresponding voice are sent directly to the brain. I don’t know all the details, but that’s apparently how they do it when they only lease the rights to use the name.”

“Which means they can use deceased actors’ voices, too,”

Ichiro said.

“Apparently, there are dead voice actors whose agencies have rented out use of their names, yeah,” Shaga said. “It’s a little unsavory, but being able to use a voice you’d otherwise never get to hear again makes for a pretty popular feature. So, do you see what I’m getting at?”

Using the virtual space created through Drive technology, the dead could be made to speak again. Most players were probably choosing voices without thinking about it, but as the practice became more pervasive, it would erode people’s ideas about value more than ever before. Naturally, that was cause for concern. But that wasn’t what Shaga, as a lawyer, was trying to say.

To create a voice completely out of common knowledge of that voice, you needed a voice actor’s name to become the basis for that knowledge. It was a practice that could shake the very foundation of the legal notion of “likeness rights.”

“And voices are just one problem,” Shaga went on. “‘Likeness rights,’ you know? In the legal world, they’re a big deal right now. Thistle wanted to keep things amicable, so during development, they bought the rights to the voice actors, even if they were just using the name, but...”

“There’s a chance that future VR products might not keep things so amicable.”

“Precisely. Anyway, back to the main subject. That’s one field in which people want to get the things Drive technology can do on clearer legal footing, even if it means changing the law itself.” Shaga paused, then continued. “Japan is a country that puts code of law first, but precedent still matters. Without established legislation, when a trial about Drive technology comes up, there’s a good chance that whatever decision they make could have an influence on future legislation.”

Ichiro was starting to understand what he was saying. It wasn't just Drive technology; any ruling about Rosemary in court could also have an influence on future legislation. In a void, that would just mean that it was a problem that needed a careful legal ruling, but Ichiro knew the darkness of the world too well.

There were people out there who wouldn't take kindly to the idea of changing the current laws. Some would profit from it, and others wouldn't. If Rosemary was deemed an individual by a court, the creation of laws to govern sentient programs would be unavoidable. This would make problems for some segments of the world. Of course, one could say the same about Drive technology in general.

"There's a faction of people who would want to pressure the ruling so that they could craft legislation to be more favorable to them," Shaga explained. "That's what I'm trying to say. That's what's difficult about the Rosemary thing."

"Have you told President Azami about this?"

"No. She doesn't realize she's at the eye of a hurricane, though she's going to have to find out someday."

Ichiro pulled his smartphone out of his pocket. He still hadn't opened the e-mail his father had sent him earlier.

The man was a shifty manipulator, but he generally had faith in Ichiro. Yet he had gone to the trouble of sending him an e-mail...

A fatherly warning, perhaps. Ichiro's intuition drew a natural link between his father's e-mail and Shaga's words. There could be more turbulence ahead.

With that in mind, Ichiro returned his cell phone to his pocket. "Well, I'll pray this incident doesn't cause you to lose your taste for those cigarettes."

“I’d rather have your efforts than your prayers.”

Shaga got ready to smoke another cigarette, but Ichiro had only agreed to stick around for one, and thus, he returned to the restaurant.

It was well into the night by the time they had finished their curry, and they were now sitting around, relaxing. It was the end of a very long—or very short, by some measures—day. Each paid their own bill, and they left the restaurant, heading out together into the hot, humid Tokyo night. The spontaneous offline meetup was winding down.

“Thanks for tonight, everyone,” Airi said, holding the limp Fuyo on her back. Megumi Fuyo had been left in a state of bleary half-consciousness thanks to her heavy drinking.

“Thank you, as well,” Ichiro said. “Will you be able to handle Megumi?”

“Yeah. If I get her to Kanda Station, someone from the Mizuno Group can come and get her, she said.”

“Mm, good,” Ichiro said.

Fuyo didn’t seem like the type of person who could hold her liquor, yet she had been surprisingly eager to drink. Getting plastered like this was unseemly behavior for the heiress to a big corporation, and while it happened rarely enough, she’d probably get a scolding from her father later for it. What was even worse, she had done it in public.

“You know, if you’re so worried about her, you *could* help...” Airi’s razor tongue did not suffer at all for her body being nearly crushed beneath the other woman’s weight.

“I don’t have time for that,” Ichiro said. “I need to finish things

up quickly so that I can enjoy our offline meetup.”

“Fair enough. I’ll take care of her, then.”

“Please do. Goodbye.”

Airi was a bit shorter than Fuyo, so the woman’s pumps scraped along the ground as Airi tottered off down the sidewalk. The group watched as her silhouette—or more precisely, the silhouette of Fuyo, carried on her back—disappeared into the darkness.

“She’s a good girl,” Shaga said. “But with an edge.”

“She gets ten points to all craft skills by default...” Edogawa murmured. He’d been discreet in the amount of alcohol he drank, and there was no sign of stumbling in his walk, but the softening of his prickly demeanor was probably the power of the alcohol. He had said he was staying at a nearby business hotel, so he was probably going to walk home.

“Well, I’m going, too,” Ichiro said. “I did bring a Miraive Gear with me, but I won’t have any time, so I probably won’t see you until the next offline meetup.” It sounded like he intended to take part in it.

In his usual low voice, without the slightest trace of excitement, Edogawa said to Ichiro, “Let me know if there’s any way I can help with Rosemary, too. You can get in touch with me through Shaga.”

“When will you ever be honest with your feelings?” Ichiro asked.

“Please don’t say it that way. It’s upsetting, even as a joke.” With that, Edogawa turned on his heel and began walking in the direction opposite the one Airi had gone in.

Shaga also dismissed himself, claiming he had some docu-

ments he wanted to clear up before morning. As a result, Ichiro and Azami were left behind together.

Ichiro was gazing up at the sky.

“What’s the matter, Ichiro?” she asked.

“Nothing. I was just thinking back on the first time I played *NaroFan* ...”

“Are you getting sentimental?”

“Nonsense.”

It had all started when his second cousin Asuha had asked him to join the game to try to find King Kirihito. It felt strange, now, to think that she had been the start of it all.

They had been at his great-grandfather’s birthday party, in the restaurant on top of that towering hotel. From its heights, he had lorded over that view of the city at night. A view that included Jinbocho. Back before he had known Airi or Edogawa... It was hard to believe that had been a mere two months ago.

“If not for your cousin, I would never have met you,” Azami said.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Ichiro replied. “Asuha was the one who started it, but I think that one way or another, I would have developed interest in *NaroFan* , and tried playing it.”

“So, if I had asked you to play it, you would have been interested?”

“Perhaps there’s a world in which you did.” Ichiro shrugged jokingly. “A great deal has happened in the game these last two months. I can say one thing clearly: I’ve had fun. I’m very happy that I was able to learn that *NaroFan* exists, and to play it.”

“You’re making it sound like it’s all over.”

“Am I?” He gazed at the sky, eyes narrowed. There in the dark, its faint light reflected in the eyes of Ichiro Tsuwabuki. “Regardless, I do think we’ve reached a crucial juncture.”

His words made Azami feel suddenly anxious. She wondered if Ichiro Tsuwabuki knew something about this incident that she didn’t. His cool and detached mannerisms had always come with a seeming all-knowing perceptiveness, but this time, they made her especially nervous.

“To be honest, my hopes were not high at first... but it was more fun than I thought it would be,” Ichiro went on blithely, denying Azami her chance to inquire further. “Though I do think there’s room to improve on the game system front.”

“Ah... Ichiro?” she asked hesitantly.

“Hm?”

“May I ask what it is about our game that you like so much?”

Azami was the one who ran *NaroFan*’s development team, after all. She was in a position to read the activity logs of all players at all times, and with Ichiro Tsuwabuki being an important customer as well as a client, she was always monitoring what sorts of things he was doing in the game. (While it might seem a bit unsavory, the possibility of being monitored in this way was written clearly in the game’s terms of service.)

She knew, from this, that he did genuinely enjoy the game. What she couldn’t understand was why he enjoyed it so much. In this moment, she wasn’t asking as a developer trying to make her game better; she was simply curious.

“The first thing I liked was the craftsmanship,” Ichiro said. “I found it a well-realized world.” His eyes were gazing into the dis-

tance, perhaps remembering the continent of Asgard that had been burned into his brain via quantum waves. “Then I found I liked the players that I played with. Many of them shouted at me, but they were all enjoying the game. It was my first time really wanting to be a part of something like that.”

“The players?” Azami asked.

“You may not realize it, but I believe they all love the game you made. Do you remember Matsunaga? He’s quite famous, so I’m sure you do.”

Azami nodded in response.

“I believe that his investment in your game is many more times that of anyone else,” Ichiro said. “He may be genuinely upset about the thought of the service ending someday. Though I’m sure we all know that the idea of an online game you can play for 100 years is just a slogan...”

After Matsunaga, Ichiro described many of the other players. For instance, Stroganoff. It was apparently his first time playing an online game, but with the help of friends and a little luck, his “Knights” had become the top guild in the game. He was proud of that, and he dedicated himself more than anyone else to the game’s events and quests.

After the famous players, Ichiro named a few others; Azami was surprised to hear him show such an interest in so many people.

“I think you can take pride in creating a game that so many players can enjoy,” Ichiro added. “I, of course, am one of them.”

Hearing those words, which seemed to come from the heart, made Azami feel slightly maudlin. “But Thistle is no longer the game’s main developer.”

“That’s true. I don’t know how Pony may change the game in the future. That’s part of the crucial juncture we’ve arrived at, I believe.”

“Once this incident is resolved...” The words drifted naturally to her lips.

“Hmm?”

“...I’m going to see if I can get my leadership of *NaroFan* development back.”

The truth was, *NaroFan*’s development had grown far smoother since it had been transferred to Pony Entertainment. Cash flow had been greatly improved, and the game balance was also being tweaked. Azami had felt a great weight removed from her shoulders, too. The truth was, she wasn’t cut out to be a developer.

However...

She hadn’t finished making the game she and her team wanted to make, and she didn’t like having others mess with it before it was done. Hearing Ichiro’s words had made her realize that clearly for the first time.

“Though, as I said before, I think the balance and the system require some reworking,” he added.

Of course he couldn’t just let an honest compliment stand. Ichiro Tsuwabuki was a man of little mercy.

“W-Well, I’ll work on that...”

“For now, I’m just glad to see that you’ve cheered up,” Ichiro said. “That’s right. Once this incident is resolved...”

Ichiro lowered his voice as if chewing over the meaning of the words she had said moments ago.

Watching his face in profile, Azami remembered something. "Ichiro, ah, when you and Mr. Shaga got up to talk at dinner..."

"The contents of that conversation are top secret," he said. "Shaga may decide to speak to you about it sometime. But to be honest, it was a conversation with Shaga that convinced me to invite you out here. Those things you said before... I was glad I was able to hear them."

"Ichiro?"

"I think it's just about time now," Ichiro muttered after looking at his watch. "You don't want to be out too late. Shall I walk you home?"

As before, Ichiro was acting like he knew something she didn't. It got under her skin just a little.

"Speaking of which, Ichiro. Tomorrow's..." she began, when just then...

There was a squeal of tires as a car drifted around a corner and drove straight for them. It was a black minivan. Azami cringed, and nearly jumped into Ichiro's arms instinctively, but he remained calm, his bangs stirred slightly by the wind it kicked up.

The door opened with a bang, allowing a ball of energy in her early teens to come charging out.

"Itchy!!"

"Hey, Asuha." Ichiro raised a hand to the girl who leaped out. Azami was startled and bewildered, while he continued smiling in his usual cool way. "We were just talking about you. I'm surprised to see you here."

"I can't believe it! It's such a coincidence! Kiryu's mother drove us right from Nagoya, and then we just happened to see you right here..."

Asuha, or in other words, Asuha Tsuwabuki, glanced in the direction of the minivan. In the driver's seat was a woman who was probably in her thirties, waving and grinning. In the back seat was an androgynous child about Asuha's age, whose eyes were focused on a portable game screen. The child showed no sign of looking her way.

"Itchy! I heard you were arrested! Are you okay? What are you doing walking around here? What happened? You didn't break out, did you?!"

"Nonsense."

Asuha pressed herself on Ichiro and began tugging at his clothing, but Ichiro rebuffed her with his usual line. Ichiro cast a glance at Azami, then looked at Asuha and said this:

"Asuha, this is Azami Nono. She is the president of Thistle, the company that creates *NaroFan*."

"Oh, ah... ah!" At being introduced, Asuha suddenly straightened up and turned toward Azami with a bright smile. She seemed to be from a more middle-class upbringing than Ichiro was, but her manners were entirely proper.



“A pleasure to meet you, President Nono. I’m Asuha Tsuwabuki. I really enjoy your game.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

“That’s Kiryu. She’s King Kirihiro’s player.” Asuha pointed to the girl sitting in the back seat of the minivan, who suddenly seemed to realize she was being addressed, glanced out the window at Azami, and gave a quick nod.

With the introductions finished, Asuha spun around to face Ichiro once more.

“So, Itchy... what’s going on? Explain! Kiryu and I were both so worried!”

“King doesn’t seem worried at all.”

“Okay, so Kiryu wasn’t! I lied! I’m the main one who was worried!” Asuha cried as she bounced up and down. She really seemed to be a walking ball of energy.

Even so, Ichiro remained unfazed. “Now, Azami. It seems I’ll have to explain the situation to Asuha and her companions.”

“U-Um, Ichiro...” Azami spoke to Ichiro hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“About tomorrow’s ceremony...”

“Ahh.” Ichiro smiled slightly as she brought that up.

Asuha tilted her head in confusion at his reaction.

“I’m sorry, but I have a few pieces of business I’ll need to attend to tomorrow,” Ichiro said. “Besides, it wouldn’t be good for me to attend, having just been arrested.”

“Right...”

Pony Entertainment had issued a directive to disinvite Ichiro from the anniversary ceremony, but Azami hadn't tried to broach the subject until now. Ichiro probably hadn't guessed her dilemma, and even if he had, he wasn't the sort of man to make an excuse to protect her feelings... so it was probably true that he had business to attend to tomorrow. Still, Azami felt a little bit guilty over Ichiro bringing it up before she could.

“Anyway, let me walk you home, Azami,” Ichiro said.

“Ah? But, um...”

“I said I'd walk you home just before the others arrived. Thus, you take greater priority. Asuha, wait with King's mother for a while, won't you? I was planning on staying in a hotel tonight, so you could head there, if you wish.”

“Ah, okay. Got it.” Asuha took a tablet computer proffered to her by Ichiro while casting glances over at Azami. “We hadn't decided where we're staying yet, though...”

“Really? Shall I reserve you a room, then?”

“Hmm... Let me talk it over with Kiryu and her mother,” Asuha said, then ran back to the minivan with the tablet.

“Is it okay to just make them wait?” Azami asked.

“I decide what's okay and what's not. That's how I've always done things.” It was a roundabout way of speaking, but that was the only way Ichiro Tsuwabuki ever expressed himself.

Still, despite the way he stood there calmly, that implacably cool smile on his face, there was still something different about him. Even Azami, who hadn't known him long, could tell.

Afterwards, just as he had declared he would, Ichiro walked

Azami to her apartment. Still, she never did get a chance to ask him what was on his mind.

As the night went on, the number of players conversing in the guild had actually gone up. Evening through late night comprised the few hours when the employed could log in after work and share time with student players and others.

In other words, this was the time when “battle,” the most exciting element of a VRMMO, tended to pick up, and even in Martial City Delve, it was common to see players unaffiliated with guilds looking for pick-up parties to acquire experience and components. Hosting bulletin boards for such things was another function of the Adventurer’s Guild.

One way in which VRMMOs differed from regular MMORPGs was that at night, all players would take a break to log out at some point. This was because they couldn’t eat while logged in.

Real-world hunger wouldn’t affect one’s virtual world persona, but in spite of (and because of) that, the developers had instead instated an alarm system. If a person continued ignoring the warning messages that indicated changes in the signals to their brain, the system was set to log them out by force. There was no room for argument. Since getting logged out in the middle of a battle or other important scene could be a huge inconvenience to your party, the VRMMO was unusual in that the players who skipped proper meals were the ones treated as land mines.

Kirschwasser found it a good trend: The more a player got deeply involved in the game, the more they hated the idea of being thought of as a land mine. In addition to lowering the rate at which they’d be accepted into parties, they’d also be labeled someone who didn’t understand the game, which could be a huge blow to their pride.

As a result, everyone ate proper meals. They went to the bath-

room. They got sleep at night. Kirschwasser loved those alarm message windows.

This was also why “Eat proper meals” being part of the Red Sunset Knights’ code wasn’t something that was looked down on.

“I’m going to log out for now, too,” Tomakomai said with a peaceful smile. “I enjoyed my first meal in the real world in a long time the other day, and it confirms my belief that food should be eaten with one’s own mouth and digested with one’s own stomach.”

“I wonder who you are, Sir Tomakomai,” Kirschwasser said.

He chuckled. “Just a gamer. Goodbye.” With a logical smile behind his glasses, Tomakomai logged out.

Amesho watched him go, then let out a big yawn. “Well, guess it’s about that time. I’m gonna log out, too. Gotta eat! Taker, Sorceress?”

“I’ll eat, too. Today’s been way too long...”

“Speaking of which, Taker, I hope you’re eating properly. Are you?”

The three of them, who seemed to know each other in real life, logged out one by one.

Yuri watched them carefully, and looked about to log out herself, when she whispered softly, “Speaking of which, Ai hasn’t logged on today, huh?”

Kirschwasser looked up. It was true that he hadn’t seen Iris today.

“Maybe it was the shock of Mr. Tsuwabuki’s arrest?” Yuri questioned.

“I wonder. Iris isn’t the kind of person to get hung up on such things. I think you know that, don’t you?”

“Well, true, but she’s always been a little delicate, psychologically speaking...”

“Ahh...” Kirschwasser mused. Iris’s psychology was maximized for offense; not so much for defense. He was well aware of this; she was like a human version of gizami armor. “I’m more worried about Fuyo, personally. I hope she doesn’t resort to anything too drastic...”

“There’s something about those two that makes you worry, isn’t there?” Yuri sighed.

“They are both fine people, but things do tend to snowball when they’re left to their own devices,” Kirschwasser murmured. “Well, I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. Though I may worry if she goes for too long without logging in, for the moment, it would be premature.”

“Yes... I suppose. Well, I’m going to get something to eat.” With that, Yuri selected the log out option from her menu window.

“It seems I’m getting hungry, too,” Kirschwasser murmured, gazing at the red-bordered warning window that had appeared before his eyes.

“Father, will you feed yourself?” Yozakura asked.

“That was my intention.”

Yozakura fell silent.

“What’s the matter?” Kirschwasser asked curiously.

“I cannot take in food in the real world.”

“Aha...” Kirschwasser stroked his jaw, then nodded. “In other words, you feel lonely that you can’t join me for a meal.”

“I do not understand. It is nonsense.”

“I don’t mind. I can just convert the flavor of the food I make into data and transmit it to you.”

Yozakura seemed to have difficulty accepting his words, whispered so offhandedly. The expression didn’t appear on her face, but she put out an atmosphere of bewilderment. Such was the nature of the “feelings” she had expressed several times today. “Can that be done?”

“I believe that it can. Master Ichiro brought back a VR laboratory from America. It contains quite a few pieces of equipment that transfer sensory information into data.”

Ichiro hadn’t given Kirschwasser/Sakurako explicit instructions on how to use it, but for some reason, he had left the manual he’d made in his spare time lying around, so she assumed she could probably work it out. Even if he hadn’t done that, it was Sakurako who thoroughly cleaned the already-unused laboratory facilities, and scrutinizing those machines day after day, she had more or less figured out what everything did.

“It may be difficult to get textures across, though. I should choose something where texture doesn’t matter much. In other words, curry.” Grinning, Kirschwasser began preparing to log out.

Yozakura watched him indifferently. “Father, I do not aspire to that.”

“Don’t you? I think Master Ichiro would be impressed to hear that you had learned what it is ‘to eat.’”

“I aspire to it.”

“Good.”

Which meant that Rosemary wanted to impress Ichiro. Or perhaps she genuinely wanted to try eating, and was using that as an excuse. Either way, Sakurako was genuinely excited by the prospect of getting to show her cooking skills to an AI.

As Kirschwasser and Yozakura logged out together, they didn't realize that another player was watching them from the shadows.

“What do you think, Ms. Hishoyama?” Otogiri asked.

The fingers of the woman typing at her keyboard near the door stopped.

“The player of that avatar, Yozakura,” he continued. “Have you heard anything from Thistle?”

“No, sir, nothing in particular.”

“Hmm.” Otogiri gazed at the Miraive Gear on the table, then at the large box of lollipops set next to it. He chose one at random, unwrapped it, and put it in his mouth. “That lawyer boy must have colluded with them. They were lying about deleting that artificial intelligence.”

“It would seem so.”

“Hmm. I thought the Tsuwabuki boy was being awfully sloppy. So, that's the reason... Thistle will have to be penalized for this, too.”

The truth was that, when he had first learned that Ichiro Tsuwabuki might be engaging in unauthorized access, he had wanted to jump up on his desk and dance—in fact, he actually had—for the excellent chance it might give him to smear the man's father. He had forced himself to regain his calm, then begun issuing directives in all directions. Was the access route just part of a complicated mask from elsewhere? In other words,

was his joy premature?

The moment he'd received confirmation that the Ichiro Tsuwabuki household was definitely behind it, he'd reported the incident to the police. Given who Ichiro was, the police had also been hesitant to act, but he'd had a friend in the department higher-ups. Smoothly and legally, Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been arrested, but...

If the real perpetrator was an artificial intelligence, that changed the story. Ichiro Tsuwabuki was completely innocent; he had been wrongly arrested. Objectively speaking, Pony had to report everything they knew. At least if they did it now, it would keep the social damage done to Pony to a minimum—though either way, it was Thistle, who had filed the false report, that would take most of the damage. This would be an excellent opportunity to get Azami Nono fully under their umbrella. However...

“We really can’t leave that artificial intelligence at large, Ms. Hishoyama,” Otogiri said.

“Yes, sir.”

“We must delete what we said we would delete, Ms. Hishoyama.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ms. Hishoyama, are you sleepy, by chance?”

“Yes, sir.” His secretary was excellent, but she could also be a bit willful at times.

“Ah, well.” Otogiri looked up at the ceiling. “After I finish a bit of work, will you help me level up for a while?”

“Certainly.”

The secretary nodded obediently, and Otogiri crunched down

on his lollipop with a smile.

As he thought, the sweet simulation was not enough. He needed some other flavor added in.

3

Noble Son, Lay Groundwork

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up.

When she woke up, an unfamiliar ceiling greeted her. It wasn't just the ceiling, but the sensation of the bed she was lying on, which felt completely different from normal. The pillow was fluffy, and not only her eyes, but her nose, were treated to sensations of luxury she never before experienced in real life.

Something is strange, she thought.

What was with this overly extravagant space? What had happened last night?

Last night had been, she recalled... that spontaneous offline meetup for *NaroFan*. She'd heard the young heir had been arrested, so she'd run to the police station in shock, gone to lunch with him after he posted bail, met his lawyer, visited Thistle, and then one thing had led to another... and in the end, she'd carried the drunk Fuyo to Kanda Station.

"Morning, Airi. Did you sleep well last night?" The door opened, and Megumi Fuyo appeared.

That's right, Airi thought. She had decided to spend the night in Fuyo's house.

"Yeah, I think... I slept so well, my memory's a little fuzzy," Airi responded, rubbing at her eyes.

Some higher-up from the Mizuno Group had arrived at Kanda Station to pick her up. Airi had helped the unconscious Fuyo into her car, wished her good luck, then turned to go home. Then the bigwig had said, “Let us drive you home, too.”

Airi’s family were middle class, so she’d refused on the grounds that her parents would faint if she were brought home in a Tsunobeni Co. limousine. But they said they’d drop her off down the block, so she’d eventually given in. She had splurged a bit for dinner, after all, and she was happy to save on the train fare.

Fuyo had seemed to be passed out drunk, but in the car, she’d woken up and had thanked her profusely.

“I’m so sorry for the trouble,” she had said.

“Hey, it’s okay, we’re friends,” Airi had responded.

After that exchange, Fuyo had hugged her repeatedly, teary-eyed, suggesting she was still quite drunk.

She had then started talking about inviting her into her house. Airi had naturally tried to refuse, but Fuyo had insisted. In the end, Airi had relented, causing the older woman to shout in child-like delight.

What on Earth is going on? Airi had thought.

She had racked her brain, but the driver had told her quietly, “The young miss is pleased to have made a friend.”

Of course, she had thought. *Just like with the young heir.*

Fuyo’s house was in Mitaka, a mansion of the sort you only saw in anime and manga. So this was the power of the great Tsunobeni Co.... Airi was struck dumb by the sight.

Fuyo was still rather drunk, so they talked about fashion de-

sign, took a bath together, and looked at pictures from Fuyo's childhood. Airi couldn't claim she didn't enjoy it, and so, the evening had passed into night.

Airi had glanced at her cell phone and turned pale when she'd seen the incredible list of calls she'd received from her parents. Fuyo had called Airi's house for her and managed to smooth things over; then one thing had led to another, and Airi had ended up spending the night.

It had been a truly full day, Airi Kakitsubata reflected.

"Fuyo, are you sobered up now?" she asked.

"Ah, yes. I suppose I rather embarrassed myself yesterday..."

"Hey, that's no big deal... I think I acted a little weird, too. Kind of drunk on the atmosphere."

Airi got out of bed and stretched. She was in a guest room, but it was bigger and more luxurious than any hotel she'd ever stayed in. Fuyo had even lent her some pajamas. They were silk.

"Airi, I've had breakfast prepared," Fuyo said. "Would you join me?"

"Th-This is so much... I already feel so indebted to you... But, um, thanks."

Fuyo just laughed. "It's all right. You can take a shower first, too."

As suggested, Airi headed for the shower room. She didn't do anything as shameful as tossing aside her clothes. Part of it was that this was her friend's house, and the pajamas were borrowed, but she was also a fashion design student, and one thing she had learned in school was to show proper respect for clothes. As much as Airi hated the bony, stuck-up old head teacher with her old-fashioned red-rimmed glasses, she did respect her passion for

clothing.

The shower room was different from the bathroom they'd visited the day before, but it was about as large as a typical bathroom in a well-to-do family household. She felt a bit flustered about it, but she set the shower heat to its highest level and bathed her head in hot water.

This was the best way to wake herself up in the morning. Her grandfather had enjoyed this kind of thing, too... until one cold day, he'd had a heart attack from heat shock and died. He had always said, "If I die, I hope it's in a hot bath," so he probably didn't regret it, at least.

She washed off all her sweat from the night before, then lathered herself with a nylon towel she had also borrowed. The night before, Fuyo had said, "Your body looks so easy to wash." It had seemed a rather silly compliment.

While she washed the lather off her body, Airi gradually began feeling awake. She got out of the shower and dried off. Her clothes had been laundered at some point and nicely laid out. Even more incredibly, she'd been provided with new underwear.

"I guess... the rich really are rich..." Airi muttered, feeling a bit uncomfortable about the VIP treatment.

She'd seen the young heir's microtransacting-as-breathing many times in the game, and he'd taken her to a rather luxurious restaurant the day before, but being in an actual rich person's house made the difference in their economic status even clearer.

Airi got dressed and exited the changing room into the hall. Several women who looked like servants lined it; they all bowed to her, which honestly spooked her a little bit.

Fuyo was waiting there, too, and led her this time to the dining room.

Airi asked, “Is your house’s dining room also... you know... with the long table with the white cloth with the candlesticks on top...”

“Oh, how did you guess?”

Just as expected. She was exactly like rich people in manga and dramas.

Airi wasn’t all that interested in the economic world, and all she knew about the Mizuno Financial Group was, “Oh, like the bank.” Educated in the “pressure-free” era, she didn’t know that Mizuno Bank had been born from a merger of three banks when she was in elementary school, and she didn’t know about it being one of Japan’s three megabanks, nor of Tsunobeni Trading Co., the general trading company which had backed it until very recently. She didn’t even know what a general trading company did.

About all Airi knew about banks came from that recent drama where that creepy actor would smile a little and shout, “Payback!”

At any rate, Tsunobeni, formerly known as TTT, had recently become one of the five greatest trading companies, and Airi was currently standing in their headquarters. It was a dizzying world of moneyed people only seen in manga and dramas. A bubbly, luxury world.

Urged on by Fuyo, she sat down at a corner of the table so long she couldn’t see the other end, but she still couldn’t get over her itchiness. It must have been her deeply-rooted middle-class sensibilities, she thought.

“Airi, do you have any plans for today?” Fuyo inquired as Airi gripped her knife and fork trepidatiously, trying desperately to observe proper etiquette.

There was no one at the table except for them. Airi’s stress had been racing at mach speeds over the thought of eating with her

family, and perhaps Fuyo had intentionally avoided them out of consideration for her.

“Mm, nothing in particular.” There was no need to hide it, so Airi answered honestly. “I’m trying to spend my days modestly, to save up money for the offline meetup, I guess. Oh, but I also have to do my free study report.”

“Oh, free study?”

“It was supposed to be about observing morning glories, but I’ve had such an amazing experience yesterday and today, I was thinking about changing it to ‘a day in the life of a rich person.’”

Airi had meant it as a joke, but Fuyo clapped her hands. “Really?! I’ll help you, then!”

“No, that’s okay...”

“Still, I do have work to do this morning. With one thing and another, I ended up neglecting quite a lot yesterday...”

“Well, yesterday... that was sort of out of your hands...” Airi said.

The young heir had been arrested, after all. Airi hadn’t been able to keep her calm, so she couldn’t blame Fuyo for freaking out a bit, too.

“I’ll help you this afternoon, so could you just wait a bit?” Fuyo asked.

“U-Um, well... okay.” Seeing Fuyo smiling so happily about it, Airi couldn’t just say, “Actually, it was a joke.” Airi was no ogre (at least, not all the time).

In the end, unable to hold out against Fuyo’s offensive, Airi was forced to comply.

Despite her nervousness, Airi gulped down the food given her. Afterwards, Fuyo went off to do her work commute, and told the servants to see to any need Airi might have. But Airi was at a loss for what to ask for, or how. This was on a totally different level from asking Kirschwasser for tea in the game.

As Fuyo left, she said, “If you want to play *NaroFan*, you can use the Miraive Gear in my room,” and Airi felt immediate relief. She could retreat into the game world, then. Besides, she had to at least let her friends know what had happened with the young heir’s arrest and aftermath.

She saw Fuyo off with the servants, then decided to hole up in her room. Just when she was passing the dining room, though...

“Are you Airi Kakitsubata?” a voice addressed her.

Who could it be? And the speaker was a man, at that... It was almost certainly one of Fuyo’s relatives.

Airi looked up timidly and saw a middle-aged man descending the red carpeted open-air staircase, holding a cat in his arms. He wasn’t very tall, yet he projected dignity.

“Y-Yes sir.”

He had enough presence to intimidate even the secretly evil (this might be misleading) Airi. Surely, this was the aura of a man who commanded the Machiavellian world of economics. In her mind, dramatic pipe organ music began to play.

“I see. I’d heard Megumi made a friend... Are you the one, then?”

Should she be glad Fuyo was telling her relatives about her?

“Oh, excuse me. I’m Megumi’s father, Tsunobeni Co.’s—”

“Ah, wait a minute,” Airi cut the man off. “If you say any more,

my heart's going to break in pieces. Let's just leave it at the fact that you're Fuyo's father."

The man burst into laughter. "I see, I see."

There was something familiar about the man's laughter, Airi thought. It sounded a bit like Captain Musca from *Laputa*.

"Well, I'm grateful to you for being friends with my daughter. By the way, there's something I wanted to ask you."

"Y-Yes? What is it?" Airi asked, slightly petrified.

Mr. Fuyo descended the staircase and, still holding the cat in his arms, whispered into Airi's ear. "I hear there's a man Megumi's in love with. The son of Tsuwabuki, I believe."

"Ah, yes. The young h— Ichiro Tswaubuki, I believe."

"Does he... like Megumi back?"

"No, sir." Without hesitation, Airi spoke a truth colder than any she'd spoken before.

But the man roared with laughter. "I suppose he wouldn't." He seemed a good-natured person, or perhaps he was just extremely confident. "Well, Megumi's getting up there in years. If you would find her a fine man, I'd be very relieved..."

"I'm afraid I don't meet many men..."

"It sounds like Tsuwabuki's son has trouble brewing either way."

Airi felt that there was a hidden meaning behind his words, and she grew a little curious. Airi Kakitsubata was not the kind of person who could restrain her curiosity. "Um, are you talking about the young heir's arrest?"

“That’s part of it. I only know pieces of the story myself. But the president of Pony...” Mr. Fuyo began, then hesitated. “No, I shouldn’t say it. It’s not technically any of yours or Megumi’s business.”

“Right...” Airi nodded, despite feeling a bit unsatisfied.

“Allow me to thank you personally for being such a good friend to Megumi and Ichiro. I hope you’ll remain so in the future.”

“Well, I certainly intend to...”

Mr. Fuyo burst out in laughter once more, then re-ascended the atrium stairway with his cat in his arms.

Megumi Fuyo’s room was up those same stairs, which meant that Airi had to wait where she was until Mr. Fuyo disappeared into his own room.

“Father,” Rosemary said.

“Oh, you’re going to call me that even in real life?” Sakurako asked. “Well, I don’t especially mind...”

It was morning. Rosemary had addressed Sakurako over the speakerphone as she was heating up the leftovers from the night before.

“We have not talked sufficiently about important matters,” Rosemary said.

“Oh, this again? You mean about how I’m a threat, right?”

Sakurako loved Indian curry. The Tsuwabuki kitchen was her castle, and it was full of all kinds of spices from all over the world, which she often combined to create new flavor profiles. These last few days, as part of her rehab from nouveau riche disease, she

hadn't had many chances to enjoy her beloved spices, but with Ichiro not present, she could sneak a few in.

The fact that the kitchen had been purged of high-quality ingredients at Ichiro's direction, and the fact that Rosemary had engaged the security locks on the apartment, was perhaps fortunate for Sakurako; despite still suffering the symptoms of her condition, it was physically impossible for her to indulge in high-quality curry ingredients.

Sakurako had spent the morning busily preparing breakfast, but Rosemary had remained persistent. She continued to view Sakurako as a romantic rival, and had pressed the importance of discussing that at every opportunity.

It had been the same last night. Sakurako had enjoyed her curry with Rosemary, but Rosemary had also peppered her with questions during that time. Which meant that she couldn't evade the matter anymore.

Sakurako simmered the curry, activated the rice cooker, and turned her gaze from the kitchen to the dining room. "I suppose I don't have a choice... Rosemary, what is it you want to speak to me about so badly?"

"How do you view Ichiro?"

"Ohh..." Right to the heart of the matter. "I have said repeatedly that we are no more than master and servant. You still won't accept that?"

"That is merely an objective description of your relationship."

Extremely tenacious. So, this was the power of love, was it?

"You mean, what do I think of Ichiro-sama, then?" Sakurako asked.

"Yes."

“How I feel, subjectively, about him?”

“Yes.”

“Could I answer that by saying what kind of person I believe Ichiro Tsuwabuki to be?”

There was a long pause before Rosemary finally answered. But...

“Yes.” Her eventual answer was approval.

“Hmm.” Watching the curry boil, Sakurako fell into thought.

What kind of person was Ichiro? She had never really thought about it before. Sorting through the fragmented information she had, she tried to bring herself to a personal conclusion.

“First, he’s a strange person.” That was the first thing she said. It was the same opinion shared by many *NaroFan* players. “And he’s rather lonely.”

“Ichiro is lonely?”

“Yes. And he’s deeply jealous and obstinate.”

“Ichiro is?”

“Yes. In addition, he has many nouveau riche traits.”

“You are talking about Ichiro?”

“I am. And, let’s see... he likes to show off.” That about did it for things that Sakurako knew.

Rosemary fell silent. Sakurako felt a bit bad about speaking so ill of the person Rosemary cared about, but then, she was the one who had issued the challenge. She also felt a little relieved to get it all out. Just a little.

She wasn't lying. She knew he was lonely from his genuine joy in dealing with Iris. She knew he was jealous and obstinate from the way he competed with Sakurako and King in their specialty fields. She knew he had nouveau riche tendencies from the excess luxury he filled his living space with.

And the way he always comported himself so coolly, with one hand in his pocket... what was that, if not showing off? That was how Sakurako thought of it.

"You are indeed a threat, then."

"Really?" Sakurako was puzzled by Rosemary's words.

"I have determined that I have less understanding of Ichiro than you do."

"Well, we have lived together for five years... The curry's finished."

"If I spend a long time with Ichiro, is it possible that I might exceed your understanding of him?" Rosemary asked.

"That depends on how hard you work. I'm a maid, and as they say, a maid must give ten times what her master asks of her. Doing that has increased my understanding of him greatly."

"Then I shall become a maid, too."

"A-Aha..." Not even Sakurako knew how to respond to that. "W-Well, I wish you luck. Shall we eat some curry for now?"

"Thank you."

Ichiro woke up in his room in the Hotel Grand Hills. He always had a few rooms reserved, not just at the Grand Hills, but throughout Tokyo and various regions around Japan, at hotels that were both discreet and had excellent security. He'd gotten

into the habit five years ago, but lately he only used them when traveling around the country.

In Ichiro's 23 years on the planet, he had stayed in hotel rooms so many times it would be foolish to try and count, but this was the first time it was for a reason as pathetic as "I got locked out of my house." Knowing it would probably not happen again, Ichiro had decided to enjoy the experience.

After taking President Azami home and returning to the hotel, he explained the situation to Asuha and the others once again. It was more or less what he'd told Airi before. Asuha and Sera had both met the culprit, Rosemary, before, so they more or less grasped the situation immediately. Asuha listened earnestly, but Sera seemed surprisingly disinterested.

"My daughter told me all about it. An artificial intelligence? How romantic!" Sera Kiryu's mother Yoriko, who looked younger than her age, clenched her fists in glee.

There was something about her that reminded Ichiro of Sakurako.

Sera responded with, "Mom, you're embarrassing me. Sit down," a mannerism which suggested that it was the daughter who had the common sense in the family.

In the end, Asuha and Sera had ended up staying in the hotel with him. Having just gotten him to take them on the trip to America the other day, Asuha had had rather complicated internal feelings about it—allowing him to treat her like this felt like proof of her childishness—but she couldn't actually afford a room on her allowance, so she docilely took him up on his offer.

As Ichiro headed for the restaurant to get breakfast, he found Sera already there.

"Morning, old man."

“Good morning,” he said. “It’s early, isn’t it?”

“I’m a growing kid, after all.” Sera’s eyes remained fixed on a portable game system.

Her height and weight both seemed a little below average, Ichiro thought.

“Seems like things have gotten pretty bad,” Sera said.

“They have. But you don’t seem bothered, relatively speaking.”

“Not like I’m the one it’s happening to,” Sera responded dryly.

It was true, Ichiro thought. She wasn’t the one it was happening to.

The Grand Hills served breakfast buffet-style. While Ichiro took a tray to get his food, Sera put the game system into sleep mode and came along.

“I’m not the one it’s happening to, but if what I said to Rosemary is what triggered it, then I’m sorry.”

“That isn’t your fault,” Ichiro said. “In the end, I believe that while people can encourage others, they can’t actually change another’s trajectory. This incident would have occurred no matter what you had said, and even if you hadn’t said anything.”

Ichiro arranged a high-class salad on his plate, then ordered a fried egg from the cook at the grill, and had a strip of roast beef prepared, as well. It was a rather large meal for a light eater like Ichiro.

Sera seemed to be a light eater, too, filling up only half of a plate. “Although Rosemary is not a person.”

“That’s true, but I feel it would be good if she became a person soon.”

“In a biological sense?”

“No, in a jurisprudence sense.”

After filling their plates with food, the two took their seats beside the window.

“Well, that’s fine. If you don’t want me to worry, I won’t.”

“Mm, good.” Ichiro nodded.

Sera took a bite of bread, the usual blank expression on her face. “...I’m okay, but.”

“Mm?”

“I’m okay, but I hope you’ll hear more of what Tsuwabuki has to say. She seems really worried.”

Sera was talking about Asuha. Ichiro was surprised to see her voicing such consideration.

Ichiro had indeed perceived that Asuha had seemed strangely thoughtful about something. It wasn’t about the news that Ichiro had been arrested in and of itself. If anything, having the situation explained in detail just seemed to make things weigh on her even more.

At the same time, Ichiro had decided not to touch upon it until Asuha came to him about it personally. She had wanted to be treated as an adult, and he had decided to respect that as much as possible.

“Tsuwabuki’s the one who invited you to join the game, after all.”

“That’s true. And you were the reason why.” Ichiro nodded quietly among the clinking of utensils.

“...In that sense, I guess I am the one who dragged Tsuwabuki into the game,” Sera said. There was no sense of self-recrimination in the words, but Ichiro felt he heard a note of deep emotion in it.

Sera Kiryu was a shut-in; she didn’t go to school. Or rather, she hadn’t been going. She had conquered her reservations now, so she’d be resuming middle school in the fall. During the first term closing ceremony, she’d faced off with the group that had been intimidating her away, so there was nothing else hanging over her head.

“I’m grateful to Tsuwabuki for that,” Sera said.

“Not to me?” Ichiro asked.

“You want me to be grateful to you?”

“No, that would be nonsense. I just wanted to say it.” Ichiro laughed a bit, then brought his cup of hot coffee to his mouth. He didn’t feel like drinking tea made by anyone but his maid, Sakurako Ogi, but coffee he could drink without reservation.

“Old man, there are a lot of things I want to ask you, but I won’t.” Sera had already cleaned her plate. She put her hands together politely, closed her eyes, and whispered, “Thank you for the meal.” He could see that even her eccentric mother had at least taught her proper manners.

“I see,” Ichiro said. “If that’s how you feel, I won’t say anything else, either.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. About what’s going on now, too... I’m not actually all that worried. My ambition won’t change, no matter what you do.” Saying that, Sera stood up. “Oh, and sorry for making you pay our hotel fee... I know you’d pay for Tsuwabuki, but the fact is that you paid for me, too.”

“It’s nothing. I’m surprised your mother didn’t want to stay here.”

“She said she’d stay at an old friend’s place in Akihabara. I’m gonna meet up with her later to do some Tokyo sightseeing. Of course, that probably means just touring arcades...”

Ichiro was reminded that Sera’s mother was a passionate gamer, too. It was really quite charming to see mother and daughter get along so well. Ichiro didn’t envy it exactly, but as someone who had a colder relationship with his parents, and who faced awkward situations where it was sometimes hard to tell who was the adult, there was something very refreshing about seeing a familial relationship like that of the Kiryus.

Hands plunged into the pockets of her parka, Sera glanced behind her.

“Ah, Itchy! Kiryu!” Carrying two large dishes piled high with breakfast on top of a tray, Asuha waved to them with her free hand.

“Tsuwabuki’s here, so I should be going,” Sera said.

“Mm, have fun.”

“Good luck to you, too, old man.” With that, Sera left the restaurant behind.

As she passed by Asuha, they exchanged a few words. Afterwards, Asuha walked towards Ichiro, head tilted.

“Kiryu’s leaving already?”

“It seems so.”

Sera Kiryu and her mother, Yoriko Kiryu, would proceed to travel around the arcades of Tokyo’s 23 special wards, overthrowing the strongest gamers in each to become an arcade-raider force

spoken of in legend all across the city. But that, of course, is another story.

Asuha sat down in the seat where Sera had been sitting and began eating her breakfast.

“I’m impressed by how much you eat, Asuha,” Ichiro said. “It’s a good thing.”

At his prodding, Asuha looked down at her plate and scratched her cheek a little bashfully. “Heh heh, lately I’m practicing a lot more, which means I’m eating more, too...”

“Uncle mentioned you’ve begun helping out with the baseball club, too.”

“Ah, yeah. That’s right. Our baseball club is pretty weak... A couple of players dropped out, and at this rate, the club’s gonna end up disbanded.” Asuha was eating rapidly, but her table manners weren’t especially bad. “At the end of Bon season next week, they’re having a practice match against one of the prefecture’s usual strongest teams, and if they win, they won’t have to be dissolved. It’s pretty much like something out of a TV show...”

“And so you’re joining them to help them out?” Ichiro asked.

“Yeah. Though of course, a couple other people joined them, too... Hyorogari in the astronomy club and Mero in the chorus club.”

It sounded like an eccentric lineup. Ichiro had his doubts that they were really trying to win, but Asuha’s descriptions suggested that the results of practice had been surprisingly good. Asuha was developing a second miracle pitch to follow up on her Hydro Blaster, and she was going to unveil it at the match at the end of Bon season.

“But it is the end of Bon season, after all... I dunno if I’ll make

it to Iris's offline meetup."

"I see. Well, you're both students, so if you come to visit during summer vacation, you should be able to meet her. Though it might be harder with the Kirihitters or the Knights."

"Where do they live?" Asuha asked.

"The Kirihitters are all in Kyushu, and the Knights' Stroganoff is in Yamanashi, I believe. Though I never asked specifically, so I don't know for certain."

"Hmm..." While bringing her soup bowl to her mouth, Asuha's vocal tone dropped a bit.

Sera's words hung in the back of Ichiro's mind: *I hope you'll hear more of what Tsuwabuki has to say*. But it was Ichiro who determined whether now was the time to ask or not. He was trying to treat Asuha as an adult as much as he could, and avoid coddling her wherever possible.

Asuha set down her soup bowl and said, after a pause, "Hey, Itchy."

"Yes?"

"What are you going to do now?"

"A lot of things. I must help Rosemary. My lawyer acquaintance said that he would cooperate, but I need to visit a number of others first, in order to prepare a legal defense for her."

"Is that all?" There was a scrutinizing quality in Asuha's expression.

Was it scrutinizing? Or had she already realized something? He felt she had grown a great deal more discerning these past two months. Ichiro gazed at her quietly.

There was a saying, “If you don’t see a man for three days, watch him closely for signs of change.” It seemed the same was true for women, too.

“That’s all. At least, for now.” Ichiro was extremely happy to see this sort of growth in Asuha.

“You seem happy, Itchy.”

“I am, a little bit.” Ichiro closed his eyes slightly and answered her question a bit more seriously. “It’s nothing you need to worry about just yet. I don’t want to do that, either. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Asuha nodded vehemently. But then she turned her eyes downward. “It’s because you seemed to enjoy yourself so much in *NaroFan* , Itchy.”

“That’s true,” he said. “It is fun, and I’ve enjoyed myself. I’m grateful to you for giving me the opportunity.”

“Hmm... I guess that’s okay, then.” Asuha smiled bashfully and scratched her cheek. “Well, never mind. I was a little uncertain for a while, but now I’m fine.”

“Ah.”

“I think you should do what you want to do... of course, even if I didn’t, you would still do it. I just decided right now that I think it’s best for you to do whatever you most want to do in the moment.”

“I see.” Although Ichiro said that, he was thinking inside, “Perhaps she’s right.”

Ichiro was a little bit afraid of the chance that he might end up examining the situation and deciding he had to do something he didn’t want to do. But even if it wasn’t something he wanted to

do, it would still be under his own free will that he would execute it. Therefore, anything he did was what he wanted to do.

That much was just as Asuha had said. No one in the world, including himself, could feel any hesitation about that.

A smile found its way to his face.

“What is it?” Asuha asked.

“Nothing. It’s just that seeing you so mature makes me very happy right now.”

“I told you to cut that out...” Asuha’s face turned a bit red, and her eyes drifted to the side.

“Asuha, what will you do next?” he asked.

“Hmm... Good question. You can’t get into your house, right?”

“I likely can. Rosemary has no reason to keep the apartment locked, so I expect she would let me in if I asked.”

Sakurako had probably won Rosemary over quite a bit in one night. She had a natural talent for softening a person’s heart, which Ichiro had experienced firsthand. To ask whether or not Rosemary had a heart would be nonsense at this point. It was because he believed that she did that Ichiro was doing what he was doing.

“Will you follow me around for a while?” Ichiro asked.

“Hmm, I guess I will.”

Yesterday it was Iris, today it was Asuha. For two days straight, he’d be taking a young girl to places she didn’t belong. But perhaps he could think of it as bringing them life experience. Though they might be hearing a few conversations that weren’t good for fostering a young girl’s sensibilities...

Once they finished eating, the two got out of their seats and went back to their room to prepare for checkout. At that time, Ichiro decided to open the e-mail he'd received from his father.

The words he'd shared with Shaga when he went out for a cigarette.

The words he'd shared with President Azami in front of the curry shop in Kanda.

The words he'd just exchanged with Sera and Asuha.

They were all different, yet there was one common thread running through all of them, a vague line of evil intent that he was beginning to see stretched all throughout this incident. In full honesty, he didn't want to look at it. Ichiro wanted this to be a terrible misunderstanding without any clear villains.

But reality was reality. Everywhere he went, he saw germs of malice. There was no incident so infused by bad luck that there could be no villain involved.

"Nonsense," Ichiro muttered, then returned the cell phone to his coat pocket.

He would do what he wanted to do. That feeling remained unchanged inside him.

"And that's how it went down." The group had listened earnestly to Iris's words.

"The group" referred to the Red Sunset Knights: Stroganoff, Gazpacho, Tiramisu, Gorgonzola, Parmigiano-Reggiano; Matsunaga of the Dual Serpents; Amesho and Tomakomai; Taker, Sorceress, Yuri, and the Kirihitters; and more.

Iris had logged in from Megumi Fuyo's room, called everyone

she knew together, and explained about the predicament the young heir had found himself in. She had considered the possibility of their conversation being logged, but had reminded herself that anyone who did that would be a developer, and she had faith that President Azami would be on their side.

They were in the large conference room in the Knights' guild headquarters. It had more than enough space to house everyone connected to Ichiro Tsuwabuki (and even many who weren't); natural, perhaps, for the game's largest guild.

In the red-carpeted luxury hall, a single man licked a poison knife and disappeared into points of light. Everyone present ignored him, to listen intently to Iris's story.

Iris wasn't quite sure whether or not to tell them that Rosemary was an artificial intelligence, but she managed to complete her explanation without directly mentioning it. Her tongue was meant for battle, not for spinning lies, so this had taken incredible effort on her part. Still, several of them seemed to intuit it from her choices of wording.

The first one to speak was Matsunaga. "Well, it sounds like he's innocent, then. That's good to hear."

"Indeed," Stroganoff agreed. "I knew he could be unscrupulous, but he's not a bad person."

"This Rosemary... is she the person who was using Yozakura's avatar yesterday?" Kirihito (Leader) asked.

"She said she was a friend of Mr. Kirsch. Was she foreign?" Yuri added.

"Y-Yeah. Maybe she was! I've never met her in person, so I don't really know..." Iris stammered in response.

They were sitting around the same round table that had appar-

ently been used in a previous Grand Quest to accommodate a united guild conference that Matsunaga had hosted. At the time, Iris had been deep in her studies, and so she hadn't attended.

I've changed a lot since then, haven't I? Iris thought.

Her assessment was more or less correct, but she herself couldn't say with certainty exactly what it was about her that had changed. Of course, such was the nature of change...

But back to the subject at hand.

"That reminds me. You talked to Rosemary yesterday, right? How did it go?" Iris asked. She had caught a glimpse of the conversation logs at Thistle, but she didn't know, concretely, what had been talked about.

"She wanted to know what we thought about Tsuwabuki," Sorceress said.

"The young heir?" Iris was puzzled by the response.

"Well, I gave my own personal answer," Matsunaga said wisely. "It was probably, you know... reconnaissance. 'Know your enemy, know yourself, and you'll never fear 100 battles,' as they say."

"Enemy? Does Tsuwabuki plan on fighting Rosemary?" Taker asked.

"Aw, c'mon, Taker," Amesho sighed.

"You can be quite thick-headed sometimes," Matsunaga retorted.

But, yes, that made sense. Iris understood now. Rosemary had gone around in the game asking people what they thought about the young heir. Though it was hard to believe she could have learned much of use... of course, Iris's best friend had proven to

her how self-defeating blind one-sided love could be.

Today, they hadn't seen the young heir at all (naturally), but Kirschwasser and Yozakura also hadn't logged in. Of course, it was still rather early, so perhaps that went without saying. They still didn't know if the young heir had made it home or not, and Kirschwasser usually didn't log in until he'd finished the housework in the afternoon.

"By the way, I know I called you all here, but are you sure you don't want to go to the one-year anniversary ceremony?" Iris asked, as if she'd only just remembered.

Yesterday had been so chaotic that she had completely forgotten, but today was August 10th, *Narrow Fantasy Online*'s one-year anniversary. The ceremony event was set to be held today on the beach next to Starter Town.

However...

The assembled top players all looked at each other.

"Well, the truth is, I don't have any interest in it... Well, maybe some," Matsunaga said.

"Which is it?" Iris asked.

"I sent one of our Scouts there, with orders to let me know if anything interesting happens. But it sounds like it's been a bit barren so far. Development authority has been transferred to Pony, so that's not entirely surprising."

It was a strangely undiplomatic way of putting things.

Matsunaga tapped at thin air to call up a window, then put up a view of the anniversary ceremony that his Scout was apparently secretly recording. The group gathered around excitedly to look.

Things seemed very lively there; the celebrities that had been

announced in advance were using guest avatars to give speeches. Among them were famous voice actors and famous manga artists, and apparently some of them had even been playing *NaroFan* before this event.

“You did always like Thistle’s unbalanced development style, Matsunaga,” Stroganoff smiled teasingly, arms folded.

“Well, for better or worse, Thistle is basically a group of amateur otaku with technology and know-how at their disposal. And the feeling of playing a bunch of geeks’ ‘my very own VRMMO’ is part of the appeal of *NaroFan*, don’t you agree? If Pony intervenes and fixes the balance, it might improve as a game, but it will also grow boring.”

It was a very otaku-like thing to say, and Amesho interrupted with a giggle. “Matsunaga, you’re so weird.”

“Thank you very much.”

“I welcome a little balance readjustment, personally,” Stroganoff said. “I’ll probably go to the ceremony later, too. The big update is going to be unveiled soon, and they’re going to announce new classes and races...”

“Oh, that does sound fairly interesting,” Matsunaga said. “What time does it start again?”

“It starts this evening. There’s still plenty of time.”

Which meant Kirschwasser would probably be logged on by then. And what of Rosemary? Iris wondered.

Either way, Iris wouldn’t be here tonight. She would be doing her fabulous social studies project with Megumi Fuyo. She couldn’t pass up the chance to see firsthand what Japanese high society was like, and to be honest, she wasn’t interested in the new races and classes, anyway.

“I don’t care about the ceremony, but I’d like to see Rosemary...” Iris pondered.

“So would I. I’m a little concerned.” Tomakomai, the hero who had (previously) never logged out once since the service began, nudged his glasses as he spoke. They still didn’t know what his story was.

“Well, if Rosemary is still in the Tsuwabuki household, I’m sure she’ll log in again,” Matsunaga said with a shrug, flashing his usual grin.

“Why?” Iris asked.

“Because there are still two people she needs to talk to if she wants to know more about Mr. Tsuwabuki.”

“Two?” Iris was confused. She could imagine who one was, but not the other. Was there really another player who was that close to the young heir?

The response came from an unexpected direction.

“He is correct.”

It was a familiar avatar’s voice. All eyes turned towards the door to the meeting room.

A Japanese-style maid, her silver hair done up in a ponytail, stood at the entrance to the room. Beside her stood Transaction Knight Kirschwasser, recently returned from the dark side. It was disconcerting for Iris to see two avatars played by the same person standing side by side.

Kirschwasser gave a pained smile and waved. “Hello, Iris. I’m sorry about this. Yozakura insisted.”

“Huh? On what?”

“On speaking with you.”

Yozakura—in other words, Rosemary—spoke with a flat, nearly monotone voice. Her finger, like a lithe white goby, was pointed at Iris. “I have admitted my defeat before Father, Iris, but it is also necessary that I talk to you.”

A chorus of applause echoed through the conference room.

What the heck is going on? Iris thought.

“It seems Ichiro Tsuwabuki is taking action,” the secretary said, removing her Miraive Gear headset.

Shinya Otogiri, CEO of Pony Entertainment, Inc., poked his head out of the mountain of lollipops on his desk and responded. “Ms. Hishoyama, is that true?”

“Yes,” the secretary confirmed quietly.

Otogiri grimaced openly, then sat back deeply in his chair. “I see. He’s taking action, eh? And by that, you mean he’s going to try to prove himself innocent?”

“That appears to be part of it, but...” The secretary explained to Otogiri about the information she had acquired.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been arrested on suspicion of unauthorized access, but the truth was, they already knew that the series of incidents had actually been caused by a rogue AI on the run from the Thistle Corporation. They had expected Ichiro to take some action to prove this, but his actions suggested he was trying for more.

There was no way, legally, for the artificial intelligence Rosemary to be acknowledged as a person under current law. Ichiro seemed to be unsatisfied with this, so before he could prove his

own innocence, he appeared to be trying to ensure that Rosemary could be guaranteed human rights.

“They didn’t discuss that part exactly, but...” The secretary set the Miraive Gear on the desk and pushed her thin-rimmed glasses up her nose. “Judging from the girl’s explanation, that must be it.”

“Hmm, I see.” Otogiri took a single lollipop from the mountain on his desk.

“But that will take him time. Does that mean that if we deal with the artificial intelligence in the meantime, we win?”

“Yes. Ichiro Tsuwabuki will lose any way to prove his innocence.”

“Even so, forcing the issue doesn’t seem to be working.” Otogiri had been petitioning his friend in the police department to seize as evidence the server machine and supercomputer in which the artificial intelligence likely resided, but they hadn’t made much progress. The man in charge of the investigation on the ground seemed to be dragging his feet.

His acquaintance in the upper ranks had seemed quite hesitant about the idea of erasing an artificial intelligence to frame somebody, but when Otogiri pointed out that its existence would cause great complications in the law going forward, the man took it very seriously. Still, just because he’d agreed didn’t mean the investigators would necessarily spring into action.

If Ichiro brought up the artificial intelligence as evidence before the investigators confiscated it, then his innocence would be all but proven. Besides, even Otogiri had his limits. Right now he wanted to avoid the risk of breaking laws as much as possible. He was already walking a dangerous line.

“As usual, the Tsuwabuki household is being insufferable,”

Otogiri said, tearing the wrapper off the lollipop and putting it in his mouth. A sweet sensation spread across his tongue. “Well, it seems like I’ll have some thinking to do. Also, Ms. Hishoyama, about the takeover...”

“Yes?”

As he licked the lollipop, he reflected that it still just wasn’t stimulating enough. If he wanted to think up a good idea, he needed to find a lollipop with a more unusual flavor.

While he talked with his secretary, who was as unflappable as ever, he opened an online shopping page using his computer at hand.

“Tsuwabuki, I’m nearing retirement,” the assistant inspector complained. “Please don’t cause too much trouble for me.”

“I was hoping it might help you reach inspector before you retire,” Ichiro said casually.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s actions the day before had caused terrible stress for the perpetual assistant inspector. Despite the massive amount he had put up for his bail, Ichiro had been excessively freewheeling in his movements. Since it was easy to erase evidence when it came to cyber crimes, he had only been afforded bail just barely to begin with, pushed over the line due to the silent pressure asserted by his family name. So then when the assistant inspector had heard that Ichiro was meeting with a lawyer and even visiting Thistle, he’d nearly had a heart attack.

The officers who had to monitor Ichiro’s activities were equally worthy of pity. They’d been forced to follow Ichiro in and out of all kinds of expensive restaurants and hotels, an experience that had left them feeling like nervous wrecks. Ichiro, having realized they were watching him, had been paying for everything, but that had also just made him more insufferable.

“To be honest, things aren’t looking good,” the assistant inspector said. “There are some people who seem hellbent on building a case against you.”

“I suppose there would be. I talked to Shaga yesterday, and he said that to stop them from building a case would be difficult given my current stance. It seems we might fight it out in court.”

“Hey, now.” The assistant inspector looked sour. “If you prove in court that you were falsely arrested, the police will be humiliated. We already look pretty bad for arresting the young heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern.”

“You rendered objective judgment based on the access logs you were given and issued a warrant appropriately,” Ichiro said. “It’s not as if the masses know that there was outside pressure at work.”

Ichiro’s words suggested that he knew someone was plotting to see him arrested. The assistant inspector let out a huge sigh; this was why he hated this job.

It was clear from the report made by the officers trailing him yesterday that Ichiro had a clear idea of who the culprit was, and he could easily name them and prove his innocence. They didn’t have all the details, but the culprit seemed to be a woman named “Rosemary,” and there seemed to be a complicated reason why Ichiro and the others couldn’t just say that and prove his innocence right away.

The assistant inspector hadn’t passed the information on to his superiors; on his own judgment, he had decided that it should stop with him. It was merely his instinct as a man who had spent years in the field, but he had a feeling that there were people among the police’s higher echelons who would find the existence of this Rosemary person very inconvenient... as well as these re-workings of the law that the lawyer Shunsaku Shaga had been talking about lately.

“I’ve been dragging my feet on it, but it won’t do much good if you don’t do something,” the assistant inspector said. “Lately they’ve been talking about seizing the supercomputer in your house as evidence.”

“I hope you will drag your feet most persistently,” Ichiro said, seeming to gaze off into the distance.

It seemed like the person behind it all must be someone extremely troublesome, likely someone near the top of the Pony Entertainment hierarchy. The assistant inspector had heard that something had gone on between Ichiro’s father, Meiro, and some executive at Pony. One of his former juniors in the department had told him about it.

That same man had already reached an important office the assistant inspector could never dream of, as someone who knew how to climb the rungs of the career ladder.

“Well, Tsuwabuki,” he said. “What are you going to do now?”

“You may have already heard about this, but I need to do things to ensure that Rosemary gets a fair trial. Then after that... well, if it’s Pony, as I suspect, I’ll have to have it out with them, man to man.”

“It seems a bit early for a Pony takeover, though,” the assistant inspector said.

“I want to save that for a last resort. I might yet work something else out. Possibly.”

The assistant inspector frowned. What Ichiro was saying suggested he was already considering it.

He didn’t know that Ichiro liked *Narrow Fantasy Online* quite a bit, and that if he wanted to maintain that enjoyment, he couldn’t take on a role as one of its developers. He didn’t know

that, but from their long years of acquaintance, he could guess that what Ichiro was readying himself to do was something he didn't want to do.

“Well, I'll work hard, too, so that you won't have to do anything desperate.”

“Thank you.” Ichiro smiled.

The assistant inspector sighed internally. Though he said he'd work hard, it seemed like all he could do was stop information from flowing to the top, drag his heels in passing on orders to his subordinates, and stall as much as possible.

Either way, it seemed impossible for him to reach inspector before he retired.

“Sorry for the wait,” Ichiro said to Asuha, who was sitting in the police station's waiting room, looking rather bored.

“It's okay. I wasn't really waiting.”

Unlike when he was with Iris, Ichiro was now holding conversations that he didn't want others to hear, and as a result, he was a bit concerned that Asuha might be getting bored. Even so, he didn't have much time to lose.

Ichiro led Asuha out of the station. He slipped into the driver's seat of the Koenigsegg parked outside and pulled out his smartphone.

“Who are you calling now?” Asuha asked.

Ichiro answered the question with one word. “Charles.”

He was the director of a robotics engineering laboratory that Ichiro had invested in.

In the recent account hacking incident, Rosemary had used an AI their lab had developed as a bot to control Ichiro's avatar, which they had labeled "Duplichiro." The lab had its own deep connection to Rosemary, therefore, but since their eventual goal was to develop an autonomous maid robot, and since she could represent a potential breakthrough in that goal, the scientists there were extremely gentlemanly to her.

Thus, although they were basically the victims, they'd decided to keep quiet about what Rosemary had done. Truly, they were model geeks.

Ichiro placed the call and explained the situation. Charles response was:

"Rosemary-chan is going to be deleted?!"

Given the time difference, it was probably the middle of the night in Pittsburgh, but the man shouting on the other end of the phone sounded more than sufficiently awake.

"Incredible! When I heard she'd disappeared from Thistle, I assumed she'd go around hacking computers all over the world looking for a place to stay! To think she'd end up at your house!"

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Ichiro said. "Now, about my request..."

Ichiro explained, and he could hear the man on the other end of the phone groan. It was like the growl of a grizzly bear.

Asuha peered in closer, puzzled, perhaps in response to hearing Charles's loud voice coming through the receiver.

Ichiro just shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"I'm afraid there's a pretty big issue on the hardware front," Charles said. "None of the bodies that would be perfect for Rosemary-chan are finished yet."

“Anything with a humanoid form that could express emotions would be acceptable.”

“As if I could put her in one of those dead-eyed machines! Do not trivialize the maid robot!”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said. “You’re unusually excitable today. Pulling an all-nighter?”

“Yep!”

Ichiro’s request had been for Charles to lend him a robot that Rosemary could use for appearing in court. It didn’t have to be a robot; anything with a microphone and a speaker so that she could speak freely would do, but a robot that could employ human-like expressions would greatly change the tone of the trial.

It would, but of course, Charles was right. If they couldn’t get her out of the uncanny valley, that would deal a powerful blow to her perceived “humanity.” And while Ichiro had said he was indifferent to the design, he had been stubbornly refused. Apparently, if Rosemary needed a body to use, it had to be a “Japanimation-style bishoujo android.”

“Well, that’s fine,” Ichiro said. “I’ll give up on the idea, then.” He wasn’t going to nitpick a specialist’s perfectionism, and he meant what he said. “Instead, I’ll just ask for that report.”

“Sure. Leave it to me. I’ll write everything that happened, and even some things that didn’t.”

“Just the facts, if you please.”

Ichiro then told him about a place he wanted him to go, and a person he wanted him to meet. Though it was within the same country, America was large. He didn’t think it was terribly far away from Pittsburgh, though.

He heard a commotion on the other end of the phone. It

seemed Charles was already preparing to head out; truly a hasty person to the end.

“So, Ichiro, if I go to this place you describe, I can meet Rosemary-chan?” he asked.

“You won’t meet her, but you may be able to see her looking healthy,” Ichiro answered while messing with the tablet computer on his knee. He’d gotten an e-mail from President Azami presenting a rough outline of what was currently going on in *Narrow Fantasy Online*. Ichiro felt just a little bit vexed. This was something he had wanted to see with his own eyes. “Anyway, I want your objective perspective as a technician, if you please.”

“Leave it to me,” Charles said confidently. “My fire of romance won’t burn out that easily. Okay, I’m on my way out.”

He was hasty, but that was good in that it meant he acted decisively.

“Oh, also. Ichiro.”

“Yes?”

“I forgot to take a picture of Asuha-chan, so please let me take one when I arrive in Japan.”

Ichiro looked at Asuha once again. Asuha didn’t seem to have heard him, as her head was cocked in confusion.

“If she permits it, I will.” Ichiro hung up the phone and put it in his pocket.

Asuha, who had remained perfectly silent until then, thinking, opened her mouth. “Hmm. Hey, Itchy.”

“Yes?”

“I’m gonna get off here.”

Ichiro was surprised. The proposal was unexpected, from his perspective. “I don’t mind, but is there somewhere else you need to be?”

“Not really, but I’m pretty sure I can’t be of use to you at all... I’m gonna try thinking of some other way to help.”

“Ahh.”

Asuha opened the Koenigsegg door and stepped outside, allowing the sweltering Tokyo summer heat to rush into the car. “If anything happens with Rosemary, tell me, okay?”

“Mm, yes. If I make any progress, I’ll let you know.”

“Mm, well, do your best, Itchy.” Asuha clenched her fists.

Ichiro hadn’t been expecting a pep talk.

With that, Asuha Tsuwabuki spun on her heel and started walking towards the station. He doubted she was going to find anything useful, but something about the atmosphere around her petite silhouette told him she would probably be all right.

But Asuha had told *him* to “do your best.” Ichiro felt like he was going crazy.

She had been maturing rapidly of late, and right now, he felt she resembled him just a little bit. He didn’t think she was imitating him, or even doing it consciously. Perhaps it was just a sign that she was a Tsuwabuki, too.

“It must be Great-Grandfather’s blood,” Ichiro couldn’t help but whisper, even though he generally thought that bloodlines and genetics were nonsense. “Well, then...”

Ichiro returned his focus to the matter at hand.

He still had a lot of things to do and a lot of places to go. This

part was starting to feel a little more enjoyable in its own way, too. He gripped the Koenigsegg steering wheel again and took off for his next destination.

Rosemary/Yozakura had come to speak to those players she viewed as “threats” to her. To break it down even more simply, that meant she was trying to “have it out” with the women who seemed closest to Ichiro.

At least, that was how Iris perceived it. She didn’t have much romantic experience herself, but it seemed clear enough to her.

It was extremely unsatisfactory.

Iris didn’t have Megumi Fuyo’s awful taste, nor her terrible eye for men. She found this thing with Rosemary an extremely frustrating position to be in, but she knew she couldn’t just turn a blind eye. Iris’s avatar reflected her emotion with extreme accuracy, the clear dissatisfaction showing on her face.

The same went for the onlookers, who seemed to think Yozakura and Iris were going to have a cat fight. It was disgusting. Total nonsense.

“What is the matter, Iris? Too afraid to respond? Hah, hah.” Yozakura engaged in expressionless shadowboxing, apparently attempting to bait her.

“Did you arrange this, Mr. Kirsch?” Iris demanded. Even if she had locked him in his house, it was still a cruel thing to convince an innocent AI to do.

Kirschwasser laughed. “We were just enjoying some movies and manga together.”

Yozakura didn’t seem aware of her sin, either.

Iris sighed. She didn't have a choice, it seemed; she'd just have to go along with it. She had to consider her position as Fuyo's best friend, too, and when she thought about it that way, talking things out with Yozakura didn't seem like a totally fruitless endeavor.

“Okay, fine. Let's do it.”

Those around them let out a cheer, applauding her courage.

“Iris, please take it easy on her!” Matsunaga called.

“Yes, she is a frail woman, after all,” Stroganoff added.

Their arms-folded suggestions from the sidelines only accelerated Iris's bad mood. “Who do you people think I am?”

“We think you're you, Ai,” said Yuri.

“That's why we're worried,” Kirihito (Leader) added.

It seemed she was surrounded by enemies. A true bed of nails.

But Iris, while psychologically frail, had faced adversity a time or two of her own. The days of fighting that had lasted close to two months had been rough, but she had never lost herself; in fact, those events had hardened her spirit, allowing her to better rise to this challenge.

But what exactly were they supposed to talk about?

As she wondered that, Yozakura spoke up, maintaining her fighting pose. “Iris, what do you think of Ichiro?”

As before, Stroganoff and the other Knights' commanders watched from afar with scowling expressions.

“Starting with a light jab, eh?”

“The give-and-take is fundamental.”

“That girl is better than I expected.”

Even in this situation, they just wouldn’t give up the color commentary.

“What do I think about him?” Iris asked.

“It is necessary that I learn this. I am concerned about the possibility that a lack of information has led me to a fatal series of mistakes.”

“You mean you’re anxious?” Iris asked. “You can’t sleep at night out of worry?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” Iris put a hand to her shapely jaw and thought.

How *did* she feel about the young heir? When she thought about it with a clear head, she didn’t think she’d ever really been attracted to him. As she thought about it, the cool smile of Ichiro Tsuwabuki appeared to the upper right of her head, but she punched it away.

“To say it plainly...”

“Yes?”

“I don’t really know.”

Iris was trying to describe her feelings as precisely as she could, but unsurprisingly, Yozakura wouldn’t accept it.

“That is not an answer, Iris.”

“But I really *don’t* know! Then let me ask you, what do *you* think of him?!” Iris shouted, pointing a finger at the other

woman.

The group behind her continued to comment on the exchange.

“A counterattack.”

“She’s really giving it everything she’s got.”

“Ai, keep fighting!”

“But don’t be too rough with her.”

At some point, others besides the Knights had joined in on the commentary.



Yozakura faltered slightly, apparently not expecting that response. Of course, being an artificial intelligence, it wasn't clear if she really had faltered, but it seemed to Iris, at least, that she had. This was a lesson she had been taught by her late grandfather: exploit your opponent's vulnerabilities.

"Me?" Yozakura asked.

"Yes, you. Yozakura, if you've come here to ask me that, you must have an answer of your own, right? What do you think of the young heir? Do you like him? Love him?"

There was a momentary pause before Yozakura answered. Iris had no way of knowing this, but in that instant, the supercomputer in the Tsuwabuki household was making so many complicated calculations that the double-point couldn't even keep up. It was likely a more complicated and esoteric calculation than anyone in human history had ever witnessed.

"Ichiro taught me the importance of thinking for myself, the significance of putting that into practice, and—"

"Pfft." Before she could finish, Iris cut her off with a snort. It was as if a katana had lashed out from her mouth, a great blade forged by Goro Nyudo Masamune himself. "That's not an answer. You want to order people around when that's all you've got? Give me a break. I'm laughing so hard I could shoot a geyser from my belly button."

"Please revise your statement, Iris," Rosemary said. "What I performed was an objective and valid evaluation of Ichiro."

"And I'm saying that your 'objective and valid evaluation' is crap." Iris was not about to show any mercy. She swung her wit's cruel hammer hard enough to crash through the ground.

"At the end of the day, it just doesn't add up. I'm not as mature

as the young heir or Mr. Kirsch, so I'll say it. You self-justify constantly, but the things you do are so clearly emotional and childish that none of it is convincing. This stuff you're doing isn't 'necessary,' it's just what you want to do! So quit beating around the bush and just say what you want to say."

Iris gave Yozakura/Rosemary no time to argue as she continued to lay into her.

"Look, at the end of the day, what other people think, objective opinions, stuff like that... it doesn't mean anything. Objective assessment only means anything after you've formed your own opinion. Until you do that, it's just information. So, listen up, Yozakura. I'm going to ask you one more time. Do you like the young heir?"

At this point, the Knights' peanut gallery had fallen totally silent. Some might say they had realized their commentary was inappropriate, but the reality was something else: They were all holding their breath, waiting for what Yozakura was going to say.

What kinds of calculations was the world-class supercomputer running to bring her to her next words? The Yozakura avatar went a long time without speaking, but eventually opened her mouth and responded: "Yes, I love him. I'm in love with him."

"Heh." Iris let out a snort, but inside, she was smiling. In that same instant, the peanut gallery burst into cheers and applause. Surrounded by cheers, Iris puffed out her chest and raised a fist. "I win."

"Was that what the competition was about?" Yuri murmured from the spectator seats.

It was not only Yozakura who had been silent this entire time. The person most moved by all of this was the one standing just behind her.

Kirschwasser's expression became very emotional, and despite the harassment warnings popping up on screen, he swept Iris into a big hug. "Iris!"

"Eek!"

To an onlooker it would look like obvious sexual harassment.

"I knew you could do it! Amazing! Iris, I'm so impressed!"

"M-Mr. Kirsch! You're dropping character!"

"I-I can't say it out loud, so I'm whispering it to you! To draw those words from Rosemary, from an artificial intelligence... you're amazing, Iris!"

"A-Am I?" Iris was rarely complimented so directly. It caused her to blush.

While the onlookers for some reason were sobbing and hugging each other emotionally, Yozakura said this to Iris: "Now, Iris, what do you think about Ichiro?"

"Oh, right..." While struggling a little bit in Kirschwasser's arms, Iris made a show of thinking again. "I thought about it a lot, and I think he's my enemy."

"Enemy?" Yozakura asked.

"Yeah, someone I need to surpass and show up some day. Anyway, it's not at all what you think, so don't worry."

"I do not think that is true, but... Very well. If you insist."

Kirschwasser whispered excitedly, "She said, 'I do not think,' Iris! Did you hear that?" into her ear, but Iris didn't quite understand what he was so excited about, and so just nodded vaguely.

A little while later, upon judging that the celebration had died down, Stroganoff spoke up:

“By the way, everyone, do you want to try to go to the hidden jungle?”

Iris wasn’t sure what he was talking about at first, but after a few moments of thought, she put the pieces together.

He was talking about the field that you could get to via the black holes that had been showing up here and there lately. But Iris’s expression was immediately dubious. Kirschwasser had a similar response. Yozakura’s expression didn’t change, but it was likely that she was thinking the same thing.

“You found a warp point?” Taker asked.

“Deep in Delve, yes. A few of our members have gone on ahead to secure the location,” Stroganoff responded cheerfully.

“Mr. Kirsch, are those the connection points that Yozakura... rather, that Rosemary used to get through?”

“I was wondering the same thing, but...”

The two cast glances at Yozakura, and she nodded with a blank expression. “Yes. Because the server machine upon which my data resides contains a 3D field map compatible with *Narrow Fantasy Online*, I tried to use it as a connection point to access the Ten Sages. As for my motive...”

“I think we all know what that is,” Iris said. It was exactly like her to cut her off like that. “Are they still connected? Does that mean the unauthorized access is still going on?”

She didn’t understand all the complicated bits, but she felt like by now, they should have done something to sever the connections between the fields. Even if Rosemary was using the Ten

Sages to perform unauthorized access and alter field data, she hadn't taken over the system itself. There should be many ways for the devs to counter her intrusion. In other words, there had to be some reason that the developers were leaving the connection up.

Iris thought back on President Azami Nono, with whom she'd eaten curry the night before. Despite being a genius, she was a bit slow in some respects, and didn't really seem cut out to be a developer. But at the very least, she didn't seem like the kind of person who would use others and concoct a scheme like this. She didn't want to think the connection was being left up as part of a plot, either.

"Well, what about you three?" Matsunaga asked them, interrupting their discussion.

Iris, Kirschwasser, and Yozakura all shared a look. The field map itself was something Ichiro had made for fun. There would be no malicious viruses or traps there, so there was no danger of data getting damaged.

After a few moments' hesitation, Iris spoke as representative of the three.

"We'll go."

"Can you do that?" Shinya Otogiri, CEO of Pony Entertainment, Inc., asked as he poked his head out from the mountain of lollipops on his desk.

A man in a blue delivery company uniform had been coming in and out of the office for a while now, delivering a large number of boxes. Inside each box were more lollipops.

The secretary nodded silently in response to the president's question. The delivery worker delivered the last of the boxes, took

off his cap and bowed, then left.

After a while, she spoke. "It's all just data in the end, so as long as we can access the server, we can take a program apart remotely."

"I understand that, but..." Otogiri said with a faintly pleased expression as he broke the seal on the cardboard. "Can *you* do that, Ms. Hishoyama?"

"Yes." The secretary nodded very calmly. Her own gaze turned to the mountain of documents piled high on her desk. "Among the documents sent to us by Thistle were those outlining the Ten Sages' programs. If I consult those, I probably can."

"I see." Otogiri thrust his head into a cardboard box and looked around a few times before looking up at her again. "But that would be crossing a rather dangerous bridge. Would it qualify as unauthorized access from our end?"

"Actually, the access route that the Ichiro Tsuwabuki household was using hasn't been completely cut off just yet."

"Oh?" Otogiri was intrigued by his secretary's words. He grabbed one of the newly arrived candies and tore off the wrapper. "In other words, a malicious program in the Tsuwabuki household is still illegally accessing Thistle Headquarters. All I'll be doing is dismantling it in order to try to protect Thistle's servers."

He pondered for a moment.

"Hmm, that's a risky excuse," Otogiri muttered while swishing the candy around in his mouth. "But I like it. Give it a try. I'll handle things with Thistle itself."

"Yes, sir. Understood."

“By the way, Ms. Hishoyama.”

“Yes?”

“This red pepper flavor just isn’t stimulating enough, either.”
As Otogiri spoke, he looked down at the buildings of Minato Ward below.

The secretary thought for a while, then finally said, flatly, “I’ll order some potassium cyanide.”

4

Noble Son, Be Surpassed

The sun was already high in the sky, and beads of sweat hung on the brows of the people in suits going this way and that on the street. The “Cool Biz” movement was on the rise, but here in the metropolis where the heat island effect was at its worst, it didn’t seem to be doing its job at all. The windows of the skyscrapers reflected the light of the summer sun, turning the asphalt into a hell of blazing heat. August was almost over, but the sweltering temperatures showed no signs of abating.

Ichiro was sitting in a seat on the café terrace, gazing at the tablet in his hand. He looked as cool as ever, enough that one might think he was enjoying an early summer breeze, yet it was still hot outside, even in the shade. Still, not only did he not show any external discomfort, he did not let a bead of sweat escape his pores. Such was Ichiro’s constantly-maintained philosophy of elegance. It was said that human philosophy could sometimes overturn common sense, although in practice, this was only true in the case of Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

“Oh, Tsuwabuki, welcome back.” This was the lawyer, Shunsaku Shaga, the kind of man who wouldn’t hesitate to say stinky sweat was part of a man’s true charm.

Ichiro glanced up, and responded with a murmur.

Shaga loosened his tie, undid his shirt buttons down to his chest, and plopped himself down in the seat opposite Ichiro. It seemed he had finished whatever it was he needed to take care of. “Oh, that’s right. I found you a lawyer. A friend of mine.”

“Hmm, thank you.”

Shaga was talking about a defense lawyer to prove Ichiro’s innocence. In the illegal access incident that Ichiro had been arrested for, Thistle was the victim, so Shaga, who was Thistle’s in-house lawyer, could not serve as Ichiro’s attorney. As a result, he’d had to find another excellent lawyer, and of course, his ability to find one spoke well of his connections. “So, how did things go on your end?”

“Mm.” Ichiro, his eyes focused on the tablet, pointed to the documents piled up on the table.

“Oh, thanks. By the way, what have you been looking at?”

“The movement of the stocks. On advisement by the president of Tsunobeni.”

“How very Nihonbashi of you.” As Shaga reached for the documents Ichiro had indicated, his eyes fell on a nearby structure, the Tokyo Stock Exchange building. Any time Shaga saw pictures of the TSE, be it on the news or whatnot, he would always say “Reminds me of the Eltreum” to those around him. No one had ever agreed with his sentiment, though.

The document stack wasn’t that thick, so Shaga skimmed through it all. The documents were all written in English, but he didn’t have a hard time deciphering them.

“An electronics engineer, a neurologist, and a developmental psychologist? I’m impressed you could get in touch with so many people in one day.”

“They’re all personal acquaintances,” Ichiro said. “They can’t amass the reports overnight, of course...”

“Well, as long as they make it in time for the deliberation over Rosemary’s personhood. You should be more worried about your-

self, though.”

Ichiro’s attitude was so leisurely, it was hard to believe he was a suspect out on bail. “You’re going to introduce me to a good lawyer, so it shouldn’t be difficult to clear my name. I’m not terribly worried, and I don’t see that I need to be.”

“Things won’t always go the way you want them,” Shaga said. “You don’t know what the Pony people might do if they learn Rosemary is still out there.”

“Oh, that?” Ichiro’s expression darkened slightly, and he produced his cell phone from his breast pocket. He tapped the e-mail icon and traced over his received message history.

Watching him, Shaga quietly nodded. “That e-mail from yesterday. It was from your father, right?”

“It was about Pony’s president. He said, ‘That man is absolutely unscrupulous.’”

In Ichiro’s opinion, his father was not one to talk in that regard, but to argue about that with him would be nonsense. His father and the current president of Pony had apparently had some bad blood in school that had persistently carried on into the modern day, and was something which Ichiro had no interest in whatsoever. He was merely genuinely grateful that his father, Meiro Tsuwabuki, had sent him an e-mail thinking of him.

“For instance, Tsuwabuki...”

“Yes?”

Shaga signaled a waitress, placed his order, and then changed the subject. “If this unscrupulous man learned that Rosemary was alive, and decided to take concrete action against her, what would you do?”

“That’s nonsense,” Ichiro said in a voice tinged with ennui. “I

don't want to think about that, even as a joke. But if it does happen..." As he spoke, he turned his gaze to the stock exchange building beyond the road and the trees. "Well, I'll be forced to take measures, I suppose."

"I see." Shaga could tell Ichiro didn't enjoy saying those words.

He didn't say anything else.

The hidden field expedition, led by the Red Sunset Knights, had an air of a picnic outing. It was such a pastoral atmosphere, it was hard to believe a top player guild was involved. The truth was, they couldn't be tense when they knew there was a field left to clear. Though they had also been hoping that the hidden field might net them some good items, so they were a little downcast when Matsunaga mentioned that if the devs found out, they would right their inventories anyway.

Yuri, Amesho, and the Kirihitters had come along purely out of curiosity. Matsunaga, too, was probably interested in seeing the field, as one of *NaroFan*'s foremost Explorers. Tomakomai was merely smiling his mysterious smile that made it hard to know what he was thinking, while Taker was sullen as usual, making it was hard to tell what enjoyment he was hoping to get out of this. Sorceress just kept twirling her parasol.

Iris, Kirschwasser, and Yozakura had come along for other reasons.

They knew what the hidden field was, and what had caused it to be connected to *Narrow Fantasy Online*. But what they didn't know was why the connection was still in place. It was hard to believe it was a mere mistake on the devs' part, or due to warm feelings towards Yozakura/Rosemary. Someone must have left it there for some obvious purpose.

They didn't know, but as long as they were hiding Rosemary's

circumstances, they couldn't explain, and the thought of just watching while their friends, foremost the Knights, just stepped in there, didn't sit right with them. That was why they had come along with the expedition.

"Hey, Matsunaga," Iris asked.

"Yes?"

They were on the road heading to the hole that connected the fields, known for convenience as a warp zone.

"Say we do end up entering that hidden field."

"Yes?"

"What happens if we're disconnected from the game while we're there?" Iris knew that Edward would probably know more about things like this, but he was apparently still busy in real life, and they hadn't heard much from him. Thus, she was seeking the opinion of Matsunaga, who seemed like the next most knowledgeable person available.

"Well, I don't actually know the programming that allows us to move throughout the game, so I'm not entirely certain." Matsunaga thought for a little while longer, then continued. "I think it's likely we'll suffer a connection error, and our game will be shut down. Just like in a server crash. Of course, it won't be that *NaroFan* itself has crashed... You know how people usually feel about server crashes, so it will probably be something like that."

Iris didn't know what usually happened when there was a server crash, or how most people typically responded. But given the nature of these full Drive-type VRMMOs, it stood to reason that the question existed, and that there was an answer to it. Even if she hadn't been through a server crash, Iris had experienced firsthand the terrible boredom of service interruption.

Matsunaga continued: “The problem is that a player’s location information is stored with their data, so if that happens, there’s a chance we won’t be able to log in with the same avatar again. The developers would need to restore our avatar’s location information to a legal one.”

So as long as they had the developers’ support, they could avoid any fatal data loss. Iris felt a little relieved. Even though Matsunaga described his own viewpoint as “optimistic,” she still felt more relieved than anything.

Before long, the group reached the ruins deep in Martial City Delve.

“There it is. It’s in sight.” Stroganoff, leader of the party, pointed.

Indeed, they saw something like a hole there, a swirling black void in the middle of space. It was like there was a subtle incursion on the graphics, as around the swirl, the polygons had gotten jaggy. The Knights’ members that had been standing guard in front of the vortex exchanged greetings with Stroganoff.

Iris turned back. Kirschwasser was scowling, as expected. Yozakura’s expression was blank, but she was likely feeling the same way inside. They really didn’t know why anyone had left this hole here, or for what purpose.

“Ai, what’s wrong?” Yuri leaned in and asked, seeming to notice that she was acting strangely.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Iris felt a bit bad lying to a friend like this, but she didn’t have a choice.

“Boy, don’tcha love it when you get to see a bug or an error in a game?” Amesho said, grinning broadly.

“It’s even more exciting given how close a VRMMO is to real-

ity,” Kirihito (Leader) agreed.

But just thinking about it wouldn’t advance anything, Iris thought. She cast a glance at Kirschwasser, and he nodded, too.

Ruining their friends’ fun though it might be, she would just have to find a free moment to put in a GM Call. Until then, she could let them enjoy themselves.

This was Iris’s thinking for the time being.

“Rosemary and the others seem to have entered the ‘forbidden territory,’” the secretary said.

The CEO of Pony Entertainment, Inc., who was staring at the jars of seasonings piled on top of his desk intently, replied: “Forbidden territory? That’s an ominous way of putting it.”

“I was under the impression that you enjoyed such phrasings.”

“Well, that’s true. I do.”

There was a line of salad bowls on his desk in addition to the seasonings. He put on a white frilly apron over his luxury suit and began pouring things out of the bottles and into the salad bowls. From his merry humming, one could assume he was enjoying himself.

The secretary’s computer had access to the Thistle Corporation’s *NaroFan* management server and some of its systems. In this respect, Thistle—or more precisely, Azami Nono—was very stubborn, and wouldn’t share what the secretary needed to enter the system directly, or to freely read chat logs. That meant that the most she could view from her computer were high-urgency requests such as GM Calls.

This particular GM Call included a message that there was a

connection point to the hidden field. The sender was Iris, account user of Airi Kakitsubata. Earlier that day, the man and the secretary had personally confirmed her connection to Ichiro Tsuwabuki, which meant that she was likely working with Rosemary.

“And the other user accessing from the Tsuwabuki household?” the man asked.

“Is with them,” the secretary answered.

“Time to get to work, then.” The man dropped a lollipop into the sea of spices, then stood up. “Ms. Hishoyama, that... artificial intelligence dissection plan of yours? Put it into practice. I’ll instruct Thistle personally to sever the connection.”

“Yes, sir.”

“After that... well, we don’t know what Tsuwabuki might try, so I’d better prepare some countermeasures.” With that, the man plunged the candy into his mouth. Then he whispered quietly, “Still not enough stimulation.”

“Are you certain you still have taste buds?” the secretary asked mildly, her eyes focused on her computer screen.

“Did the young heir really make this?” Iris whispered low enough that nobody else would hear.

“Yes.” Kirschwasser nodded in response.

This jungle, which other *NaroFan* players knew as the “hidden field,” was actually a 3D map that Ichiro Tsuwabuki had designed in his spare time. Rosemary had connected that field to *NaroFan*, partly as a prank, which had allowed her to come and go as she pleased. To be honest, Iris hadn’t been expecting such detailed graphics.

As a native of Japan and a mere member of the middle class, Airi Kakitsubata had never set foot in a tropical rainforest. She had never left the country; the furthest she'd ever gone was a trip to Okinawa for her elementary school graduation. During the winter of her second year, her trade school would be sending them on a field trip to Europe, and she was looking forward to that, but that was irrelevant at the moment.

Even though Iris had never seen the real thing before, she could immediately identify the accuracy of the jungle in front of her eyes. There were tall trees all around, with a canopy so thick that it blocked off all sunlight. Unknown animals called in the distance, and the heat seemed to cling to the skin.

"It's all trees and not much grass, I see," she commented.

"I like how it's easy to walk around in, though," Kirihito (Leader) said.

"Tall trees in the jungle block out the light, which makes it hard for small flora to grow." Amesho showed surprising knowledge.

"It is impressive graphic design, but it feels different from the map modeling of *NaroFan*'s fields." This astute observation came from Matsunaga.

"Do you think that once Pony bought them out, they added a new designer? It's certainly distinctive," Stroganoff added.

Naturally enough, there were no signs of any monsters or items here. But the Knights, who didn't realize that this was the young heir's personal virtual space, all looked around with interest, and kept their guards up.

Iris decided to try her menu window, and she found that it opened here without issue. She could access all of her avatar functions and system screens, including Skills, Arts, equipment,

and items, all without issue. Perhaps the virtual space had been built on the same engine, or perhaps *Narrow Fantasy Online* 's system was carrying through. But she knew that thinking wouldn't bring her any closer to understanding it, so she abandoned the train of thought.

"I really don't get it, though..." She checked her status and saw that it read "Unknown Point" under "current location."

"The reason they left the connection in place, you mean?" Kirschwasser responded, rubbing his chin.

"Yeah. I don't see what either Thistle or Pony would have to gain from it."

"That is true. It could have been to build hype, or a simple failure to fix a bug. Neither option would be especially admirable of the devs."

Iris felt sure they must have known about it, but she had put in the GM Call just to be safe. They should really try to do something about it.

It was while she was walking, thinking that over, that something unexpected happened.

"It looks like there really is nothing here," Stroganoff said, looking disappointed. "The field map is all they've finished, I guess..."

"Or perhaps it's here to get people excited, and they've merely disguised it as a bug." Matsunaga, standing with him at the head of the group, seemed a little disappointed, too.

Iris was also considering that maybe it was a good time to leave the field.

Just then, Yozakura's avatar doubled over. "Ah..."

“Yozakura?” Iris asked trepidatiously.

Because Rosemary, as an artificial intelligence, was not equipped to provide emotional output, Yozakura’s expression did not change. But she clutched her chest with a hand, fell to one knee, and placed a hand on a tree trunk to support herself—all clear indications of “agony.”

Kirschwasser noticed the irregularity and immediately offered Yozakura a shoulder for support. “What is it, Yozakura?”

“Oh, did something happen?!” Amesho, Yuri, Kirihiro (Leader), Matsunaga, Stroganoff, and the others, who had been walking ahead, turned around and ran up to her.

Iris checked her guild member status from the menu window and saw nothing wrong with Yozakura’s avatar. Something like this would seem to suggest an issue with the player’s physical body, but...

Under normal conditions, when the player’s physical body experienced pain or some other stimulus, as long as it wasn’t an emergency, the Drive system would filter it out. The next step would be to send a warning message, and then, if too many pain signals reached their brain, the system was designed to log them out. It was hard to imagine what condition would result in the avatar displaying this sort of suffering.

Of course, that was all under “normal conditions.” Yozakura’s login method was far from normal.

Yozakura clenched and unclenched her hands repeatedly as she looked around her.

“Yozakura, does your stomach hurt?” Iris asked, concerned. “Want to get back to town and log out?”

“No...” Yozakura shook her head in response to the kindness

offered her.

The sharp-eyed Matsunaga stood a little ways away, watching thoughtfully.

“Father, Iris, this is an urgent situation, so I must speak.” Yozakura’s tone was so unchanged from normal that Iris actually found it slightly annoying. But her next words caused Iris’s heart to freeze over. “I myself am being accessed externally.”

“What did you say?”

“I am being taken apart remotely.”

Yozakura’s words, spoken so casually, suggested a chilling possibility. Iris and Kirschwasser both froze up. The others around them were naturally confused, unable to understand her statement. But it was Matsunaga who first figured it out, followed by Amesho, and one by one, their expressions grew suspicious.

Yozakura’s player, Rosemary, was a program. By reversing the process under which she had been developed, it would be possible to deconstruct her remotely. If one thought of her as a human, though, this was the equivalent to being slowly dismembered while still alive. Now that Iris knew about Rosemary’s rich emotional life, she couldn’t just laugh off comparisons of a program to a human.

Rosemary was in the middle of being dissected alive.

There was no change in Yozakura’s avatar. That was only natural; the avatar was a user account created through conventional methods, with no special connection to Rosemary’s program. This meant that the progression of the erasure would not be reflected in Yozakura’s form. It meant that they could see no signs whatsoever of the terrifying process that was taking place.

Iris was beginning to feel uneasy. She had to hurry, but what

could she do? Kirschwasser must have felt the same way. The fact that there was no change in Yozakura's appearance just caused them to freeze up uncertainly.

"Sir Kirschwasser, you should log out immediately," Matsunaga said in a slightly strained voice. "I won't ask what's going on, though I've figured it out... You need to log out, pull out the LAN cable, and turn off the router. That's the most reliable way to stop this."

"A physical severance of connection? But... no, I'll do it." Kirschwasser shook off his hesitation. Cutting off the connection between the server and the outside world would likely damage the avatar data of the other players remaining, as Matsunaga had said before they entered this field. But that was trivial compared to Rosemary's "life."

Kirschwasser opened his menu window to do just that.

But the perpetrator of this plan was truly cruel. Before Kirschwasser could log out, Iris's avatar experienced a sudden change. That didn't just apply to Iris, but all the players there—more precisely, every player except for Yozakura and Kirschwasser.

The world went black around them. The thick tropical rainforest disappeared in an instant, and Iris was cast into empty space. A warning message appeared before her eyes.

"Your game is being forcibly ended due to disconnection from the server."

Realizing that her GM Call had gone through did not put her mind at ease. The timing of it felt malicious. She could easily guess that they were the only ones who had been disconnected from the server, while Kirschwasser and Rosemary had been left in the jungle.

It was probably also only the game that had been severed, which would mean Rosemary's gradual erasure was likely still going on.

And also, yes... Kirschwasser and Yozakura were connected to that jungle through the internal network of the server it was housed on. It was fully possible that even if the connection to the game was severed, they might still remain in there. The purpose of separating them from the game was to prevent Kirschwasser from choosing the option to log out from the menu screen.

Iris couldn't be sure about this, but the possibility was very real.

Iris—rather, Airi Kakitsubata—sat upright, her consciousness having fully returned to the real world. She felt a fluffy soft bed beneath her, totally different from the one she usually slept in. She removed her Miraive Gear, then remembered that she was in Megumi Fuyo's room.

She had to do something. But there was nothing she could do by herself.

Just as she was thinking that, the door opened.

“Oh, perfect timing. Airi, I just got a bit of urgent work in...”

“Fuyo!” Airi cut her off. The question of whether it was all right to ask her for this lingered in her mind for a moment, but she cast it away immediately. She could think about that later. “I need your help!”

Fuyo's expression returned to normal the moment she noticed the unusual severity in Airi's voice. She spoke to her in a calm, yet gentle tone. “Has something happened?”

Eikei Fuyo was the president of Tsunobeni Co., one of Japan's

five largest trading companies. As was his habit, he was once again walking through the garden of his estate in Mitaka City, Tokyo, holding his beloved cat. The cat he held in his arms was named Miké. It was a Russian Blue that had grown fat from its sumptuous lifestyle.

Eikei Fuyo was in high spirits. His deeply sheltered daughter Megumi, who had had so much trouble making friends, had brought a friend home for the first time today. She seemed a bit shy around strangers, but also like a goodhearted, straightforward girl. He had suspicions that the age difference was a bit too great, but considering his beloved daughter's job, it was probably a good thing to always have a contact with younger sensibilities.

His work was going well as always, too. Ichiro Tsuwabuki, whose investment advice he'd been asking for quite often lately, had proven an excellent advisor. Truly, he had the wind at his back. It was about time for him to hear from Ichiro again on that, too, though given the arrest and everything Ichiro had to do surrounding that, he felt a bit bad obligating him to do it.

It would soon be afternoon, so Eikei Fuyo thought over his plans for the day. If that Airi Kakitsubata girl chose to remain a little while longer, he'd love to introduce her to his beloved garden and have afternoon tea together. Lately, one of his favorite pastimes had been inviting a famous patisserie to come by and make him sweets. And since Megumi had come home, too, he thought maybe he'd speak to her, too.

With those thoughts in mind, he walked down the brick tiles, heading for the mansion. Before he could reach the mansion's expensive door, though, it burst open, and Megumi Fuyo and Airi Kakitsubata flew out.

Eikei Fuyo's face broke into a smile.

"I see you two have afternoon plans already," he laughed.

“Forgive me, Father!”

“Sorry, talk later!”

The two were like a whirlwind, running off towards the mansion’s garage.

Eikei Fuyo laughed heartily, rustling Miké in his arms. The fat cat merely knitted its brows unhappily.

“That’s youth for you, isn’t it, Miké?”

“Meow.”

“I think a storm’s on the way, isn’t it, Miké?”

“Meow.”

Eikei Fuyo kept laughing as he pulled a smartphone from his breast pocket. He still wasn’t at all comfortable with the touch panel, but clumsily, he managed to open his address book, pull up Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s name, and tap “call.”

Ichiro hung up the phone and tucked the smartphone into his breast pocket. His expression was vicious, and that, more than anything, was something Shaga had never seen from the man before. There was none of the calm there that Ichiro usually displayed. Shaga watched silently for a few moments to see what he might do, but after closing his eyes and thinking for a while, Ichiro just called a waitress, opened a menu, and said this:

“Give me everything on the menu, from here to here.”

“Huh?”

“All of it.”

Shaga wasn’t the slightest bit surprised by the strange behav-

ior he was witnessing. He brought a coffee cup to his mouth, thought, *It begins*, and nothing more.

When Ichiro Tsuwabuki got flustered, he became extremely reckless with his spending. It had died down quite a lot recently, of course.

Thinking things must have gotten rather serious, Shaga asked: “So, what did he say?”

“Apparently, he’s made his move,” Ichiro said in a surprisingly level voice. “He said that Iris and Megumi left their house in a hurry. There was a Miraive Gear in Megumi’s room, which Iris seems to have been playing, and the servants remember hearing them say something about ‘Rosemary.’”

“I see.” Shaga lit his cigarette and pulled out his own smart-phone. As he checked the e-mail he’d received while Ichiro was talking on the phone, a wrinkle appeared on his brow. “I think we’ve hit a small snag on our end, as well.”

“Tell me.”

“The perpetual assistant inspector received a tongue-lashing from his superior. A detective is heading for your house now to confiscate the supercomputer and the server.”

“If they only wanted to confiscate them, I wouldn’t mind, but I doubt that’s it.”

The waitress appeared again with a tray of cups and a nervous expression on her face. The coffees and café lattes made from a variety of beans and flavors sat cramped upon the small, elegant table.

“Reminds me of one of those lotus pod Photoshops,” Shaga said.

“A what?” Ichiro always engaged earnestly with whatever he was given. He took a cup, and while showing only superficial interest in the aroma, continued. “It’s only speculation, but I believe that Sakurako-san is trapped. The house’s locks are flawless, and unless Sakurako-san, Rosemary, or I try to open them, the detectives won’t be able to get in.”

“If you’re not at home, they’ll call your cell phone.”

“Yes, and I’ll ignore it.”

This was the sort of reckless proposal that would normally be unthinkable from Ichiro. It seemed to Shaga that he was treading a line very close to breaking his own rules. Ichiro Tsuwabuki had never yielded before authority, but his personal philosophy demanded adherence to basic social norms.

Around the time he’d finished all the coffee, the second and third courses of drinks arrived. Before long, other light meals, such as sandwiches, were brought. One after another, they went into the stomach of the self-professed light eater, Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

“Our first task will be to save Rosemary,” Ichiro said. “Then we need to get people from the police who are not influenced by Pony, and are on our side legally, to take action, so that they can’t do anything to Rosemary once they have her.”

“I can put in some calls,” Shaga said. “But either way, we have to stop Pony from doing what it’s doing. You have a plan?”

Ichiro didn’t answer at first. His hand stopped halfway to a sandwich, and he closed his eyes. Then, after a moment’s thought, he said, “I do.”

Shaga had no interest in the psychological process the man had had to go through to steel himself to say those words. If Ichiro said he had an idea, then he did, and if he said he’d do it,

he'd do it. He didn't have the kind of relationship with the man where he could inquire about something like that gracefully.

But there was one other thing Shaga was curious about, so he decided to ask it. "Tsuwabuki, are you going to eat all that?"

As far as Shaga knew, Ichiro Tsuwabuki was a light eater.

Ichiro broke the sandwich on the table in two, took out his smartphone to start calling someone else, and responded. "When I get angry, I get hungry."

Ah, so he is angry, Shaga thought.

Fuyo raced her K-car down the highway right at the speed limit. Airi was surprised by what a reckless driver Fuyo was. Airi would be old enough to get her license next year, and this was a reminder that driving brought out one's true self. She'd have to be careful.

After she'd logged out, she had explained everything to Megumi. She'd explained about going to the hidden field with the other players, about how it had been the 3D map Ichiro had created for fun, about the fact that it was unrelated to *NaroFan*, about the fact that Rosemary had created the connection, and about how Rosemary herself was currently being taken apart remotely by some unknown player.

She'd had a feeling that she wasn't explaining it all terribly well, but after hearing it all, Fuyo had quietly nodded and said, "I understand."

She had agreed to Airi's response for help, and then said nothing else except, "Come with me." She'd taken her own light automobile out of the garage, put Airi in the passenger seat, and left the house. Now they were driving down the highway.

“Have you told Ichiro about this?” Fuyo asked her as she drove, the first question she had posed to Airi this entire time.

Airi shook her head. “I haven’t.”

She looked at her cell phone. There were plenty of ways she could let the young heir know what was going on if she wanted to. Yet Airi was hesitant. She knew that, given what was happening to Rosemary, it was an urgent situation. But the situation’s urgency made it all the more clear what action Ichiro would take if he knew.

She knew what he would do, and what would come of it.

Airi thought back on the conversation they had had at Thistle the day before. She thought about what would happen if he broke his own rules for Rosemary’s sake. She didn’t want to think about it. The fact that she could so easily imagine what might happen was all the more reason why she didn’t want to think about it.

If Ichiro acted, things would no longer be able to remain as they were. A fatal change of some sort would take place. Airi wasn’t yet mentally ready to let that happen.

That was why she had asked Fuyo. Fuyo was the only “adult” that Airi could trust. She was her best friend, and an adult, and so she could trust her. She knew it wasn’t exactly fair, but it was the only tool she had at her disposal.

“I understand how you feel, Airi,” Fuyo said as she gazed out the windshield from the driver’s seat. Such a gentle voice, such a kind expression.

“Fuyo, I...”

“We’re friends, after all. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure everything works out somehow.”

The car stopped at a red light. Fuyo looked at Airi and smiled.

“Airi, you should just be as strong and mature as you always are. I understand how you and Ichiro both feel. I promise I will save Rosemary.”

“As a rival in love?” Airi asked.

“Yes, as a rival in love.”

Those were words Airi wished Rosemary could hear. In that moment the hesitation in the back of her mind immediately lifted, and her mind became clear. Airi Kakitsubata had her focus back. “All right, Fuyo. I’m counting on you.”

“Leave it to me.”

The car continued racing towards the chaotic 23 wards of Tokyo.

“What are you talking about?”

Azami Nono was on the phone, displaying an anger she rarely ever showed. All eyes in Thistle were focused on her.

She was speaking directly to Shinya Otogiri, the CEO of Pony Entertainment, Inc. Pony currently held about 40% of Thistle’s stock, and a little over 10% had been bought up by him personally. That meant he was effectively their majority shareholder. It was unbelievable that one would snarl at their own owner like this, but if you’d heard what he’d said to her, perhaps it would seem justified.

“It was impressive how quickly you responded to that GM Call, but don’t try to do any more than that,” the man said coolly. “Of course, you should continue to do your duties as developers. There were players on that map, after all, so you’ll want to repair their avatar information.”

“That wasn’t what I was asking about!” President Azami snarled.

A little before noon today, she’d received a GM Call from a player letting her know about one of the “hidden fields” people were talking about. Recalling what had happened the day before, President Azami could more or less guess what was going on. She had been left out of everything from the discovery of the unauthorized access through to Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s arrest, but she was hoping that at least Pony’s countermeasures had cut off the unauthorized access route.

The realization that they had left an access route behind was a huge wake-up call for her. At the same time as she’d received the GM Call, she’d sent out an order to cut off their access to the game, and it was done. That much was fine. But what President Azami didn’t understand was his statement that she shouldn’t try to do anything more.

“Well, listen, Nono,” the man said. “I know what you’re trying to do. You found the new unauthorized access route, and you’re trying to seal it for good this time. I’m saying I want you to wait. After all, unauthorized access really is a massive problem. I want you to wait until I dispatch my own engineers.”

“If I may say, your company’s actions in dealing with the unauthorized access incidents do not seem to be made in good faith,” she snapped.

“Ahh.” There was a moment’s pause, and then laughter from the other side of the phone. It was a snickering sort of laugh. “Good faith, eh? Good faith as a company, you say?”

She felt a sticky, unpleasant feeling begin to wind around her like a snake.

“I heard, Ms. Nono, that the one behind the last account hack, the... what was it again? The artificial intelligence... That it actu-

ally got away.”

President Azami froze up. Was he on to them? Before her brain could fully catch up, the man on the other end of the phone continued.

“If the public were to learn about that, it would be difficult for Thistle to stay in business. Not even I could cover for you then. Don’t you want to keep making games at your company?”

President Azami fell silent, unable to respond. Otogiri’s words had hit their mark. But more than that, she wanted to know if this man really knew where Rosemary was. But just as she was wondering about that...

“Coming in!!” The door to the office flew open.

Airi had asked Fuyo to help her, but she didn’t know what the woman actually needed to do.

Fuyo’s car entered the metropolis from the highway, making a beeline to Jinbocho in Kanda, Chiyoda Ward. Naturally, they were heading towards Thistle. Airi had been thinking about going right to the young heir’s house, but she also knew how strict the security at the mansion was. If Ichiro was at home, things wouldn’t have gotten to this point, and if Kirschwasser couldn’t log out, then no one would answer the intercom anyway, so a visit there would just be a waste of effort.

Besides, they were in a race against time. Airi didn’t know how long it would take to take apart a massive software program like an artificial intelligence remotely. In the ten or so seconds between when the process started and when they had been disconnected, she hadn’t noticed any sign of fatal changes. It might depend on the number of people on the job, but she guessed it might even take several hours.

The first thing they had to do was get to Thistle headquarters and explain the situation directly. If Azami knew what was happening, she could probably do something. She was Rosemary's creator, after all.

On the way, they tried to call President Azami, but no one answered. It was the same when they tried to call Thistle itself. The woman was probably just busy, but the situation being what it was, Fuyo and Airi felt unusually nervous. At the moment, Thistle was entirely a child corporation of Pony. It was impossible to deny the possibility of there being pressure from above preventing them from answering.

Just then, Fuyo abruptly turned the steering wheel, causing Airi's head to hit the passenger side window.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry, Airi. But we're in a hurry. We're changing our destination."

"Huh?" Airi asked confusedly, rubbing her bumped head.

"I don't know who it is that's trying to delete Rosemary, but... shall we attempt to guess?" Fuyo asked seriously, staring straight forward.

"W-Well..."

"The president of Pony gets along very poorly with Ichiro's father," Fuyo said. "I doubt that by itself would spur something like this, but who else would benefit in the end from Rosemary being deleted? And who else would have the means to go after her directly?"

"Oh... I see."

There was something different about Fuyo in this moment. Airi was reminded of her presence during the guild sponsor inci-

dent; she was staring at the face of Megumi Fuyo. Not the naive, aging rich girl, but the famous designer who crackled with rival energy.

Fuyo was a major heiress whose father commanded Japan's economic world. The more Airi thought about it, the more she realized that the world Fuyo came from was very much like the young heir's. She was even alike in the way she attempted to live off her own talent rather than leeching off her parents forever.

Despite knowing that, the fact that Airi wasn't intimidated might have been the result of her numbed sensations at the moment.

"So, Fuyo, where are we going?" she asked.

"To Shibuya. MiZUNO's headquarters." Fuyo's eyes were like steel. "Airi, I'm going to do what you don't want Ichiro to do."

Azami Nono was shocked by the person who barged in. "Ah... um... Asuha?"

It was Ichiro Tsuwabuki's second cousin, the player of Felicia in *Narrow Fantasy Online*. She was dressed in pastels appropriate for a girl of her age. Marching through the office, whose members looked a bit shaken by the appearance of a real-life middle school girl, she thrust her smartphone screen at Azami.

"It's an e-mail from Itchy."

Azami's voice trembled as she took the proffered cell phone. "A-Asuha, this is..."

The e-mail contained all of Ichiro's suppositions about what was going on. Azami's emotions, already high-strung from the conversation with Otogiri, lurched rapidly in a new direction.

“Is this about Rosemary?” Edogawa, in a corner of the room, asked sharply.

Asuha turned around.

The man gave a small bow. “Hello. I’m Edward, Edogawa.”

“Oh, hello. I’m Felicia, Asuha Tsuwabuki. Thank you for taking care of Itchy.”

“What a ridiculous thing to say. I’ve never done anything to take care of him.”

But Azami didn’t even hear their conversation. Rosemary was being erased. That was roughly what the e-mail amounted to. She had already hung up on Otogiri, but she remembered what he had said. It was Azami herself who had told him that the account hack had been done by the artificial intelligence Rosemary, and it was she who had filed a false report out of fear that she would be disposed of as a mere program.

Even if it meant she herself had committed a crime, she wanted Rosemary, who had acquired free will, to “live” somehow. Part of it was her curiosity as a researcher, while another part came from her feelings as a mother.

Right now, though, even that wish was being threatened. Rosemary was being erased. Azami could not accept that.

An idea coming to her, she turned to her PC and began furiously typing on her keyboard. A strange atmosphere hung over the office. The others looked at Azami, a range of emotions in their eyes, but she didn’t have time to scrutinize their meaning. She had to save Rosemary.

“President Nono!” It was Edogawa who grabbed Azami’s arm. He had been talking with Asuha prior to that, but at some point he had appeared at Azami’s side.

While he did that, Asuha snatched her smartphone back from her.

“Wh-What? Let me go!” Azami snapped.

“President Nono, get ahold of yourself. I understand what you’re trying to do. You want to cut off the access route, right? Didn’t you read Mr. Tsuwabuki’s e-mail?” Edogawa spoke rapidly and loquaciously in a manner that was totally different from his usual listless speaking patterns. But he couldn’t hide the trembling emotion in his voice.

The e-mail they had gotten from Ichiro had gone on to speak in more depth about the access routes that Pony was using to dismantle Rosemary remotely. Rosemary had rigged a backdoor program in the Ten Sages, and now, communication was going on between Thistle and the Tsuwabuki mansion with extremely weak network security on both ends, which made hacking extremely easily. It had taken time to notice and repair this, and they had just begun working at plugging the holes when she’d gotten that call from Otogiri.

The backdoor program was what was being used to take Rosemary apart. If they could just finish the repairs, that could potentially interrupt the erasure process, but it wouldn’t fix the fundamental problem. As long as Rosemary was in the system, it would be hard to say that the Tsuwabuki network security was perfect, and there were many ways they could get at her if they were willing to be unscrupulous.

Turning on Pony now wouldn’t save Rosemary. Azami would just be taking unnecessary risk. To not just delay Rosemary’s disassembly, but to stop it completely, they needed to stop the problem closer to the root.

“But there’s no way I can do that!” Azami shouted in frustration.

“Yes... well, probably not by yourself,” Edogawa said with an air of hesitancy. “Listen, President. Maybe it’s not my place to say this, as a transfer employee...” In that moment, the trembling in Edogawa’s voice wasn’t coming only from anger and indignation. “If Mr. Tsuwabuki sent this e-mail, it means that he probably has a plan to do something about it himself. Rosemary may be saved even if we don’t do anything. But I don’t like that idea, because I really hate him.”

“You must care a lot about Itchy, Mr. Edward...” Asuha whispered.

“I’m telling you, I hate him!” Edogawa screamed.

What were they talking about, at a time like this? A tiny bit of irritation entered Azami’s expression. But when he said his next words, she could not help but agree.

“I don’t think you want to just sit back and watch while that man saves Rosemary, either.”

“W-Well...” Azami tried listlessly to deny it, but eventually nodded.

“Mr. Edward, do you have an idea?” Asuha asked.

“I do. I definitely do.” Edogawa nodded. “I really didn’t want to resort to it, but it’s a method you’re familiar with, too, Felicia.”

In that moment, his eyes were not those of the endlessly put-upon small business systems engineer, Domon Edogawa, but of Machina Blacksmith Edward, who had once crawled his way up to become the number one in the Akihabara Forging Guild.

Full of confidence, Edward turned to President Azami and said, “I’m going to get ahead of that terrible man. Because this will probably be my last chance.”

“Oh, I managed to log in,” Matsunaga said.

It had been less than two hours since they had been disconnected from the system. A rather fast response, in Matsunaga’s opinion. He thought they’d receive some warning or penalty from the devs for having entered the hidden field, but there was no sign of it. He suspected the developers didn’t want to acknowledge the existence of the hidden field, and a penalty would be acknowledging that it had existed.

When Matsunaga logged in, he was standing in a corner of Martial City Delve. It was the same place they had been just before they jumped into the hidden field through the “hole.” A few other had already logged in. They were looking around, clear dependency on their faces.

“Hey, Matsunaga.” Five Knights led by Stroganoff were already there.

Matsunaga raised his hand lightly and returned the greeting. “Hey, Stroganoff.”

“What’s going on here?”

“I’m not sure. We were cut off from the field, and there was a location error for our avatars, so I guess they must have fixed it.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Stroganoff said.

“What did you mean, then?”

Stroganoff hardened his features in a way that reflected his “Monstrous” title. “I’m talking about what happened on the hidden field. Yozakura was in pain, and the connection was severed right afterwards. You caught on to something, didn’t you?”

“Ahh...” Matsunaga scratched his forehead.

That was true. Though it might be more accurate to say that

the circumstances had made him curious. Kirschwasser and Yozakura should have been disconnected from the game when the rest of them were. That being the case, then as Matsunaga had suggested, Kirschwasser should have physically disconnected the network and preserved Yozakura. Of course, that was assuming Matsunaga's preposterous theory was true. He was a little concerned about how perfect the timing was, though...

It was clear that that wasn't what Stroganoff wanted to hear, though. He wanted to hear Matsunaga's preposterous theory. But Matsunaga was a bit hesitant to voice it, given what a ridiculous-sounding story it was.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't be right to hide it, either. These players were just as worried as he was.

"Hear me out, Stroganoff, and don't laugh."

"Are you doing a bit?" Stroganoff asked skeptically.

"No, I'm serious." Matsunaga made his face solemn.

Stroganoff's expression tensed. "This isn't like you. Out with it."

"Well, I think that Yozakura's player might actually be an artificial intelligence."

Stroganoff burst out laughing. "Gwahahahaha!"

"Hey." For the first time since he began playing *NaroFan*, Matsunaga wanted to kill one of his fellow players.

He had known Stroganoff would laugh at the idea. That was why he hadn't wanted to say it. After all, they knew that Yozakura's player was in love with Ichiro. The suggestion was utterly mad.

It was her words, "I'm being taken apart," that concerned him.

It was a terrifying phrase if it was coming from a human mouth. It couldn't be just a bit of roleplay, either, as Yozakura wasn't that sort of character. And when Matsunaga had offered his suggestion of countermeasures to Kirschwasser based on his theory, the Knight had agreed without hesitation. In other words, the pieces fit together.

"That's not like you, Matsunaga," Stroganoff chortled. "I think you've been watching too much anime."

"He's been watching too much anime since the day he was born," one of the four commanders behind him said, and the others seemed to be in agreement.

But Matsunaga was backed up from an unexpected direction: the sky.

"You're exactly right, Matsunaga."

The group looked up at the sky and saw a humanoid form approaching from an already short distance away. The knights tried to recite the cliché lines:

"What's that?"

"A bird?"

"A pla—"

"Stop that." The figure from the sky landed before they could finish it all.

It was an unexpected visitor.

"Hey, it's Edward," Matsunaga commented. "Haven't seen you logged in for a while."

Yes, it was the Fighting Blacksmith of the Akihabara Forging Guild, Edward. As usual, it was hard to read emotion on his me-

chanical face, but his usual thin, monotone voice seemed somehow passionate.



“I’ve been busy with RL work,” Edward said. “I know that’s hard for a small business owner and a professional blogger to understand...”

It seemed he was as sullen as ever. Clearly, he was only ever soft in front of Bossman.

Stroganoff interjected, “What’s going on, Edward? You also think that Yozakura’s player is an AI?”

“She is, Stroganoff, but I don’t have time to convince you about it, so just indulge me, please. I want to save Yozakura.” Edward spoke rather quickly, but there was definite appeal in what he had to say next. “Listen, you two. Do you want to beat Ichiro Tsuwabuki at something?”

The workers at Thistle Corporation had never been so united in purpose.

Or, well, maybe they had... After all, the office was like their second home. They had worked together here to make their very own game. Their balance was sloppy, their business skills were weak, and for a for-profit industry, they were extremely lax. But Azami Nono knew they were first-rate when it came to pursuing a united goal.

In this moment, the Thistle Corporation looked like itself again: liberated from the designs of Pony Entertainment, united in the pursuit of a single goal. Part of it was their grand mission of saving Rosemary, but there was another feeling that pervaded, as well. It was a bit like that of children playing a prank.

The plan’s name was Operation: Final Five.

Azami couldn’t begrudge them this bit of silliness. At the least, Edward really did seem to want to save Rosemary, and his plan

was definitely unscrupulous, but it felt like it would be extremely effective while also keeping Pony in the dark about what they were doing until the very end.

“The location data for all the avatars is fixed!” a worker shouted excitedly.

“Great job! Let’s move the plan to the next phase!”

The one who had taken the lead on the project was a GM known mainly by his avatar name, Raspberry. He’d become so known by this handle that Azami, to her great shame, occasionally forgot his real name.

He cast a glance at Azami and scratched his head. “Are we being too silly, President?”

“No, it’s fine,” she assured him. “Everyone’s been so gloomy lately. Let’s give it all we’ve got on Final Five.”

“Okay!” Raspberry agreed forcefully.

The workers as a whole were facing their screens, tapping their keyboards. Their next job was the exact opposite of what they had been doing until recently: They were reconnecting the game and the hidden field. As long as the back door program used for the unauthorized access was still active, such connections were extremely easy to make.

The problem was Kirschwasser’s player. Being cut off from the game meant that she was likely trapped in the virtual space. Having used an unauthorized route to enter the Tsuwabuki mansion’s virtual world, being cut off from the game would eliminate her ability to log out. That was how the system worked.

Of course, just reconnecting her to the game wouldn’t allow her to log out again right away. Their prioritized restoration was the easiest part possible: a route for avatars to travel back and

forth. Once the virtual spaces had been cut off, it would take some time for the *NaroFan* menu window to be usable there again. Which meant it would still take time for her to be able to log out.

That was why they were going forward with Operation: Final Five.

“Connection re-established!”

“Okay, let’s contact Edward and...”

“Wait! One avatar has already entered the connection area!”

“Th-This avatar is...”

They seemed to be getting really into it, Azami thought. They must have been feeling rather bottled up themselves.

“Okay.” Next to her, Asuha whispered something and put away her smartphone. It seemed she had sent someone an e-mail, but Azami couldn’t be sure who it was. “Miss President, can I borrow a Miraive Gear, too?”

“Oh, yes. Please take part in Final Five.” She gave her a quick nod.

Asuha clenched her fists and said: “Okay, I will!”

Watching Asuha leave the room, Azami found herself thinking of Ichiro Tsuwabuki. Edward’s statements had suggested he was working on his own plans, and Azami thought that sounded about right. Setting aside the question of whether Edogawa and the others would beat that aloof man to the punch...

She could imagine, more or less, what he might attempt to do. And she knew that it would bring about a fatal change in his relationship to her—in other words, the relationship between developer and player.

Asuha had likely realized that, as well. As the one who had invited Ichiro Tsuwabuki to join the game, what must she be feeling?

The thought of it made her feel a bit lonely.

The logout button was grayed out. He touched it again and again, but nothing changed.

After the umpteenth failure, Kirschwasser closed the menu window and slammed his fist into a tree. Kirschwasser and Yozakura were, in this moment, the only ones inside that enormous jungle. He could more or less guess why this was happening.

The field they were in had been cut off from the game. Some of his data, such as graphics, stats, Skills and Arts, were autonomous within the fictional space, which meant there was no visible change in Kirschwasser's avatar. But when he opened a menu window, it was clear that none of the functions could be used.

The fact that he and Yozakura were the only ones left in the fictional space was likely because they could access it through the house's local network. They were completely trapped right now. Because they weren't accessing it through an expected route, they couldn't log out. It was a fatal flaw in the system.

If his physiological needs such as hunger got too great, Kirschwasser would receive warnings and then be forcibly logged out. But he didn't have time to wait for that.

"Rosemary, I'm sorry!" Kirschwasser—rather, Sakurako—could feel in that moment how powerless she was. All she could do now was sit on the ground, cradling Yozakura's avatar.

"Father..." Yozakura said in an extremely calm voice. "Am I going to disappear?"

Sakurako didn't say yes. She couldn't. She didn't want to.

She didn't want to acknowledge the reality.

Sakurako had only met Rosemary for the first time the day before. Rosemary was the hateful AI who had used the house's security measures against her and locked her in her house.

But so what? Her sense of self had developed so much in just these two days. Sakurako had been happy to see that growth, and she was certain that Ichiro would be pleased to see it, too. They had become real friends.

Sakurako had cooked for her, and Rosemary had said that her food was delicious. She'd grown annoyed with her, discussed the parts of Ichiro that Rosemary didn't know, and even gloated at her. When Rosemary had said that she wanted to be a maid, Sakurako had thought it was impossible, but she had also wanted to encourage her a little.

How was she supposed to acknowledge that that same Rosemary was being deleted, right now, by some pigheaded fool?

"I do not wish to disappear."

At those words, Sakurako looked up.

"Father, I do not wish to disappear. I still have not done anything. I have not yet told Ichiro that I love him."

It was difficult to put into words the emotion welling up in Sakurako now. Ichiro Tsuwabuki had always said that what could be expressed in words was merely superficial; that the human heart was not so easily communicated. She usually just let those words roll off her back, and never expected that she would now feel them so keenly.

"You can hear this, can't you?!" Sakurako screamed. She screamed at the cruel someone who was still dismantling Rose-

mary, despite recognizing in a corner of her mind that she had seen this scene before. “You can hear this, and you’re still doing it?! She’s not a program! She’s alive! Can’t you see that?”

A silence fell.

Then a message window appeared in the air, a phrase displayed on it. “This is my job.”

Rage.

Sakurako’s vision went red. She drew her Knight Sword and threw it at the menu window. It passed through and embedded itself deep into the tree behind it. “You rotten person!”

Another message appeared. “My boss is a rotten person, yes.”

“You should go punch him in the face, then!” Sakurako shouted, unable to restrain her anger.

Anger at the unreasonable person behind Rosemary’s dismantling. Anger at the executor of it, who was still doing it, even now. She was even angry at the fact that they were claiming it was on their boss’s orders. If that was the case, couldn’t the person at least try to rectify their boss’s misunderstanding? But no matter how she shouted and chastised that person, the process continued.

Below the message window sat a Pony Entertainment company emblem. So, Pony was behind it after all, Sakurako thought. But what good would knowing that do for them now? She felt abashed.

“You cannot do anything,” the message window said, as if to emphasize her powerlessness. “No matter how strong you are, no matter how you try to attack the badge of the window, it will not affect me in the real world. But you may try, if it will make you feel better.”

The words seemed to see directly into Sakurako's heart. For a moment, she pulled out her Knight Sword, and thought about slicing the badge to bits. But she shook her head. The person was right that doing that wouldn't accomplish anything.

If nothing else, she wanted to be by Rosemary's side, to hold her hand and to distract her from her fear of death. Perhaps it was just self-satisfaction, but even if it was...

"Father," Yozakura spoke up, suddenly. "There..."

She was pointing at a completely unremarkable bit of space. But then, a clear change came over it.

A rip appeared in the air. Then, the rip expanded. It was an unreal sight, like something out of anime made possible here in this world of highly detailed computer graphics. Once the rip reached a certain size, it split open, like thin ice beneath a boot.

A shadow slipped in through the cracked space. A black whirlwind blew in to the virtual jungle world.

With the force of its flight, almost as an afterthought, it sliced at the Pony badge with its sword. For some reason that resulted in a damage visual, but the number displayed was zero.

Slipping through the trees, the intruder landed, standing at a diagonal from Sakurako and the Pony emblem.

"Is that..." Sakurako whispered, dumbstruck. The new intruder was someone who shouldn't possibly be here. Before Sakurako could even wonder how he had come, she finished, "King Kirihiito!"

"Hey." The boy in black raised a hand in greeting. He had fallen from ultimate solo player to second-best solo player, but there was no trace of his legend losing its power. He hadn't friended a single person, and no matter the situation, he always

aimed to solve it by himself. No one knew his true identity. People could make guesses about his rough real age and gender, but nobody had ever gained positive proof.

To Kirschwasser, or to Yozakura hanging limply in his arms, he just gave a short greeting over his shoulder. His brazen attitude hadn't changed, either.

"What are you doing here?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Felicia filled me in."

Asuha, then? But wasn't this virtual world completely cut off from the game?

As Kirschwasser/Sakurako was wondering about that, King Kirihito took an even more implausible action. He readied his faithful sword before the message window and attacked the Pony emblem.

Calm letters appeared on the message window. "This is pointless."

"Oh?" King Kirihito showed no sign of being fazed. "But here's something the old man used to say. Whether or not something is pointless is for me to decide."

His attitude was lackadaisical from beginning to end, but there was force in the way he held and struck with his sword.

"It's nonsense," King Kirihito added with a chuckle. It sounded like he'd been wanting to say that for a while.

But it *was* pointless, wasn't it? Sakurako tilted her head. They weren't dealing with a game boss built out of data. No matter how much he attacked that badge, it wasn't going to let out a death rattle and collapse. There was no way that this could possibly harm the person who was taking Rosemary apart somewhere in

the real world.

But King Kirihito readied his XAN and unleashed its power. Advanced graphic visuals poured from the sword, making the virtual space tremble.

Watching the sight, Yozakura whispered, “Kirihito.”

“Yes?”

“I must speak to you.”

“Can we do this later?” At King’s dismissive words, Yozakura fell into silence for a few moments.

“But I...”

“Oh, that’s right.” King turned back, scratching his head. He stared straight at Yozakura and shrugged his shoulders. “Did I forget to mention? There’s no need to worry. I’m here to—”

“We’re here to save you!!” a voice bellowed through the virtual jungle.

Just like when King Kirihito had appeared, a fissure opened in space, and then a red-haired giant broke through, as if ripping it apart with the sheer force of his body. He rode a monstrous steed at least three meters tall, holding his magical sword Sour Cream aloft in one hand.

King clucked his tongue ruefully as the man stepped on his line. “You’re here already?”

“I could say the same to you! I can’t believe you stole my spotlight again!” Stroganoff of the Red Sunset Knights seemed more amused than irritated. The giant dismounted his horse, looked at the dumbfounded Sakurako, then roared with laughter. “You look as surprised as a crow who’s been dinged with a peashooter, Sir Kirschwasser!”

“No need to worry. Leave the rest to us,” Tiramisu, who had arrived behind him, said with a smile.

All of the sub-commanders of the Knights seemed to be present. But what could they possibly be planning to do? Sakurako’s confusion only grew deeper. Yet she could feel Yozakura, in her arms, cling to Kirschwasser’s armor a little tighter.

“They all came here... for me?” Yozakura asked.

Sakurako heard the words, then looked at Rosemary. It was true. She didn’t know what was going on, but there was one thing she could say with utmost certainty: “Yes.”

The person dismantling her didn’t seem to know exactly what was going on. They only repeated the “It’s pointless” line one more time, apparently having realized they were trying to get in the way, but was unable to do anything about it.

King Kirihito and the Red Sunset Knights led by Stroganoff prepared their weapons en masse and charged at the Pony badge.

“Stand down, King! You’re no use in this fight!”

“Yeah, right.” As King unleashed “Bash,” the light effect unleashed by XAN grew larger, until the radiance streaming through the jungle threatened to burn their eyes. It was followed by Stroganoff’s “Down Burst,” Tiramisu’s “Punishment,” and Parmigiano’s “Comet Cannon” all exploding out one after another. Naturally, all did zero damage.

From the midst of the action, Stroganoff shouted, “You’re the real star here! Go, Gorgonzola!”

“Right.” Gorgonzola, who had been chanting the whole time, thrust his fist up to heaven. The field scenery was overwritten for a moment as they appeared to be transported into deep space, surrounded by twinkling stars. Before long, that galaxy con-

tracted into a single point, which was followed by a huge explosion. It was the massive attack spell Art that had the flashiest visuals in all of *NaroFan*, “Galaxian Explosion.”

“Oh, it’s begun,” said a voice.

Kirschwasser turned back to see the leader of the Dual Serpents standing there, his Hide Coat flapping in the wind. “M-Mr. Matsunaga...”

“It’s impressive. This isn’t a sight you see often. What a flashy lineup.”

“But no matter how they attack, they’ll never do any damage,” Kirschwasser said.

“Oh, they’re definitely doing damage. It’s not the emblem we’re attacking, you see.” Matsunaga snapped his fingers, and a dust cloud erupted as countless figures leaped up from the ground. The late summer fashion, ninja gear in pastel colors, seemed strange when combined with their threatening Noh masks, which reflected their determination.

This was the Dual Serpents’ Frilly Shinobi Army, a legend across the Asgard Continent.

“Father,” Yozakura said.

“Y-Yes?”

“The speed of the dismantling is slowing.”

“What did you say?” Sakurako looked around the field again. Kirihito and the Knights were attacking the company emblem before them, while Matsunaga and the Shinobi Army danced their odd dance behind him. All of them seemed to be lagging somewhat.

In that moment, she understood completely the meaning of

Matsunaga's words. She knew what they were really attacking.

"Operation: Final Five. That is this plan," Matsunaga said, dancing powerfully.

"In other words, F5 tactics..." Kirschwasser whispered.

It was a terrifying plan indeed. The method which Ichiro Tsuwabuki had employed back in the Delve Necrolands, which the devs had since forbidden... That horrible sealed technique was now being unleashed here, in this place.

It wasn't the emblem they were attacking, nor the person taking Rosemary apart. It was the virtual space and the server on which Rosemary resided.

Again and again, seams formed in the virtual space here and there, and player after player swarmed in.

5

Noble Son, Rain Down

Around the time Ichiro Tsuwabuki was making a sensation in the Japanese stock market, Otogiri, Pony Entertainment's CEO, was heading for a trading partner, carrying a thick duralumin case in one hand.

He'd more or less guessed that Ichiro Tsuwabuki would try to make some kind of money game out of this, and so he'd come up with defensive countermeasures. There was no sign of the man coming after him directly at the moment, but Otogiri wasn't about to leave it up to chance. That was why he was doing what he was doing.

When it had been announced that Ichiro Tsuwabuki would be taking over a certain telecommunications company, he'd panicked for a minute, thinking perhaps the man had gone after them there. But the stock he'd strong-armed his way into buying had settled at just short of 20% of the company, and there was no report from Otogiri's secretary that their work was being interrupted. He felt reassured on that front.

Still, there was currently no guarantee that Ichiro Tsuwabuki would not move to buy Pony out. If Otogiri had his right of management wrenched away from him, all of his plans would go up in smoke, and the management structure he had spent so much time building up would be left in someone else's hands.

Legally, if you owned one-third of a company's stocks after buying, you were fundamentally obliged to take it over. Since Otogiri's right of management would only be affected if his enemy

reached that one-third limit, if he was going to try a hostile takeover, he would have to do it before trading closed at 3:00 PM. If that time limit passed, Otogiri reckoned, then he could rest easy for the rest of the day.

It was the son of Meiro Tsuwabuki he was dealing with. The father was a shifty manipulator who was difficult to deal with, and the son was no less so. He was well aware of the explosive danger posed by the man's unpredictability. The truth was, the prices of his stock on the exchange were in a bad state.

"Just 90 minutes left, I guess..." Otogiri murmured to himself in the back seat of the moving car. He pulled a lollipop out of his pocket, tore off the wrapper, and put it in his mouth.

If they could just get through today, they'd be fine. In a money game, defense was always the easier position to play. The law made hostile takeovers like the kind Ichiro Tsuwabuki was going to do very difficult. It fundamentally took the side of the weak. Thus, if he acted weak, the law would protect him, and he could keep his fangs concealed until they were needed.

As long as he could ride out today, the artificial intelligence would be dismantled. Then he'd just have to find the proof of the unauthorized access to Thistle in the Ichiro Tsuwabuki super-computer. Once that was done, he could sit back, relax, and leave the situation to the police.

Having tired of looking at the outside scenery, Otogiri pulled out a cell phone in his pocket and used it to check his company's stock information. Would Ichiro Tsuwabuki make his move? Had he already made his move?

"Oh...?" Otogiri's eyes opened wide.

There had been a hostile buyout attempt on Pony Entertainment. But it was not from Ichiro Tsuwabuki, nor from any of his subsidiaries or affiliates. There was no sign of involvement by the

Tsuwabuki Concern, which Meiro Tsuwabuki controlled, either.

“Ah, Mr. Untenshugahara!” Otogiri called.

“Yes?” the man driving the car responded evenly.

“There’s a place I’d like to stop by.”

Perhaps Otogiri would use one of the defensive measures he’d prepared for Tsuwabuki. Otogiri manipulated his cell phone with the speed of a high school girl and sent quick instructions to an affiliate office. During the feature phone era, he had had the ability to text so fast that his fingers seemed to disappear, and he hadn’t lost his touch in the smartphone era.

“Yes, sir. Where to?”

“Hmm, well...”

An affiliate of the Mizuno Group, MiZUNO, Inc., were the ones announcing the takeover of Pony.

Operation: Final Five was underway.

The server machine that hosted Rosemary and the virtual jungle was located in the Ichiro Tsuwabuki mansion. Due to a bug that had been caused when the virtual jungle had been cut off from the game, Sakurako had been unable to log out, which had lost them their main way of preventing outside access to the server machine. The purpose of the plan, then, was to crash the server itself.

The heavy burden on the server might affect Rosemary, but it would be nothing compared to the dismantling being done on her. It was like giving her a swift punch to the gut to knock her out and protect her. The fact that Rosemary showed no sign of concern or distress over the attack to the server itself was Saku-

rako's main source of relief.

"Meow-hoo, I'm here... Whoa, Matsunaga! Creepola!" Amesho called.

"Oh, that's a compliment in our business."

As Amesho appeared with nearly 5,000 of her 10,000 friends in tow, the lag grew even more severe. Players with already weak connections had frozen up, and some were even forced to log off.

The dance that Matsunaga and his Frilly Shinobi Army were performing had changed from a medley of slightly older otaku favorites from the likes of *Haruhi* and *Lucky Star* to Michael Jackson's "Thriller," but their precise movements all became a jumble in the face of the lag.

"Hmm, maybe I'll sing, too," Amesho said. "I never got to sing at the fashion show with Fuyo... Hey, wanna sing, Yozakura?"

"I do not know any songs."

"Oh, right, I guess that was Kirsch's player back then. Well, what can you mew? Get Tsuwabuki to teach you for next time."

King Kirihiro and the Knights continued to produce their flashy, burdensome visual graphics, while Matsunaga and the Frilly Shinobi Army danced their strange dances. Amesho and her fan club were singing and partying. It was a truly chaotic sight.

What must the person taking Rosemary apart be thinking right now? They might already be having trouble keeping their connection up. After all, what he-or-she was using wasn't an official access route, but the backdoor program that Rosemary had set up.

It was easy to pick up irritation in the words that appeared in

their message window: “What is all this? Are you mocking me?”

In that instant, another seam appeared, and a black wind blew through. “We’re always serious when it comes to enjoying games!”

“The Kirihi—whoa! Too many!”

The long line extended through the other side of the warp zone. It was an army of black-suited men who nearly rivaled Amesho’s still-increasing fans in number. It was unclear how many people this virtual jungle had been made to support, but the number of avatars packed in among the trees was soon more black-clad than not.

It was The Kiri hitters (Licensed).

It didn’t mean anything in this virtual jungle where players couldn’t open up menu windows, but that was what their guild name had been changed to.

“We don’t want you thinking numbers are entirely Amesho’s game,” one of them declared. “We called up all the Kiri hits to help us!”

There were a few Ainas and Leifas and Lisliths mixed up in there, too, but most were Kiri hits.

“Everyone, back up King!” another called.

“Right!”

“W-Wait!”

The Kiri hitters (Licensed) all readied their weapons and began to strike at the emblem. To the observers, it looked like an overwhelming torrent of black had swept up the six most powerful players in the game. Combined with the powerful lag, it was hard to follow exactly what was going on.

“But it still hasn’t gone down,” Matsunaga said. “This is quite the server.”

“Heh heh, we ain’t even got started yet!” Amesho said with a grin, suggesting they still had a plan remaining.

As she pointed, he looked up above, and saw an enormous tear beginning to form.

“You aren’t going?” Edward asked.

“I live in a Leo Palace,” Yuri responded. “I don’t have a lot of confidence in my connection.”

The two of them had come to the Doom Range. Thistle’s developers had created another giant warp zone here, and they were fighting hard to get it to connected to the jungle. Those efforts were beginning to pay fruit. They were going to be the ones to deal the fatal blow to the server. Tomakomai had also come to help with that work.

The enormous golem “Gobo” that Felicia controlled stood in front of them. Felicia was standing on Gobo’s shoulder, breathing deeply to calm her spirit.

Edward the Blacksmith was slowly adding parts to Gobo’s large body. Yuri and Tomakomai were bringing materials to facilitate the process.

Most of the parts being added were those that buffed magical power and augmented magic attacks. That would increase the flashiness of the visuals, while the size of Gobo’s huge body would further add to the graphical burden.

In other words, the finishing blow of Operation: Final Five would rest on the combined attack of Felicia and Gobo.

“All ready!” Edward cried, and Felicia’s eyes snapped open on Gobo’s shoulder.

“GraaAhh!” She lifted both arms to the sky, palms facing each other, as powerful energy began to spark between them.

“It’s almost like the Stoner Sunshine...” Edward whispered.

“Here comes my fireball miracle pitch!!” she called.

The sparked energy, amplified by the parts that Edward had added, produced an even grander visual effect than before. The fireball, large enough to overwhelm even Gobo’s enormous body, shone like a sun over the new land.

The pitcher reared back for the first throw. Felicia’s soul sparked.

“Sure-kill! Hydro! Blazerrrr!!”

“That’s my hometown!” Edward interrupted, but it was hard to hear him over the ear-splitting roar.

The huge fireballs raining down from the sky clearly put an immense burden on the server. It would only take one more push to bring it crashing down.

Having come this far, more and more players were starting to drop, their connections having been overwhelmed. The more players they lost, the harder it would become to bring the server down. It was time to deal the finishing blow.

“Hey,” King Kirihito said. The boy’s words sounded all the clearer in this situation where it was nearly impossible to have a decent conversation.

“King Kirihito, are you all right?” Kirschwasser asked.

“I’m fine. My build doesn’t put much of a burden on my connection, and right now I’m connecting from a better connection than the one at my house. When my father came back from his business trip recently, he also helped me clock up the Miraive Gear’s IPU a little bit.” King sheathed his sword. The next words, though, had a hint of loneliness behind them. “It was meant to be preparations for my last battle with the old man.”

Sakurako didn’t know how much King knew about the current incident. Perhaps Tomakomai had explained. And he had probably at least seen the news of Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s arrest. But from the way he was talking, he seemed to know more or less everything. Perhaps he knew that this incident would forever mark the end of that dream.

Sakurako hadn’t heard anything outside of the call from Ichiro that morning, but she was still well aware that that was a possibility.

Yozakura stood up and spoke. “Kirihito.”

“Yeah?”

“Please let me talk.”

“Go ahead, but I think we’ve had our talk already...”

Despite that, Yozakura stared straight at King Kirihito.

“Tell me, Kirihito. What kind of person is Ichiro to you?”

King Kirihito was walking away, but at this, he stopped. In that impressive lag hell, there was a moment when all the sounds around them disappeared. Perhaps it was just a coincidence caused by the computer, though.

King answered. “I wanted to beat him, I guess. Or rather...” Sakurako saw King’s expression in that moment, a genuine smile without a trace of ennui. “I will beat him. I won’t lose next time.”

“Thank you for your answer,” Yozakura nodded, then touched the shuriken-patterned switch on the back of her hand slowly.

King Kirihito and Kirschwasser’s expressions froze. Sakurako had had no intention of explaining the function to Rosemary, but now she was utterly flustered.

“Hey, don’t do that!” King shouted with a trace of anger in his voice.

“Nonsense. This is the server in which I reside. The final blow should be dealt with my own hand.” The electricity effect was already beginning to swirl around her body. With no way left to stop it, Sakurako could do nothing but pray that at least it would all end the moment it activated.

Yozakura, Rosemary, cried with utter confidence: “Cast off!”

The server collapsed.

“Your game is being forcibly ended due to a disconnection from the server.” The message appeared in the darkness into which Sakurako had been plunged. A moment later, she opened her eyes.

She tried to leap to her feet, then remembered she was held in place by the headset gear. She tore it off, then opened the Miraive Gear Cocoon’s hatch. As she climbed out, the hem of her maid uniform got snagged and left a big tear. But she had no time to worry about it.

Too impatient even to unhook the caught hem or to care that it had been provided by her employer, she simply ripped the hem off. She would apologize to Ichiro later.

Sakurako turned off the router’s power and pulled out all the LAN cables connecting the server to the outside world. While she was there, she also restarted the crashed supercomputer and

server machine. Perhaps due to the severe burden it had been under, the office where the machines were kept was unusually hot. She turned on the air conditioner and set the temperature to 18 degrees Celsius, then brought ice from the freezer and began using it to cool down the server.

“Rosemary! Rosemary!” she began calling into the intercom with her free hand. After calling for her several times, there was static, and at last, a response.

“Fa... ther...”

“Rosemary!” Sakurako collapsed on the floor with a sigh of relief. “Are you... intact?”

“Yes. There was no damage to my program from the server crash. I have lost approximately 30% of my functionality due to the remote dismantling, but I am still... me.” Rosemary’s tone was, as always, monotone and calm. But those last words confirmed to Sakurako, more than anything, that she was safe.

Thank goodness. Now that she knew that for sure, Sakurako could finally start to calm down.

“I’m glad. I really am gla—”

“Father?” In the middle of exclaiming her relief, Sakurako felt a burning sensation in the corners of her eyes. Emotion was welling up inside of her, impossible to hold back.

Rosemary, obviously confused, trepidatiously asked this question: “If I may, Father. Are you ‘crying’?”

“O-Of course not! I’m not cry—” She choked up again.

No matter what else she tried to say, the only sound she could produce was an incomprehensible wail. She tried several times to stop herself from crying, before finally deciding, *To hell with it.*

Ichiro wouldn't be home for a while yet, so she should get out all her tears now. She let the final dam burst, releasing all of the torrent of emotion that she could not express in words.

Each call from Rosemary of "Father, Father," only caused the wellspring to flood forth anew. It was to the point that she wasn't sure she would ever be able to stop.



“Miss Azami contacted me,” Shunsaku Shaga said cheerfully on the other end of the phone. “It looks like she managed to save Rosemary. Isn’t that nice?”

“Mm, good.” Ichiro nodded with satisfaction from the driver’s seat of his Koenigsegg. From the faintest of clues, he had been able to piece together that she had been in danger, and it seemed his hunch was on the money. But President Azami and Edogawa had worked together, and they’d pulled Rosemary from the jaws of non-existence. He felt a little like he’d been outshone, but he was still very satisfied. He was mostly glad he’d been spared the effort.

When he’d learned that Rosemary was in danger, he had been prepared to do something ridiculous to make sure the connection to his house was cut. There would have been many ways to do it if he’d circumvented his own rules. But thanks to them, he hadn’t had to do that.

Edogawa had actually called Ichiro about all this a little while ago. In his usual logical way of speaking, but without hiding his hostility for Ichiro, he had explained how they’d taken the server down. In the end, he’d said a few words that suggested he was wrapping it up: “I didn’t expect it to go so smoothly. You should compensate us a little more.”

Ichiro had responded with a more or less heartfelt “Thank you,” and said nothing more.

“Well, what are you going to do now?” Shaga asked. “The stock exchange is closing soon.”

“Yes, that’s true. I’ve laid all the groundwork, so after it closes, that’s when the real game begins.” With his cell phone in one hand, Ichiro opened his tablet.

“So, you’re really gonna go up against Pony, eh?”

“Yes.” It was a clipped response, as usual, followed by a lengthy, logical-sounding explanation. “Everyone at Thistle is defying Pony’s will to act, so protecting them is one of the reasons I should seize Pony. If I buy up the whistleblowers Pony and Thistle, people may think I’m trying to cover up evidence, but that’s where I’ll have to put faith in the skill of the lawyer you introduced to me.”

“Glad to hear it. So, what are the other reasons?”

“I’d like them to pay,” Ichiro said. “Both for trying to delete Rosemary, and for making me angry. Of course, there is one other reason, if that’s what you’d call it...”

Ichiro looked at the Pony stock information on his open tablet.

MiZUNO, Inc. had bought up about 8% of Pony Entertainment’s stock. The fact that they had managed to get that much in such a short time showed Fuyo’s ability as a CEO, or perhaps the name value of the Mizuno Group. Unfortunately, in regards to the former, it also came with a rather bitter pill.

There was a term called the “Pac-Man Defense,” a defensive strategy against a hostile takeover. Put simply, it meant turning to the company that was trying to buy you out, and instead buying them out. The image of a company about to be devoured devouring the opponent instead had been inspired by the old video game created by Bandai-Namco.

It seemed that in terms of management skill, Megumi Fuyo’s was still dwarfed by that of Pony’s current CEO. A little over one third of MiZUNO’s stock had already been bought.

“Well, regarding that, I bear some responsibility for what’s happened, so I need to see it through,” Ichiro said.

“Ah, well. You have been going to such lengths in your preparations to buy up Pony, anyway.”

“Exactly.” Ichiro closed his tablet and then gazed out his windshield. He was only gazing at an ordinary underground parking lot, though. Nothing about the view was remarkable in any way.

It was true that Megumi Fuyo had bitten off more than she could chew, but at the same time, her actions had helped to disguise Ichiro’s own intrigues. They would be so busy defending against MiZUNO’s attack that they probably weren’t noticing how the other stocks were moving. He had been expecting to have to resort to heavy-handed measures, but thanks to her, things had all gone far more smoothly than expected.

“That reminds me,” Ichiro said. “There was one other reason.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“I think that President Azami, Edo, Megumi, and the others have all done very well, but...”

Ichiro paused, then breathed, without a shred of doubt or shame, the truth of what he was feeling.

“I am still the coolest of all, and thus, I feel I must do something worthy of that title.”

MiZUNO, Inc.’s office wasn’t very big. It had only a handful of employees. But all the furniture there was exquisitely tasteful, with an openness that was reflective of Megumi Fuyo’s character.

Airi, feeling a bit out of place there, shrunk into herself like a stray cat taken into a home, drinking the coffee she was given. She’d thought her acquaintance with the young heir had made her more brazen, but it seemed that some timidity remained in her. She wasn’t sure if she should be pleased about that or not.

Regardless, the sight of Fuyo conferencing earnestly with the heads of business and accounting was very reassuring.

That had been about three hours ago.

Airi had been surprised by Fuyo's declaration that they were going to buy up Pony's stock. It was true that it seemed like the kind of thing the young heir would do, and Airi didn't want Ichiro to have to do it, either, for the reasons he had stated. This course of action was a natural development after Fuyo's declaration that she would do what Airi didn't want Ichiro to do. Still, it had been surprising.

MiZUNO didn't have the luxury of an employee cafeteria, so instead, the two of them decided to get takeout for lunch. The company was generous enough to comp employees' lunches, but the prices on the takeout menu Airi had been given still made her head spin, so she asked for the cheapest thing on it.

That had been about two hours ago.

Quite a lot of time had passed by now, in terms of Rosemary's dissection. Airi was feeling quite nervous, and Fuyo seemed to be feeling the same way.

Would she be able to finish up the lengthy process of buying up all of Pony's stock in time? Maybe, maybe not. But the use of force against Pony was necessary in order to protect not just Rosemary, but Ichiro Tsuwabuki, too.

Just as Airi was trying and failing to eat her 2,000-yen delivery lunch, she received a call from President Azami. The woman apologized for not being able to answer their calls earlier, confirmed Rosemary's current condition, and explained the details of the plan to save her.

Airi was relieved, but then she wondered if that would count as their company turning on Pony. She mentioned this to Fuyo, who responded, "Then I shall do this to protect Thistle, as well."

They had dug not only into MiZUNO's funds, but into Megumi Fuyo's own personal accounts, and had bought up 4% of Pony's stock.

That had been about one hour ago.

And now, in the present...

"H-How can this be?!" Megumi Fuyo's expression, which had once been so confident, was now stricken with shock and despair.

"They got us!" a member of management cried.

"It can't be!" her accounting manager chimed in.

Airi didn't know what was going on. What she could sense, sinkingly, was that things were going poorly.

After disposing of the empty takeout packages that had been strewn about the office, Airi ran up to the group. "Wh-What happened?"

The handsome gentleman in thin-rimmed glasses who was in charge of accounting responded with a grim expression. "The Pac-Man Defense."

"I don't know what that means," Airi said. "Could you simplify?"

The bespectacled gentleman only scowled.

The slender female head of accounting explained the term politely. "It means that Pony has bought us out. It's a typical defense mechanism. A hostile takeover requires the ability to purchase stock, so buying out your opponent is one way to defend against it."

"But for such a large company to act so quickly..."

“They must have been prepared to defend against a buy-out.”

“Th-That can’t be...” Fuyo whispered in open dismay.

The bespectacled man nodded. “Yeah. If Pony bought our stock, that means someone must have sold it.”

“But the main holder of MiZUNO’s stock would be...”

Airi Kakitsubata caught on quickly. She could tell that Megumi Fuyo’s dismay couldn’t just be from the fact that Pony had bought their stock. It was likely the realization that people she trusted had stabbed her in the back.

If Fuyo gave it real thought, she could probably figure out who must have sold stock to whom, but Airi’s instincts told her to abandon that line of thought. It wasn’t something anyone would want to think about.

Airi pulled some public textbooks from the bag. She had bought them earlier, as they related to her upcoming second term’s curriculum.

According to the textbook, if you held over one-third of a company’s stock, that gave you powerful influence at stockholders’ meetings. Sony already had bought close to 38% of MiZUNO’s stock. They were nearly utterly defeated.

“U-Um, President...” A shy-looking female employee who had been answering phones spoke up, voice trembling.

Fuyo’s face was pale as she turned to face her. Having apparently lost the will to speak, she urged the employee on silently.

The woman’s eyes darted around as she continued. “You have a visitor. It’s the CEO of Pony Entertainment...”

He was here already. Fuyo’s face flushed in anger for a moment, but she quickly replaced it with professionalism. “Very

well. Have him wait in the meeting room.”

She was trembling slightly, but her voice was clear. Fuyo turned back to Airi, and said the unbelievable:

“Let’s go, Airi.”

Airi was shocked. “Huh? Me, too?”

Brazenly, the man had not brought a single ally with him into the enemy stronghold. He’d apparently had a driver in the car he’d taken to come here, but when they entered the meeting room, he was the only one there.

He looked to be a man in his mid-fifties. He was a little on the short side, with a compact frame and hair that had probably been dyed from its natural gray, which made him look younger than the wrinkles on his face suggested.

But the fierce and sly old fox sat on the sofa with an unsettling expression that was not exactly a smile, but not neutral, either. In this way, he reminded Airi of Megumi’s father. Even though they were all wealthy business owners, he was nothing like Ichiro or Fuyo or President Azami. Perhaps it was a special aura unique to those who had crawled their way up through the economic world.

“My, what a fine office. Very feminine, you could say,” the man said, gazing brazenly up at the ceiling. His tone was a mocking one.

“We are a fashion brand, after all,” Megumi responded with an iron smile. “Of course we’d pay attention to such things. Allow me to offer you a formal introduction. I am Megumi Fuyo, president of MiZUNO, Inc.”

“Pleased to meet you. I am Shinya Otogiri of Pony. But I think you know that.”

Normally, this would be where they'd exchange business cards, but Fuyo made no move to reach into her breast pocket. She had given only the most superficial of introductions, and did not bother hiding the fact that she had no desire to get to know the man better.

"This is my friend, Airi Kakitsubata," she said coldly.

"Oh... ah... hello..."

"You're bringing a friend to this important negotiation?" the man asked.

"Oh, but I find this neither important, nor a negotiation," Fuyo informed him.

It was an obstinate thing to say to someone who owned 40% of her stock. Airi was feeling a lot more flustered than usual. It wasn't that she was worried about Fuyo's attitude; it was clear enough that it was all about saving face, and that Megumi Fuyo was a paper tiger. If even the 17-year-old Airi could realize it, then the man standing before them surely would.

"Well... all right," the man said. "Where shall we begin? You've really done it, you know. I'd thought Tsuwabuki might try to buy me out, but I never thought you would. It was unexpected, but, well, Tsuwabuki never actually tried anything, so it's been fairly fun in its own way."

Fuyo remained silent, her expression furious. It was an outrageous way to act towards someone whose company now owned close to 40% of her stock.

She said: "The stock that MiZUNO issues..."

"Ah. Yes, I know what you mean," the man replied. "Thirty percent belongs to you, 40% belongs to Tsunobeni, and 10% belongs to your father, I think? In effect, your father and his com-

pany own about 50% of your stock. Well, it is a business group, after all, so that's natural. In other words..." A nasty smile appeared on Otogiri's face. "Your father sold me his stock in your company."

"No!" Fuyo cried and rose to her feet. "Th-That can't be! My... my father would never..."

"Well, maybe it's his way of punishing you for treating your business like a toy. He sounds like a good father to me. Of course, I sweetened the deal significantly, so there's a good chance that that turned his head, as well." There was a strange inflection in Otogiri's tone. It was like he was bullying her, like he was enjoying Fuyo's reactions: eyes wide open, sweating, shaking her head... It suggested a sadistic personality. It was an obscene thing to be witness to.

In truth, Megumi Fuyo's father... Airi didn't know his name, but they couldn't really know what he was thinking. Whatever his reasoning, at the end of the day, he had given up a lot of stock to Pony in exchange for money. As a result, MiZUNO would have to get approval from Pony in order to do anything.

I don't like it, Airi thought. She found it very hard to express what exactly it was that she didn't like. But she definitely didn't like it. She didn't like Otogiri.

The next thing she knew, she had let the dam burst. "Why do you hate the young heir so much?" Airi demanded.

"Eh?" Otogiri's eyes went wide, apparently not having expected the "young lady" to speak to him like that. "You think that I hate Tsuwabuki?"

"It's obvious that you do. You were apparently worried about the young heir trying to buy you out, which means you must be thinking about him all the time. From the way you're acting, you also know that his arrest was on false pretenses. Are you also the

one who tried to kill Rosemary?”

“I dislike foulmouthed children.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“A-Airi...” Now it was Fuyo’s turn to panic. But there was no need to be worried; Airi Kakitsubata had the special ability to nullify psychological attacks when Unit: Megumi Fuyo was on the field. In other words, she was invincible.

At the very least, she wasn’t a paper tiger like Fuyo—and she was just about to declare that before she quickly stopped herself. This was very bad; her attack power had increased so much, she actively had to hold herself back.

Airi didn’t relent, but she continued on with greater caution. “So, what’s the deal?”

Otogiri’s eyebrow twitched, and he looked up at the ceiling. “Well, there are all kinds of reasons, I suppose. I had a bit of history with Tsuwabuki’s father, though I don’t feel like going into that now, as it would probably bore you. That was where it started. The Tsuwabukis have always been a thorn in my side, so when things started to point towards Ichiro Tsuwabuki as being behind that unauthorized access, why wouldn’t I be happy? I could scarcely believe it myself, but I didn’t know at the time that the artificial intelligence that you mentioned was still alive. Thus, given the circumstances, it seemed unquestionable that Ichiro Tsuwabuki was the culprit, and I gleefully reported him to the police. I have a few friends there, after all.”

With that, Otogiri set his duralumin case on top of the table and opened it. Inside was a whole sheet of lollipops.

Otogiri took one out, ripped off the packaging, and put it in his mouth. “Want one?”

“Sure,” Airi said.

Fuyo seemed flustered. “A-Airi...”

Since Otogiri was a wealthy man, Airi had assumed they must be gourmet lollipops of some kind, but it seemed they were the cheap ones you got at convenience stores. Still, it was a flavor Airi liked, so she was glad to get it.

“Okay,” she said. “But now we know the young heir is innocent.”

“That’s right,” the man said. “But after I got him arrested and all, I couldn’t bear the idea of him getting off free. Besides, there would be a lot of people who would be troubled by the continued existence of a self-aware AI. It would require the changing of a few laws, which would also bring business leaders to an important fork in the road. If an AI were put on full trial, it would put the workings of the legal system into the spotlight, and which path we take on that fork would end up being decided for those business leaders. I’m friends with a lot of people like that, so I thought it would be in our best interests to just delete the thing. That should more or less cover all of my reasons.”

Why was it that final bosses were so generous in revealing their motivations? Of course, that did make everything a lot easier, Airi thought.

“But it seems like I have no more reason to worry,” Otogiri added. “The artificial intelligence should be deleted by now, right?”

“I heard they botched it, actually,” Airi said.

“What?”

“Ah...” Airi didn’t notice her slip of the tongue until she saw the change in the man’s expression. The man didn’t show any

anger, but there was a clear change in the confident air that had hovered around him previously. There was something strained about him now, something about to burst.

That tension, combined with Otogiri's normally powerful presence, seemed ready to overwhelm the two women. Airi Kakitsubata worked hard to bear up under it, but Megumi Fuyo had all but lost. She was already under the influence of Debuff: Despair, though, so it was hard to fault her.

Airi had thought Otogiri might try to ask about the details, but he showed no sign of doing that. Instead, with his next line, he made it clear that he had already guessed what was going on.

"I see... They'll need a penalty then, too." Otogiri grinned and looked up at the ceiling. "The air in here has gotten stale. Let's continue our discussion elsewhere."

Something in his words suggested there was no room for argument. For once, neither Airi Kakitsubata nor Megumi Fuyo could refuse him.

It was late in summer, and the days were getting shorter. From the roof of the MiZUNO office building, they could see the city of Shibuya bathed in orange. Airi willingly came along, convincing herself that he surely couldn't be intending to push them off the roof in a rage.

Otogiri crunched down on his lollipop, then spit the stick with just a few fragments of candy remaining on it onto the floor below.

Still grinding it in his teeth, Otogiri gazed off at the setting sun. "It seems you put one over on me, too. I'm a little annoyed about that."

"It's because you try to use money to get everything to go your

way.” Airi just barely managed to slip in the insult, but it lacked her usual force.

Otogiri smiled. “Oh? That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means just what it sounds like. I know all about you. You’re a *NaroFan* player, right? ‘Iris,’ wasn’t it?”

Her heart skipped a beat. Pony was the mother company of *NaroFan*’s developer right now. It wouldn’t be that strange for him to have access to her information, but his ability to pick out Iris’s name out of tens of thousands of players unsettled her greatly.

But Otogiri still had more to say. “You’re right that I’ve tried to use money to get what I want. But what’s wrong with that? It’s the same as Ichiro Tsuwabuki, and you.”

Her insult had been a boomerang, and by the time she realized it, it was too late. The blade she had thrown had turned back, and it was now rushing right for her. He had lashed at Airi with the same sharpness of tongue that she had turned on him.

“Y-You’re wrong... I’m not like you,” Airi stumbled.

“Yes, yes you are. Think about it. Not about Ichiro Tsuwabuki... just yourself. Iris Brand was built with his money, wasn’t it?”

“Wait a minute!” Fuyo protested. “Airi isn’t...”

“No, no. Your emotional appeals won’t work on me. The same goes for you, Ms. Fuyo. I’m sure Iris has asked you for help, as well. Such wonderful friendship. But at the end of the day, what form did that help take? Money, right? You tried to buy my company with money, didn’t you? Which means it was money that

Iris wanted from you.”

The blazing evening sun bathed Otogiri’s creepy smile in red. Neither Airi nor Fuyo had any way of arguing against him.

“You can try to argue the point, but at the end of the day, you both know the truth,” the man said. “The world revolves around money. Money is justice. Money rules all. Money powers everything. Money can even change or buy a person’s heart. Allow me to demonstrate.”

Otogiri opened his duralumin case again. Airi had thought it contained only lollipops, but he reached in and pulled out a stack of bills about one centimeter thick. They were all 10,000 yen bills. Airi couldn’t even guess how much money it must represent.

Then, what Otogiri did was to unceremoniously throw it down on the floor. “Ms. Iris, take this and go right home. You may be foul-mouthed, but you’re blameless. I’ll overlook what you’ve done. Buy yourself some tasty food and some pretty clothes.”

Everything Otogiri had said was true. On unsteady legs, Airi began to walk towards the money.

“A-Airi! You mustn’t! You yourself must know that there are more wonderful things in this world than money!” Fuyo screamed after her.

But Airi couldn’t stop.

Iris Brand couldn’t have formed without the young heir’s money. The young heir had always protected her pride, but at the end of the day, money had been behind everything. The only reason they had been able to beat that powerful boss monster a week ago was because of the young heir’s money, and the same had been true this time. She hadn’t been able to do anything herself, so she had asked for Fuyo’s help. She had been reliant on the power of Fuyo’s money.

She had seen personally the ability money had to change a person's heart. Everything Otogiri had said was correct.

"Yeah, at the end of the day, you're right. About everything." Airi picked up the bundle of money on the ground and dusted it off.

"Heh, of course. Then if you understand that, you should—"

"But that's no reason to be wasting money!"

Airi had reeled back with her arm and slapped the unprepared Otogiri across the face with the stack of bills.

"Blurgh!"

"Airi?!" Fuyo shouted.

"Do you realize that the money you dropped just now is worth more than all the New Year's gifts I've ever gotten combined?! Do you get that? Well? Do you get that this wad of bills is literally worth more than my 17 years on this planet? And that you just threw it away like garbage? No matter how tough you might talk, you're trash! And if I give in to someone like you, I could never face my grandfather in hell!"

"Airi, your grandfather is in hell?!" Fuyo yelled.

As Airi ranted, she continued slapping the man with the bills. He fell on his back, so she straddled him, and just continued wailing on him with that centimeter-thick block of cash.

Tears had begun to form in the corners of her eyes. Tears of anger over the unfairness, the unreasonableness of it all, and her hatred of the awful way that everything could be solved with money.

"You said money is justice, right? Then how about this?! And this?! Is this justice? Would you be satisfied being beaten with an

even thicker wad of bills? Do you... do you really think this is justice?!"

Airi was deeply aware of the cruelty of this capitalistic society which infused Otogiri's words. And yet, here she stood, heroic. Her silhouette burning in the setting sun, wielding a one-centimeter-thick stack of bills that represented more money than she'd likely ever earn in her life, she stood against the man.

She was truly the Don Quixote of her age, the first volley of a counterattack against the invisible hand that Adam Smith had once sung about. She was fighting as hard as she could.

And then, as if to praise her actions, a man's voice reverberated across the battlefield.

"Iris. The things you do always truly surprise me."

"Th-That voice..." Otogiri, his cheeks red from the slaps Airi had given him, let out a groan.

They heard the sound of rotorblades. They looked and saw something looming over them, high in the sky, above the buildings. Seeing it circle around in the sunset-lit buildings of Shibuya, Otogiri, then Fuyo, and then Airi each spoke in turn.

"A bird?!"

"A plane?!"

"Uh, I think it's a helicopter..."

Then something unbelievable happened.

A man leaning out of the helicopter's door let go, dropping casually out of it. Fuyo caught her breath, and Airi's jaw dropped. He was in free-fall from the high sky above. What would the gravitational constant have to say about this man, who kept perfectly calm in the face of the wind resistance battering his body?

Well, it allowed him to set down lightly on the roof.

And then he spoke.

“Hey, it’s me.”

Airi was honestly offended by his insolence.

It was the young heir of the Tsuwabuki Concern, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. There were likely none among the world’s elite who did not know his name. He didn’t help with his father’s work, and whenever he had free time, he spent it driving into a virtual world. But he was not simply an idle playboy. He paid for his residence, his lifestyle, his maid, and everything else out of his own pocket.

These past two months, nearly every strange occurrence at the Thistle Corporation and in *Narrow Fantasy Online* had had his name behind it. Everything he’d done had started up a storm with massive collateral damage. Some people had matured from the experience, while others had ended up with headaches and ulcers. If one believed in the butterfly effect, he had probably caused more unhappiness than the reverse.

Now, today, Ichiro Tsuwabuki was descending from the skies above Shibuya. Falling faster than the setting sun, he had landed on the building’s roof and greeted them with his usual cool tone. It was such an extraordinary development that they watched the scene unfold with jaws dropped. It was Megumi who first realized that standing slack-jawed was impolite, and so she closed her mouth quickly.

“Iris, Megumi, you have both done very well,” Ichiro said. “Thank you. But please let me handle things here at the end.”

“Wh-What... Ichiro...” Fuyo stuttered.

Seeing Fuyo immediately retreat into lovey-dovey shy girl

mode, Airi let out a sigh. *Here at the end, huh?* It sounded like the young heir really did mean to end everything here.

“I-Ichiro... Tsubabuki...” Otogiri slapped his own cheeks and groaned in annoyance.

Airi was no longer straddling him, so at last he could stand up.

Ichiro stared at the man’s face in disbelief, and then said, in a slightly strange voice, “Are you sulking?”

“It’s swollen!”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have wasted money, then,” Ichiro replied.

Ichiro snapped his fingers, and several cans of coffee dropped out of the helicopter above. He caught the cold steel cans neatly and handed two of them to Otogiri.

The man pressed one to each of his cheeks. He looked a lot like the main character from the old folk tale *Kobutori Jiisan*, Airi thought.

Otogiri snapped back at Ichiro, “Wasting money? That’s funny, coming from you. You’re just as impudent as your father.”

“Nonsense. I have never once wasted my money—at least, not in my own subjective opinion. As for my impudence, I must grudgingly admit that I have it. Though I do believe I’m a bit more bearable than my father.” Ichiro spun the words out eloquently. Then he spoke again.

“Ah, but such things hardly matter.” Illuminated by the setting sun, he pulled the tab on the canned coffee, looking almost like a model in a commercial. “There’s a lot I’d like to say, but I’ll sum it up thusly: You have lost.”

“Oh?” Otogiri harrumphed, the coffee cans pressed to both

cheeks. “The interruption of the erasure of the artificial intelligence... did you commission that?”

“No, the Thistle people did that on their own. I disdain them for the act as much as you do.” He wore a delighted smile.

Iris recognized it as his usual smile, though in real life, there was a slightly more delicate sensibility behind that facial expression than it had in the game. He must have been delighted that something unexpected had happened.

Airi remembered his words from the night before. *The world does not exist for my sake, and that’s what makes it interesting.*

But Airi wondered if it was a bit early yet for a declaration of victory. It was true that Rosemary had been saved, and the young heir’s name had been cleared. But with MiZUNO’s stock still monopolized by Pony, the people of Thistle wouldn’t escape punishment for going against Pony’s wishes.

Otogiri seemed to feel the same way. A slippery smile consumed his swollen face, and he spoke up again. “But you never actually did anything, did you? Hmm? Or are you going to pull out some kind of magic trick to make me pay?”

“I am,” Ichiro said, as lightly as could be. “Do you remember those things you were saying? That money equals justice, that you can do anything with money?”

“What about them?”

“Well, I feel the same way,” Ichiro said. “But I should offer you one word of warning. By accepting that, you must also accept the fact that money can also do anything *to you* . Money is power, and power betrays. Unless you can tame it.”

Ichiro snapped his fingers again. As he did, a change came over the skyline of Shibuya which spanned out before their eyes.

The displays on the four large LED screens near the Hachiko Entrance to the station changed. They now displayed graphs reflecting movements in stocks, which probably would have been boring to the young people passing over the scramble crossing. The large LEDs, with their massive circulation and booming sound, were often referred to as an “instant Shibuya-jack,” but the crowd of passersby only stopped for only a second before continuing their crossing.

“How much did you pay to use those screens?!” Airi exclaimed.

“I can’t believe you were talking about not wasting money a minute ago!” Otogiri shouted.

Fuyo seemed pleased. “Tee hee... oh, Ichiro... Telling me I did very well... you’re embarrassing me...”

“Ah, nonsense, nonsense. This is my turn right now, after all.” Ichiro wrinkled his brow very slightly at the feeling that the conversation was getting away from him. “First, a brief explanation. This is Pony’s stock. It was like this right up until 3:00 PM, when the Tokyo Stock Exchange closed for the day.”

Displayed on-screen was a list of domestic and international investors and large corporations. Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s name was not among them, though MiZUNO’s name stuck out a bit for holding about 10% of their shares.

“Now, after the day’s trading ended, I decided to buy up your stock. I believed that would make it harder for you to be on your guard. I think I took about 28% of it.”

Otogiri laughed. “So near, and yet so far. Well, it’s not a takeover bid, and by the end of trading, you didn’t have over one-third...”

Then he saw the screens’ contents change, and Otogiri’s smile

froze. The cans of coffee fell from both of his hands.

“Yes, the takeover announcement will come out tomorrow,” Ichiro said. “I wasn’t especially dealing under the table, but I do think he’ll probably sell to me.”

The graph’s ratios changed dramatically. It was true that close to one-third, or in other words, 28%, was in Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s name, but the investor with close to 20% was “Eikei Fuyo.” Even Airi could tell at a glance that this was Megumi’s father.

“That... that... that dirty old fox!”

“Please refrain from insulting yourself.” Ichiro’s manner was as cool as ever as he responded to Otogiri’s helpless jawing. “All together, that’s about 50%. I can probably buy from other investors, too, which should give me a full majority. You see now, don’t you? I win. Even if President Fuyo attaches some strings to the purchase, I am still going to buy out your company. Nothing so lukewarm as being head of the board... I’m buying your company outright.”

Airi had never heard Ichiro use such combative words before. But she didn’t have long to react to it before Otogiri lashed out, frothing at the mouth. Ichiro avoided the flying spittle just by bending his upper body slightly.

“B-But it’s not over yet!” Otogiri screamed. “My company doesn’t belong to you yet!”

“Of course you’re right,” Ichiro said. “You may try to take defensive measures, if you wish. Are you going to issue more stock? I’ll buy it all up. If you want to penalize the people at Thistle, you’re free to try. Whatever you do, I’ll make it up to them.”

Ichiro snapped his fingers, and the displays on the four large LED screens suddenly changed once more. From left to right, they now read “NO,” “N,” “SE,” and “N.” A curtain dropped down

from the helicopter at the end, displaying the letters “SE.”

“That’s right, it’s nonsense,” Ichiro said. “Pony, Thistle, and Megumi’s company all belong to me.”

Fuyo fainted at Airi’s side. She seemed to be falling into some happy delusion, hearing only the nice parts of what the young heir was saying.

Otogiri slumped onto his knees. As if possessed by a demon, he tore his hands through his hair, moaning in the manner of someone who could not admit he had lost.

Airi was starting to feel a little bit worried about him. They said that a cornered rat would snap at a cat, and a much larger beast might be able to take someone down with him.

But the young heir continued on, seemingly not at all concerned. “Oh, and there was one other question that I had. Judging from your actions, I suspect you have some way of finding out detailed information about things going on in the game, but I’ve heard that there was almost no real-time information sent from Thistle to Pony. I wonder how you could know the things you know.”

“Oh, that?” Otogiri stopped mussing up his hair and glanced up. “It’s because I’m a *NaroFan* player, too. I’ve been logging in now and then to see how things are going.”

“I see. I didn’t realize.”

“Heh heh. I really envied you... Surrounded by all those other players, enjoying the game so much... if I’d said that, would you have believed me? Would you forgive me?”

“Nonsense.”

“I thought not.” Perhaps his back had hurt from his long time

writhing on the ground, because Otogiri soon stood up and dusted off his elbows and knees.

There was something Airi couldn't figure out. From the way Otogiri was speaking, he must have been rather close to Iris and Ichiro in the game. She couldn't ever remember meeting anyone like him, though. A player who had been nearby, watching them, but whom Airi hadn't noticed... who could it be?

"So, what avatar were you, anyway?" she asked.

"Hah!" Otogiri grinned in response, then threw his duralumin case at them.

"Eek!" Airi shrieked.

Ichiro caught the case before it could hit her. "None of that, now..."

In that same instant, Otogiri plunged his hand into his breast pocket, pulled something out, and brought it to the ready. Airi cringed instinctively. But it was neither a gun nor a knife; it was simply a lollipop. He tore off the wrapper, which was printed with a skull mark, and as he began licking it, he screamed.

"This lollipop, you see... is coated in poison!!"

Otogiri was taken to the hospital.

Having done what he'd desired to do, his expression seemed somehow satisfied.

"Being the president of a large corporation must be really stressful..." Airi whispered as she watched the red lights of the ambulance fade away into the distance of the Shibuya streets, but her words were swallowed by the sweltering summer winds of evening.

Either way, everything was over. Miraculously, it seemed that Otogiri would pull through, but since the poison in the candy he'd licked was illegal to purchase in Japan, charges would be filed against him.

There was a huge host of problems to deal with before everything could be considered wrapped up. The truth was that Thistle had defied Pony's directives, connected the game to the Tsuwabuki household server, and dragged a tremendous number of players into their mischief. If the press managed to learn the whole story, it would be impossible to avoid a somewhat troublesome situation. Thus, Ichiro had contacted a friend of his in the press and asked if she could perhaps write an article regarding the Rosemary incident that would skew public opinion in favor of Thistle.

The conversation had unfolded thusly:

"Sorry, but I can't do it, Tsuwabuki. I'm a newspaper reporter, so fairness is important. You know I can't write articles biased to one side or the other."

"It's for justice."

That fired the reporter up. "Well, if it's for justice, I don't have a choice! Leave it to me! I'll write up the whole story, and see to it that Thistle comes out ahead! Pony's board of directors is going down!"

One way or another, beginning tomorrow, the irresponsible public at large was going to find it utterly unacceptable that Pony should stay in charge of Thistle.

Ichiro ended the call, then sighed.

"Was that the one from your detective agency?" Airi asked.

"Yes. Somei. I mentioned a newspaper reporter with more pas-

sion than good sense, didn't I?"

Airi scowled a bit at his response. "Passion, huh? Are you sure you should leave her at large?"

"I am not," Ichiro said. "Shaga and I both agree that if Japanese culture ends up on the decline, Somei's articles will surely be the cause."

But while Yoshino Somei was severely lacking in common sense, her passion and her skill as a writer were real. Altogether, she wasn't a tremendously reliable ally, but if you incorporated the word "justice" into your proposal, it wasn't hard to get her on your side.

"I'm starting to realize that the word 'justice' can be a dangerous one..." Airi murmured.

"Well, we can have a philosophical debate about that another time. For today, let's dismiss. It's already night, after all." The sun had gone down while Ichiro was making his various wrap-up calls. Ichiro and Airi had been talking while standing in front of the office building, gazing at the Shibuya scenery. Fuyo had shown no signs of awakening from her blissful slumber, so they had put her to bed on the office sofa.

There was no sign of waning among the crowds of people passing over Shibuya's scramble crossing. The four enormous LED screens still read "NONSEN"; the "SE" had left with the helicopter.

"Ah, that's right. Give this back to that guy." Airi handed a stack of bills to Ichiro.

"He gave them to you. You might as well take them."

"Listen, you," Airi said hotly. "Let me tell you something about money. It's only a precious commodity because you acquire it

with the sweat off your brow. I mean, to be totally honest, I do want it... thanks to the offline meetup, I probably won't be able to afford anything new from the fall collections... Fuyo's taking me to TGC, and, Ahh, I'm sure I'm going to run into a day when I'll really wish I'd taken it, but... well, you know?"

"I see. I'll return it to him, then." Before she could change her mind, Ichiro slipped the bundle into his breast pocket.

Airi's expression changed slightly, and she seemed about to say something more, but she bit it back, shook her head, and at last slapped her cheeks lightly and nodded. Either way, it seemed she had fought back her temptation.

Later, Ichiro and Airi were drinking the canned coffee he had brought with him in the helicopter, gazing at the Shibuya crowds. The canned coffee was a new product set to be released next month, which he had received from a food and drink conglomerate when he was buying up Pony's stock. He had taste-tested it, liked it quite a lot, and bought them on the spot.

How much time had they spent like this? Amidst the crowds of people walking to and fro, Ichiro and Airi alone stood stock-still. There was a sense that they had been left behind by the flow of time.

Airi at last spoke up. "Are you quitting *NaroFan*?"

"Mm." Ichiro turned to look at Airi. She continued to look forward rather than trying to return his gaze, can of coffee in her hands. Ichiro looked away again from her profile, which threatened to blend into the night's darkness, and responded. "I am."

"I see."

Buying up Pony, Inc. meant that he was now the chief operator of *Narrow Fantasy Online*. To him, it was as if the continent of Asgard now belonged to him alone. Ichiro didn't want a world

that belonged only to him. That was nonsense. Therefore, he would quit. He had made that decision, and he was prepared to see it through.

After a long period of silence, Airi continued, "I guess that follows, huh?"

"Yes, it follows."

"That doesn't mean we'll never see each other again, though."

"That's true. We can meet up any time we wish."

What was Airi trying to say? What were the words she was seeking from Ichiro? Ichiro Tsuwabuki was not so slow-witted that he could not guess. But Ichiro would not say those words. Airi surely knew that, as well. Here at the eleventh hour, Ichiro could not compromise the sort of person he was in order to be kind.

In the end, Airi never asked for that, either.

"I should go," she said, her words surprisingly decisive.

"Take care on your way home."

"I don't need you to tell me that... oh, that's right."

"Hmm?"

Airi seemed to have remembered something. Ichiro looked at her curiously. She said, "I've been wanting to say it since yesterday, but I kept forgetting."

"Oh?"

"That." She pointed to Ichiro's lapel.

It was the accessory that he wore without fail any time he left

the house: a slightly tacky silverware brooch in the shape of a butterfly. It sat stock-still upon his lapel, its wings spread proudly in a beautiful contrast of blue and yellow.

Without even smiling, Airi continued. “That made me kinda happy.”

“Mm,” Ichiro said.

“That’s all. So long!” With those last words, Airi spun on her heel and ran off into the crowd.

Ichiro didn’t try to stop her, and he was sure that Airi didn’t want to be stopped. He cast a glance at the butterfly brooch shining on his lapel, drank down the rest of his canned coffee, then looked up at the night sky. Unlike the continent of Asgard, there were not many stars in the sky of Tokyo.

Ichiro pulled out his cell phone and placed a call.

“Oh, hello. Sakurako-san? Yes, everything’s finished. I’m heading home now.”



6

Epilogue

“Look, I was trying to sever ties with him in the coolest way possible,” Airi fretted from the back seat of the minivan. “But then once I got home, I remembered we still had the offline meetup...”

“I really don’t think it’s anything to worry about...” Yurina said from the driver’s seat.

“I agree,” said Fuyo calmly from the passenger seat. “After all, you didn’t think you were never going to see him ever again, did you?”

Yurina Chigasaki wasn’t too different from Yuri, her avatar in the game: she was a striking college student with a noble bearing and a tall, slender silhouette. Even the fact that she had bought this used van to help her and her friends go out and have fun seemed like a rather heroic motivation. Fuyo had even asked her if she wanted a part-time job modeling, but Yurina had just turned a bit pink and demurred.

The *Narrow Fantasy Online* offline meetup was taking place in Shinjuku, but Airi and Fuyu had first decided to meet up with Yurina and take her car to the site. Fuyo had applied herself to finishing up everything she needed to do for TGC in preparation for the meetup. Then, since she had time to spare, the two of them had decided to check out the apartment where Yurina lived. As a result, a 17-year-old, a 20-year-old, and a 28-year-old had ended up having a girls’ night out and pajama party sleepover, and sadly, the details of what happened cannot be printed here.

“I’m sure Mr. Tsuwabuki won’t mind, either,” Yurina assured her.

“I don’t care what he thinks! It’s about my pride in the moment!” Airi shouted.

“A-Airi, please keep your voice down... you’re hurting my ears...” Fuyo stammered.

At Airi’s insistence, we’ll keep things vague, but the truth was that when she had said goodbye to Ichiro Tsuwabuki at the end of the Rosemary incident, she had had to work very hard to control her feelings. She hadn’t wanted the young heir to confirm or reject those feelings, and she hadn’t wanted him to be disappointed by her expressing them in words. So she hadn’t said anything. She had just said goodbye, turned around, and walked away.

She had totally forgotten about the upcoming offline meetup.

After that, she had logged in every day (it had only been a few days), but even when she had hung around the Iris Brand guild house all day, the young heir had never appeared, and Kirschwasser and Yozakura, apparently busy with real life, hadn’t shown up either. Her initial hunch, that the young heir was never going to play the game again, was starting to sink in as fact.

Ah, but for Airi’s sake, we’ll stop there.

At any rate, she had begun to feel rather stupid over her internal conflict of the last few days, and she’d eventually started wanting to dig herself a hole to hide in. Fuyo and Yurina couldn’t really understand why, and that’s what brings us to now.

“Well, I haven’t seen Ichiro for several days, either, so I’ve been really looking forward to today. But...” Fuyo giggled. “Did you know that he cares so much about me that he’s helping me prepare for TGC?”

“W-Well, I guess that would follow,” Yurina said. “You are a subsidiary company, more or less.”

Pony Entertainment’s stock was now officially about 60% owned by Ichiro Tsuwabuki, which meant he was their official CEO and boss. Since over 60% of the stock was now owned by an individual, the company had been delisted from the market. It had been rather major news.

The 30% of MiZUNO’s stock that had been bought up by Tsunobeni had been released by it, so of course Ichiro Tsuwabuki had bought it up, which had shifted it from the Mizuno Group to a Pony subsidiary.

As far as Pony itself went, Airi and Yurina didn’t understand much about it, but the young heir had conducted himself with a confidence that implied either great skill or great experience. He had led the company, which had come perilously close to a management crisis, back onto a steady track.

In addition, he had ended up not being indicted for the unauthorized access incident. But not much about that had been made public yet, so they would just have to hear it from the horse’s mouth at the offline meetup.

The subject had strayed, but Yurina decided to take them back to it. “Well, either way, I think you just need to steel yourself for this, Ai.”

Airi looked back up and nodded. “Ah, well... that’s true... Yeah, I should just say hi like I usually do...”

“That’s right. Just be your usual self.” Fuyo smiled brightly, and Airi finally felt calm.

Then, just as Airi was feeling better, Yurina spoke up again. Her hands were firmly on the steering wheel, and her eyes gazed forward (she was a much more conservative driver than Fuyo),

but her expression, reflected faintly in the windshield, was ever-so-slightly mischievous. “Fuyo, tell us more about what you were saying last night.”

“Oh, about the last day of the incident. Airi was just incredible!”

“C-Could we not talk about this?” Airi could feel herself getting strangely sweaty, but Fuyo continued telling the story with gusto. When she reached the part Airi was most afraid of, a description of when she had slapped the former Pony CEO across the face with a wad of bills, even Yurina had to burst out laughing.

Airi still wanted to dig a hole to hide in, but now it was for other reasons.

Three men and one woman sat together in the reserved seats of the Azusa Special Express headed for Shinjuku.

They were “The Monstrous” Sergei Kyoshirovich Tanaka, “Baron” Choji Kazuha, “Saint” Misuka Terauchi, and “Demon” Gorgonzola Saito.

“Shooting Star” Hikaru Ichibanboshi would normally have appeared in the group, but he had eaten some expired Hakata pollock roe the night before and unfortunately now had to sit things out. Instead, they kept a picture of Parmigiano-Reggiano sitting next to the window, like a funeral photo.

These were the elites of the Red Sunset Knights, taking the train to the offline meetup in Shinjuku. They were in their seats, picking at the station-bought lunches open on their laps, faces grave.

“It really is tough, after eating the commander’s home cooking last night and this morning...” Terauchi muttered, moving her chopsticks listlessly, her expression slightly disgusted.

“Well, I bet the food that we eat at the meetup won’t be as good as Sergei’s cooking, so let’s use this to help ease our palates down,” Kazuha joked.

Sergei remained stone-faced. “Complimenting me won’t earn you a higher wage.”

Only Gorgonzola Saito spent the entire time silent, arms folded.

Out of these four, Misuka Terauchi alone lived in Sendai. She had applied for plenty of paid leave in advance of the meetup, thinking she’d arrive in Tokyo a day early and do some sightseeing. But then the commander, Stroganoff, had invited her to Yamanashi to hang out, so she had gone there instead.

She had heard that Stroganoff, Gazpacho, and Gorgonzola knew each other in real life, but she hadn’t expected them to be childhood friends. When they’d explained the circumstances that had led them to start playing the game, she had burst into tears from how touching it was.

Sergei ran a restaurant. It appeared that it was quite high-class (though he insisted that only applied to the appearance), and with that as their backdrop, Terauchi had filled up on the beef stroganoff he prepared on site. Though she would be spending the night in a business hotel, they had stayed up late discussing where things might go in *NaroFan* from now on.

“So, about *NaroFan*,” she said. “What do you think will happen next?”

“I’m not sure.” Stroganoff, who was so loquacious in the game, was rather soft-spoken in the real world. He seemed like the type who only said what was necessary, though that was cool in its own way (if you ignored his rather small stature).

By contrast, it was Gazpacho who was the outgoing one, and

he was far more svelte and handsome than you'd expect, given the bearded dwarf character he played in the game.

"Tsuwabuki's shown no sign of logging in since then, either," Sergei said.

"I wonder what the old bastard's up to," Kazuha commented. "Well, I think he's coming to the online meetup..."

"Ah... well, we should speak more respectfully," Saito added.

The three then spoke up in chorus: "Because he's a dev now!"

Yes, the Dragonet Magi-Fencer Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who had been a thorn in the Knights' side so often before, was now the CEO of both Thistle Corporation and Pony Entertainment. He was the most powerful person in *NaroFan*. While they doubted he would do any such "nonsense," it would be easy for him to lay down bans with a word, so they would need to be careful how they spoke about him in the future.

To the players inhabiting the large-yet-small continent of Asgard, the developers were effectively God. The players might talk openly about how the balance was crap, or about how microtransactions were eating the game, but they couldn't actually be insubordinate with the devs. Most of the developer-gods were magnanimous enough to laugh off obvious insults, which gave the players a measure of freedom. It was a give-and-take, faith in exchange for survival in the game.

Either way, Ichiro Tsuwabuki was now the boss of those developers. Which meant he was no less than God in the eyes of the *NaroFan* playerbase.

"He became God so that he could keep fighting for our world, outside of our world," Kazuha said.

"The economic world, mainly," Saito added.

“When you put it like that, it sounds very grand... a little like a novel?” Terauchi mused.

“It’s something you see a lot in anime and games,” Sergei pondered.

They all gazed up at the roof of the train car, reflecting on the moment.

“Speaking of which, we’d better finish eating these lunches,” Kazuha muttered a moment later, then stared down at the station-bought lunch on his lap, which he hadn’t made much progress on. “Sergei, this is why I said we should have gotten the field vegetable and katsu lunch set.”

“That might have been a safe choice, but the pairing of chicken katsu and fresh vegetables suggested a lack of effort in preparation.”

“We should have gotten the genkigai lunch.”

“N-Now, now...” Terauchi said. “I brought some haginotsuki and sasakama. We can enjoy those for a snack after we finish our lunches.”

In the end, those lunches were really bad. But nobody complained any further, and they resumed silently munching, the atmosphere like that of an all-night study session.

The Azusa Special Express passed through Otsuki Station, heading right for Shinjuku.

A little ways up a back alley in Akihabara stood a PC parts shop called Aono, Inc. The store wasn’t that large, and their selection wasn’t especially good, but if you asked the well-connected woman who ran the place, she could get most anything for you (not limited to PC parts), so it was considered a hidden gem by

those who knew about it. Of course, it had a few faults, like inflated margins, but still.

“Ed, shouldn’t you be going around now?” the shopkeeper, Aono Sakata, said to Edogawa, who was loitering around the store looking at parts.

Edogawa checked his watch. “Ah, yeah, you’re right. You said you weren’t going, right, Bossman?”

“I told you not to call me Bossman. It’s Aono,” the charming young female shopkeeper with the beauty mark under one eye said as she put out her cigarette butt. “And yes, I won’t be going. Say hi to the kids, though.”

“Right.” Edogawa gazed at the woman, who was reading her newspaper spread out over the counter. Frowning, he struggled to superimpose the image of the scraggly-bearded dwarf who ran *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s largest crafting guild over her real one. But when Aono grunted a “What?” at him, he quickly averted his eyes.

He would lock the secret deep inside him—well, it probably wasn’t actually a secret, as such, but Aono apparently didn’t want her real identity known to others.

He bowed politely, and was about to leave the store, when she called him back.

“Hey, Ed.”

“Yes?”

“Do you enjoy the game?”

It was an unexpected question, but Edogawa stopped walking and turned back. “Yes.”

“Glad to hear it.”

He lingered in the doorway for a while, but there was no sign of Aono saying anything else, so he quickly left the alley.

If she was asking him a question like that, did that mean it seemed like he didn't enjoy the game? When he thought about it, maybe there had been a time when that was true; a time when he'd been so prickly and prideful, he hadn't had the presence of mind to just enjoy it. He was under no illusions that that was completely in the past, but he still felt that he had matured a bit, or at least chilled a little.

The offline meetup was coming up. That man would be there.

Edogawa headed for the JR Akihabara Station, glancing at his cell phone as he went. The e-mail Iris had sent out contained the agenda for the day and a detailed list of those attending; Ichiro Tsuwabuki's name was on the list.

Edogawa had also managed to get the impression that Ichiro wasn't logging in to *NaroFan*, either, but that didn't change the fact that Edogawa thought of him as his mortal enemy.

The offline meetup would be another battle that he couldn't afford to lose.

He bought an energy drink at a convenience store, chugged it, and then stepped into the station.

"Meow-ho, Tomakomai!" Shoko Amemiya waved her arm in the lobby of Narita Airport.

A tall, scrawny man in a coat waved back to her, dragging his suitcase behind him. He had a sickly pallor to his face, like he was all skin and bones, but atop it he smiled a gentle smile.

Densuke Tomakomai had managed to make it back to the country just in the nick of time. He was going to be heading to the

offline meetup next, so he'd really been through a lot. It was hard to tell whether Tomakomai was tired or not, given that his appearance was already that of a walking skeleton.

"It's nice to meet you, Amesho," he said. "Though we've both seen pictures of each other, at least."

"Myeah, we have. But Tomakomai, have you lost weight since the picture on your home page?"

"That was from before I started playing *NaroFan* . I wasn't expecting you to come here not in disguise, though."

"Aw, it's not like I'm all that popular," she said. "My income as an idol is basically money for pocket change."

Despite that, Shoko was looking quite beautiful, dressed from head to toe in the MiZUNO brand's latest fashions. They had been a gift, in exchange for her cooperation during the guild sponsor incident. She was known as a damsel player in the game, but nobody would have expected her to act the same way in real life.

"Watching Fuyo made me realize that a woman's appeal has an expiration date, so I should probably just do what I can while I have the chance," she added.

"Everyone has their own way of thinking about things, but if you don't do it in moderation, you'll burn out."

"Yeah, I'll be careful," she said.

Tomakomai and Shoko made a strange pair, walking through the airport lobby side by side.

"So, how'd things turn out with Yozakura?" she added.

"Oh, that?" Tomakomai had been watching the Rosemary incident from an ocean away, but he'd ended up more involved than

he'd ever expected to be, on Ichiro Tsuwabuki's request.

From his position as a scholar in the field of neuroscience, he had been tasked with charting Yozakura/Rosemary's reactions to certain electric signals via *NaroFan*. The concept had been quite novel for Tomakomai, but in practice, it wasn't terribly different from the work he usually did.

"By the way, did Tsuwabuki know you were in neuroscience?" Shoko added.

"It appears so. He seemed to have known the reason I hadn't logged out since the *NaroFan* service began, too."

Densuke Tomakomai was a distinguished professor at Abashiri Medical University, and the head of the neuroscience research center there. He was a leading expert in the field, and Drive technology, which used quantum waves to immerse the consciousness in a virtual realm, was his pet subject. He had been playing the game, literally, without eating or sleeping, receiving IV drips for nutrition the entire time. As a result, he had been able to prove with his own body that there were no negative physical side effects to Driving, and he was a leading voice in the scientific world that the technology could be a godsend for people in terminal care.

"I did everything I could," he told her. "Now it's simply up to Mr. Tsuwabuki and the people at Thistle."

"I see..."

All Tomakomai could do was pray that his report would help Rosemary be acknowledged as human in court.

"Hey, Tomakomai! Amesho!" Just then, the two heard a voice calling them, and they turned to face it at the same time.

They were in the airport lobby, which was full of people com-

ing and going, so it took them a minute to realize who it was that was calling to them. Eventually, they noticed a plain-looking man in black clothing walking towards them and waving. Neither of them could put an avatar to the face.

“Who are you?” Shoko asked what could have sounded like a scathing question to the man in black.

“Heh...” The man let out a chuckle and produced a paperback from his bag. It was a first printing of *Dragon Fantasy Online*, well-worn from regular reading, but most likely a premium item by now. It was then that Tomakomai and Shoko both recognized him.

“Oh, Kiriri?” Shoko asked.

“I’m impressed that you identified us,” Tomakomai added.

“Well, I’ve seen your faces on the internet...” The man, apparently Kirihito (Leader), laughed as he returned the paperback to his bag. “Heading for the offline meetup, right? I wonder what everyone’ll be like.”

“Hmm, I expect everyone to be meow-re or less what they look like in the game... You look generic in both, too.”

“G-Generic? Hey, Kirihito’s handsome!” the man protested.

“Like 80% of the male avatars in the game are handsome, which means you look generic,” Shoko said. “Not that I mind being surrounded by handsome men, but being flanked by a skeleton and an extra is pretty fun in its own way.”

Shoko Amemiya apparently had no filter. Kirihito (Leader) looked a little conflicted about this, but he did not bother to put his feelings into words. Perhaps he was aware that he looked generic.

From there, they took the Narita Express from the airport and headed for Shinjuku.

“Today’s the offline meetup, I hear.”

Masaki Majima was lying on the bank of the Arakawa River, looking up at the sky when Eika Sugiura arrived.

Her shadow passed over Masaki’s face, causing him to turn over in annoyance. He was silent for a while after that, but finally spoke up, sullenly.

“I know,” he replied.

“You aren’t going, I suppose?” Eika said, giggling delightedly.

“There’s gonna be someone there I don’t want to see. What about you, then?”

“Not going, for the same reason.” As she said that, Eika sat down next to Masaki, who was still lying down.

Eika’s outfit was about the same as that of Sorceress in the game. It seemed stifling in the heat of summer, but Masaki decided not to comment on that, as he had no right to talk.

Masaki and Eika had joined *NaroFan* at Shoko Amemiya’s invitation two months ago.

It would be hard for them to say that playing video games, which they had little history with, had been of any benefit to them. It was also hard to say that meeting the people they had met had been of any benefit to them. But if someone asked them if they had had fun, they would probably admit that, yes, they had. They had met a lot of people of the sort they disliked, but the two months they had spent playing the game had been rather fun.

“Tsuwabuki, huh?” Masaki said. “He’s a weird one...”

“So is Iris,” Eika said. “She’s not the type of person you meet very often.”

It was true. He’d rarely met anyone like those two before.

Anyone like Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who never stopped flaunting his own talent.

Anyone like Iris, who, while aware of her lack of talent, spent her blood, sweat, and tears to keep moving forward anyway.

Maybe it was meeting people like them that had made these last two months worthwhile, even if it meant taking back what he’d said before.

Masaki lay there in thought. Suddenly, he realized he did want to go to the offline meetup.

“Hey, Masaki,” Eika said. “I bought you some puddings if you want them.”

“Don’t call me Masaki.” Masaki sat up abruptly from where he was lying on the grass. “Where are you going?”

“Shinjuku.”

“Do you have train fare?”

“I’ll walk,” he whispered after a pause.

Eika giggled. “Oh, please. I’ll lend you money, then.”

“No way.”

But despite his insistence, Masaki Majima, a.k.a. Taker, ended up taking the witch Eika Sugiura’s railway pass and heading for Shinjuku on the Saikyo Line.

“That reminds me. The offline meetup is today, it seems,” Shunsaku Shaga said in the middle of discussion about the trial.

Azami looked up at the clock on the wall and nodded. “That’s right. It’s soon, isn’t it?”

“Well, I’m mainly glad that we managed to prove Tsuwabuki’s innocence in time.”

Azami nodded in response to his words, whispered as he flipped through the documents.

The reveal of the existence of the artificial intelligence Rosemary had resulted in Ichiro being cleared of the charges of unauthorized access. It had been a false arrest, so there had been quite a lot of censure directed at the police, but in a way, they were worthy of sympathy; no one else would have expected a sentient program to have committed the crime.

At the same time, that reveal was sending shock waves through various industries, and the Japanese legal world was apparently in a panic regarding how to deal with it. In the midst of all that, Shunsaku Shaga alone seemed energized.

There had been no public announcement about Rosemary’s existence yet, but rumors were beginning to spread on the internet. The news about Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s arrest had been broadcast far and wide, and then, other than the announcement that he was falsely accused, all new word had stopped. As a result, people had started wondering if there might be a conspiracy at hand, and the major message boards were all awash in gossip.

“Well, our battle continues... Of course, putting it that way makes us sound like a manga that just got canceled...” Shaga said, after finishing his explanation about the documents.

“That’s true. What do you think will happen to Rosemary, in the long run?”

“Well, there are those who think that the program should be put on trial as someone with acknowledged personhood. There are also those who think it needs to be worked out what age and position she should be treated as having, and those who think this should be deferred as a special case until legislation can be worked out. Opinions seem to run the gamut.” Shaga reached for a cigarette in his pocket, but stopped when Azami glared at him. There was no smoking allowed in the meeting room. “There’s no conclusion yet, so for now they seem to want you, as the program’s creator, to take responsibility. Sorry for all the trouble.”

“Not at all...”

“I’ll do my best by you,” Shaga said. “There might be some pressure coming from unexpected directions, but this time I’ll have Tsuwabuki backing me, too.”

She knew that much. She hadn’t spoken to him properly about it, but Azami was roughly aware that Ichiro Tsuwabuki had been working for them tirelessly behind the scenes. There were apparently those who wouldn’t accept new legislation based on the advancement of Drive technology, and they wanted to do what they could to take down Azami and Rosemary. But from what Shaga said, their resistance had been surprisingly meager.

Then, out of nowhere, President Azami remembered something. “That reminds me. Pony’s former CEO...”

“He’s out of the hospital and will be put on trial soon,” Shaga told her. “For violation of the Poisonous and Deleterious Substances Control Law. They’re working to get unauthorized access added onto it, too... He admits to it himself, but the secretary’s insisting she did it of her own accord, so it’s getting a little complicated.”

It seemed there was a complicated network of relationships there, though Azami didn’t have the energy to inquire any further.

“Well, that’s it, more or less,” Azami said. “It’s getting late, so we should probably take a break.”

“Yes, indeed. Can I take you to lunch?”

Azami met Shaga’s light come-on with a bright smile. “Absolutely not.”

The summer sun was blazing overhead. Asuha Tsuwabuki stood on the pitcher’s mound.

It was the top of the first inning, and Asuha already had two outs. The ball felt completely different from the one she usually threw, so she had allowed one man on base, but she was starting to get the hang of it now.

Today was the *Narrow Fantasy Online* offline meetup.

Many of the people Asuha knew in the game would already be meeting up in Tokyo. Asuha had wanted to participate, but she couldn’t miss this match today.

It was a practice match against a team from a nearby school who had won a championship before, and she was helping out. The baseball club at her middle school was small and weak, so to save them from being disbanded, as the ace of the girls’ softball club, Asuha had agreed to take part in their practice match as a pitcher.

Not long ago, she might have prioritized the meetup over the match. Even now, she was not actually obligated to be standing on the mound today.

Just a little while ago, Asuha had heard these words from Ichiro:

“In the time I’ve been away, you and Iris have both have grown

up a bit. It makes me extremely happy.”

She had merely been happy to hear it at the time, but on more careful examination, it had brought her to a conclusion.

She had to find something that she could lose herself in. Then she would master that.

Just like Iris was working to become a clothing designer. Just as Sera Kiryu was seeking to become a master gamer. Asuha wasn't thinking of trying to beat Ichiro like they were, but now she wanted to find the one thing that she could devote herself to.

Her answer was this white ball.

The moment that thought entered her brain, Asuha felt as if she were on fire. The boys from the championship team would prove an excellent chance to test her skill. She didn't want to let that slip by. There's a difference between hardball and softball, as they say.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki had retired from playing *NaroFan*. As the one who had invited him to play, Asuha felt a bit sad about that, but she also wanted to keep adventuring in *NaroFan* as Felicia. She couldn't keep chasing after Ichiro her whole life. An adventure was something a person should continue under their own power.

So for now, she would put everything she had into this ball.

She nudged her cap and glared at the batter's box from atop the mound.

Her opponent was fourth in the lineup, Futa Saruwatari. He was a first-year in middle school just like her, and was already a regular in the lineup, expected to go pro. He had an excellent eye, and he had watched her two pick-off attempts without flinching.

She needed to get three swings from him and finish him off. Then she would announce her victory to everyone once the offline meetup was over.

The corner of Asuha's mouth turned up.

"Here it is... my new technique! Sure-kill miracle pitch!"

She raised the ball up high. The Tsuwabuki blood sleeping inside of her awakened.

As she cried out, the white ball in her hand bent in an unpredictable way, then slammed into the catcher's mitt.

In the deepest part of the Doom Range was Heavensword Mountain, currently the tallest point in *Narrow Fantasy Online* . On fair weather days, it served as a sightseeing spot that offered a fantastic view of the entire Asgard Continent. But considering how much trouble it was to climb, it didn't offer particularly profitable mobs, so just about the only players you saw there were ones coming to sight-see.

A single boy had arrived at the top, his black Accel Coat flapping in the wind.

The weather was clear, but the wind was strong, enough that letting your guard down for a moment might send you tumbling down the sheer slope. But the boy stood at the summit with great confidence. Various emotions passed through his eyes as he gazed down at the Asgard continent below.

"Oh, today's the offline party, isn't it?"

He turned back to the source of the unexpected voice. At some point, a familiar elf had appeared. He stood there hunched as though cowed by the strong wind, the usual thin smile on his face.

“Mr. Matsunaga.”

“Hey, King.”

After that brief exchange, the two stood side by side.

King Kirihito and Matsunaga weren't going to participate in the *Narrow Fantasy Online* offline meetup. It would be the only way for them to talk to one of the men who would be in attendance, but regardless, neither had demonstrated any interest in taking part.

While the wind battered them, Matsunaga spoke to the silent King. “He ran off with the win, didn't he, King?”

A slight change came over King Kirihito's face.

The Dragonet Magi-Fencer Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who had knocked him from his perch as the ultimate solo player, was no longer in Asgard. Even his account had been erased, and the only traces left of his existence were the Monetary Blades scattered across the Doom Range.

In the end, King Kirihito would have no chance for a proper rematch. That was what Matsunaga had meant by “running off with the win.” Even though Ichiro had gone missing, King couldn't stand tall with the assurance that he was the strongest player again, and Ichiro had left behind no statement on the matter. That had left a lump in King's heart, and Matsunaga had seen it.

“Well, I think it's fine.” How many minutes had King Kirihito stood in silence before he managed to whisper his response? “I never thought I'd lose to anyone in games except my mother, but the old man still beat me in this game, at least. Now that he's left the game, it means I definitely lost. I think that's fine.”

It wasn't like King Kirihito to simply admit defeat. Weighing

those words, Matsunaga peered over at King's profile. He saw the young man looking up at the sky, smiling a tranquil smile. It was the face of a person who hid aggression behind a facade of cool, of a person preparing to make a decision.

"I spent my second term as a shut-in anyway, so it's okay. Next time, I'll bring myself up to the old man's level and challenge him there. Even though I don't know what form it'll take..." King drew the XAN smoothly from his belt and held it up to the sky, shouting as if his challenge might reach someone up there. "Next time, I won't lose!"

"At first, I thought I should just give it to you, too..." Ichiro Tsuwabuki said with a fed-up expression, his cell phone in one hand.

Sakurako, who had gotten everything ready for the outing, fidgeted, exchanging glances between Ichiro and the clock. They had to move out quickly, or they'd be late to the meetup. But the person he was talking to on the phone was apparently being incredibly stubborn.

"Father." Rosemary's dispassionate voice came through the speakers newly installed in the Tsuwabuki house. She was speaking very softly, probably in consideration of the fact that Ichiro was in the middle of a phone call.

"Yes?" Sakurako asked.

"Who is Ichiro talking to?"

"Ah, most likely his father."

She was referring to Meiro Tsuwabuki, Ichiro Tsuwabuki's father and head of the Tsuwabuki Concern. A shifty manipulator, as Ichiro described him. His ability to exploit and manage others was truly incredible, and Ichiro also admired him, secretly—

though that secret had been leaked. But there was no sign of that respect in the conversation they were having now.

Sakurako had more or less figured out what Meiro had called Ichiro about. He'd been monitoring the recent Rosemary incident, and had seen the huge change in the Japanese stock market. As a result, Ichiro had acquired a large amount of stock, and control of a large company. Meiro likely wanted to see them added to the family group.

“But the management of Thistle, MiZUNO, and *NaroFan* ...” Ichiro was saying. “Once I began handling it all, I started to realize it was interesting in its own way... ah, nonsense. Don't be so angry. Yes. Yes. That might also be fine. I am a bit curious to find out which one of us is the better CEO...”

Ichiro showed no sign of rescinding his authority. Listening to him talk down to the man on the other end of the phone, Sakurako couldn't help but sympathize with Meiro. It was like his own son was picking a fight with him.

“Well, I need to head out. I'm going to end the call now. Yes. Yes. Nonsense. I'll be coming to Great-Grandfather's for New Year's, at least. We can talk more then.”

Ichiro then apparently hung up on his father.

“Forgive the wait.”

“Well done, Ichiro-sama,” Sakurako said.

“Well done,” Rosemary agreed.

Several days had passed since it had all gone down. It had been something of a blur to Sakurako. Ichiro's innocence had been proven, and the true culprit Rosemary herself was about to be “taken into custody.” But as a result of actions taken by Ichiro, Shaga, and Somei, the artificial intelligence had been allowed to

remain in the Tsuwabuki household.

At present, Ichiro had her running the building's security, and she was receiving pay with a proper contract. He had installed speakers around the house for Rosemary's convenience, and he'd planned to install security cameras, too. But Sakurako had objected, so he'd decided on a moving camera instead. The camera that served as Rosemary's "eyes" sadly lacked its own method of propulsion, so generally, Sakurako or Ichiro would carry it.

Right now, they were going to carry her to crash the offline meetup. The cell phone that Rosemary would speak through was in Sakurako's bag. It had an application (designed by Ichiro) to always keep the camera function on, and it served as Rosemary's terminal. Sakurako found herself rather delighted by the science fiction of it all.

"Ah, but here we are, going to the offline meetup," Ichiro breathed as they headed for the door.

"It is hard to believe, yes," Sakurako said. "As is the fact that we've only known them all for two months."

"True."

"A lot has happened over those two months."

"That's true. A lot has happened."

"It's been a very rich two months."

"Yes, perhaps the third richest two months of my life," Ichiro said, almost dismissively.

Sakurako found herself narrowing her eyes. But Ichiro was as impudent as ever, and showed no sign of noticing it.

Still, he did say this, with a different emotion in his smile than his usual coolness: "But it has been the most fun two months, I

suppose. I really enjoyed this summer.”

Those were likely Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s unvarnished feelings. If so, then Sakurako had no right to object to his words. Rosemary must have thought so, too, as she also showed no sign of interrupting.

They changed their shoes and walked out the front door. Just then, Sakurako spoke, as if remembering something. “That’s right, Ichiro-sama.”

“Hmm?”

“I just remembered, I heard you got really angry back there...”

“Yes, I was quite angry.”

“Was that...” Sakurako opened her mouth trepidatiously, and finally asked the question. “...for me and Rosemary?”

Ichiro let out a laugh and kept walking, flipping the key to the blue Koenigsegg in his hand. With his usual cool demeanor, he spoke one word out onto the now faintly-autumnal wind. The word was this:

“Nonsense.”



AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. It's me, Blitz/Kiva.

Paying to Win now has a whole six volumes! That makes seven books I've written in my life! In addition, HJ Bunko has printed over 600 volumes! Talk about time flying. That's incredible! While I was marveling at my own incredibleness, my book series, *Paying to Win in a VRMMO*, reached its final chapter. The web version's story is also almost wrapped up, so you could say it's pretty much all settled.

This arc... I really think it has the ring of realism to it. I was able to finish it up thanks to everyone's support. Thank you very much.

It's the last volume, so I asked for a lot of selfish things, especially regarding the page count. There was so much that I said I couldn't cut out! So, we didn't have much of a choice.

Paying to Win is finished, but in the web version, there's a sequel called *Paying to Win in a VRMMO: Sub-Account*, a story about an Iris who's now in college called *Irish Sniper*, and a short story collection about Sakurako-san as a curry reporter called *Curry Lover Sakurako-san*. So, if you're curious, go check them out.

Also, at the point I'm writing this afterword, I don't know when it'll be, but I might write a story about the detective past of the young heir, the lawyer Shaga who appeared in the last volume, and the newspaper reporter Somei whom we saw a glimpse of. I think the title will be *Tokyo Surf City Blues*. That's only tentative, though; if I think of something better, I might change it!

Now, let's talk about my new work! I've decided to publish another of my *Shosetsuka ni Naro* novels with Hobby Japan. This one won't be published with HJ Bunko, but with HJ Novels instead. So, let's have a commercial. Take it away!

Don! Don. Yes. This is amazing! I've been transported away with my class!

Put simply, an entire high school class is sent to another world, and they've all become monsters! There are a lot of characters in this one. Put simply, about 40 of them! And they're all monsters!

Tasuku, who does a lot of illustrations for TRPGs, will be handling the illustrations! He's great at doing monstrous-looking things. I've managed to cajole him into drawing about a third of the class, around ten characters, and they're all uniquely cute and cool monsters. I hope you enjoy it!

Oh, about Katsuo who did the cover fold-in comment? Um, well... There will be a Katsuo in this story, too. More precisely, katsuibushi (skipjack tuna flakes). Yes. I'm looking forward to it, too. He'll make great soup.

There are a lot of crazy transformations, like the protagonist being a skeleton and the main girl being a slime, the quiet library representative girl becoming a sexy-looking succubus, the loud-mouthed gossip girl becoming a harpy, and the handsome jock becoming a dragonewt. Anyway, if you like monsters, please read it! And even if you don't like monsters, please also read it. You won't regret it! The class resurrection story will probably come back in fall or winter of this year!

Now, let's get back to the money story... though calling it "the money story" sounds a little vulgar, I guess. I'm going to be spoiling a few things from this volume here.

Let's talk about the title page. If you've finished reading to the

end, you'll understand what the title page means. It's like they've graduated from the young heir and had a protagonist swap.

Iris has been a popular character ever since the web version, so I was a little uncertain about waiting until the second volume to introduce her. At first she was just your typical stubborn heroine, but the way she gradually powers up... I didn't really anticipate it, but it was really fun to write. As a result, she's a leading lady in the sense of being a female hero more than in the sense of being a love interest to the protagonist or a story MacGuffin. She's the protagonist, you know?

So she had to be the one to deal the final blow against the final boss. And she did it with the power of money. Iris, more than anyone, dominated (physically) with the power of money.

Well, it would take too long to talk about all the characters, so I'd better move on! Acknowledgments!

This is the final issue of *Paying to Win* .

To Mr. K who has looked after me since I joined up, and everyone at HJ Bunko editorial, thank you very much. To Rein Kirishima, who did wonderful illustrations for all six-plus-one volumes, thank you very much. I still remember dancing from happiness when I saw the volume one illustrations.

To everyone who's been supporting *Paying to Win* since the web novel days, to everyone who's still loving my work in web novel form, thank you very much. I owe all of this to you.

To Kasuga, Natsuya Semikawa, Teren Mikami, Yu Rando, and Tappei Nagatsuki, who did the foldout author illustrations, thank you very much. I think they all looked like me.

And now for the obligatory "AND YOU"...

To everyone who picked up this book and read the afterword,

thank you. I hope we meet again! Later!