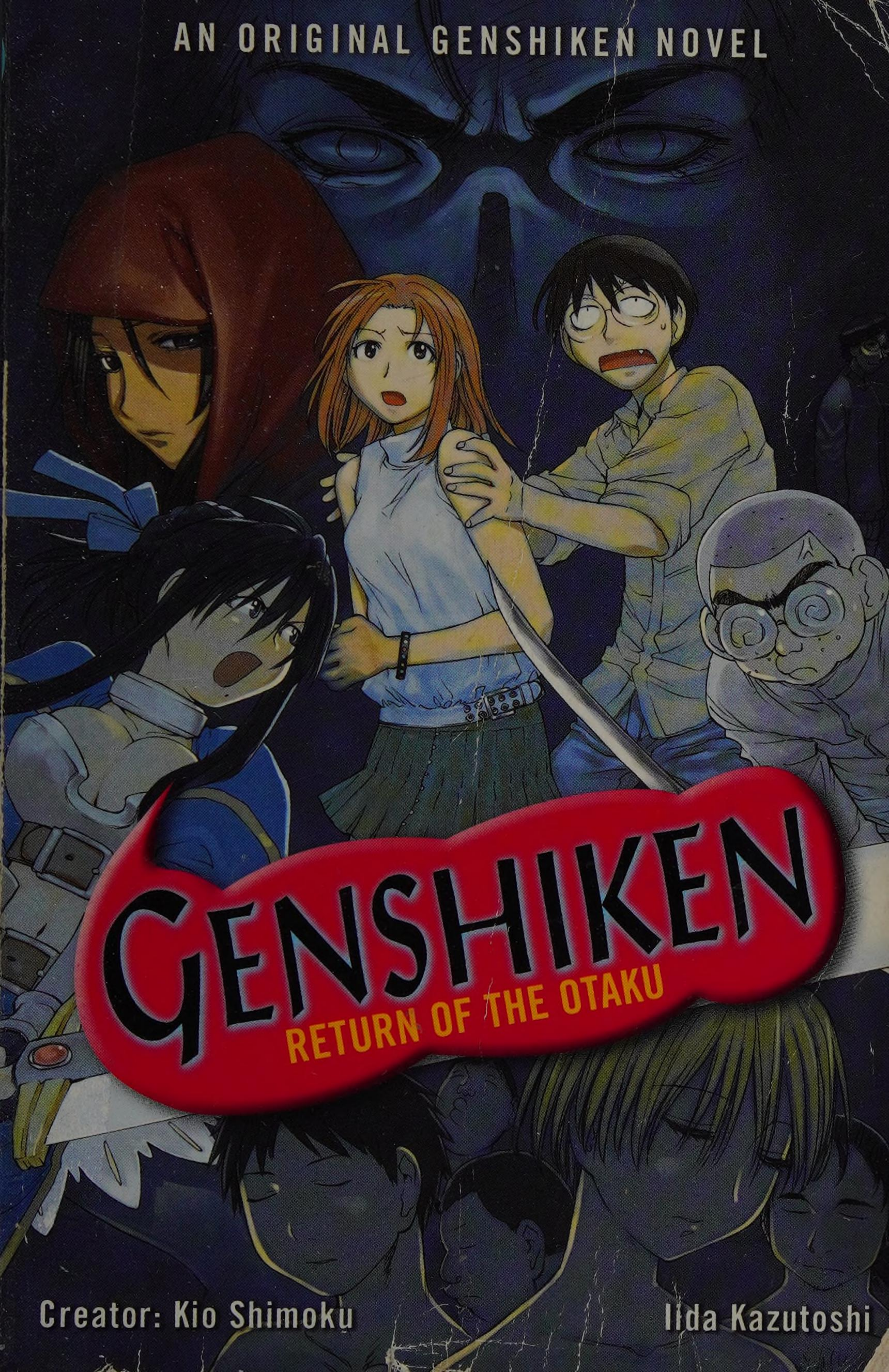


AN ORIGINAL GENSHIKEN NOVEL



GENSHIKEN

RETURN OF THE OTAKU

Creator: Kio Shimoku

Iida Kazutoshi

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Genshiken : return of the

Otaku /

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GENSHIKEN:

Return of the Otaku

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KIO SHIMOKU

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IIDA KAZUTOSHI

TRANSLATED BY

Katy Bridges



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Genshiken: Return of the Otaku is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Character

Harunobu Madarame

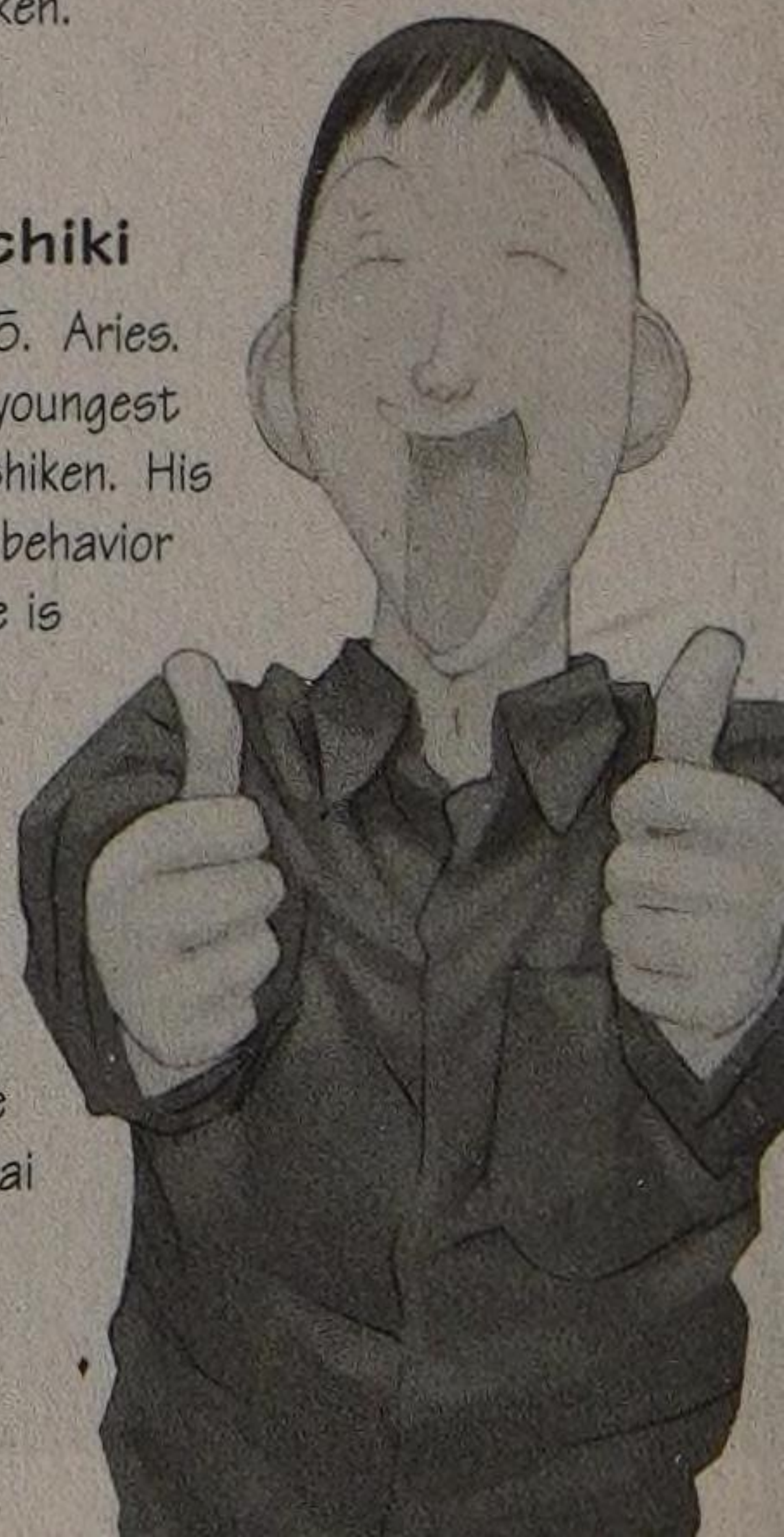
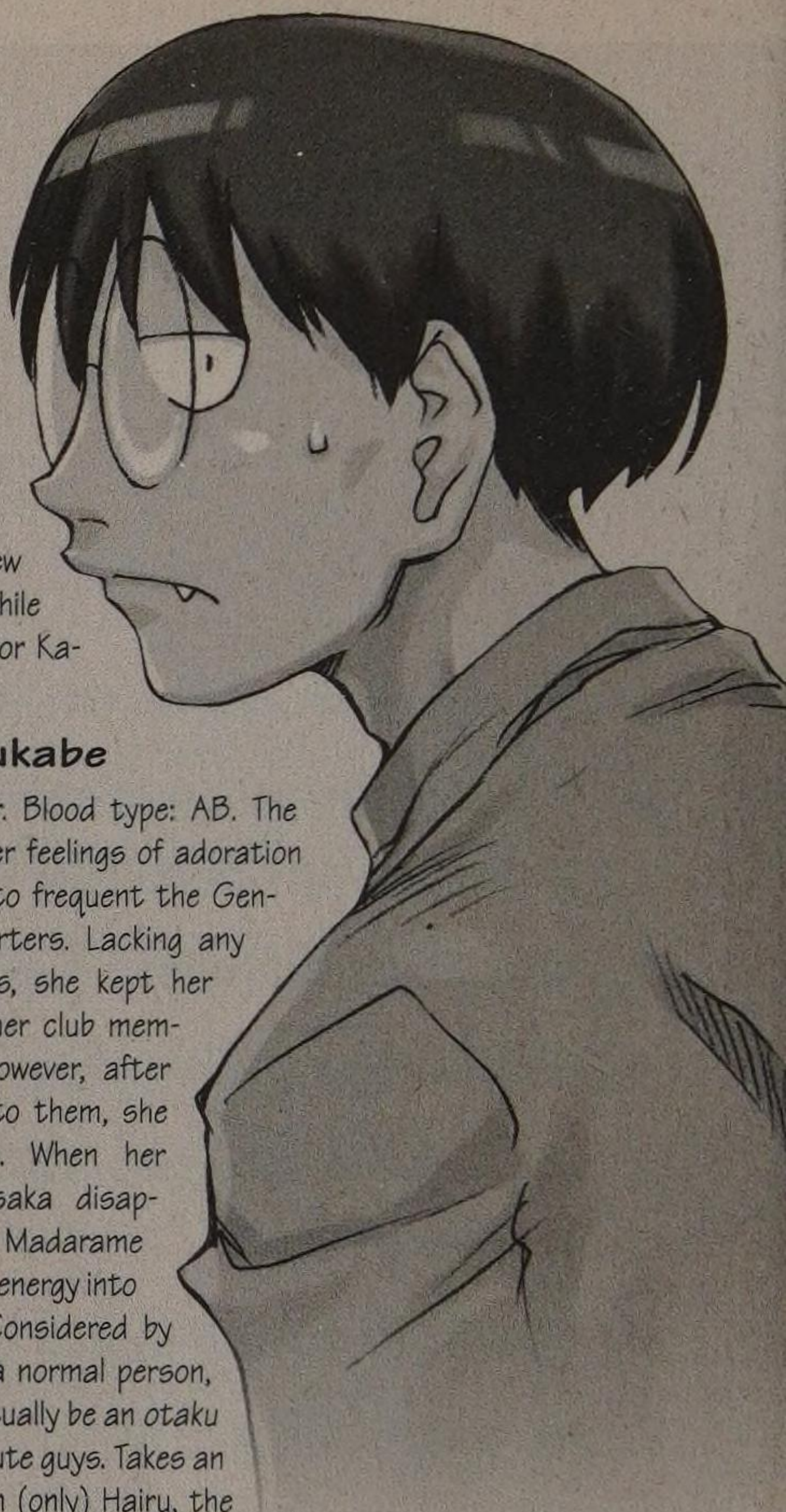
Born October 25, 1982. Scorpio. Blood type: O. The hero of this book. The second president of the Genshiken (the Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture). Characterized by his glasses, short hair, and slender visage. His strong point is logical thinking, and he frequently praises himself for things he says and does. He creates characters more often than strictly necessary and cannot always express his true self. When Kousaka disappears, he finds a new opportunity to spend time in Saki Kasukabe's company while they investigate. Madarame harbors unrequited feelings for Kasukabe. He asserts that he was a snake in his last life.

Saki Kasukabe

Born July 19, 1983. Cancer. Blood type: AB. The heroine of this story. Her feelings of adoration for Kousaka lead her to frequent the Genshiken club headquarters. Lacking any otaku qualifications, she kept her distance from other club members at first. However, after becoming used to them, she officially joined. When her boyfriend Kousaka disappears, she and Madarame throw all their energy into finding him. Considered by many to be a normal person, she may actually be an otaku for really cute guys. Takes an interest in (only) Hairu, the very handsome chairman of the on-campus club organization committee, who opposes the Genshiken.

Manabu Kuchiki

Born March 21, 1985. Aries. Blood type: B. The youngest member of the Genshiken. His eccentric speech and behavior are offputting and he is overly sensitive to smoke, but he still possesses a lovable character. He gave himself the nickname "Kuchii." He gets drawn into the adventure when he buys the imoto game Kyodai ★ Kenka in Akihabara.



Introductions

Kanji Sasahara

Born January 13, 1984. Capricorn. Blood type: B. A truly devoted otaku. An upstanding and positive young man who once hid his otaku tastes from others. Associating with the members of Genshiken brought about a spiritual awakening. He has now developed into a fine otaku. He is considerate toward his younger sister. His sister, however, holds him in contempt, calling him "monkey." He wants to work in manga editing.

Souichiro Tanaka

Born December 22, 1982. Capricorn. Blood type: AB. Known for his hair pulled back in a ponytail. A cheerful and good-natured guy. He builds plamo—plastic figures ranging from the small to life-size garage kits—like a master craftsman and is a professional at making their clothes. Skilled at photography, he sometimes acts as cameraman for cosplay events at the comic fest.

Kanako Ohno

Born July 14, 1983. Cancer. Blood type: O. A natural-born cosplayer. A returnee to Japan who lived in America through high school. Her interest in cosplay and yaoi doujinshi leads her to join Genshiken. She and Tanaka start to date because of their mutual interest in cosplay.

Makoto Kousaka

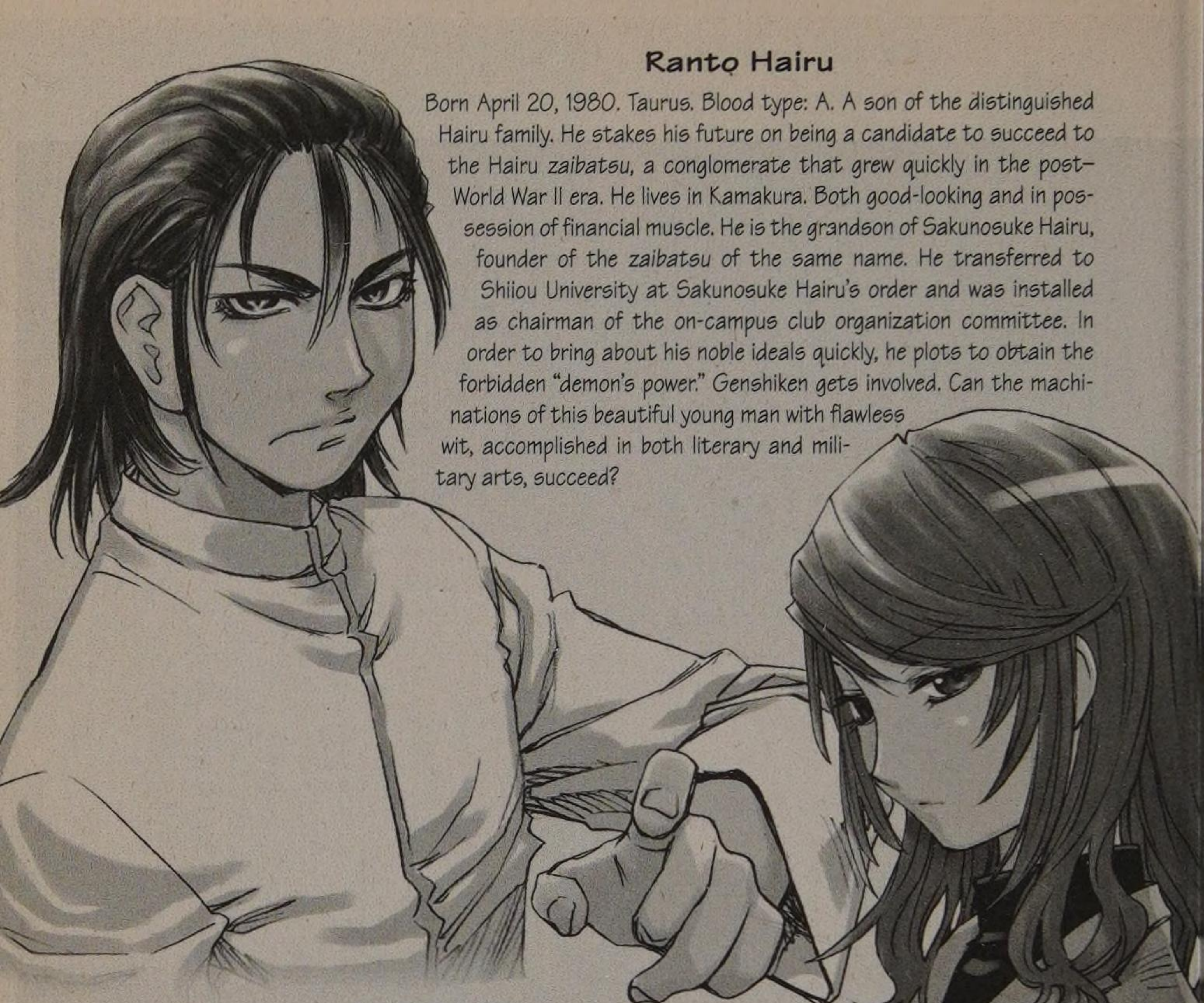
Born February 2, 1984. Aquarius. Blood type: B. Has a great sense of style. One would never guess that on the inside he's a bishoujo anime-loving, gyaru ge (adult video games)-playing super-otaku. His skill in combat games ranks on the national level. Friends with Kasukabe in childhood; they started dating after meeting again in college.

The First Resident

His name, date of birth, astrological sign, and blood type are all unknown. The first president of the Genshiken. His existence is shrouded in mystery. He is a mysterious father figure who always shows up to help in times of trouble.

Mitsunori Kugayama

Born June 29, 1982. Cancer. Blood type: A. Although a giant of a person, he has a restrained personality. He speaks softly because he stammers. He likes to remain in the background so as not to be noticed. The best at drawing in the Genshiken.

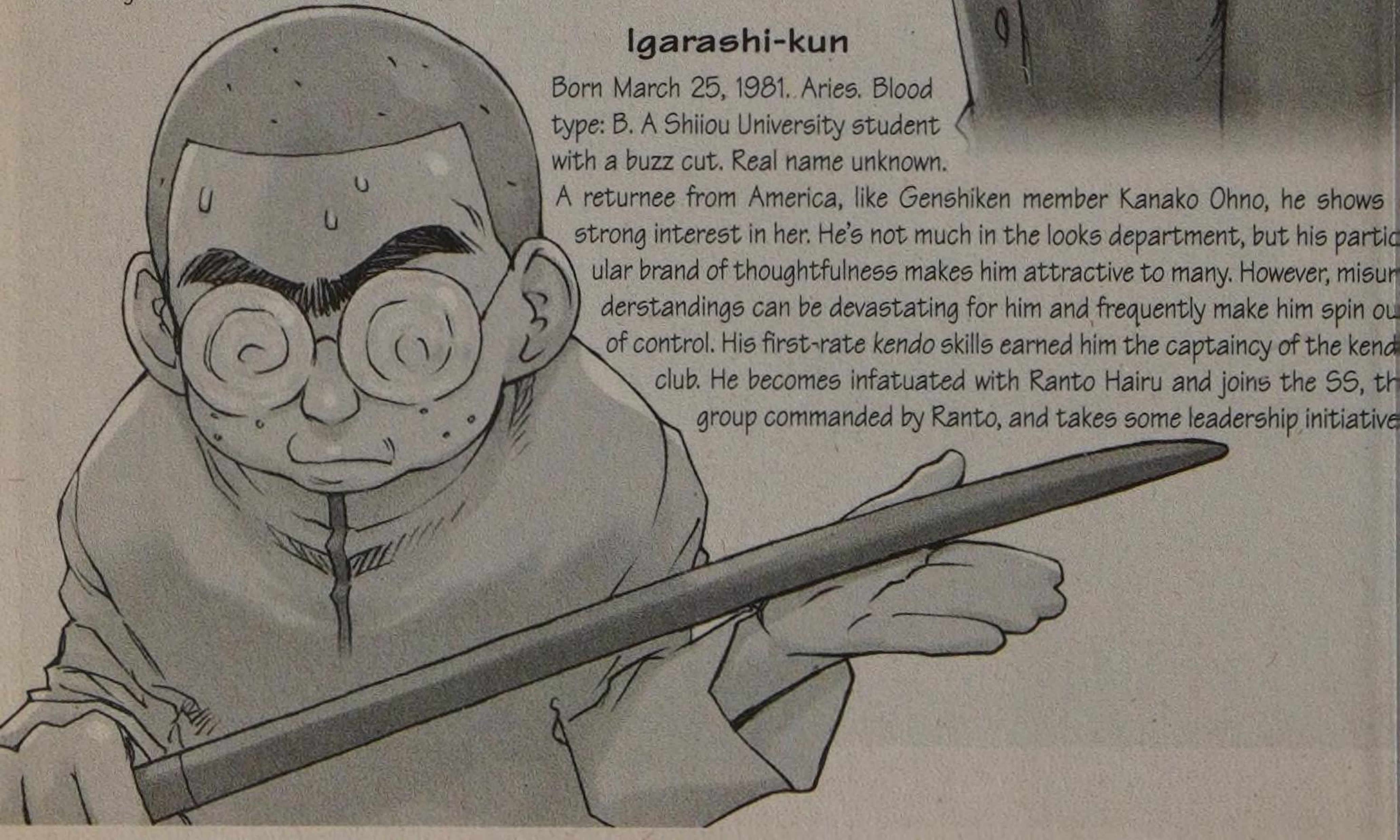
A black and white illustration of two characters. On the left, a young man with long, dark hair and a serious expression, wearing a light-colored traditional Japanese garment. On the right, a young woman with long, dark hair, wearing a dark jacket, looking down at something in her hands.

Ranto Hairu

Born April 20, 1980. Taurus. Blood type: A. A son of the distinguished Hairu family. He stakes his future on being a candidate to succeed to the Hairu zaibatsu, a conglomerate that grew quickly in the post-World War II era. He lives in Kamakura. Both good-looking and in possession of financial muscle. He is the grandson of Sakunosuke Hairu, founder of the zaibatsu of the same name. He transferred to Shiiou University at Sakunosuke Hairu's order and was installed as chairman of the on-campus club organization committee. In order to bring about his noble ideals quickly, he plots to obtain the forbidden "demon's power." Genshiken gets involved. Can the machinations of this beautiful young man with flawless wit, accomplished in both literary and military arts, succeed?

Anna Hairu

Born February 6, 1984. Aquarius. Blood type: A. Ranto Hairu's younger sister. Adores and respects her older brother. Secretary at Highland, an IT company where Ranto is employed. Actually runs the company herself. Anna always works with Ranto and is working to realize his ambitions. However, she becomes anxious about Ranto's losing himself as he gets deeper into achieving his goals. She possesses an unusual character for this day and age, capable of great devotion, sparing no effort on her brother's behalf. She is also similar to the little sister who appears in the legend of the siblings who turned into demons. . . .

A black and white illustration of a young man with a buzz cut, wearing large round glasses and a light-colored traditional Japanese garment. He is holding a long, thin sword horizontally in front of him.

Igarashi-kun

Born March 25, 1981. Aries. Blood type: B. A Shiiou University student with a buzz cut. Real name unknown.

A returnee from America, like Genshiken member Kanako Ohno, he shows strong interest in her. He's not much in the looks department, but his particular brand of thoughtfulness makes him attractive to many. However, misunderstandings can be devastating for him and frequently make him spin out of control. His first-rate kendo skills earned him the captaincy of the kendo club. He becomes infatuated with Ranto Hairu and joins the SS, the group commanded by Ranto, and takes some leadership initiative.

GENSHIKEN:

Return of the Otaku



1

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KUCHIKI
ON
SUNDAY

It was hot. This was the middle of the scorching desert. A flat expanse of sand, sand, sand.

In the distance was an oasis. It shimmered in a haze of hot air.

He'd try to make it that far. Surely there would be water he could drink.

He'd also be able to wash there.

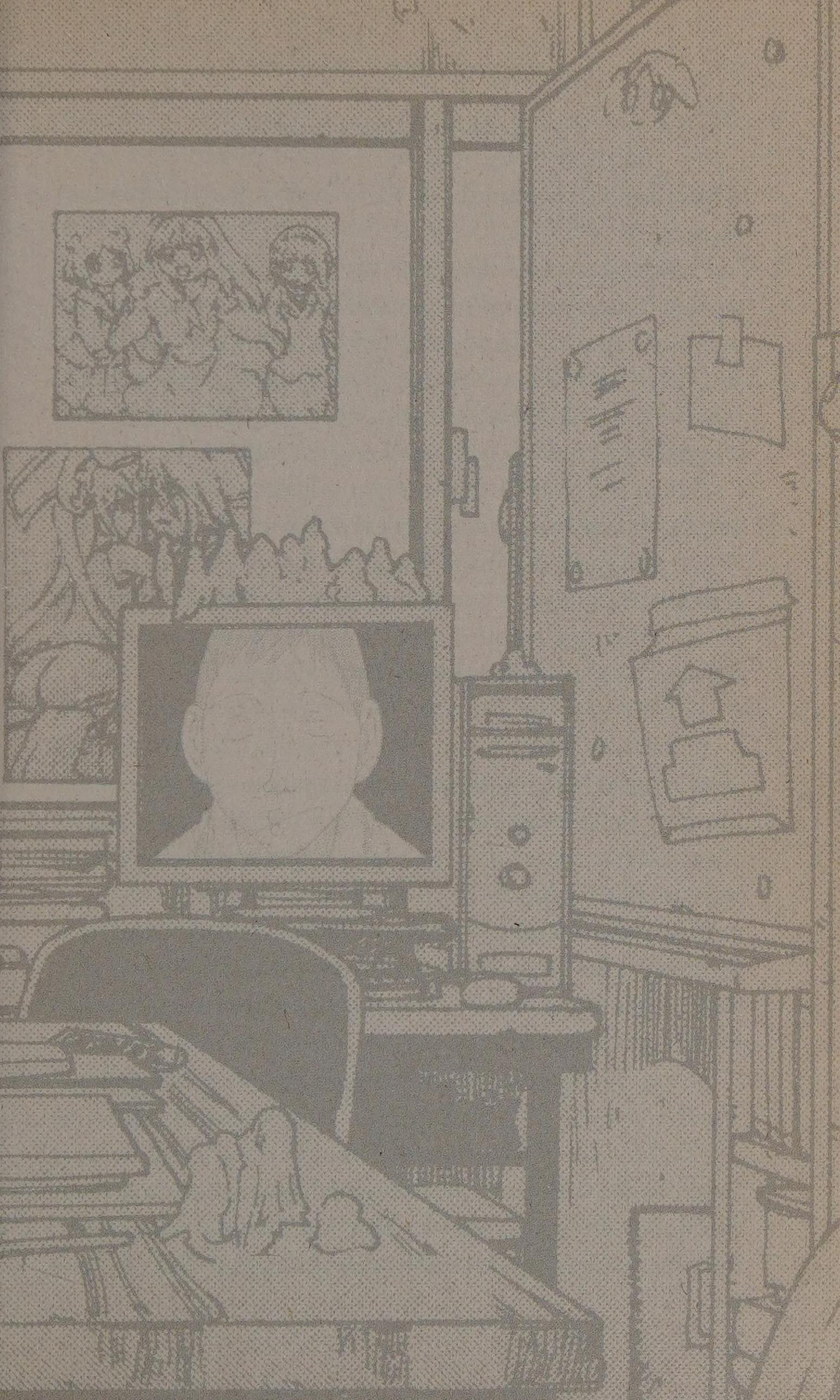
The camel must want to rest, too. Pleeeease, just a little farther.

Was this a dream? Sometimes in dreams you could never get to where you wanted to go, could you? Things faded into the distance just as you thought you would get there. But sometimes at the moment you gave up, you could suddenly get there, right?

See? We've arrived.

There was a girl washing in the water. Hello there! Don't be afraid, I'm not here to hurt you. I'm a traveler. I'm a merchant traveling the Silk Road.

Would you like this manga? It's my gift to you.



■ Akihabara Sketch

This place is the source of the visual culture of modern Japan.

“Modern culture” means things like manga, anime, and games. It seems this was once referred to as “fringe culture” and “subculture,” but looking at this town now, you’d find that hard to believe. On this Sunday during spring break, Chuo Dori, Akihabara’s main street, bustled briskly with shoppers and tourists from morning till night.

But in the middle of the night, almost all the shops on the street had their metal shutters down. The street suddenly changed from the noise of the day to the quiet of the night, with no sign of people anywhere. In spite of there still being some time before the last train of the night, even the *izakayas* and restaurants were closing down.

Night comes early in Akihabara. There is an extreme difference in population between day and night. This part of town clearly shows a completely different character from other popular areas.

The people who gathered in this area had mountains of so-called work to put in order in their own rooms at night. They went back to their various bases in the evening hours for that purpose.

It was late at night when Manabu Kuchiki walked down the Chuo Dori. In both hands he lugged a paper bag as he shuffled toward home, so slowly it seemed as though he were about to die. His lanky frame swayed heavily left and right. He walked like someone working hard to find his sense of balance. His clothes looked as though he had chosen them

merely for comfort, but the fleece and jeans were actually what worked best to maneuver through Akihabara.

Kuchiki was a member of the Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture, called the Genshiken for short. In an effort to become closer to the other members, he had asked them to call him "Kuchii," but this pet name had not stuck, which he thought was unfortunate.

The fifteen-liter-capacity backpack on Kuchiki's back bulged with the day's spoils of war. This alone was a fair amount of weight, but there was also the paper bag he hoisted in both hands.

Naturally, it was filled to the bursting point with gathered treasures. Their weight far exceeded the limits of the paper. But then why didn't the paper rip to shreds in the hands that held it?

One of his favorite game characters was drawn on this bag. He wanted to keep using this bag for a long time. He had reinforced the parts where it was likely to break with packing tape so it wouldn't be damaged. Many girls reuse bags with the names of expensive brands on them, and this was not so different.

There is tremendous doubt as to whether love can save the world, but an *otaku's* love can improve the strength of paper. And cut down on deforestation as well.

Perhaps because the quantity of paper *otakus* use is so much greater compared to that of normal people, this might balance things out from an ecological standpoint.

On Sunday, Kuchiki had been very busy. First he had gone to the game shop to purchase a *doujin* fight game. Of course, Kuchiki had a prepaid reservation for this game, but if he

didn't get the goods right when the store opened, it would be meaningless. It was important to be there at precisely the moment it was released, as soon as it could be sold. He treasured that first moment. This was a trait that was strongly reminiscent of the feelings of a true Tokyoite getting a taste of his first smoked bonito of the season.*

At this point, there was a surprise. The character illustrator for the game made an unscheduled appearance. In this industry, illustrators were called painters. Naming them in this way was also in the spirit of a true Tokyoite.

Kuchiki was in the middle of the line in front of the open shop, about twenty people back from the head of the line.

A clerk appeared from inside the shop to open the metal shutter.

A bearlike man walked up from the rear of the line toward the clerk, meeting him halfway. Whoa, was someone going to break the Akihabara ban on cutting in line? People suddenly perked up. One customer said quietly under his breath, "It's Akanemaru@Nukenin-san, the painter."

Kuchiki took a good look at the man and remembered seeing his face in a gaming magazine, although the portrait had been a mosaic, not made public.

Why could Kuchiki tell that the customer's face was the same as the protected image of the painter?

Mosaic processing meant making points unclear to lower the resolution and make the image vague. With things like adult films, this method of processing was generally irreversible: it was physically impossible to regenerate the un-

* *bonito* Tokyoites are reverent about the first bonito of the fall. Delicious.

modified images after filter processing even once, because the original information was lost.

Nevertheless, that they would know Akanemaru@Nukenin-san's face without using any special tools meant that they were different from ordinary people, in that they could ascertain what the image looked like before it was modified.

But it wasn't that they had any special ability; it was only after attending many sales events, the *doujins* had all figured out the relationship between the pen name and the actual person by listening to how the *doujins* addressed one another. At any rate, seeing his face, Kuchiki's brain made the connection between the sound "painter" and what it meant.

This was a charismatic painter, thought to be one of the coolest developers in the world of *doujin* games, and the character designer for the game being sold today. Countless beautiful young girls sprang from the tips of those clumsy-looking fingers on those large, loutish hands attached to those burly, hair-covered arms.

As that thought occurred to him, Kuchiki somehow felt a little proud.

The painter himself had put his own turbulent feelings into the pen name "Akanemaru@Nukenin." He was really a civil servant at a municipal office in the small town where he lived. His *doujin* buddies told him he was good enough to go pro, and it wasn't as if he didn't get invites to do so from developers.

He thought if he did turn pro, he could use all his time to work at painting and this would improve his ability as a

painter, but still he had doubts. The pros and cons of working in a government office away from a major city versus being a game developer were so extreme that there was no way he could compare the two.

As a result, he worked each day from nine to five at a city government office. When not in the office, he wore his game developer face, which is how he had gotten to where he was now.

One of his co-workers regarded his life choices in a positive light.

This friend judged that performing his steady job for most of the day was somehow connected to his expression of sensitivity because of the delusions that were accumulated, and that this was training.

Akanemaru@Nukenin thought so himself.

This was because he had realized he did a better job when he transferred the demon that was never satisfied to his brush. He was also feeling his way for how to live his life from this point on, making him more sensitive to the voices of his fans than other charismatic painters.

Then a minievent began, a service for extreme fans in which Akanemaru@Nukenin drew the lead characters in his own hand on the outside of the box of the brand-new games that had been sold.

Customers were beside themselves with excitement. Voices that were hardly voices at all slipped out.

“Whoa.”

“Wow . . .”

“Umph . . .”

Akanemaru@Nukenin merely drew silently on the outside of the boxes, not performing any extra services like shaking hands or schmoozing with fans. He and they might be on opposite sides of the situation, but all involved were extremely shy. Still, a fair amount of communication took place.

This event occurred spontaneously, unforeseen by any of the people present, including the painter. Perhaps the painter wanted to share the overwhelming joy of the moment when the software he crafted was put on sale to the fans who loved it, or maybe he wanted to have direct contact and share his feelings of gratitude with the customers who had taken the time and trouble to line up to purchase the software.

Finally, it was Kuchiki's turn. "Th-thank you very much. I'm so moved. Heee—!" said Kuchiki in a furor of excitement.

"Oh, th-thanks. Which character would you like?"

"The hero's rival, Momiji, please. And the date, and 'To Kuchii' written in katakana with a heart mark, please. 'Kuchii' is me, Manabu Kuchiki. Oh, thank you. I'm so excited." Kuchiki's behavior and gestures themselves were strange, but he managed to convey to the painter everything that was important.

The fans gyrated wildly, the shop was filled with enthusiasm, and the scene was enveloped in a festive mood. The enthusiasm spread to customers who had come to the shop for other reasons, and people vied with one another to buy copies of the software. This resulted in the game's selling in unprecedented numbers, selling out on its first day, even though it was unusual for a *doujin* game to do so.

Unerring guidance from the shop staff meant that this surprise event went smoothly. The fans dying to buy the software, the painter, and the clerks all wore big smiles.

It was true some places in the world were being torn apart by war. Bombs might fall from the sky, suicide bombers might strike, but this place overflowed with love and peace.

Kuchiki gazed at the illustrator as if he could lick him all over. The acrid smell of the oil-based pen filled his nasal cavity and knocked around in the back of his head, making him feel slightly drunk. He was unable to repress the great joy welling up inside him. Then he heard the sound of drips coming from his melting brain. He lost it.

"Kuchii, you've been so happy since morning that it's suddenly going to drive you into reckless mode!" The *otaku* who lost it suddenly took the form of a shopping monster. Nothing was too extravagant; cost was irrelevant.

He would own all that his heart so madly desired. Cash was compensation, merely a means to buy what he wanted. If he had no more of it, it was of no concern to him.

Anything else was short-minded money management, the act of a coarse miser with nothing to call his own.

He would buy two, maybe three, little models of *bishoujo* at a set price if he wanted to, even if the price was a bit steep. This was an elegant purchase. Now that he was high, he had a sense of how to use money. Nothing could stop him.

After he had purchased three of the same charming *bishoujo* figures with movable joints and wearing semitransparent clothes—one to admire, one to archive, and one to play with—Kuchiki's Akihabara excursion began.

Kuchiki cruised quickly through the used-game stores and anime DVD shops and took a short break at his favorite maid café.

As he passed, he saw that one of his favorite cosplay restaurants was having a sexy costume special "Our Girls Can Do It If They Try" day. He stood at the counter slurping several cups of coffee. The waitresses, who usually dressed all cute, served customers while dressed in real bondage outfits.

This got Kuchiki's libido going, which prompted him to hunt for a shop that sold *doujinshi*.

This accounted for his bag's being full to the point of bursting.

Around two P.M., he ate an Akihabara specialty, canned *oden* and canned ramen, from vending machines while sitting on a park bench.*

The noodles in the vending machine ramen were made from *konnyaku*.† This was because regular ramen noodles would get soggy inside the can. This was a brilliant concept. This was reverse engineering. They had formulated ramen by faking the noodles, the main ingredient. A little post-modernism from the food industry.

But did you really need to go so far as to hermetically seal it inside a can? This criticism came up from time to time. If consummate Akihabara residents were asked this question, most would answer "yes" with pride.

They wanted to possess everything beloved that existed

* *sitting on a park bench* Normally, only beggars eat outside.

† *konnyaku* A solidified jelly processed from the plant called "devil's tongue." *Konnyaku* noodles are a little chewier than wheat noodles and reportedly contain fewer calories than they require to chew and digest, making them a diet food darling of girls all over Japan.

in the world, not just with food but even the microcosm of the can. Because they had that maddening desire.

But Kuchiki ate up the canned ramen and canned *oden* with such gusto it was clear he had no time for thoughts such as these.

After that, Kuchiki went to an import PC game store to check up on the latest Western games and then to a CD shop to buy a voice talent's CD in order to get a ticket to a handshake event. For buying two CDs, you could get a photo taken with the voice talent, but Kuchiki still did not know that particular voice talent very well, so for now he settled on buying just the one CD to qualify for the handshake event.

In the plaza in front of the station, he listened attentively to the singing of an idol who had some *moe*. Rather taken with her, he took a photo of her with his compact digital camera.

Taking a leisurely look around, he discovered a girl dressed as a maid passing out flyers. She definitely had *moe*. He pointed his single-lens reflex camera. "Photo, please."

She turned as if dancing classical Japanese dance, placing the palms of her hands over her eyes to conceal them.

This was a sign that if he didn't take a picture of her face, he was welcome to photograph her. This pose was an exact copy of the one in flyers liberally pasted on the phone booths of yore, advertising sex establishments both legal and illegal. That this pose was the same was probably just chance. But if the pose was an exact copy, could it really be considered "just chance"?

Kuchiki pondered this absentmindedly but cast his thoughts aside as he gathered sensitivity in his pointer finger to press the shutter. It was not as if he were a theoretical *otaku*.

Akihabara on Sunday. Kuchiki worked hard and bought hard. As he was very tired, he went to a spot off the beaten path to a beef bowl restaurant, where he ordered a beef bowl with extra sauce.

He had never been frugal with his hobby, and his infrastructure for life's necessities such as clothing and food was simple; his money sense as an *otaku* had not changed in a long time.

After he finished the beef bowl, Kuchiki ordered the Ikenami Shotaro* *yoroshiku*, snacking on the all-you-can-eat *beni shoga*.† Sipping tea, he carefully checked off his successes of the day one by one. When the *beni shoga* pot was empty, he requested a refill.

Immersed as he was in his process of checking, he hadn't noticed that it was now late at night. He'd probably been in the restaurant for four or five hours.

Normally, it's awkward to stay for any length of time in a beef bowl restaurant, nor was this restaurant designed for long stays, but Kuchiki was oblivious.

"Well, it seems as if it is time for me to return home.‡ It would be easy to let the last train slip by and spend time in an Internet café. I, Kuchii, may not seem like it, but I very much like cleanliness ♪." He stood up and started for the station.

On the way there, Kuchiki realized he had completely

* *Ikenami Shotaro* A writer famous for going to soba shops and eating all the ginger and drinking tea.

† *beni shoga* Red ginger used as a garnish to spice food. Yummy but salty and spicy. Eating it straight would make you thirsty.

‡ *time for me to return home* He deliberately takes a highfalutin tone here.

forgotten about his promise to Kanji Sasahara, his *senpai** in the Genshiken. "Kya! Kuchiki, you were so wrapped up in your own affairs that you forgot your promise to your *senpai*. *Senpai*, I'm sorry! I'm sorry, *senpai*! Please forgive me!"

He picked up his pace on his journey to the station. As he did so, someone emerged from an alley and called out to him.

"Hey. Hey, bro, I have it."

"Huh?" He wasn't that far away, but it seemed to float out of the darkness. The voice was that of a young woman.

Kuchiki strained his eyes. The back of his neck prickled. Maybe she was wearing black clothing and had long black hair. She was probably one of those maids he'd seen earlier. His eyes got used to the darkness, or she had drawn closer, because gradually he was able to make out her silhouette, but he couldn't see her face.

It looked as if a hood covered her head. Her shoes made tapping sounds on the pavement as she drew up beside Kuchiki. He saw that her scarf was red. Humph, was this cosplay from "The Little Match Girl"?

"I have it."

"I don't know what you mean. . . . I am terribly sorry. What is 'it'?" He thought this might be a hard sell for a variation of what he'd been up to earlier at the cosplay café. One that included physical violence. Kuchiki took a step backward.

Watching her warily, Kuchiki recalled a silk-screen picture he'd bought at a bustling circus that he'd put in storage in his room and not looked at since. Hadn't the beautiful girl who sold it to him said it was by a world-famous artist? He'd forgotten who, though.

* *senpai* One's elder in a group, who has more experience in any given activity.

It had taken three years to pay off the loan, and the interest was still getting him.

It was terrifying to recall. Remembering the poster and the limited-edition anime boxed sets that he had not been able to buy because he'd fallen into debt hell made his pillow wet even now.

"You got caught up in the romantic mood that the sales-girl created, right? It's just typical date commerce. She was trading on getting your hopes up. To be taken in by a flesh-and-blood woman's charms means, Kuchiki, that you're still a novice. Well, it happens. All you can do is chalk one up to paying your dues for evolving into an *otaku*, ha-ha-ha," Harunobu Madarame, president of the Genshiken, had said, dismissing it. But Kuchiki still could not get rid of the feeling that the girl had been interested in him. If she hadn't, then would she have stood so close to him like that and let him take peeks down her cleavage?

Maybe he was fooling himself, but Kuchiki always had high hopes for girls even though he was always disappointed, but perhaps this could be said to be the nature of *otakus*.

Since then, Kuchiki had been cautious about dealings at the side of the road. Even so, there was no way to protect against this kind of sneak attack.

■ Urban Legend

"I have it," the girl in the red scarf kept repeating in exactly the same tone of voice.

"But I have no idea what . . . I am sorry. Oh! By 'it,' you mean *that*? *That* thing?" Something came to Kuchiki's mind.

"Uh, do you mean Kyo-Kyo-Kyo-Kyodai ★ Kenka?"

"I have it." He didn't put much store in any of those

urban legends, but they *could* happen. What his *senpai* had told him was true.

All at once, Kuchiki's barriers against high-pressure sales came crashing down, and curiosity took their place.

It was said that Kyodai ★ Kenka was a novel game that had been created by an anonymous *doujin* club. This game was a big topic on the Internet. There was absolutely no final and conclusive information, but in the meantime, it was one of the highest-profile games around.

Because there was so much noise mixed in with information on the Net, you never knew how much of it was true, but you gathered it all and made your own judgment.

This game seemed to be related to some crazy little-sister murder. There was information only people who were directly involved knew, and there was also a relationship to the creators. . . .

That video of the murder happening—in other words, a snuff film—had been recorded, and if you cleared all the scenarios, the encryption would be released and then you could view it, or you couldn't view it. . . .

And once you opened up this game software, a terrible virus planted in it would erase it off your hard drive in three days, so even now there was no proof that it actually existed.

Now for an introduction to the incident on which Kyodai ★ Kenka was modeled.

However, the people who have found a relationship between Kyodai ★ Kenka and this incident are mostly the

people on the Internet who like rumors. The anonymous *doujin* club that created this game has publicly announced that “this is entirely a work of fiction. There is no relationship between this game and any individuals or groups.

“In addition, gossiping about the connection to this event is repugnant. It is a fact that information collected exclusively by this club for this work was taken out of circulation afterward.”

The game went on sale almost the same day as the murder. Therefore, if one thinks about it rationally, it must be an indisputable fact that there could be no connection between the game and the murder. There was no time for a snuff film to have been included in the manufacturing process.

Still, one occasionally hears that dousing a burning rumor with cold water will spread the flames. This example fit the pattern. You could say that this work was burdened with a sad fate.

There were also gamers who insisted that the scandal had nothing to do with the game, that as a pure work of art, this was magnificent. Every conceivable little-sister pattern from the sister-love genre was included, and on top of that, the situations were infinite. In some people's estimation, it was even the perfect game, with scenarios to make you burst out laughing and kill scenarios that could make you bawl like a baby.

Now that the game had vanished from the market, the number of people who could not verify any of this had gone up dramatically. Whenever anyone blogged about Kyodai ★ Kenka, so many people would hit the blog immediately to criticize the posts for being made up, or for being arrogant

because they owned the game, that the site would immediately crash.

■ Summary of the Incident

The incident took place on a residential street in a suburb in the Kanto region.* It was a murder done by a member of the immediate family.

The perpetrator was the older brother, the victim, the younger sister. Both were young people with futures.

The scene was a family of four: a mother, a father, son, and a daughter. There were two buildings on one lot. One was an obstetrics clinic that had been there for generations. On the other half of the land was the private home used by the family. The father was an obstetrician, the mother a midwife.

The murder took place at the clinic while the mother and father were away at an academic conference.

The perpetrator was a twenty-two-year-old student who had failed his college entrance exams.† He had hoped to become the obstetrician who would take over the clinic when the time came.

The murder victim was his nineteen-year-old sister, who was in her last month of pregnancy. She was unmarried, the father of the child unknown.

It has yet to be revealed whether there was some type of dispute between the siblings or what kind of psychological process led to the slaughter. After the brother had murdered

* *Kanto region* Encompasses greater metropolitan Tokyo, Saitama, Ibaraki, Chiba, and Kanagawa.

† *entrance exams* Medical university entrance exams begin at age eighteen and are given only once a year, so this guy had failed four times.

his sister, he cut her up and discarded the parts in a nearby forest park in an effort to hide the crime. The first part of the body was discovered by an elderly man who was taking a walk in the early morning. Crows were pecking at the purple skin. Members of the crime investigation team gathered up the other body parts. The corpse was not seen by the public. From things they confiscated, the police ascertained that the brother had set up surveillance cameras inside the house to meticulously record his sister in different situations around the house.

It was this fact that gave rise to the rumor of the existence of videos of the moment of the murder and of the dissection of the corpse.

■ Kuchiki Disappears

"It's for you." The girl wearing the red scarf walked up to Kuchiki and held out something disc-shaped.

Kuchiki thought he would see what the red-scarfed girl looked like, but his eyes were glued on what she held out.

The disc-shaped object was a bare DVD-ROM. There were words written by hand on the surface, but it was dark and he couldn't read them.

Kuchiki took the DVD without hesitation, as if hypnotized.

After that, Kuchiki couldn't remember where he walked. He arrived back at his apartment in a stupor.

Reality was unclear, as if he were dreaming. But it wasn't a dream. The DVD-ROM he had was proof. Kuchiki booted

up his computer and put in the disc. A destructive virus popped up as soon as he did so, but this was after the DVD had mounted. Installation took place automatically. Then the program started up.

The display went dark. Kuchiki's own face was reflected back at him as he peered into the darkened monitor.

The computer began to read the data recorded on the disc. He could hear whirring and squeaking sounds. Just as he was starting to think it sounded like a woman sobbing, there appeared a brilliant title screen: a sign in pastel colors like you'd see on an arcade game. The lettering was rounded and cute. A little-sister character popped up on the screen, faced Kuchiki, and said, "Hey, older brother,* what do you dream?"

At being addressed as "older brother," Kuchiki, who had been absentmindedly watching the screen, gave an involuntary start. This was because rather than being part of the title production, the little sister's line sounded like a real question directed at Manabu Kuchiki.

"Dreams? You mean, mine . . . ?" As he was forming the answer in his head, he suddenly felt his vision blur.

He thought for a second that in his rush around Akihabara, he might have caught a cold, but a cold was not what it felt like.

His vision hampered by the blurring, from the edge of consciousness, he felt that someone had grabbed him and was pulling him toward the display.

Before he had time to mutter *What the hell is going on?* his entire body went limp.

* *older brother* This form of address is the same whether directed to a blood relative or to an older, unrelated boy, so the question would not strike Kuchiki as unusual.



In the next instant, he felt cool hands touch his back.
The hands were very small.

The small hands pushed him hard.

Kuchiki pitched forward at an extreme angle, hitting his
head hard on the display.

The impact made Kuchiki lose consciousness.

No one saw Manabu Kuchiki after that.



2

...

THE NEW CHAIRMAN
OF THE
ON-CAMPUS CLUB
ORGANIZATION
COMMITTEE
APPEARS!

Unngh. This is uncomfortable. It's like I'm not human anymore. I feel hairy all over. If I feel like this, am I a monkey? I look in the water to see my reflection, and a monkey is what I am.

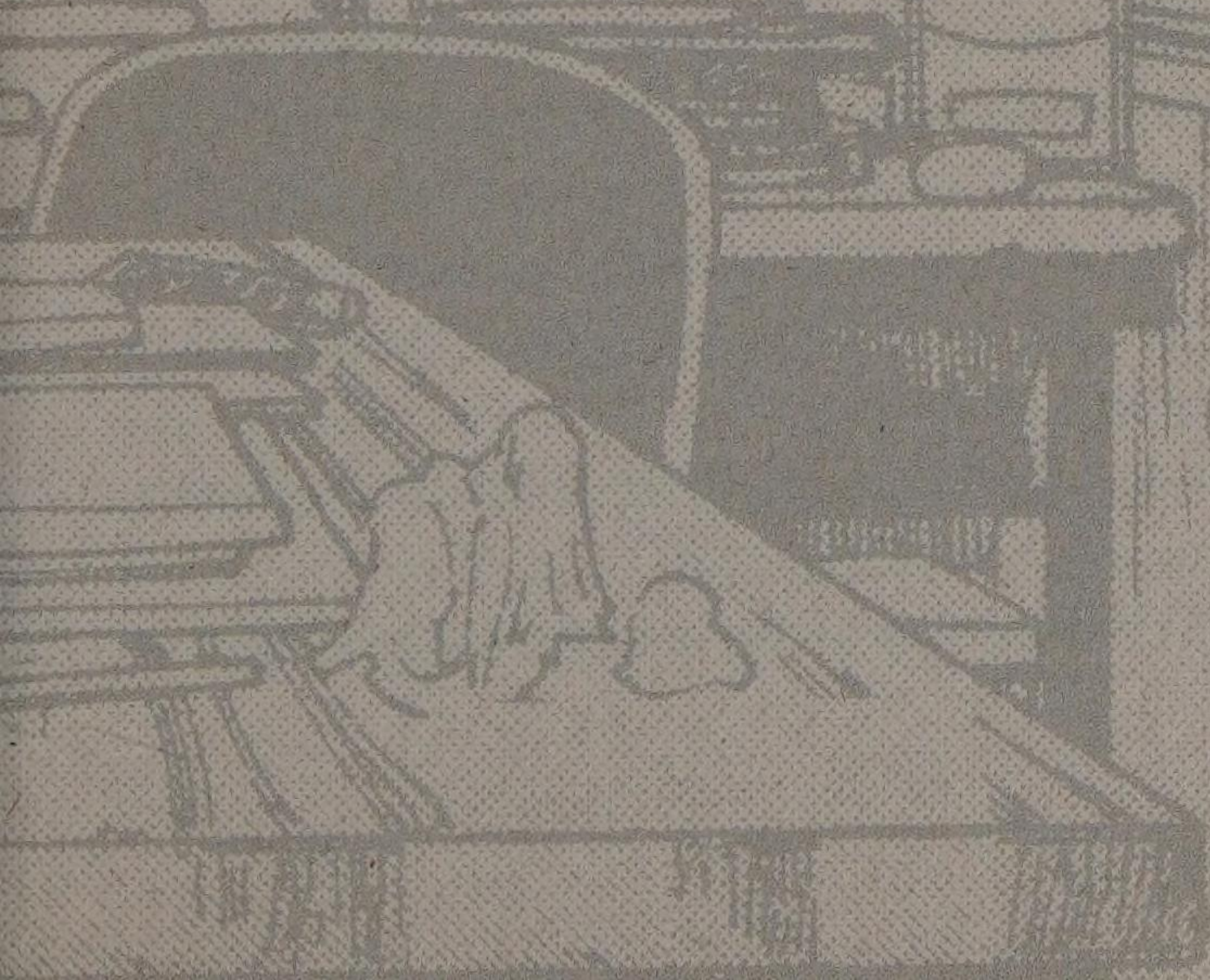
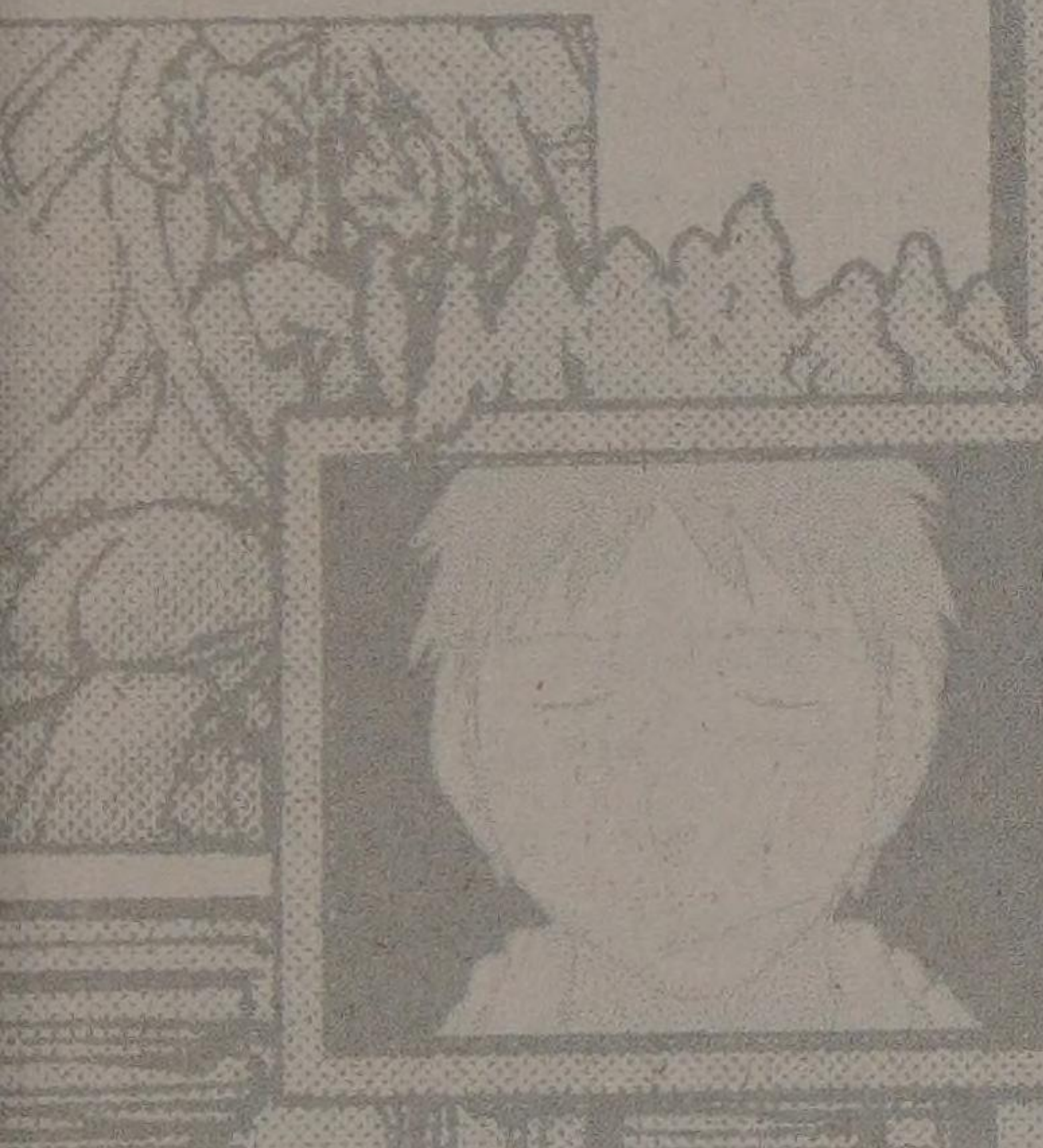
If this is a monkey exhibit at the zoo, I must be down at the bottom of the hierarchy. I am really not prepared. Even though I fought really hard, I don't want to go up very much.

Be that as it may, even for monkeys, life is hard. Reality is hard, that's why we need delusions, but there's no one I can take that up with.

I don't have the right to do that with the zoo director, my keepers, or the zoo visitors.

There's a young monkey that doesn't have a protector. A girl. I'll give her this banana. It's a little green, though. You must be hungry.

Okay, I'm tired of this place. Time to go. I'll say good-bye to my monkey self, make like a banana, and split.



■ Ranto Hairu Likes Milk

Kamakura. A gigantic building soared above the sea at Shonan. It was an overbearing building and did not at all fit in with the surrounding scenery.

Because its excessive height detracted from the beauty around it, and because of the general contempt for the “upstarts,” the building was scornfully referred to as the “Smokestack Building” by the area’s residents.

This building was held by Highland Company, the IT affiliate of the Hairu *zaibatsu*.^{*} Its official name was the Highland Building. The Hairu conglomerate was the last of the *zaibatsu* to form in Japan, making its fortune from the sudden increase in demand for semiconductors that was driven by the demand for office automation.

Highland Company, the parent body of this *zaibatsu*, had grown quickly in a short span of a little over ten years. However, it was not generally known what made up most of its business.

It was said that it engaged in business practices that the Japanese business world was unaccustomed to, shady methods that included jacking up stock prices through various capital fund plans, management, and hostile takeovers.

In any event, by forcefully subduing many citizens’ campaigns and through sabotage, this radical company had succeeded in doing something as lacking in common sense as constructing its own gigantic building on a site that was a place of tradition and status.

In contrast to how the people in the area felt, the Smoke-

^{*} *zaibatsu* A chain of related companies that, in this case, are all family-run.

stack Building embodied the momentum of the surging wave aspect of Highland Company.

At the same time the Highland Building was completed, it was announced that after studying economics at Harvard University, Ranto Hairu, heir apparent to the Hairu *zai-batsu*, would return to Japan.

Soon after returning to Japan, Ranto took over as president of Highland Company—at the tender age of twenty-two.

The upper area of the Highland Building was residential. This is where the Hairu family lived. The entire top floor was a supermarket, but other than Hairu, admittance was limited to Highland's top executives.

Because all four walls of the supermarket were transparent glass windows, one could see out over all of Kamakura. There was a sweeping view of the Shonan coast, including scenic and historical sites such as the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu shrine, the Great Buddha, and Genjiyama, and, depending on the weather, the summit of the greatest peak in Japan itself, Mount Fuji.

The morning sun began its leisurely rise at six A.M.

The morning glow stained the sky. Then light reflected off the ocean. For one miraculous instant, the world shone gold.

Ranto Hairu liked to greet the morning while undergoing his bath treatment.

Night had ended; morning had arrived.

By assimilating this natural dynamic rhythm, tremendous energy penetrated his body and heightened his sensitivities.

His firm, beautiful body without an ounce of excess flesh, a body that evoked a Greek statue of Ares, was purified by three women. All three women were beautiful.

The three women wore only thin singlets that, when wet, showed everything in relief. A form more captivating than nudity.

A normal young man in this situation would feel sexual excitement, but Hairu's nether parts showed no hint of such a transformation.

Whether this was due to force of will or a problem with his constitution was unknown.

Bathed as they were in gold light, the beautiful naked young man bathing with his three half-naked women attendants evoked a solemn air reminiscent of a religious image.

A chime rang.

"Open connection." Hairu made a sign with his finger. The TV phone circuit connected.

Steam poured out from the ceiling. A screen appeared in midair for the image to be projected on.

"Well, Ranto-h. You seem in high spirits this morning. Also, naked."

"Good morning, Most Honored Elder."* The person called "Most Honored Elder" appearing on the TV phone was a fat old monster who would remind one of Rasputin.

This was Sakunosuke Hairu, founder of the Hairu *zai-batsu*, who, based on the wealth he had built, had earned the nickname the Heisei[†] Child Tycoon. He had now entered the Buddhist priesthood in order to find rest for his soul and referred to himself as the monk Kaimon. However, this was merely a nice name for someone greedy who wanted it all. This was evidenced by the way his long fingers toyed

* *Most Honored Elder* The term Ranto and Anna use to refer to Sakunosuke is actually closer to Honorable Old Man.

[†] *Heisei* Name of the current era in Japan.

with the nape of the neck of the female secretary seated beside him.

He was supposed to be semiretired but was still the actual leader, who functioned as the nerve center of the *zaibatsu*.

"When did you get back to Japan?"

"About one month ago, sir."

"Was it wrong for me to call for you so suddenly?"

"No, I had absorbed all I could in their country."

"I see. I thought it was time for you to begin your training as the heir apparent to take over the Hairu *zaibatsu*. Something aside from business, which is going well."

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"I have prepared a toy for you. I want you to play with it. It's nothing particularly difficult. Begin today without delay, because today is an auspicious day."

"Yes, sir."

"My name means something there, so I took care of things with the people upstairs. Whatever you do, don't cause problems."

"Thank you for your consideration, sir."

"Ranto-h, I wonder how the Land of the Rising Sun will survive at this rate. Foolish politicians. Worthless government officials who act only for their own self-interests. Patriots in name only. You young people who will shoulder the future are surely disgusted, but you must not worry. You know what you have to do. I will not tell you it can be done in a short space of time. Before my name joins the list of the dead, please clear the way."

"I understand. I will try to be worthy of your faith in me."

"Carry on. Now, also eat a good breakfast with meat and vegetables and carbohydrates. And milk." The Most Hon-

ored Elder tried to continue speaking as he coughed violently, but the connection was suddenly broken.

"The Most Honored Elder is as abrupt as ever." Hairu smiled faintly. He looked down contemptuously at the view below as he gave his wet body over to the women.

He was bewildered at being back in Japan after fifteen years away. Japan had changed so much in just a short time into a childish country that knew no shame, where even in public, adults were engrossed in activities suitable for elementary school. The way in which Akihabara, which used to be Electric Town, had changed was particularly terrible. . . . Why was it that the streets were plastered with pictures from comics?

Japan had seemed strange to Hairu while he'd been away, but he'd believed this was due to the way information was manipulated. However, when he arrived back in Japan, he had found this was not the case. Japan had not achieved the stature of a nation in the international community.

"Ranto-sama, may we wash your back now?" asked one of the women helping Ranto with his bath.

"My battle begins today!"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Oh, nothing. Go ahead." Hairu stood up slowly.

On the orders of the Most Honored Elder, he was to begin attending a university in Japan starting today. His younger sister, Anna, knew the plan's details.

The waiting women dried Hairu off and draped on his robe. Hairu headed toward the dining room. His sister was sitting in the dining room when he arrived. A waiter pulled out Hairu's chair for him.

"Good morning, Elder Brother."*

"Good morning, Anna. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I did. Did you have any frightening dreams?"

Hairu did not answer this question.

"Well, time for breakfast. As is the custom of our family, let's eat well at a leisurely pace."

Together the two of them said, "*Itadakimasu*,"† and began to eat breakfast.

"You heard my telephone call from the Most Honored Elder. What is my 'toy' this time?"

"It's a private college called Shiiou University, in the Tama hills. It's about twenty minutes from here.‡ By helicopter."

As the Most Honored Elder had instructed, the breakfast menu for the Hairu family consisted of sirloin steak and salad. Bread and also rice. And fresh milk, brought straight from the farm unpasteurized and without additives.

They ate a good breakfast. This was one custom with which they had been strictly charged by the Most Honored Elder.

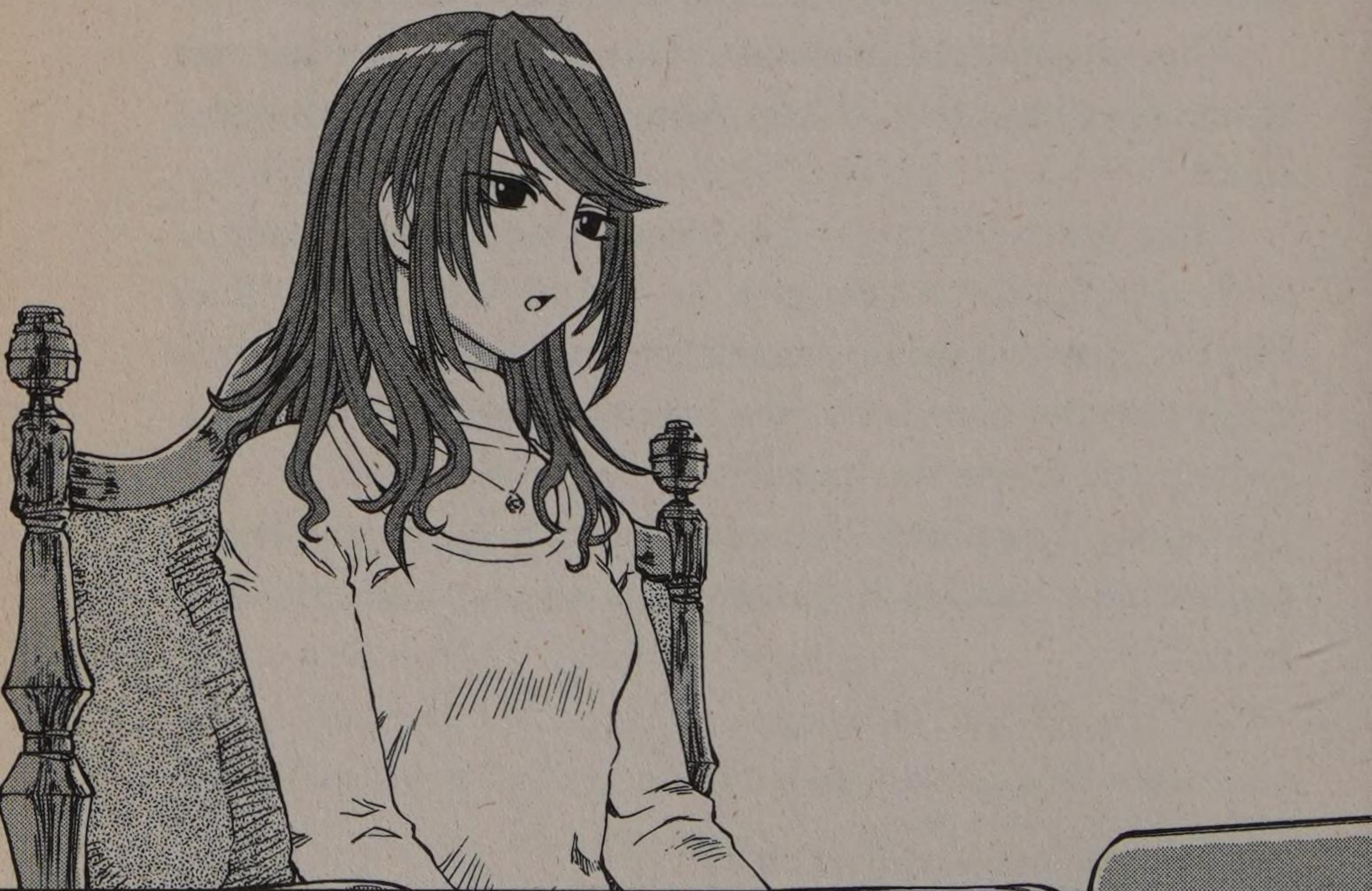
"Starting today, you will begin managing the on-campus club organization committee at Shiiou University, Elder Brother. You will make yourself the president. You will soon enter into the contest to take over the *zaibatsu*. I will work to help you in any way possible, Elder Brother."

"Good. I was planning to ask for your help, Anna. Thank you." Hairu handed his empty cup to the waiter. "More milk!"

* Elder Brother Anna addresses him as *Onii-sama*, a very polite form of address, instead of with the usual *Onii-san*.

† *Itadakimasu* Said before beginning any meal.

‡ *twenty minutes from here* Longer by train, which is how most people commute.



Soon after that, a helicopter landed on the heliport of the Highland Building. Ranto Hairu sat in the rear seat with his arms crossed. He wore a white student uniform with a stand-up collar.*

Anna sat beside him. As might be expected of Ranto Hairu's younger sister, her features were refined, and her eyes, which had a tendency to be downcast, betrayed a tinge of sadness.

■ The New Chairman of the “On-Campus Club Organization Committee Strategy” Meeting

It might have a Tokyo address, but the campus of Shiiou University was nestled in the rolling hills where the hustle and bustle of the city suddenly changed to peaceful scenery.

There was a club at this university called the Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture, or Genshiken for short, where they intensely studied general subculture, including anime, comics, and games.

“It's time for the ‘twenty-fourth voluntary resignation of the previous chairman of the on-campus club organization committee and the incorporation of the new chairman trends and strategy’ meeting,” Harunobu Madarame, current president of the Genshiken, announced loudly in the Genshiken room.

Including Madarame, this meeting had five attendees:

* *student uniform* These are usually black. Hairu probably looks like a Japanese Navy man in dress uniform.

Kanji Sasahara, Makoto Kousaka, Saki Kasukabe, and Kuchiki. Other members entered and left during the meeting. Well, really they were just having a conversation.

Madarame got the ball rolling. "But, boy, what a shock. Can you believe that the chairman of the committee would get Vice-Chairman Kitagawa pregnant and they would get married?!"

"Why, yes, that hot news was dug up by me," said Kuchiki. "I staked out the wedding site to make sure and even watched them cut the cake. Kitagawa-san looked beautiful in her wedding dress."

"Normally, you wouldn't stake things out, would you . . . ? Oh! Don't tell me. You didn't have feelings for her, did you, Kuchiki-kun?"

"Wh-wh-wh-what do you mean, Sasahara-san? The chairman is more my . . . No, don't make me say it. I, Kuchii, am going to watch what I say!"

"To be accurate about it, he's the past chairman. The new chairman's already been chosen," Kousaka accurately pointed out. Having transcended being an *otaku*, Kousaka was a super-*otaku*, deeper into *otaku* stuff than anyone else. All the same, he had handsome features, a neat personal appearance, and an elegant sense of style. But none of this put anyone off. This was most likely because he was gentle, cheerful, and possessed a pleasant personality. He was an easygoing guy liked by all.

"But the former chairman's amazing. I mean, he's providing for two and working while he's going to school. He's, how should I put it, forthright? Honest? I really get the feeling he's ready and determined to be a productive member of society." This was from Sasahara. He was a new *otaku* who had made his debut in college, but it was more as if his tastes

had emerged in these surroundings. He was not very enthusiastic about the Genshiken being all talk and no action.

"Oh, come on, Sasahara. You'd be ready too, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think my version of ready and the former chairman's version of ready are a little different. . . ."

"Hey, Sa. Sa. Ha. Ra. You still feeling a little timid about living the *otaku* life? In that respect, Kousaka is *really* amazing."

When Madarame turned toward Kousaka, Saki Kasukabe had snuggled up to him and gone to sleep. Kasukabe was Kousaka's girlfriend. She had no *otaku* tastes whatsoever. However, she came to the club room more often than any other member just to be with her boyfriend.

"Vice Chairman Kitagawa criticized us a lot, but in the end she finally let things slide, didn't she?"

"Mmm, Kousaka, did you know I shed my pride to help with that?"

"Huh? You did, Saki-chan?"

"Oh, Kasukabe's awake. You took your clothes off?"*

"Ack! Of course I didn't. It's just a figure of speech!"

One round of Kasukabe's special "Saki punch" right hook came out of nowhere. *Ker-wham!*

"It's true. Saki-san saved us from falling victim to Kitagawa-san's evil designs." This was from Kanako Ohno, who had come into the room in the middle of the conversation. She always seemed to pick up on things right away. Her hobby was cosplay, and she often dressed up for the school festival. She had many fans.

"Saki-san found out something embarrassing about Kita-

* *took your clothes off* Actually a pun about going to bat for someone.

gawa and used that to get her off our backs. But in the end, that was actually what led to the former chairman's confession of love to her. . . ."

"Whoa, I never knew that. Hope it's not too late to say thank you, Kasukabe-san," Sasahara said.

"So Miss Kasukabe* played Cupid. Didn't mean to do that, did you? Oh no, it's wonderful. You won. Wonderful! You were natural-born enemies."

Kukichi's outbursts like this were usually ignored.

"You were the Cupid of love, Kasukabe-san?"

"You have a problem with that, Madarame?"

"Oh, no. No! No problem, but . . . Cupid is a baby with a bow and arrow, who shows his behind and has bird feathers on his back. Ah, might be great. Kasukabe-san's Cupid. Would be great. You want to try dressing up like that? What do you think, Ohno?"

"Great idea! Let's do it, Saki-san!"

"No way." Another fist headed for Madarame's face. This time it was a straight left. *Ker-wham!*

Kousaka put his hand on Kasukabe's back and thumped lightly. "There, there, Saki-san. Calm down."

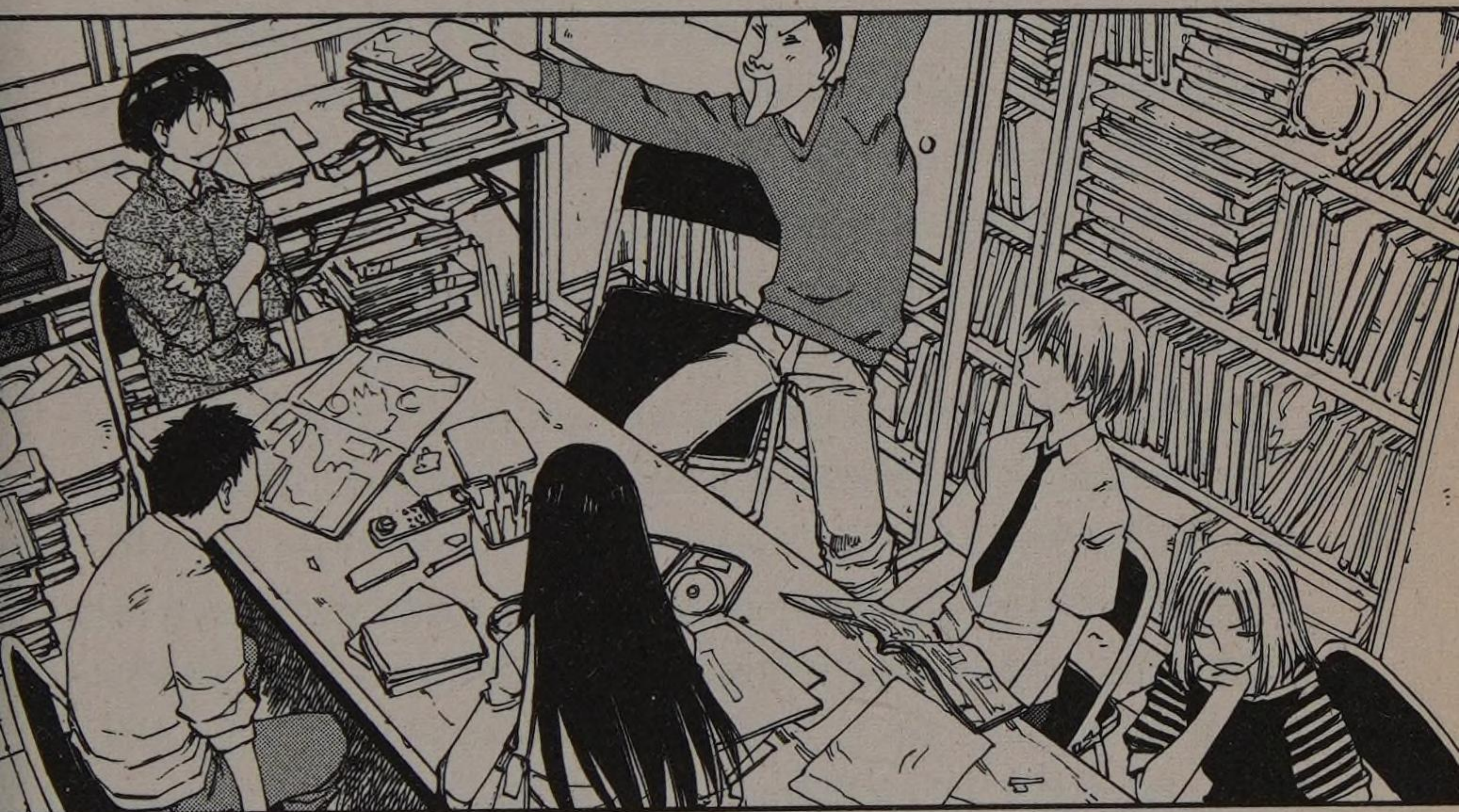
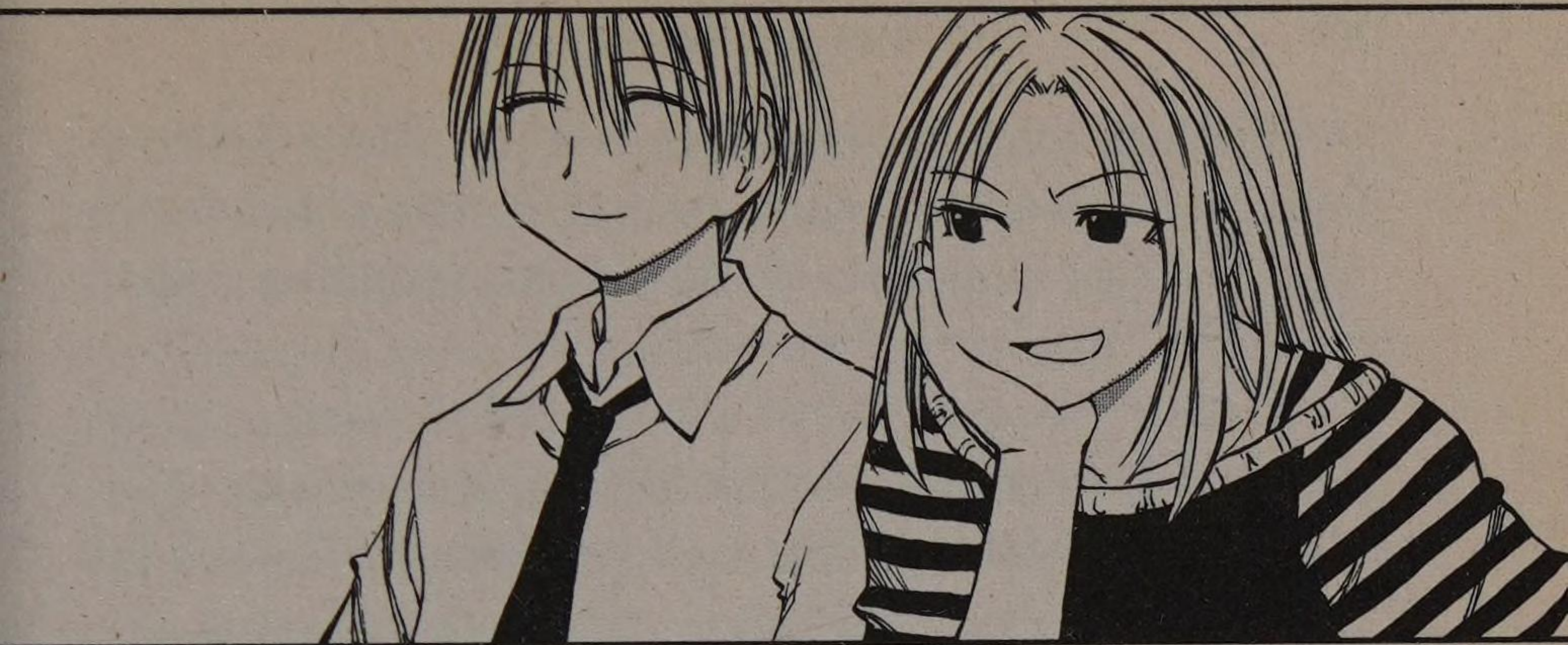
Kasukabe took a deep breath to calm herself. Kousaka was the only one who could get her to calm down once she got going.

"Let's get back to what we were talking about. Where were we? What kind of meeting were we having?"

"Madarame, are you an *otaku* and stupid? You're beyond help."

"You're out of line, Saki-chan."

* Miss Kasukabe The speaker uses a special term of respect here that is a highfalutin word for *lady*. "Miss" is a standard translation.



“Well, okay, let’s move away from the issue of the twenty-fourth new on-campus club organization committee to the issue of taking money out of the budget to purchase a high-spec PC. This is a meeting, right?”

“Genius, Sasahara. What a wonderful secretary you are. This is called a small show of leadership from our next president, Kanji Sasahara. That is, if Kasukabe-san doesn’t get riled up.”

“He’s not after the president’s seat, and that’s not what meeting this is, Sasa-yan! It’s the ‘twenty-fourth voluntary resignation of the previous chairman of the on-campus club organization committee and the incorporation of the new chairman trends and strategy’ meeting!”

“Wow, Saki-chan. Just wow.” Kousaka stroked Kasukabe’s head.

The verbal give-and-take between Madarame and Sasahara served only to deepen Kousaka and Kasukabe’s feelings for each other.

Perhaps this was one of the reasons Kasukabe came to the Genshiken room every day even though she filled the air with abuse.

“I hear the new chairman is the heir apparent to some *zaibatsu*. Must be nice to be the son of that kind of family.”

“It’s like a manga character but real, and at the same school as us. Lucky!”

Ohno had lived in America most of her life, making her pronunciation of *lucky* quite good. Whenever Ohno used her *r*’s and *l*’s, Madarame longed for her fluency. There weren’t many clubs outside of Japan that studied *otaku* culture, but lack of language skills was a big barrier when he played multiplayer games online. Madarame always wished he could speak English at such times.

"Normally, there'd be some kind of selection process, but I heard this time there was only one candidate, so he just took over with no election."

"You sure know a lot about it, Ohno-san. All I ever do is watch anime on TV. . . ."

"No, Sasahara-san, this isn't the election of a foreign chairman. It's campus news. It's on the bulletin boards. Did you know, Madarame-san, about that guy?"

"No, not a bit. Should I go on behalf of the Genshiken and introduce myself? Can't believe there was no election. But he's the son of some big *zaibatsu* family? He's really rich. High-def plasma would be nice. I want him to give us a bunch of the on-campus club organization committee money."

"I hear he's really cute. The girls are all excited. The rumors have been flying since this morning."

"Can't be. There isn't anyone hotter than Kousaka anywhere. . . . But . . . I still would kinda like to see this guy, though. Well, in any case, Madarame's not going to be tactful when he goes to introduce himself, and that would affect what our club gets. I'd better be the one to do it. 'Kay, bye, Kousaka. I'm having dinner with friends tonight. See you tomorrow."

After Kasukabe left the room, the atmosphere in the room became a little less tense. For whatever reason.

"Well, I have to go. I have a lesson."

"What lesson? You're already fluent in English."

"No, a different kind of lesson . . . Like a dance lesson."

"Mm? Dance? Hey, wait, does it have to do with your next cosplay character?"

"Yes, it does. I needed to know more than just a little. Also, I hate it when the costume constricts my waist, so I've taken up running."

"Which means Tanaka's making your next costume. He's intense when it comes to costumes. He gives priority to the silhouette of the costume, and the model has to adjust to it. He patiently works in the shadow of all those gorgeous, gorgeous 'layers.* Wow, I am deeply moved."

"Madarame-san, no one says that anymore."

"Good-bye, everyone!" Ohno followed Kasukabe out, leaving the four boys in the room. The meeting continued.

"Y'know, Kasukabe-san doesn't see it, but I think she really acts a lot like an *otaku*. She has a weakness for good-looking guys. It's like 'Saki Kasukabe, handsome-man hunter, calling!' or something."

"Ah-ha-ha. Whatever you say, she's now one of our main members."

"Handsome-man hunter. You mean she hunts them, handsome men. Frightening! Kuchii feels like there's going to be a crisis. Oh no. Maybe I should learn karate. A correspondence course. Duh-huh, duh-huh."

"How 'bout it, Kousaka? The opponent is the son of a prominent family? Plasma? High-def? Blu-ray?"

Kousaka smiled and said nothing.

"Mm? What's up, Sasahara?" Madarame noticed that Sasahara was flipping the pages in the memo pad in his hand.

"Um, there's something I was wondering about. The other day I got a call from a friend back home. Oh! He's an *otaku*, of course. He wants to know if you can buy the game *Kyodai ★ Kenka* in Akihabara. He says rumors about this game are all over the Net, but I don't even know what he's talking about."

* 'layers Short for *cosplayers*, as the authors explained during Ohno and Tanaka's visit to Nippori.

"I will be going to Akihabara tomorrow. After I buy the software I reserved, I'll have some time, so I will look for it. 'Kyodai ★ Kenka,' right? Where is my notepad? If I find the game, give me a present. I, Kuchii, would like an idol telephone card.

"It'll be an exercise in futility, I think. I've looked all over, and I have never seen any sign of it. You don't know anything about it, Sasahara? It's all over the Net right now. Oh, that's right, you don't have a computer, do you? I can't believe it. This is the information age. How can you be an *otaku* without one?"

"I want to buy one eventually, but first I have to get the money together."

"You could just get a loan. If you download some stuff, you can pay it back in three days. Of course, some stuff is illegal to download."

"That's true, downloading some kinds of things is illegal. I've looked at some magazines to see which model would be best, but I really have no idea. New CPUs keep coming out, and it's a problem if the OS isn't stable. There's all kinds of other factors, like they may get cheaper if I wait a little longer. It's all so confusing."

"I know how you feel. But if you don't take that first step, you'll certainly never get anywhere. That first step may be small, but it's one giant step for mankind."

"You sure say the darndest things when Kasukabe's not around, Madarame."

Madarame made no reply.

The idle chitchat that could not quite be called a meeting went on and on and on.

In addition to these people, the Genshiken had two other

members—Souichiro Tanaka and Mitsunori Kugayama—but they had not yet shown up.

Every now and then, the First President of the Genshiken would pop in. His identity was shrouded in mystery. No one knew his real name or how old he was. All anyone knew was that he had been in school since 1987, when the Genshiken was formed.

If that was the case, just how many years had he been in school? When pressing for details about the First President, everyone had stopped trying to guess, because it made them vaguely uneasy. Some things in this world are better not known. For some reason, it could not be otherwise. This was not due to their being afraid of the First President, as evidenced by the way the members had always spoken with reserve during the First President's frequent visits to the Genshiken room.

They hadn't seen much of him since he had quit to write his graduation thesis, but every now and then he would pop into the Genshiken room during a discussion. He would just show up without advance notice, rather like a *zashiki warashi*.^{*} Sometimes he would help out those in a tight spot with tidbits of useful advice.

The information that had toppled Kitagawa, the former vice-chairman of the on-campus club organization committee, which Kasukabe mentioned earlier, had originally come from the First President. Many mysteries surrounded him, making him seem much like a mountain hermit unconnected to the world.

^{*} *zashiki warashi* A child spirit that brings great luck to a house it inhabits. From the Touhoku region.

■ In the Smoking Area

It was an agonizing age for smokers. Some people were very sensitive to smoke, especially if you smoked in a public place like on the street. Not only that, you could be fined, too.

Smoking cars on the bullet trains had been abolished.* Restaurants and cafés with special smoking areas had become the norm. The number of shops that were completely nonsmoking was increasing.

Now the only place where you could smoke without fear of bothering someone was your own house. This was fine when you lived alone, but if you had a family, you had to be considerate. You might be advised that smoking stank, and in the end your only smoking spot would be the balcony. Balconies were hot in summer and cold in winter. You couldn't say they were comfortable.

The tendency toward not smoking was inevitable and gaining strength globally, but could you say that a world in which a single puff wherever you were was not allowed was truly clean?

While Kasukabe puffed on her smokeless cigarette in the small smokers' area, she recalled a theory from her morning lecture on Japanese literature by a professor who was a heavy smoker.

"There is a book called *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*[†] by Yukio Mishima. In the final part of the book, there is a scene in which the lead character, who had planned his own death, smokes a cigarette and decides he wants to

* no smoking on the bullet trains Not true, as of October 2008.

[†] *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* In Japanese, the title is *Kinkakuji*.

live as he stares at the smoke rising from the pavilion he destroyed by fire. If he hadn't taken one puff of his cigarette here, it would have completely changed the literary value of this work, wouldn't it? If the world became completely nonsmoking, we would at the same time lose our understanding of what his smoking a cigarette at this time means."

At this point, the professor had drawn a deep breath, just as if he'd actually taken a puff from a cigarette. "If the world were to become such a busy place, then researchers like me would be rejected as pointless. What a foul world. No smoking? No thanks. I do not believe that the majority of smokers inflict any specific damage on those who do not have a taste for tobacco. I am in favor of separate areas for smokers and nonsmokers. We only want to be able to smoke. And if we are discussing *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, not even God has the right to take that away. That's right; having a smoke is like praying."

This professor's tendency to digress during lectures was totally exhausting, but Kasukabe still liked him. People who lived their passions sure had a lot to say when they got older, didn't they? Would Kousaka be the same? She wondered if she would be with Kousaka then.

She really did want to go see the new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee, who was supposed to be handsome, but just dashing off to see him after she heard a rumor would make her like a groupie girl who goes crazy over one of those Korean-born stars. If you didn't count his *otaku* tastes, Makoto Kousaka was the perfect boyfriend for her, so she wanted to draw the line there.

Kasukabe took a puff on the fake cigarette that was supposed to help her stop smoking.

The designated smoking spot was a small area outside that was always filled past capacity with people smoking. This was not unique to Shiiou University; it was like that in other places as well.

And as the same faces always gathered there, over time it turned into a smokers' network.

One wonders how much information was acquired through the exchange of casual conversation here. Too much to list: things like good part-time jobs, which apparel shops close to the station were having sales, which classes were easy A's, and what was going to be on the lunch menu in the cafeteria next week. This network was unlike the Internet in that it was not anonymous but between "you" and "me." The quality of the information was completely different.

Kasukabe had once caused a small fire with her smoking, and consequently, the Genshiken's activities had been curtailed. She felt responsible and was trying to control her smoking as a result. However, because it had been her habit for some time, she came here often. And she liked the view from here. It calmed her down.

As she took a puff of her fake cigarette, she heard the conversations of the people around her. As one might expect, the hot topic was the new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee.

"Sup?"

"Sup? Oh, man, without nicotine I feel like crap. Geez, forgot my lighter. Got a light?" These two seemed to be pretty close friends. Kasukabe had seen them in the smoking area many times. As he passed his lighter to the guy with dyed brown hair, the guy with razor stubble said, "Hey, a helicopter flew in. Did you see this morning?"

"What's special about that? Helicopters don't swim." He puffed and sighed, "That was good." The guy with the brown hair took the lighter, lit his cigarette, and exhaled smoke with gusto.

"That's not what I mean. I mean a helicopter flew in and landed on one of the buildings on campus."

"No way! There's a heliport on one of the lecture halls?"

"Remember when they were working on the roof last year? I bet that's when they put it in. Didn't know it was a heliport, though."

"Oh yeah, right," answered the one with the brown hair, without much interest.

"So, like, I hear it was a transfer student that got off the helicopter."

"For real? You mean he came to observe the campus by helicopter?"

"Think so. Shinya saw it. Oh, here's Shinya now."

"Sup?"

"Sup?"

"Sup? Geez, forgot my lighter. Anybody got a light?" Razor Stubble passed his lighter to the one called Shinya. Shinya lit his cigarette and exhaled deeply.

"Now I'm finally awake."

"Hey, Shinya, you saw that student come by helicopter, right?"

"Oh, sure did. He's transferring from another school. He was wearing one of those school uniforms with the white stand-up collar and everything. A pretty cool guy, from the look I got. And he had a girl with him. I got a good look because I just happened to be on the roof right then cuz I go up on the roof every day to listen to my transistor radio."

Shinya put the lighter in his own pocket. Smokers tended to do things like that. Razor Stubble didn't notice.

"So who is this transfer student guy? Not some normal college student, is he? And why was there a woman with him?" Brown Hair asked the other two, suddenly seeming interested.

"Like, that's because he's the young president of Highland Company, the one that's always in the tabloids right now. I don't know about the girl, but she looked about the same age as him. She was so beautiful, I was quite impressed. Guess she's what you'd call a nice girl from a very good family."

"What's a big shot like that coming to our school for? I mean, he's not a student, is he? He's a company president, right? A student *and* president of a company? I don't get it." Brown Hair was full of doubts. Shinya answered as if he'd just been waiting for it.

"I thought it was strange, too. I've been sharing information with different people since I got here this morning. And I put that together with the gossip from the little birds in the smoking area. The young president of Highland Company is transferring here as a student, and he's now chairman of the on-campus club organization committee. I don't know much about the girl. There wasn't enough information about her."

"Did the school make a heliport just for him? That's some kinda special treatment!"

"You think his company offered a bunch of funding to the school? That or an endowment?"

"Sounds like some kind of plot to me. What's going to happen to us?"

"Aw, it's got nothing to do with us. I mean, he's president of a company. Who knows what will happen? He's getting ready to offer bribes and stuff," cut in Razor Stubble, who had been listening all along.

There was a moment of silence as the three of them simultaneously blew out tobacco smoke.

"Well, I pray that academic fees don't go up."

"Sure would be nice if they used the donation to get a steam locomotive. Then getting around campus would be easier."

"I want them to make the curry* in the cafeteria into Indian curry!" Talking excitedly, the three boys left in the direction of the school cafeteria.

A pair of women came in to take their places. They were employees in the Educational Affairs Department.

Their cigarettes were thin, so they probably wouldn't stay long. "Yes, that's right. I hear that transfer student is incredibly good-looking."

"Eye candy, huh? Cute like a Johnny's band boy? Attractive like a host?"†

"Any of those. I heard a girl fainted just from looking at him."

"Wow. Sounds like a Beatles documentary."

"I heard when one girl first saw this boy from a prominent family, she broke up with her boyfriend right then and there."

"Sounds like Kurohige Kiki-ippatsu."‡

* *curry* Japanese curry rice is good, but very different from Indian curry.

† *hosts* The male equivalent of hostesses in Japan. These men entertain women for a living and are always attractive.

‡ *Kurohige Kiki-ippatsu* Close Call with Blackbeard, a Japanese children's game. The setup consists of a plastic barrel with several slots into which kids insert plastic swords until a pirate pops up out of the barrel.

"And one girl got pregnant. Just from looking at him. She wanted to eat sour food right afterward."*

"Wow, I'd better tell that gynecologist I know . . ."

Even though they were making stupid jokes back and forth, these women—who were more than ten years older than the students—were clearly in a tizzy over the new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee.

Kasukabe's luck had served her well. In just under five minutes, she had learned that someone named Ranto Hairu had landed in a helicopter on the roof of a building at Shiou University, that he was a transfer student, the new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee, the son of a prominent *zaibatsu* family, and unbelievably handsome.

"Seems like the new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee isn't just anybody. I'd better check him out."

The office for the on-campus club organization committee was on the top floor of the club's building. That would probably be where the Ranto Hairu of rumor could be found. Kasukabe climbed the stairs to the top floor committee office to see.

When she got there, she found a paper pasted on it that read, "The on-campus club organization committee has moved to meeting room 3 in Sakunosuke Memorial Hall."

Kasukabe knocked on the door just to play it safe, but there was no response.

* *sour food* The equivalent of pickles and ice cream.



3

...

THE SHIOU
UNIVERSITY
SUPERIOR
SEEDS

I was swimming in the sea. At the bottom of the ocean, I found a girl. She seemed to be suffering. Poor thing.

Are you crying? I can't see your tears because we're in the ocean.

If you want to stay in the water, all you need to do is go up to the surface and get a big breath of fresh air and dive under the water again. Just keep doing that.

Have you forgotten how to swim? Or are you drowning?

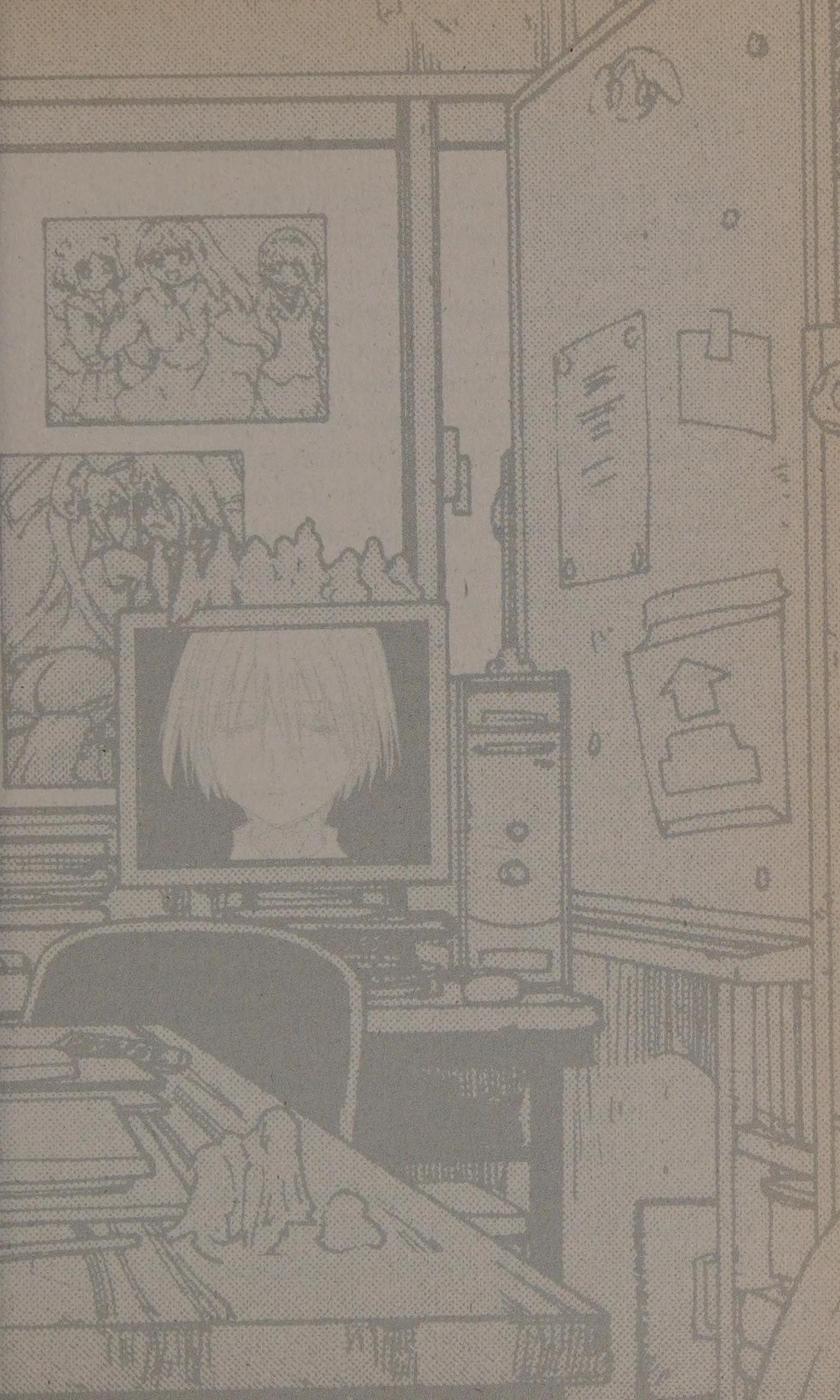
If you are, that would be awful.

But every time I reached for her, she quickly moved away.

I would have called her name, but I didn't know what it was.

Still, in a world where gravity is weak, we are free.

You want to stay here. I understand. I will stay here with you forever.



■ Ranto Hairu's Speech

Ranto Hairu was in meeting room 3 in Sakunosuke Memorial Hall, which was located off campus.

Hairu's first job after becoming chairman had been to move the on-campus club organization committee office from the cramped club building to the decrepit and largely unused Sakunosuke Memorial Hall.

This hall had the same name as Sakunosuke Hairu, the Most Honored Elder. There might have been some connection there, but if there was, Hairu had no information about what it was. The Most Honored Elder had various connections, so it would not be strange if he had one with the hall.

Hairu liked Sakunosuke Memorial Hall. It was old but retained an appearance of grandeur. In addition to meeting rooms, it also had an auditorium, making it good for corporate gatherings. The presidents of the major clubs were assembled in meeting room 3. About thirty were present. Judging from their outward appearance, most of them were somehow involved in physical education. Although the room was now used for meetings, it had sometimes been used as a classroom. On the wall opposite the door was a chalkboard, and just in front of that was a podium. The back of the room had risers like a movie theater, making it easier for the audience to see the lecturer. The room could hold about one hundred people.

Hairu and the woman accompanying him sat facing the club presidents. The woman was Anna. She held a large tubular case with both hands.

Hairu wore a student uniform. The white shirt with the stand-up collar had not a single stain. A lone red flower was tucked into his breast pocket. He remained quiet, eyes

closed, perhaps gathering his thoughts before making his speech.

There was an indefinable feeling of nervousness in the room. Not one student was talking, perhaps affected by the atmosphere.

Hairu had controlled the atmosphere in the room just by sitting down.

The university offered tennis in the spring, snowboarding in the winter, and the remaining sports groups held a joint athletic event. But none of the event club presidents were present.

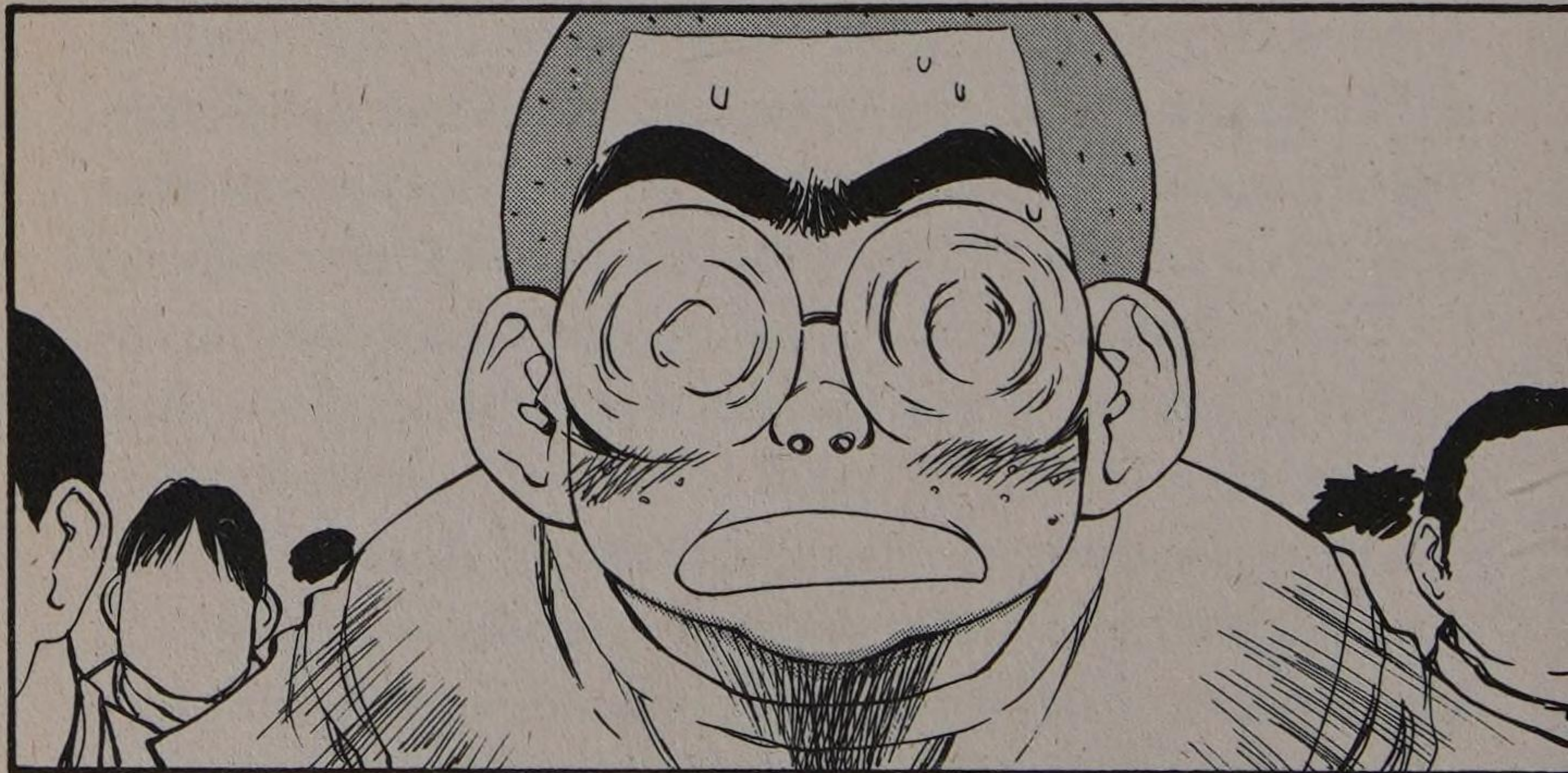
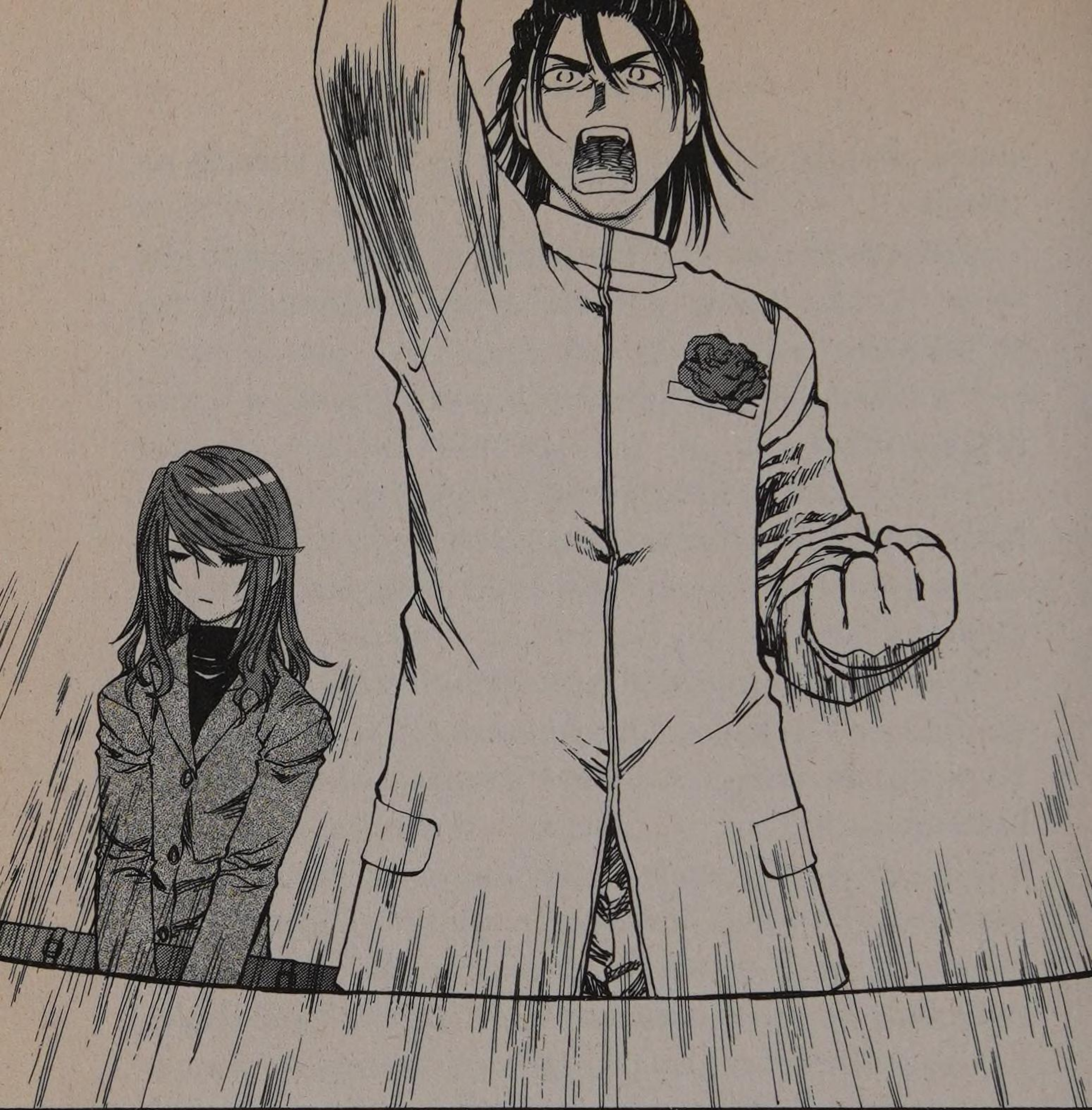
These types of groups might not have been invited to the meeting, or they might not have come because they had no interest in the activities of the on-campus club organization committee.

The *otaku* clubs, such as the anime and manga clubs, were not to be found. Nor, of course, was the Genshiken.

Judging that it was time, Hairu rose elegantly from his chair and proceeded to the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Ranto Hairu. I am the new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee."

He wore no microphone. Nevertheless, his voice carried all the way to the people sitting in the back row, who could hear him clearly. "You ladies and gentlemen who have come here today are high-caliber people, with a strong on-campus club organization committee consciousness, physically and psychologically fit, who seek to better themselves each day."

The words themselves were high-handed, yet the effect was mitigated by his fine-featured face and clear voice. "I have eliminated in advance those who were inferior. Therefore, you here in meeting room 3 could be said to be excel-



lent seed stock, chosen from diverse sources. There is no other metaphor for you than seeds. Until today, the purpose behind this organization committee was merely student recreation: in fairness, just extended fun and games. But can we say this is the intrinsic purpose of an on-campus club organization?"

Observing his listeners, Hairu picked up the pace. "It goes without saying that the answer is 'no!' I believe that the purpose of every on-campus club organization committee that exists in every university, as a high seat of learning, is to forge a model of an ideal nation. From this moment onward, this new on-campus club organization committee must break away from its old mind-set and be reborn as a practical group that seeks to be the cornerstone of an ideal nation. Let me say it again. You are superior seed stock. In time you will bloom into beautiful flowers. And then you will ripen into fruit and redeem us from the degradation, the psychological famine, of mankind."

Hairu held up the single red flower from his breast pocket. He was truly the son of the Hairu *zaibatsu* family, well acquainted with how to captivate human nature with the art of speech.

"This old name covered in fingerprints is unfitting for the organization that will nurture us as we fight. I want to propose that from this day forward this organization be called the Shiiou University Superior Seeds, or SS for short."

Behind Hairu, Anna stood up and removed a rolled-up cloth from the tube. She unfurled it to reveal a banner for the Shiiou University Superior Seeds. A close look revealed that the logo had been designed with the two letter S's side by side.

"Let anyone who has any objection tear up this flag at

once and throw it away!" Everyone in the meeting room was perfectly still, as if paralyzed.

The sound of someone gulping resounded through the room.

Hairu took the member roster from Anna and looked through it. "Baseball, soccer, track-and-field, judo, swimming, rugby, gymnastics. Ah, there's a kendo club. Kendo will do nicely. Kendo is a martial art that blends strengthening the body with mental training, making us more tenacious. Will the captain of the kendo club please stand."

The gaze of everyone in the meeting room moved simultaneously to a group of small, geeky guys wearing glasses.

■ Igarashi-kun's Unsent Letter

In the uniform pocket of the captain of the kendo club whom Hairu had urged to stand was a letter that would never be sent.

The captain had a buzz cut, glasses, and pimples. In addition, he was stumpy and had short, bowed legs. The elegant design of the logo did not suit him.

From Igarashi to you.

Please let me introduce myself. My name is Igarashi. This isn't my real name.

Everyone calls me Igarashi because of my *igakuri*-style buzz cut hair.

It's too much trouble to make everyone change one by one, so I just let them call me Igarashi. Names are nothing

but a label, so that name's as real as any other. As long as I answer to Igarashi-kun, that's who I am. Please call me Igarashi-kun, too.

When you understand who I really am, then I will tell you my real name. I'm sorry this is so sudden, but will you be my lover? Oh, did I say lover? Oh, lover. Lover.

When I was little, I lived in New York. It had to do with my father's work. My dad had an import-export business, but this was back before there was a fixed exchange rate. The business didn't make a living, and it seems that because of it, he got into some kind of illicit trade.

My dad always had these shady-looking people around him. They were all loser types. The men looked like drug addicts. The women looked like prostitutes.

They were always very good to me, but that's because I was always gentle with them.

In my heart I always hated these people of ill repute.

Why was I born with moral values? I wonder. It's not like that's what I was taught.

Anyway, in his bookcase my dad had a ton of hard-core stuff: hard-core novels, hard-core magazines, hard-core art, you name it. But one was a different kind of hard-core. It was *Go Rin No Sho* by Miyamoto Musashi. It was an English translation, so it was called *The Book of Five Rings*. Kind of straightforward, isn't it?

Anyway, I sucked up everything about this great swordsman.

I had Japanese citizenship and I'd never lived anywhere except America, but I longed for Japan. I wanted to go to the country that had given birth to Miyamoto Musashi one day.

But my dad said we were living hand to mouth, so I had to stay there until I grew up.

I wondered if I could ever grow up to be a decent human being where I was.

I worried endlessly. But one day my mother, who lived in

Japan, asked me if I'd like to live with her. My mom and dad had gotten divorced a long time before.

Here was my big chance.

But I wondered why she had sent me to live with such a father. There must have been some terrible circumstances.

Anyway, I entered junior high school in Japan. The language was hard for me. They made me read the textbook out loud for English class. Anyway, when I read it with normal pronunciation, a classmate suddenly punched me and told me not to act all stuck-up.

Even so, the textbook sucked. I mean, it had stuff like "This is a pen." And "Yes, I think so, too." If I said something that dopey downtown, some gangbanger would just blow me away, *bang*, straight to heaven.

But I worked hard at Japanese. And I got so I could speak it. Maybe it was in my DNA (not like I know what DNA is). But in the process I forgot English. I remember only simple words. Why do you ask?

I began to practice my beloved kendo. Ever since coming to Japan, I'd been treated like an outsider. It's that island-country mentality. The stress had built up over time, so I hit single-mindedly and hard.

My *kiai* when I hit my opponent's face was "Me-n," which my *senpai* in the club would always say sounded kind of African.* Na-ha-ha.

And I got really strong. In high school I was assistant captain. So that's why I got a recommendation to get into this school.

After living with my dad and seeing all those scruffy losers, I was too pessimistic about my own life. I never thought I would go to college. I had the American Dream. Or I wanted to be a kamikaze. This is also all thanks to Miyamoto Musashi-san.

And then I met you. You, Ohno.

* *African* Literally, "like a black person."

You, with your long hair, your large breasts that make me tremble (no, I'm not talking about sex, no way, absolutely not!), deciding on your pose with the big sword.

Kanako Ohno-san. Oh-no!

You are as bright as the sun, and although it shames me to say it, your breasts are also impossibly large. I was so happy to have met a woman who fits my ideal so perfectly.

The excitement of that day I met you led me to polish my own bamboo sword all night long.

I heard from other people that you lived in America for a long time, too. What a surprise! Perhaps I came to this country to meet you, or you came to this country to meet me. Both of us holding swords.

I can only think that our meeting must have been destiny.

I wonder how couples where both people do kendo get along. Do they have fencing matches when they go out on dates? That would keep them warm at night, wouldn't it?

Still, what kind of martial art is your sword suited for . . . ? I've never seen one like it.

Oh, you're in the Genshiken club, aren't you?

Does that mean you're doing some kind of primitive swordplay, like Spartan-style or something? I'm really interested.

For now, let's start by being friends, and as our friendship deepens, we can grow closer. ♥

From your Igarashi-kun, full of feelings for you.

"You'll be perfect. You're traditional; you are promulgating an ideal style of Japanese person. You could be SS material. What's your name?"

"My name is I-I-Igarashi-kun."

"Well, Igarashi-kun, we will now conduct a test in a different room to ascertain if you truly are SS material. This

meeting will take a break until we know if you have passed or failed. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for remaining quiet thus far."

Guided by Anna, Igarashi-kun left the room with Hairu.

■ Kanji Sasahara Makes a Speech

Meanwhile, back in the Genshiken room, everyone was still talking. Manabu Kuchiki had left for his part-time job, Makoto Kousaka was playing a fight game by himself, so the only two talking were Harunobu Madarame and Kanji Sasahara.

"What's Kuchiki's part-time job?" Madarame asked.

"Well, I hear he works as a host."*

"Oh, no way. You've gotta be kidding me."

"Well, that's what he says he does. Can't trust him, though. Although he's got a lot of money to spend; it must come from somewhere. Maybe it's true."

"Maybe I should do that, too."

"Oh, Madarame-san, I'm sure you'd be good at it. With that snake eye of yours, you'd be a real lady-killer."

"Nah, I won't do it. I'm not good at talking to women that are three-dimensional, and it wouldn't be good for my liver. Not to change the subject, but recently you see them at the bookstore all the time, don't you? You know, novels from manga hits."

"You mean novelized versions, don't you?"

* *Kuchiki's working as a host* This is weird, because hosts are good-looking.

"Yeah, those. I guess a lot of people read them. What do you think?"

"That's a pretty vague way to ask, Madarame-san. As for me, I think they're pretty interesting. I read a fair amount of them."

"Yeah? Usually it's the opposite for me. First I read 'em, and then I get to thinking I'd like to see 'em. That is, if there's a novel first. I mean, novels are all just words, hard to read, aren't they? Kind of hard to grapple with. That's why I like manga. Anybody can read 'em. Then, after it gets a fan base, it gets made into an anime and gets shown to the masses. It's an established tactic, right? Why do they have to go about it from the other way, I wonder? So stuffy."

Sasahara gathered himself to embark on a rebuttal.

"You're the old type, Madarame-san. Right now using the printed word is hot. In a novel you get to see what happens between the frames of a manga. The character's thoughts are stated completely. Even if the story is the same as the story in the manga, it can seem totally different depending on who's telling the story. A whole different interpretation from the one you had before is presented, and there are new discoveries when you start realizing, 'Oh, that's what this character was thinking when' So after you read the novel version, if you go back to the manga again, you can find deeper significance."

"Wow, that's interesting."

"When you say 'that's interesting,' what character are you being?"

"Y'know, Sasahara, you sure are getting into it with people today. What's up? You in a bad mood? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, sorry. Must be the weather, it's gotten so hot. I don't have a computer, so I get most of my information from print. So if someone starts talking about the printed word, I take it very seriously."

"No worries. It's okay. And when you get all intense like that, it gets me fired up, too," Madarame said. "But one of those serious punches like Kasukabe-san's would not be good. What I want to know is, are there problems if the writer of the novel is not the same as the one who writes the manga? Like maybe a character's image would be different or something like that."

"Well, if they didn't have a basic understanding of, and love for, the work it would be bound to be a failure, wouldn't it? And then there're those nasty short deadlines. The fans can see through those pretty easily. But the risks are the same with making a manga into an anime. And anime production requires a bigger staff. And you especially can't avoid incompatibilities like someone saying that other female voice talent would have been better."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Sometimes with novels you get a whole original story that supplements the story line."

"Yeah? Y'know, that's a totally two-dimensional thing. We who are into *doujinshi* do it all the time. . . ."

"True. I think the matter of obtaining the author's official consent is vital. Because if there's no quality control, it diminishes the merit of the work itself. For *doujinshi*, you don't have to do as much groundwork, but that's kind of different."

"Really? I see what you mean . . . ,” Madarame muttered.

"See what?"

"Nothing. I just thought this was a case of big publishers

behaving like the little guy. On the other side are we crazy *otaku* who have always been active with *doujinshi*. We're proud of being pioneers. In a way, I feel like our playground's been taken away by grown-ups."

"Active with *doujinshi*? Haven't you only ever just bought them?"

"Don't be silly," said Madarame. "Just buying them is an act worthy of praise. Without people to buy them, this world would never have been formed, would it?"

Sasahara had touched a nerve. Madarame readied his counterattack.

"And, y'know, the whole basis of large publishers is corporate enterprise. We must assume they can't escape from profit and loss."

"That's true."

"To put it another way . . . the wonderful thing about individuals is that their work is supported by their own enthusiasm. Perfectly fresh and pure. Pure, therefore beautiful and strong. This cannot be copied by an organization such as a publisher, which cannot escape that it is a for-profit enterprise."

"I see your point, Madarame-san." After taking a breath, Sasahara continued. "But it's a different era now. If you get really popular, they move you toward the wall,* and then you make a profit and move toward being a corporation. These days *doujinshi* writers report earnings as sole proprietors on their income tax forms. That's why a lot of clubs form a corporation, for tax purposes."

* *moving toward the wall* Refers to becoming more popular and better known at comic conventions. Popular clubs that produce good *doujinshi* get placed toward the walls as opposed to being placed in the center of the room. This improves the flow of foot traffic, as crowds tend to gather around the popular clubs' booths.

"Yep. I hear the tax office is going after *doujinshi*."

"That makes the boundary between amateurs and pros pretty indistinct, doesn't it? On the other hand, if publishers are looking at *doujinshi* purely from a business standpoint, then *doujinshi* are a great way for them to expand. There're a lot of industries that make more money. There is the advantage that pride in being a publisher supports the culture of publishing. Publishers are turning into *doujinshi* producers, and *doujinshi* are turning into publishers. At some point they'll converge. Isn't that the best of all possible worlds for both of them?"

"Wait! Wait, Sasahara-kun. I don't know what you're trying to say. . . . What do you mean, best of all possible worlds!? And college students don't need to know anything about tax planning or filing income tax forms. You're up to something! Admit it! Come on, now!"

"Oh, I was just thinking it would be nice to make a *doujinshi*, so I did a little research. And I was thinking I'd like to work for a publisher someday."

"Oh, really? That's great. You've got vision in life. But wait, no. No way. What do you think the Genshiken is? We throw ourselves into the hobby world body and soul. If you become all obsessed with details like that, you can't get to where you want to go."

"I'm sorry. You're pure, aren't you, Madarame-san? I think that's beautiful, really I do. My personality isn't the type that can move forward. To be honest, I'm jealous."

"Oh no, you have your good qualities, too, Sasahara."

"M-Madarame-san."

For a moment they both stared hard at each other, wordless.

The sound of Kousaka's game controller could be heard throughout the room.

"Well, this exhibition just now was kind of BL-like.* Your obstinacy bowled me over, Sasahara. You were 'attack' and I was 'parry.' Or was it the other way around? Well, whatever. That was close. We almost crossed the line. Because in the real world, I am normal. Ah-ha. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. Hey, Sasahara, you laugh, too! Ah-ha. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha."

"Ah-ha. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha."

"Ah-ha. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha." Kousaka joined in the laughter. Kousaka was the type who was unconditionally happy when people around him were happy.

"Um, Madarame, can we go back to what we were talking about? Sorry it's a sticky topic. But I'm on 'attack,' so I'm going to keep at it."

"Oh no, please, go right ahead, Sasahara-kun. I will keep it up as 'parry.'"

"Everyone says that ability in our national language is declining, but on the contrary, I think opportunities to read and to put things in writing are increasing, because everyone blogs and emails. Even my awful little sister blogs. Sometimes she asks me the meaning of difficult words. Like 'What's *logo* mean?' Stuff like that."

"In this day and age, it's normal for idols to blog, too."

"Yeah, so if you count all the stuff being written, the good and the bad, I bet it's about three times as much as ten years ago. This is just my sense of it. I'm sure this has something to do with novels based on comics."

"Oh. One should expect this from someone who wants to

* BL Boys' love.

get into publishing. You're very persuasive. Have you gone around me and issued an unofficial decision?"

"Of course I haven't. I'm not even looking for a job yet. I'm only in my second year of college."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Okay, I'll try one. Which one do you suggest?"

"This is a good one. It was just published, very popular. I'm not finished reading it so I can't lend it to you, though." Sasahara took a volume out of his bag.

"Oh, it's *Genjitnen*! Wow, I didn't know it had been made into a novel. What's this—? No way! This involvement could never have happened in the original story! Shizuka Gozenchan* and Lord Yoritomo got together!"

"That's right. These novels have a tendency to be surprising. If you did this in manga, it would be sheer parody, but you might say that changing the medium creates a new point of view. But this improvement would be hard to do in a *doujinshi*. They'd say it was heretical doctrine."

"True, if you worship the original story too much, it would be awkward."

"Think of the impact of that novelized version of *Gundam*. Don't you think it would have been better if they'd gotten the original author to do it?"

"Mm-hum. The *Amuro X Sailor* was certainly that way. All right. You don't have to elaborate on their virtues anymore. You're quite eloquent in your field of expertise, Sasahara. I'll buy this on my way home and read it. But Shizuka Gozenchan and Lord Yoritomo? Who'da thunk it? One thousand years of unrequited love, and it finally gets re-

* *Shizuka Gozenchan* A famous love story from *Heike Monogatari*. She is also a character in the game *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai*, in which she has long silver hair.

ported in a novel. It's good that their unrequited love was reported. Hard to believe, though, it's so sudden. If that's the case, Yoshitsune-kun's situation inevitably changes, doesn't it? He's always been stuck to Shizuka Gozenchan until now. . . . But, well, Yoshitsune-kun goes at his own pace, and everyone loves a princess character, so no need to worry there." For some reason, Madarame looked over at Kousaka playing his fighting game.

"The next bit's a spoiler, but do you want me to tell you?"

"Uh, no, that's okay. Do not tell me. No. Do not tell me ever, fool. No thank you. Do not tell me Ivan, fool. 'Ivan the Fool.'* *Iza Kamakura!*"†

"Does anybody want to play me?" Kousaka had gotten tired of playing by himself. Sasahara and Madarame shook their heads and said in perfect unison, "No way. I'd lose."

■ Igarashi's Unsent Letter, Part 2

To Kanako Ohno, my sunshine.

I saw you in the hall again today. I followed you for a while. I sated myself with the radiant, sweet, fragrant scent from your hair.‡ It created a feeling of teen spirit!

Huh, is this kind of thing disgusting?

It is ungentlemanly to do such things. I am sorry I didn't say hello. But I didn't know if I should say anything to you or not. Because I don't want you to hate me. When I think that way, the words get more and more backed up in my throat, and I find myself doing creepy things.

* *Ivan the Fool* In Japanese *Ivan* sounds like the word for "don't tell me." Madarame is referencing Tolstoy's "Ivan the Fool."

† *Iza Kamakura!* A traditional battle cry of the twelfth-century Kamakura era.

‡ *scent from your hair* Literally, "from the nape of your neck," which is considered very erotic in Japan.

I don't want to become a stalker. Because inside me lies the spirit of a warrior. I would commit hara-kiri* before I would sink so low as to become that kind of pervert. I would cut off one or both of my pinkies, and it wouldn't hurt a bit. Well, it might hurt some. You also have chosen the way of the *ken*, so you must know about *bushido*.† Do you understand what my preparedness for it means?

Once upon a time, there was a historical figure named Mizuhiroshi Iwashi in Japan. I found out about him through a manga. He faced his lover and shouted *Well, lover!* in his mind. He is my *senpai* big-time. Ha-ha-ha. He stood before the object of his affections and yelled this: "I would die for you!" He is another great warrior.

And something else nice happened today. I thought I'd share it with you.

I am now one of the SS Standards Brigade! They accepted me! This. Is. Amazing.

My life's never been anything special, but when, for the first time in my life, I was bathed in the spotlight, I got drunk on the shining light. Can someone like you who sparkles all the time understand this happiness?

To be SS material, you need to pass an extremely difficult test, and I passed it. It was quite severe.

Do you want to ask what kind of test it was?

Sorry. I can't tell you. This is an ironclad law.

HINT NO. 1: It has to do with seed.

HINT NO. 2: It was thanks to my thick glasses.

HINT NO. 3: Lucky I spent so much time with my father's books.

You are wise, so I think you'll see right through this. It'll be a little embarrassing if you get it right. But now you will see that I'm not some kind of pervert. Ack! Is that okay? Because I'm not a pervert. You hate perverts, right?

* *hara-kiri* Seppuku, or hara-kari, is ritual suicide by disembowelment.

† *bushido* The samurai code of chivalry.

Ranto Hairu is amazing. Do you know who I mean? The Hairu who became the new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee. I never dreamed I would know a person who spoke so truthfully and accurately. I am so glad I came back to Japan.

It is he who is the samurai, the ideal Japanese man I imagined.

The simple version is, Hairu-san wants to build the ideal nation. A samurai nation, not "some limey." And the grand enterprise of reforming the nation of Japan is going to start right here at Shiiou University.

It isn't often you get to stand in the undulating sea of history. Furthermore, I am a member of the Standards Brigade that will carry this out. This is a huge honor. I am elite. Because I work really hard.

Hairu-san spoke of his many plans. Let me introduce one of them.

It's the "expulsion of degenerate arts."

I'm sure that for a wonderful person like you, Ohno-san, this does not apply, but right now in Japan, the monster of degenerate arts runs wild inside our heads.

It's like a disease. To make a comparison, it's as bad as virulent cancer. It consumes young people, and it eradicates nations. This is a lamentable situation. Smooth, they will be smooth. Our brains will have no more wrinkles on them.

And that's not all. Why should we worry if our brains are all smooth, not textured?

Imagine this.

You hate bald guys, right? Good thing I have a buzz cut. At least I'm not bald.

Imagine this.

Incidentally, this is a quote from John Lennon. John was killed in the neighborhood where my house was. My dad stood in front of the TV cameras and yelled that he was the real killer, he was the real criminal. And the real killer had already been arrested. I don't get it at all. My dad was prob-

ably just being an attention whore. But no one paid any attention to him at all. It was the same for me until Hairu-san found me.

So, like he says, if you get a taste for this degenerate arts thing, you get to where you can't tell fantasy from reality, your brain function becomes numb, and in the end you could easily wind up committing heinous crimes. How terrifying!

Also, this means that art is like a mirror of the spirit of the people and the nation.

So, thanks to the rise of degenerate arts, the dignity of our nation has been damaged.

To people in foreign countries, it makes me want to say, "Just who do you think you are, throwing around words like *Japanimation*, jerks!" We have missiles, machine guns, and flamethrowers! You want a piece of us? Eat Utamaro!* Haha!

Eek, I just got all excited! Sorry. It's one of my bad habits.

Okay, so, government officials are in such a peace stupor that they have mistaken this for a compliment and have set forth a policy to promote this, or something.

"In dealing with undeveloped countries, the role Japan must play is leader, not trickster!" is what Hairu-san said.

He says that the fantasies brought about by degenerate arts are part of a plot by major international powers to weaken the nation of Japan. Sharp, sharp! Nothing gets past Hairu-san. Japanese people should be into *onigiri*,[†] bamboo spears, and obi sashes.

Extravagance is our enemy! The tax office is also our

* *Eat Utamaro!* Utamaro (1753–1806) was a woodblock print artist and one of the most famous of the *ukiyo-e* artists. *Ukiyo-e* prints documented the so-called Floating World of the geisha. When Utamaro's work was introduced to Europe in the mid-1800s, it became a major influence on French Impressionism. Igarashi-kun is commenting that Japanese art has a long and venerable tradition that includes much more than the trivial-sounding "Japanimation."

[†] *Onigiri* Rice balls.

enemy! The customs house is also our enemy! Give me back all those hard-core magazines I brought back!

So we're going to reform the world.

Starting with this university.

From your Igarashi, who feels the need to wear sunglasses for protection from your radiance.

■ Reading the Weather

"Ladies and gentlemen, one of our brethren, Igarashi-kun, captain of the kendo team, has passed the strict test administered in the next room with flying colors. He is now reborn as a member of the SS Standards Brigade!" A uniformed Igarashi-kun stood beside Ranto Hairu. The uniform, furnished by Hairu, had the SS mark of the Standards Brigade. Igarashi-kun stood smiling awkwardly at all the attention.

"Let me affirm. Only those possessing mental and physical toughness may join our team. We should learn from him. Like him, we must have an iron will as we implement reforms at our university. Compared with this, oh, what fragile things words are. Hereafter I am inspired to be careful of my words to you, ladies and gentlemen. Words are merely deception: fraud, a swindle, seductive tools to be manipulated. I'm sorry to say that these are the only weapons I have."

Hairu waited a beat before continuing. It was a time-honored finishing touch in public speaking.

"Let's have some applause! For the SS! And for the future of Shiiou University! For Japan! And for the future of our world! Blessings upon them!"

Thunderous applause and cheers from the audience that Hairu had roused with his clever speech resounded in meet-

ing room 3. Excitement begot more excitement. After a time, clapping their hands was no longer enough, and the audience began stomping their feet.

At this time meeting room 3 was enveloped in a feeling of intoxication. You could even say that every attendee's heart had been captivated by Ranto Hairu. They had all fallen into blind submission.

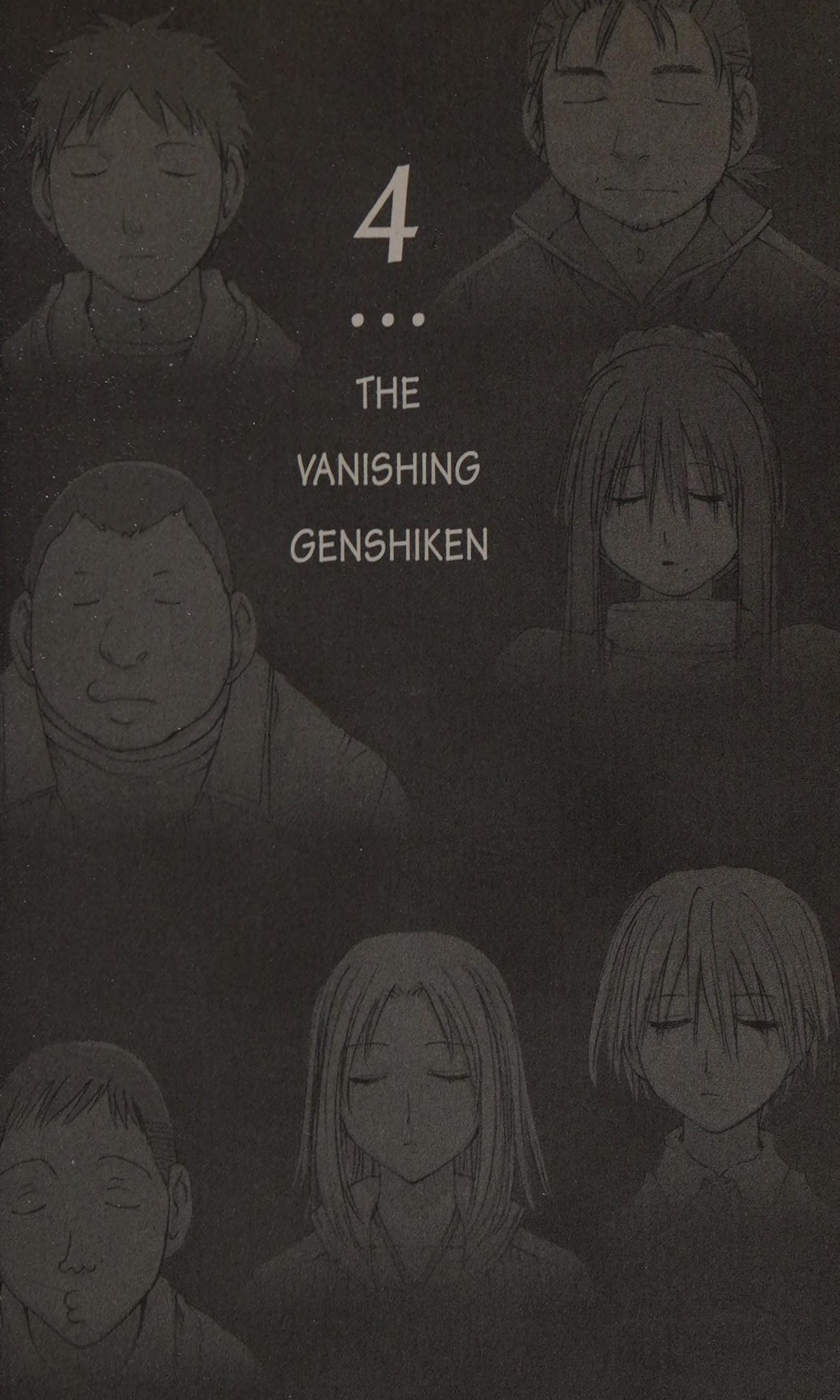
It was something like love.

"Mm? That an earthquake?" The sound of the ground rumbling came from Shiiou University. The people who lived close by felt a slight shaking. The low rumbling sound recalled the birth cry of a monster from a science fiction movie.

At Shiiou University, one man stood on a rooftop.

He was thin. His dark eyes took in the details of Hairu's parked helicopter as if boring into it. He touched and felt the helicopter.

He looked up at the sky. "Looks like we're in for a storm . . . ," he muttered to himself, for there was no one else around. It was the First President of the Genshiken.



4

...

THE
VANISHING
GENSHIKEN

It's time to go home. I must gather the children. The mothers will be here soon.

All right, everybody, come on!

Here they are.

Huh? One's missing.

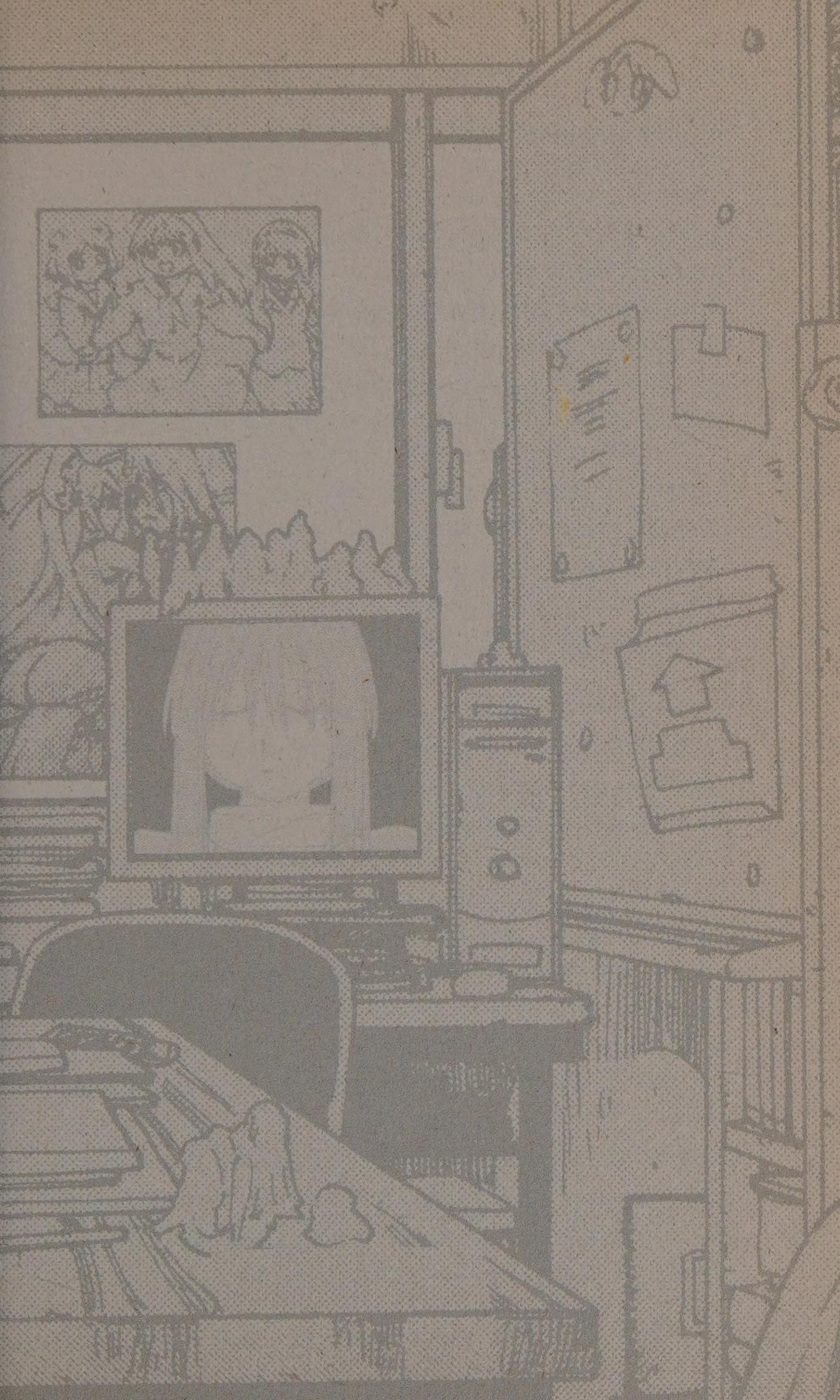
Oh, I see. One must still be playing hide-and-seek.

Your teacher's going to be "it," honey. I'll find you.

She's not anywhere.

I don't remember the kindergarten grounds being so big. And now that I think about it, I don't remember that child's mother ever coming to get her. Her older brother always came to pick her up. . . .

I wonder if her mother is working. Oh, there you are! Shall we play together while we wait for your brother to arrive?



■ Operation Roller School Go-Go

Under Ranto Hairu, the on-campus club organization committee moved to Sakunosuke Memorial Hall and adopted a new uniform of Hairu's choosing.

Sakunosuke Memorial Hall had been constructed in the art nouveau style. All it took was chandeliers for illumination, steel tables, and some silverwork for borrowed elegance to drastically change the atmosphere.

The velvet rugs were thick enough to make a cat unable to resist the temptation to flop down and purr.

It was early in the afternoon. Hairu and Anna could be seen relaxing over the same sort of tea that the royal family of England drank at teatime.

"Shiiou University seems to have calmed down quite a bit."

"Yes, it does. The SS is always watching the student body, so there are no more scenes of people squatting down just anywhere on campus;* wearing old, worn-out clothing; or smoking while walking. Also, there is not a single piece of litter on the school grounds. Of course, it was awful at first."

"That is a good trend, Anna. How many people are now on the SS team?"

"The participants in the meeting a few days ago brought along friends to join, so the numbers are increasing. Right now there are about fifty, counting the ones we have approached. Naturally, we don't ask just anybody, only those of excellent background."

"Excellent. You know exactly what to do, Anna. This is

* *squatting* In Japan it is considered disgusting to sit on the ground, so boys often hang in a deep squat to rest their legs. This is considered bad manners but not disgusting.

not the kind of group where more members are better. If the SS team has a sense of superiority, the group will function well."

"Is that the reason you used Igarashi-kun as an example?"

"Mm-hm. By playing up someone meek like him, I get the rest of the team's attention. Which means they will pledge their unconditional loyalty to me."

"I understand." A bell rang outside. "It looks like the SS has gathered in meeting room 3. Is there an activity for today?"

"Mm-hm. Today I think I will propose 'Operation Roller School Go-Go.' I want you to write down the names of all the clubs that participate in events and put them in envelopes."

"I understand. Roller School Go-Go is a cheerful name for it."

Hairu and Anna entered meeting room 3. About fifty SS team members' eyes watched their every move with keen expectation.

"Today I want you to show me what you can really do. Because of you, ladies and gentlemen, the public morals of Shiiou University are moving toward normal. This operation should make them more perfect. The name of this operation is Roller School Go-Go. This is not a threat; it is the elimination of inferior elements by the use of force." There was a small stir in the assembly hall.

"I have an envelope here. This was created by my secretary Anna from past data and things she's been hearing. Before going into the details of the operation, I want to make sure we're all on the same page. First, what is our duty as students

at this university? You, answer me," Hairu asked of a student sitting in the very front row who appeared physically fit.

"To be diligent in our studies."

"Very good. Diligent study is not an end in and of itself, it is a means to an end. Do not study blindly. It is important to separate what is good from what is not. Why do you think that is?" Hairu asked a thin student sitting all the way on the left.

"To create a tough, cast-iron body."

"Very good. The institution of higher education called college is a place for the final training for educated people of talent so that they may contribute to the national society. Here we attain knowledge. But knowledge by itself has no value. A healthy and sound psyche is needed to make it legitimate. A healthy and sound psyche. Only a body of cast-iron can secure this. I believe most of you do some kind of sport. Sports make each individual person strong, brave, and naturally increase your ability to distinguish unfairness." Hairu looked at the list in his hand.

"All right. I'm afraid that it is a fact that among you there are some inferior seeds who are almost beyond help. They do not understand their duty as students in this university. What exactly is an event-related club? Why are they operating such clubs? You, what do you think?" Hairu pointed to a pockmarked student sitting on the far right.

"The purpose of that kind of club is to satisfy simple desires. Furthermore, they are inferior seeds worthy of contempt."

"Clubs are supported by the on-campus club organization committee. A public activity, so to speak. Do we have any need to recognize such arrogant, filthy activities? I ask all of you."

“Absolutely not!”

“Very good. Today, Operation Roller School Go-Go goes into effect. There are about fifteen event clubs at this school. By six o’clock tonight, you must obtain letters of intent to cease club activities and disband from the presidents of each of these clubs. I want squads of about three to five SS members to obtain these letters simultaneously. I won’t ask how. I repeat: all event clubs must issue a letter of intent to cease club activity by six o’clock. That is all. However, any who feel penitent and wish to go forward as proper students who participate in sports can have club recognition, on the condition that as proof of their intentions, they must completely shave their heads. Ladies and gentlemen, I’m counting on you! Let the operation begin!”

The SS members formed squads with those sitting next to them and received envelopes from Anna. Inside the envelopes were the names of the event clubs of which they would be in charge.

The SS squads flew from meeting room 3. Only one hour remained before the deadline Hairu had set. The squad leaders were nervous that the presidents of the clubs might not be on campus.

Yet their faces were filled with the happiness of being entrusted with such an important operation. With one hour left and no questions asked, it was “anything goes.” The joy of being able to slaughter those they found offensive whipped them into a frenzy.

■ Igarashi-kun A-Go-Go

The squad led by Igarashi-kun, captain of the kendo team, consisted of four people. One member was also from the

kendo club, with the two remaining members from the sumo club. The name of the club drawn from their envelope was "Endless Summer." Its office was on the first floor of the club building. The sumo club members struck their bodies hard against the door. They thought it would shatter with one good blow, but it only came off its hinges.

The six members of the Endless Summer club inside the room looked up in shock at the door suddenly flying off. They had been settling accounts for the tickets to their most recent party.

"Hey, Igarashi-kun. What's up? Why the scary face?" asked a member who was an acquaintance of Igarashi. They were in the same year in school and the same department, but not particularly close friends.

"Please give us a letter of intent to cease club activities and disband. Please."

"Huh? What are you talking about? Fuck off!"

"This is not a joke. This is a serious matter. Will you cease club activities or not? Which is it?"

"Man, I don't understand a word you're saying."

"No arguments, please. Just give us your letter of intent to disband. We don't want to have to use force."

Giving him the evil eye, the most tan of the members came over to Igarashi-kun and grabbed him by the lapels. "You can't just bust in here and tell us to cease club activities and disband. Make like a tree and leave, you four-eyed shrimp!"

Igarashi-kun turned to the sumo team members and winked. "Show them some love."

The members of Endless Summer put up a good front, but it was too little, too late. "Some love" from the sumo team at Shiiou University was nothing to be trifled with. The sumo

club members rushed at their opponents, pulling back their fists. All the momentum went into a power punch to their opponents' Adam's apples. The typical person struck like this can't handle it. In moments, some members of Endless Summer had passed out, unable to breathe. Within ten minutes after Igarashi-kun and the others had burst into the Endless Summer office, the president wrote the letter of intent to cease club activities, sobbing.

On this day at Shiiou University, event clubs were eliminated. Their summer had ended.

■ Hairu Aims for the Heights

Ranto Hairu looked down upon Shiiou University the day after Operation Roller School Go-Go was completed. His hand clasped fifteen letters of intent to cease club activities. He ripped them into tiny pieces and threw them into the air. The fragments of paper danced through the air as they fell slowly to earth.

"Elder Brother."

"Anna?"

"The operation yesterday was a big success, wasn't it?"

"Mm-hum. I never dreamed they'd get back all the clubs' letters to cease club activities within the allotted time. The SS works better than I ever dreamed it would. The public morals of this university will no doubt get better."

"Even so, you don't seem to be in good humor."

"It was too quick."

"Why is that?"

"I have the university almost under my control. The system is starting to function. Even if I leave it alone, it is still in the palm of my hand."

"Splendid. It is a first step toward your ideal world, isn't it, Elder Brother?"

"Mm. It is, but what I see before me has no meaning. Having a toy to play with is not enough."

"What about speaking with the Most Honored Elder about it? I can relay the message."

"I am not in the mood to be treated like a child by the Most Honored Elder. In your message, would you please try to coax out of him something more than just a toy? I'm counting on you, Anna."

"I understand. I will."

Hairu looked down on the world below. The SS was admonishing some female college students laughing and talking in shrill voices as they had a good time. The girls corrected their posture, cut their talking, and walked quietly.

This is good. An orderly school. An orderly society. This is good, but no longer can I be happy with just a "toy." I want to obtain more power and govern Japan—no, the world.

Hairu's phone rang. It was Anna.

"The Most Honored Elder is on the line."

When Hairu went back to the on-campus club organization committee room, the Most Honored Elder was on the monitor.

"Good morning, Most Honored Elder." This time there was no woman beside him. The old man's face was unusually serious.

"Ranto, I heard how things are going from Anna. The emptiness you feel now is something that people like you and me who rule cannot escape. My own experiences with this are many. You feel you cannot be satisfied with a toy, am I right?"

"Yes. I am sorry to be so selfish."

"Not to worry. I thought this might happen. Actually, you are now at a special place, where I laid the cornerstone for the Hairu *zaibatsu*. That is why I sent you there. I didn't know I'd be telling you this so soon. Well, it's an old man's fairy tale. Would you like to hear it? If I tell you, you will not be able to go back to playing with toys, all right?"

"Yes. Please," Hairu answered without hesitation.

■ The Most Honored Elder's Younger Days

In the days when Sakunosuke Hairu was a student at Shiiou University, student demonstrations were shaking things up all over Japan. Shiiou University was no exception, with countless student demonstrations and barricades against the university authorities, and subsequent negotiations taking place day and night.

At that time, all the conflict at Shiiou University was over inappropriate use of student fees by university authorities. Students boycotted classes and took over a lecture hall.

As a student, the young Sakunosuke Hairu threw himself into the strife. As one of the university's leaders, he was compared to Che Guevara.

But he also took advantage of the opportunity created by the student demonstrations and wore several different hats, becoming a fixer, so to speak. Not only was he a double agent between factions, or even a triple agent, he was also dancing in the dark between university authorities, public security, police, riot police, and politicians.

At that time, raising money for student movements was

mainly done through fund-raising campaigns, but he negotiated with companies to give donations so huge that it was no longer proper to call it a campaign. He poured money into each faction, stirred them up, then made it his policy to offer information to the police and public security.

Even so, he stood on the front lines of the conflict and bravely clashed with riot police.

To a casual observer, it looked as though he had no specific goals. However, by doing these things, he learned much about human psychology. After these experiences, Sakunosuke launched himself into the business world with an excellent grasp of human nature.

Due to the allegations of inappropriate use of student fees, the students barricaded themselves inside a lecture hall. After the protest had continued for ten days, the university got tired of waiting and requested that riot police be brought in.

The riot police would storm into the lecture hall on the next day or the day after. Sakunosuke and the others in the lecture hall decided to create traps to retaliate against the authorities in some way.

Sakunosuke had been digging holes into the flooring all night when he found a stone demon. He thought it might be an unexploded bomb from the war. This was something he could use on the college authorities or with the riot police.

Carefully, and all alone, Sakunosuke dug up the demon. When he got a good look, he saw it was a Jizo* almost one

* *Jizo* The bodhisattva guardian of child travelers and the underworld. People often do things like dress them and wash them to receive favors.

foot tall. Two horns protruded from its forehead. It was a Demon Jizo.

Sakunosuke tucked the Jizo carefully into his clothing and made sure not to alert his compatriots as he sneaked out of the building.

The next day the riot police stormed the lecture hall and arrested all the occupying students. Strangely, no one criticized Sakunosuke for deserting the protest. Being in the right place at the right time seemed to be his natural gift.

Ever since Sakunosuke had gotten his hands on the Demon Jizo, fortune had come his way.

He had an abundance of material for use in extortion, and even when he did not press the parties involved, he merely had to watch as large sums of money rolled in. Investing the money in politics raised his status as an activist and also increased his own net worth. It enhanced his relationship with the university authorities and public safety officials, as well.

When he tried going into mah-jongg parlors to try his luck, he always had a big *yakuman** win at each one. If he bet at the horse races, his horse always won. His reading of the market was always on target; his high-risk futures transactions yielded enormous profit.

Suddenly, he had made a fortune. Even Sakunosuke, for whom nothing seemed to go wrong, started to worry that his luck wouldn't hold.

Then one night the demon appeared in his dreams. Sakunosuke watched, temporarily paralyzed.

"Things are going well, aren't they?"

* *yakuman* A win worth thirty-two thousand points.

"Mm, who are you?"

"I am the Jizo you woke when you dug me up. A Jizo made for the repose of a soul. I am the one bringing you luck."

"Are you, now? I think you're overdoing things. And what do you want in exchange? My soul?"

"Ha. I have no interest in that. I'm not one of those devils like they have in the West. There's something I'm looking for. You see, I used to be a double Jizo. About one hundred years ago, we broke and were pulled apart. Ever since then I have been looking for my sister, my other half; hence this body of mine. I cannot move. If you find my other half, the luck I send your way will be still greater. I will put the world at your feet. I can do that for you."

"Where will I find what you're looking for? I have no idea."

"Probably close to me, but that's all I know. If I let someone use my power of Strength through Dreams, they should be able to see. Those who use it see the truth in their dreams."

"Is that possible for me?"

"No, it's not possible for you. Your dreams are all practical, aren't they? The Strength through Dreams power is not like that."

"All I have to do is look for it. And then I can become king?"

"Yes. However, it must be you who places my sister at my side, because you're the one who found me. It won't work if anyone else does it. The more Strength through Dreams power you have, the easier my other half will be to find, but the more you will end up revealing your own hand of cards. Do you understand?"

"Don't be stupid. That's what borrowing someone else's

power means. I know that much. Aren't there any other rules? No tricks, now."

"I saved the most important thing for last. If someone starts using the Strength through Dreams power, I won't be able to limit the luck I send. As a result, changes may occur in the user's body. However, all you have to do is find my little sister and put her by my side with your own hands and all will be well. For a man of greed such as yourself, this is not such a bad thing to hear, is it?"

"Let me sleep on it."

"You're more cautious than I expected. You may do well in life." The demon disappeared. The paralysis wore off. Sakunosuke went to the sink to get a sip of water. Just because it had appeared at his bedside didn't mean that anything the demon said was true. Yet it was true that Sakunosuke's extraordinary luck went on and on. Perhaps there was a grain of truth in what the spirit Jizo had said.

Sakunosuke considered it. Should he go along with what the Tamashi Jizo* had said or not? And then he arrived at a conclusion. This would be the best ace in the hole anyone could ever have. Things were good now. There was no reason to play that card at this point. This ace was something to use when you wanted to lay your hand on the table.

The next day he invited a mountain ascetic he knew he could trust to go with him to bury the Demon Jizo back where he had found it and put it under seal. It was an action the Demon Jizo had completely failed to foresee. Until the seal was broken, the deal would remain in limbo.

After that, Sakunosuke turned to the business world, but

* *Tamashi* Soul or spirit. Jizos are everywhere in Japan, especially in the countryside at the sides of roads, protecting the fields.

the momentum of his advance continued without weakening. His first investment capital had been due to the demon's blessings, but staying in the business world would take more than luck. It was his experience as a fixer built up during the protest era that spoke volumes. And it was this experience that enabled Sakunosuke to amass an enormous fortune.

Finally, Sakunosuke had given a large donation to Shiiou University to build a lecture hall over the ground where the demon had been sealed.

■ What Ranto Hairu Wants

The Most Honored Elder broke the connection. Ranto Hairu sat back on the sofa. "Is it true or a lie; is it a lie or is it true? Quite frightening, this story."

"I do not understand. . . . It feels a bit frightening."

"And yet, borrowing the power of a demon would be amusing, more so than playing at being leader here. I intend to give it a try. Will you work with me, Anna?"

Anna made no reply.

"By making a demon's power mine, I can live an even more mighty existence. Perhaps I can control all of Japan—no, the world! I can make starvation, war, and ethnic disputes disappear from the history of mankind. How about it, Anna?"

"I agree with making an ideal world, but if you achieve that in a short space of time, I feel as though you will no longer be the man you are now, Elder Brother."

"That's the risk you take to fulfill your dreams. I intend to resign myself to that. Anna, you won't help me?"

"No, it's not that. . . ."

"Well, then, okay. You will work with me."

"Yes."

"It means we will brave danger together."

"If I am with you, Elder Brother, then that's enough for me."

"In order to have the power, I need what the demon is searching for. I will use the SS to start looking for it. I want you to become my shadow and seize the power of Strength through Dreams. I will be sun, you will be shadow, and together we will use the power to the fullest. This shall be the bond of brother and sister."

"Yes."

"Here, Anna, put this on. It's a charm for protection."*
Hairu handed Anna a red kerchief.

■ Kanji Sasahara Visits Manabu Kuchiki's Apartment

Kanji Sasahara relied on an address he got from someone in the Educational Affairs Department to find Manabu Kuchiki's apartment. It had happened about a week before. Kuchiki had been very excited when he called Sasahara on the telephone. "Hello, Sasahara-san. It is I, the lowly Kuchii. I got it after all, that fantasy game Kyodai ★ Kenka that you and your friend were looking for! She said she had lots, so I have three—one for you, Sasahara-san; one for your friend; and one for me! I am going to play it right now! You've got to see this game, too, for sure, Sasahara-san. It's the hot fantasy game right now."

"Yeah? I can't wait. I don't have a PC, so I'll have to do it

* *charm for protection* Literally, *omamori*. Much more powerful than a good-luck charm.

at your house. I'm on the train now. I'll call back as soon as I get off."

"Oh dear, I am sorry! I was so excited that I did not consider your circumstances. It was rude of me. How regrettable! Please visit soon! Please come to my humble abode at a time that suits you. And I will also bring it to you in the near future. So sorry!"

Sasahara quickly called back after he got off the train, but his call was picked up by an answering machine and he never did get to speak to Kuchiki. He had heard nothing from Kuchiki since.

Just what had happened to Kuchiki? He had been full of energy when Sasahara had heard from him about getting the software. Sasahara was worried because he hadn't been able to contact Kuchiki since. Perhaps the game was so interesting that he was completely engrossed in it. Or was there some other reason? If he was worried for nothing, that would be okay. Sasahara had come to make sure Kuchiki was all right. He walked to a train station close to the university and spent twenty minutes on a school bus from there. Then he went two stations on another train and took another bus to arrive at his destination about thirty minutes later. The bus stop was on a small shopping street. From the bus stop he walked about fifteen minutes to a residential area. Kuchiki's apartment was supposed to be around here somewhere, but he was having trouble finding it.

The sun had finished setting. Now he had only the streetlights to help him see.

After walking up and down the street many times, Sasahara finally was able to find Kuchiki's building, Maison du

Craie.* Despite its fashionable name, it was a two-story wooden building that had obviously seen better days.†

The building creaked as it swayed in the wind. He removed his shoes just inside the shared entrance hall. A pair of shoes he thought were Kuchiki's were in the shoe cupboard, which meant Kuchiki must be home. A sign written in permanent marker reading "Kuchii's Place" hung near the door. It was colorful, like something a teenage girl might have written, and the characters were rounded and feminine. Kuchiki had probably made it himself. A Do Not Disturb sign dangled from the doorknob.

"Kuchiki-ku-n, it's Sasahara. Kuchiki-ku-n!" Sasahara called out as he knocked, but there was no answer. His room looked to be small, only four and a half tatami mats.‡ He had to be out or else sleeping. Unless Sasahara was way off, there was no way Kuchiki could miss the fact that he had a visitor.

He tried yelling louder than before. "Are you there? He—eey, Kuchiki-ku—n!"

At this, the door next to Kuchiki's was flung open, revealing a muscular middle-aged man. "The guy next door is a friend of yours?"

"Oh! Yes. We go to the same college."

"Man, but the people here are strange! Sometimes in the middle of the night he shrieks and makes strange noises. Sometimes he even shouts while he dances. But it's okay by me. I'm always having my buddies over for *tetsuman*. By *te-*

* *Maison du Craie* House of Chalk.

† *seen better days* Buildings are usually not meant to last in Japan, and age is always a bad thing in an apartment building. Newer is better.

‡ *four and a half tatami mats* Roughly eighty-seven square feet.

tsuman I mean playing mah-jongg.* All-night mah-jongg. Don't college students do that anymore?"

"I specialize in strip mah-jongg."

"Really? College students have come a long way since my day. Can I play?"

"Uh, well, no. My opponent is a CPU. And when the clothes come off, it's just a picture."

"Huh? A picture? And CP is U? Is that some kind of spy code name or something? Scary! That's okay. I don't need that kind of game!"

"I think that's best."

"Oh, and you know, sometimes I hear the voice of a girl moaning coming out of his room. Does he have a girlfriend? He doesn't seem like the type."

Despite himself, Sasahara had the impulse to say, "Oh, that's just one of his adult-oriented computer games," but if this guy wanted an explanation, Sasahara would rather not get into it, so he swallowed it along with his saliva.

Still, Kuchiki-kun was doing computer games without headphones? And he was being overheard. . . . As Kuchiki's senior, he'd speak to him about that. Not as if Kuchiki-kun would listen, though. . . . "Uh . . . Kuchiki-kun and I are in the same club at school. He hasn't been in school in a while. I'm a little worried about him, so I came to check up on things. Do you know where he might be?"

"Hmmm. Actually, I haven't seen him for a while myself. Look, he's usually noisy. But lately it's been quiet. I wonder why. Not to change the subject, but are there coeds at your school? Introduce me!"

"Um, sorry. I have to go." Flustered, Sasahara fled from

* *tetsuman* From *tetsu*, meaning "all-night," plus *man*, from *mah-jongg*.

the next-door neighbor. Kuchiki might be eccentric, but he had nothing on this guy.

"Ooh, I shouldn't have run away." Sasahara ground his teeth at his own cowardice. Without continuing to talk to that next-door neighbor, even as strange as he was, he would never get to the bottom of this. For now, though, he decided that it had been a good call to cut off that particular conversation.

I'll wait until the lights go out next door, and then I'll go back to Kuchiki-kun's room again. If he just hung out, he might be questioned by the police as someone suspicious. He didn't have a bomb or knife, so it was unlikely they'd take him to the neighborhood substation. He would prefer, however, that they didn't look in his backpack, because in it today he had a Lolita *doujinshi* that he'd borrowed from the Genshiken that included some rather explicit pictures.

He'd been stopped by the police in Kabukicho* in Shinjuku and had his backpack searched before. The *doujinshi* he'd had at the time had been pretty normal, so he'd gotten off with a sarcastic smile from the police officer, but now that child pornography was such a problem, criticism of the Lolita genre mounted daily. It would be exceedingly awkward to be questioned just now. He'd probably be marked as someone who was part of a crime ring. Not that his backpack had anything to do with this.

I'll go back to the street with the shops where the bus stop is for now. It would be great if there's a café or a family restaurant.

Sasahara went back to the street with the shops, but, alas, there was neither café nor family restaurant. Only one In-

* *Kabukicho* The red-light district in Shinjuku. The police probably thought he had drugs.

ternet café was open for business. He decided to spend about an hour here.

■ The Skinhead Internet Café

Ugh, were Internet cafés supposed to smell this bad? He'd never set foot in one before and was confounded by the odor.

"Would you like open seating or individual?"

"Individual, please."

"You will be in room 13. This way, please."

After being shown to the room by a skinhead clerk as bald as an egg, Sasahara started up the personal computer.

But huh? What was this? Windows? No. Not Macintosh either.

The first start-up screen he saw left him completely bewildered. Was it this store's own original OS? But how could it be? They didn't have things like that, not even in Akihabara.

But as long as he waited, the screen remained black. There was an "A" and ". .". Also a ">" blinking at him toward the side of the display.

Well, he'd just have to try to operate the thing. But there was no cursor, and there hadn't been any mouse to begin with. No way to search for anything.

"What the hell kind of personal computer is this?" To calm himself down, he took a sip of coffee from the cup in his hand.

The coffee was overboiled. Just the one sip he took of the terrible stuff made acid pour into his stomach.

It's no use. I'm outta here.

The hallway was as complicated as a maze. He couldn't tell the way to the exit. But since the shop was not particularly big, Sasahara figured that if he started walking, he'd manage to find his way out.

He came out in an area where capsulelike things were lined up. Sasahara thought they looked like the things in science fiction movies used for cold sleep. Probably beds for Net refugees. Didn't look like they'd be very comfortable for sleeping. Curiosity aroused, he went to go peek inside. The top canopy of each capsule was clear, so he was able to see inside. He peered into a number of capsules, but there was no one sleeping in them at this hour. He did see something that was different, though.

There's someone over there. I wonder if they're sleeping.

The capsule farthest back of the eight that were lined up seemed to have someone inside it. Seized with an urge to see what they looked like as they slept, Sasahara drew closer.

Huh? This face looks like—

But just then an angry voice came from behind Sasahara. "Hey! What are you doing in here? This place is off-limits!"

"Hya! Sorry! I just got lost on the way out! I didn't see anything!"

"Get out!" The skinhead glared angrily. Sasahara panicked and ran.

Once he was out of the café, Sasahara realized he had never paid the usage fee. Should he go back and do it?

The person sleeping in the capsule had features like Kuchiki's, and he kind of wanted to go back and check on it, but . . .

First I'll go back to Kuchiki's place.

The coffee Sasahara had tasted at the Internet café had been truly awful. He looked around for a vending machine where he could buy something to get the taste out of his mouth. There were several vending machines on the street, but all were sold out of everything.

Finally, he found a vending machine with something that wasn't sold out, a drink he was seeing for the first time in his life—persimmon juice. "One hundred percent juice" was written on the label. But how would it taste? Figuring, well, it would probably be drinkable, he popped the top and took a swig. Ga-h! Bitter. It was bitter! The drink was made from astringent persimmon! The inside of his mouth went numb; his senses were paralyzed. His mouth *still* had that awful taste in it. Or rather, it had just suffered a crushing blow.

When he looked at the can, he saw written on it, "There is a 1 in 256 chance that you will get a can of juice made from astringent persimmon. Those who beat the odds here are unlucky! So that means tomorrow will have something good in store for you. Sorry!"

He realized that every single store on the street was closed, metal shutters down. Even the convenience store. Thinking it must be later than he realized, he took out his phone to check the time. It was still only eight o'clock. He also realized that his phone wasn't getting any signal. He was outside his coverage area.

This street was a little off. It was just as if he'd stumbled into some strange country. Suddenly, he felt lonely. Somehow Sasahara started thinking about his family. His father's face. His mother's face. His little sister's face.

"Father, Mother, I'm sorry for not being a good son and

being halfway *otaku*. Someday I'll win the special prize at the Akihabara Electric Festival, and I'll buy you the newest massage lounge chair available," he muttered to himself.

"Little sis. Keiko Sasahara. We haven't been getting along well recently. It's because you call me monkey. Why do you call me monkey, I wonder? If I'm a monkey, doesn't that make you one, too? You are my younger sister by blood, after all. You are really stupid. For your present, you can have some green bananas."

Family. Would he ever see his loved ones again? He noticed he was thinking things he usually never thought. "What's with me?! Got to pull myself together!"

■ Another Visit to Kuchiki's Place

The light was off in the room next to Kuchiki's. He hoped the lights were off in all the rooms, not just the one next door. He didn't want to meet another weirdo.

Kanji Sasahara walked all the way around Maison du Craie to check that all the lights were off. "Good. This will work. Everything'll be fine."

He rapped lightly on Kuchiki's door.

As expected, there was no answer, nor any sign of a person inside.

"Kuchiki-kun, you're not here, but I'm coming in. Sorry," said Sasahara in a low voice as he opened Kuchiki's door. It wasn't locked. Kuchiki had left it open, so that meant he must have thought he'd be coming right back.

Soundlessly, Sasahara entered the room.

Or so he thought until he stumbled over something. He had no idea what it was, but it started a domino effect, the sound of things falling down all over the room one after the

other. He worried that the noise might bring out the next-door neighbor.

Otaku rooms were like that.

Gingerly, gingerly, so as not to make any more noise, Sasahara made his way to the center of the room and pulled the chain for the naked lightbulb.*

The room lit up. Now he could see into the room clearly. The room was so full of stuff there was no place to step, just like every member of the Genshiken's. Sasahara's room was no exception.

Even so, the jumble was extreme. Posters of anime characters Kuchiki liked were plastered over every inch of the walls except where the windows were. DVD cases and comics were stacked in towers all over the room. Several were just about to touch the ceiling. It was strange how they stood although unsupported, just like stalagmites.

For some reason, the ceiling was covered with travel pennants. It must be Kuchiki's own personal taste.

A smell like mold rose from the messy unmade bed. The coverlet bore the imprint of its owner's body.

No way would I want to wrap up in this blanket.

In the corner of the room was a small kitchen with instant ramen cups scattered about. The ramen was half eaten. The noodles were soggy with too much soup and no longer looked like noodles, and there were flecks of stuff floating in the soup. If you ate this, in the best-case scenario, you'd go to the hospital. In the worst-case scenario, you'd be a dead man. Whichever the case, he could feel that just looking at

* *naked lightbulb* Rooms in Japan, even one-room apartments, usually have a single lamp in the center of the room with a string that you pull to turn it on. There is no wall switch. Usually, the light has some kind of shade, though.

them was enough to make his stomach shiver and shake with fear.

Sorry, stomach. I won't look at them ever again.

Suppressing the sick feeling in his stomach, he calculated from the state of the noodles and soup that Kuchiki must not have been in his room for about ten days. For a normal person, this would appear to be a house full of garbage, but for an *otaku*, it was full of coveted items. Particularly for their owner, Kuchiki, each thing must have strong associations. That he should leave the door to his treasure chest of a room unlocked while away for ten days or more was unthinkable.

And his shoes were in the cupboard. He couldn't believe that Kuchiki would have more than one pair of shoes. As to why this was, it was because Sasahara, the detective who was making the deduction, had only one pair himself. It takes a thief to catch a thief. It takes an *otaku* to find an *otaku*.

There was red packing tape stuck to the windowsill, forming a kind of permanent weather stripping. Was it to keep drafts from blowing in? Even so, it was an unusual amount of tape. It had an ominous, cursed-looking appearance.

Hmm. Something wasn't right.

Feeling as if he were the hero in an adventure game, Sasahara parted the jungle of *doujinshi* on Kuchiki's desk to safely reach his computer.

When he turned on the power, an OS he'd seen before started up. Windows. He knew how to operate this one. Relieved, Sasahara waited for the computer to finish booting up. The next moment, something absolutely incredible jumped out at him.

Sasahara was thunderstruck.

A life-size image of Kuchiki's face completely filled the fourteen-inch display. For just a moment, the pale face drained of vitality looked like a freshly severed head. Sasahara felt his heart suddenly start to race.

Kuchiki's eyes were shut, and he looked just as if he were asleep. Forgetting this was only a computer monitor, Sasahara began to yell frantically.

"Kuchiki-kun, are you all right? Hey, Kuchiki-kun, are you okay? C'mon, Kuchiki-kun!"

It could have been in response to Sasahara's voice. Kuchiki gradually opened his eyes, as if in slow motion.

But those eyes sparkled like glass marbles, seeing nothing.

Next he slowly opened his mouth. Spittle drooled out. "Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

It looked as if the Kuchiki in the display were saying this, but the voice was that of a young girl.

Sasahara felt the sensation of the palm of a damp hand on his back. It felt revolting. Goose bumps erupted all over his body. Sasahara turned around to see what the hand he felt on his back really was. There was nobody there.

Yet the feeling of the hand had not gone away. The Kuchiki on the computer display kept speaking the same words over and over in the young girl's voice. The hand pushing on his back gained strength, propelling him in the direction of the computer monitor whether he liked it or not. Kuchiki guffawed. Sasahara's face transformed as it touched the display. Still, the strength in the hand on his back did not let up. Kuchiki's waiting mouth opened wide. Sasahara was sucked into the blackness, and then the world went dark.

Kanji Sasahara vanished.

■ That Night, Saki Kasukabe Wanted to Visit Makoto Kousaka's Place

The evening of that same day found Saki Kasukabe enjoying a cozy dinner with a former co-worker from the boutique where she used to work part-time. The two girls resembled each other; they could have been sisters. The two of them had gotten along well in the all-female workplace.

They were at an Italian restaurant in Azabu Juban.* Kasukabe had just finished eating her favorite squid ink black pasta and was about to decide on dessert. "Oh, that was delicious. The squid ink black pasta here is better than anywhere. It gets all wrapped up in the pasta, and at the moment you bring it to your mouth, you suddenly get hit with the fragrance of the rocky seashore. It's the absolute best. By the way, are my teeth all black?"

"Yeah, they are. You can't let the boys see you like that, can you?"

Kasukabe laughed. "But, hey, during the Edo period,[†] this was how the beautiful women made themselves up to look. It's okay to look like this for a little while. And it's part of the fun of squid ink black pasta. But wait! Is this like cosplay? Could it be that I am starting to get it? Reeally?"

"Huh? What do you mean, Saki?"

"Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself. Hmm, I'm having trouble deciding on dessert. The crunch of the caramelized sugar on the crème brûlée is utterly superb. Or should I have the walnut gelato? Oh man, I can't decide!"

"When she couldn't decide, the old Saki would simply

* Azabu Juban A very wealthy part of Tokyo.

† Edo period 1603–1867. Women of the era blackened their front teeth to be stylish.

have had both. Just what kind of changes have taken place in your mental state?"

"Humph. Really? Guess so. How unladylike. Sorry to have been rude."

"Hmm? I get it. You were having trouble making up your mind, and as a result, the one you chose in the end tasted all the richer for it. In other words, Saki, you have found a nice boyfriend?"

"Mmm. Guess I have. Sometimes I'm not sure, though. I'll have the *crème brûlée*. How about you, Junjun?"

Kasukabe and her former co-worker ordered *crème brûlée* and gelato, respectively.

"Ooh, feels crunchy, like tearing off a scab. It's irresistible."

"What kind of metaphor is that? You know, you can be a little strange sometimes, Saki. And lately we haven't been hanging out together. Are you two still happily in love? What's his name—y'know, that supercute one? The one you showed me the pic of in that e-mail on your mobile?"

"*Kou-saka*. He's Makoto Kousaka-kun. We're heading into our second year. That's a long time for me, isn't it? Maybe even a record for me."

"Because you used to have a lot of boyfriends. But if your boyfriend's that handsome, I can see how you would have calmed down a bit."

"He's so cute. He's cute, but . . . It's not like we don't have any problems. Or rather, we have lots. Big problems remain, because he *lives* for his hobby. And he is a knock-down, drag-out complete hobbyist."

"Isn't it okay as long as his hobby isn't playing around on you with other girls? Guys with obsessions are good. They

have their own style, they know how important it is, and they don't try to arbitrarily force you into having strange values."

"You have a point there." But Kousaka's obsession was erotic computer games. Could Junjun understand the stress this caused her? Her rival in love was an erotic computer game. Two-dimensional! Anime characters! And if the day came when he got into Lolita characters, how could she, with her flesh-and-blood body, compete?

The idea! Still, whatever she said, maybe she was getting used to Kousaka's hobby. Sleeping wrapped around a life-size anime character printed on a pillow was pretty comfy, too.

Huh? Now that she was talking about Kousaka, she suddenly wanted to see him. She felt miserable. Would it be a problem if she went over to his house tonight?

What was the anime that was on late tonight . . . ? Oh, that was it. He just sat there and watched that one, so it would be all right. She wouldn't be in his way if she was in his room.

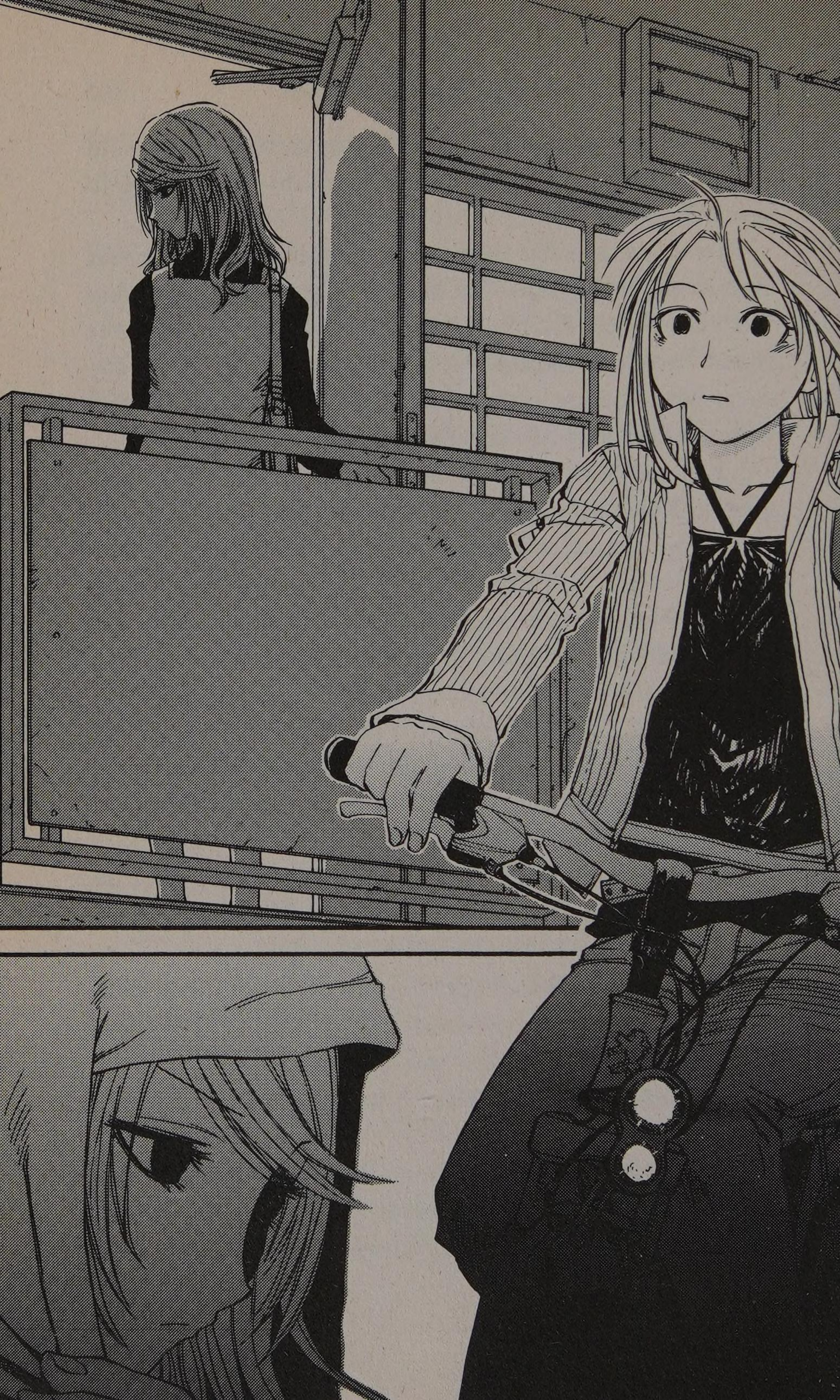
Still, who knew that she, of all people, would end up memorizing the late-night anime program listings?

"Well, Junjun, see you later!"

"You take care, Saki. Let's have dinner again soon! Next time bring along your boyfriend."

It wasn't that Kasukabe was reluctant to have dinner with Junjun, but she wasn't sure how she felt about bringing Kousaka along.

After leaving the restaurant and saying good-bye to her former coworker, Kasukabe headed straight to Kousaka's place, riding her bike since she'd missed the last train.



Eh-heh-heh. Kousaka liked pudding.* She'd stop off at the convenience store and buy just one. Then they'd eat it together as she fed him his half.

Whew, c'mon! Ooh, this was hard work.

Sweat poured down her body. Her makeup must be ruined. Riding a bike this late at night to take some pudding to your boyfriend, now *that* was love. *He might be glad, right?*

Kousaka's room was on the second floor of his apartment building. The light was on in his room. Of course it was, even at this hour. She thought of checking in with Kousaka first on her mobile phone but didn't really feel like it. What was he doing under that light? Playing games? Watching anime? Reading manga? *I'd be happy if he was thinking about me. Really happy.*

I came to see you. I brought you some pudding. But they were sold out of the puchin[†] pudding you like, so this is one of those ones in a little earthenware pot. I'm sure you'll still like it.

The door to Kousaka's room opened, and a figure came out. Was he coming out to meet her? *Kya! Mental telepathy!*

"Ko-sa . . . n? Mm, mm, m? Mmmm?"

Kasukabe could not believe her eyes. It wasn't Kousaka coming out of his room; it was a woman!

* *Pudding* Actually more like custard. Comes in individual servings like JELL-O pudding, but much tastier.

[†] *puchin* A type of pudding that comes in a container. To consume it, you tear off the foil cover and place it upside down on a plate. Then you pop the small tab sticking out of the bottom, and the pudding makes a little sound as it slides out onto your plate. Children (and adults who admit to it) love to do this, and the pudding's really tasty, too.

The woman's face was lit by the streetlights but still somewhat in shadow. She was not the same type as Kasukabe but still could be considered quite beautiful. She appeared to be between eighteen and twenty years old. She was wearing a drab gray dress that fell to midcalf.

The girl wrapped her head in a heavy red scarf, pulling it low over her eyes. She disappeared quickly down the alley as she adjusted it.

Kasukabe stood rooted to the spot. Just like a watch when the battery has run down, she was unable to move at all.

■ Angry-oke

"Check, check, check, one, two. Ah, ah, ah. Today's weather will be clear. One, two, three, pugya, pugya, choeh, choe-eh-eh-eh! Gi-eheh-eh-eh-ehhh! Ehhgyo, wanyawawa! Gugyaaa! Zongwaaaa, cough cough, nugwaa, aiii aii, ababayaiaiiyaa!"

About the time that Sasahara met Kuchiki in an unforeseen way and Kasukabe was standing petrified in the street, unable to go into Kousaka's room, Madarame was about to crumble. By himself inside a karaoke box. He was randomly spitting out all the nonsense he could no longer suppress. This was unusual tension.

Why did he get angry? Then he got angry with himself for being angry. Anger begot more anger, which made him even angrier. What was in store for him? He knew in the long run this wouldn't help. He knew it. He knew it, yet he did it anyway.

Madarame called karaoke like this angry-oke. Recently, he'd been doing this all the time. The reason for the frequency was unknown even to him.

Today he was at it more furiously than ever. Perhaps this

was his special method for getting rid of stress? No, nothing so good-mannered. Flying spittle and sweat pouring off his body collected on the box floor. The heat rising from his body steamed up his glasses, sending him crashing to the table and breaking a glass. A shard cut him on the arm, and he started to bleed. But without stopping the bleeding, Madarame faced the microphone to shout into it single-mindedly.

His ghastly but enthusiastic singing left one of the roving employees rather frightened.

All the songs he was singing along with were anime theme songs aimed at the young-girl crowd, so this was amusing but also added to the chaotic feeling of it all.

He felt uneasy. Something was going to happen.

What do I truly want to do?

What do I truly want to be?

What do I truly wish for?

What does truly mean, again?

Madarame understood nothing. Not one single, solitary thing.

But if he wasn't yelling, he felt as if his heart would shatter. So that's why he continued with his "angry-oke." It had been more than two hours since he started.

The inside of Madarame's throat became red and swollen.

■ Igarashi-kun's Unsent Letter, Part 3

To Ohno-san of the smooth skin.

I saw you running hard at sunset. Are those what you call hot pants? They look really good on you. Very hot.

Your calves are beautiful, as curvy as smelt full of roe; I forgot to breathe, I was so entranced. I suffered from lack of

oxygen. You could bring a man to tears. Your willful neglect is killing me!

And there's your thighs and your ass! Your bust is so luxuriant that my gaze always stops there, but your other parts are quite nice, too! I've discovered a whole new world. Like Columbus.

Running is the basis for every sport. Very admirable.

There's a connection between running and progressing in kendo because it strengthens the leg muscles, is good cardio training, and improves the balance. But running can lead to unexpected injuries if you don't stretch out your joints beforehand, so be careful. Especially of your hip joints, okay? But your body must be particularly flexible. I could tell as soon as you raised your sword to strike. Not just your joints, but your body must be also. That's what I thought when I saw that ancient protective gear dig into your flesh.

I have a question: Doesn't that protective gear expose too much of your skin? Does thinking that make me disrespectful of your school of swordfighting? Or does the exposure have the effect of distracting your opponent? It certainly would if I was fighting you. My eyes would drift to someplace they're not supposed to go, and right when I did that, slash! Argh! That would be it!

I wonder if my speculation that your entire body is flexible is correct. I'd like to check for myself. I'm not trying to be lascivious. This is the interest of one athlete in another. Truly.

I want to know if your flesh is soft and pliant, if your skin is smooth. If I felt it, I just know it would feel wonderful. So soft. So smooth. Soft and smooth. Smooth and soft. That is to say, smoft.

Of course, it's okay for you to touch me, too. It is your justifiable right.

My body is stiff, and I can't say my skin is so pretty either.

Rough and pimpled. Pimpled and rough. That is to say, rimpled.

Do you not think that to approach Grand Master Miyamoto Musashi, even a little bit, we need to fill in the interval, to get smoft and rimpled to check things out?

Somehow it's not just my body that's stiff but my prose as well. This may be because Hairu-san is a big influence.

Uh, this next bit is about the crucial expulsion of degenerate arts. I was just about to list all the clubs that may be affected: the manga club, the anime club, the games club, and any clubs pursuing those activities. Being immersed in kid stuff like that at their age is proof that their psyches are warped.

Correcting their lives to that of healthy, sound students is for their own good. Don't you think so, too?

Oh, that's right. Something called the Society for Modern Visual Culture was on the list as well. It has a lot of kanji in its name, so it was hard for me to read. I looked in the dictionary for the first time in a long time. Can you read it easily? It's pronounced "*gendai shikaku bunka kenkyukai*." I don't know what that means. It would be pretty scary if they were researching nuclear fission.* I am a great believer in No More Hiroshimas.†

But if "Genshiken" is a club that studies ancient swordsmanship, you have nothing to worry about.

From Igarashi of the rough skin.

Humph. I've really outdone myself. This one's so long and not pulled together at all.

But that's okay.

* *nuclear fission* In Japanese, this sounds similar to the name of the Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture.

† *No More Hiroshimas* The popular antinuke catchphrase in Japan.

Because Ohno-san, the one I adore, is not going to read this letter anyway. Because I'm not going to send it.

And just who the heck are you who is reading this letter?

■ Madarame × Kasukabe

"Oof, I'm tired." Harunobu Madarame's voice was completely dry, making him sound like a ventriloquist's dummy.

More than three hours after Madarame began his angry-oke, he realized that his actions were completely meaningless. At the point of realization, continuing angry-oke was no longer possible. It was that kind of activity.

Yelling without purpose in some corner while the rest of the world went to hell seemed ridiculous. When you thought this, you lost. Madarame had lost his battle against himself.

"This seems pretty much like life." Raindrops were beginning to splash down in ones and twos. Gradually, it became a downpour.

Madarame really did not do well when wet. He was especially not good with rain. Luckily, the shop always had a few cheap plastic umbrellas at its door.

But right now he was in a devil-may-care mood and didn't mind if he got wet.

Could I possibly be lonely?

A round of angry-oke always left him feeling empty.

Was this because he was by himself? If he was with someone, would this feeling of loneliness, of emptiness, be so unbearable? Did he need a girlfriend after all? If he did, should he go to Tanaka's place or to Kugayama's? No, this was different. That wasn't it.

There is someone I want to see. I'm missing someone. There's

just one person I want to see. But I can't. That's why I feel so miserable.

On the opposite side of the road, he saw a figure approaching, pushing a bicycle with a flat tire, eyes downcast.

It was the very person that Madarame had so earnestly wanted to meet.

Therefore, Madarame was surprised.

Utterly astonished.

Amazed.

Horrified.

Glad.

Feeling good.

Able to smile.

Miserable.

Happy.

Unable to stand it.

"Kasukabe-san . . ." Rain mingled with tears was on Saki Kasukabe's face.

"Oh! Madarame. I hate for you to see me looking like this. I don't have an umbrella," Kasukabe said, sniffing. Her words were mixed with sobs.

"Kasukabe-san . . ." *I want to ask you what's wrong, if something happened, but I can't.*

He wanted to wordlessly sweep her into his arms but didn't dare.

The rain had been only a passing shower. Soon it stopped.

Madarame and Kasukabe sat down on a park bench in a children's park that looked out on the street. The bench was wet, but as both of them were wet from the rain, it made no difference.

"You don't want to catch cold. I'll buy us both something warm. Is coffee okay?"

"Hot chocolate."

While drinking the hot chocolate, Kasukabe finally was able to stop weeping.

Slowly, gradually, she opened up to tell Madarame what had happened.

"I'm really sorry. I apologize in advance for not having any words of wisdom. If you'd been your normal self, I bet you would've pounded on her right then and there, torn her apart limb from limb, and tossed her in the incinerator. But this reaction is surprising."

"Ma-da-ra-me!"

Madarame braced himself for the punch that would follow. But contrary to his expectations, the anticipated blow did not come. Instead, Kasukabe said, "You can eat this pudding if you want. It would be a shame for it to go to waste."

For Madarame this was an unexpected tack. "Uh, I'll eat it. Thanks. I love pudding. You sure it's okay for me to take it? Isn't it Kousaka's? Ack! I've just put my foot in my mouth."

Ignoring this, Kasukabe said, "I like to think I'm really cool about the small things. But I'm not." The clock in the children's park already read 12:00 A.M. Madarame felt uneasy that they might get tangled up with some street toughs. Lately, something called *otaku* hunting, where *otakus* were being mugged for their money, had been on the news.

Kasukabe is the type that if anyone messed with her, she'd definitely fight back. That would mean that in this situation I couldn't just run away. Mmm. I've never even been in a fight, so I'm probably not very good in one.

Guess I'll just have to visualize myself as a fighter.

I'd probably take a little damage with the first punch. So I'd look for my chance and tackle 'em. Then the thing to do would be to sit on 'em and rain blows down from above. When they dropped their guard, I'd do a kansetsu waza.*

Then, to quickly assess if I should I go for the arms or head. He taps the floor, the bell sounds. I win, I win! It was the perfect strategy. . . . But this is all assuming I'm going up against just one. And that there's a referee. How does that "Ashita no tame ni sono ichi"[†] go again . . . ? Shoot! All I can remember is the part that goes "Eguru yo ni utsu beshi."

"Uh, Kasukabe-san, it's getting late, and . . ." Hey, mouth of mine! Don't go talking on your own without me!

"I'm not sure how safe it is here. How about coming over to my place? You don't have to if you don't want to. But I have a repair kit, so I could fix the flat tire on your bike. You could go home afterward. I could see you partway home. If it's too much trouble, you could stay over. If you did, I'd go to a manga café."[‡]

"Uh, y'know, Madarame, I think you should quit inviting girls who are drowning in sorrow over to your place on the pretext of its not being safe here. It makes your ulterior motive all the more transparent, whatever you might think."

As expected, second place. He knew he had lost his power of judgment in the excitement of battle, but he was able to recognize good advice when he heard it.

"At times like this, keep it simple. Saying 'Come over to my place,' is best. Although I feel perfectly safe going to

* *kansetsu waza* A judo technique involving joint manipulation and limb entanglement.

[†] *Ashita no tame ni sono ichi* A fight strategy from *Ashita no Joe*, or *Tomorrow's Joe*, a manga about boxing. There is also a video game. He can remember only one part of the strategy.

[‡] *manga café* Some manga cafés offer customers all-night stays for a fee.

your place with confidence. You are an *otaku* through and through, and I know you don't have any interest in real women. And my clothes are wet and feel disgusting. Pushing my bike all the way home like this would be too miserable for words."

"Come to my place." He was barely able to get the words out.

"You bet!"

The background of the entire page features a dark, monochromatic illustration of six anime-style characters. They are arranged in two rows of three. All characters have their eyes closed, suggesting a state of sleep or meditation. The characters have various hairstyles and are wearing simple clothing. The overall tone is somber and contemplative.

5

...

MADARAME'S
LONGEST
NIGHT,
MORNING, AND
AFTERNOON

I took the bitter smell out of the plastic and cement with FRP and stuck it on with adhesive. After it dried, I painted it with varnish to protect the surface. When the mold was finished, I used a marking pen to put in the design on the body pillow and stepped on the pedal of the sewing machine. I was very careful in deciding when to use fine-grained sandpaper and coarse-grained sandpaper. You have to be careful not to inhale the organic solvent or thinner. Inhaling the fumes makes you light-headed and clumsy. Getting clumsy can spoil everything.

Gradually, the body took shape.

Next, the clothing.

I made one big curtain by endlessly tying scraps of cloth like brocade, linen, lace, and fleece. Making a curtain was not what I intended, so I did it over again. This time I got it right. Shall I put it on? Yeah, nice. It looks good on you.

Okay, now the container's done. A place to put you in and take you out of. Because, of course, your joints move, too.

■ Hairu and Abnormal Changes

He was having a nightmare.

In the middle of the night, Ranto Hairu bolted awake. His whole body was covered in sweat. His pajamas and sheets were wringing-wet with sweat. He was at his home in Kamakura.

“Is something wrong, Elder Brother?”

When Anna had heard Hairu thrashing around and moaning in his sleep, she had rushed to his bedroom to check on him. She stood at the door. Because she was at home, she was not wearing her kerchief.

Hairu was trembling, his muscles rigid. His teeth wouldn't meet up as they chattered uncontrollably. Hurriedly, Anna moistened a towel to wipe away Hairu's perspiration. Yet as soon as she wiped the moisture away, his skin became damp again. Gently, she cradled Hairu, covering him to ease the rigidity in his body.

Perhaps thirty minutes passed in this manner. Finally, after Hairu's calm had returned, he murmured, “Thanks, Anna. I feel much better. It was a dream. Lately, I've had the same dream every night. But this one . . .”

At first, the dream had been abstract, but as he dreamed it over and over, it had gradually become more vivid. Now it was as tangible as if it were there and it were happening to him. It was a tragic tale of a brother and sister.

“My goodness. What's this?” Anna had discovered two small protuberances on the upper part of his forehead, one on the left and one on the right.

Anna touched them. They looked to be small boils, and she had intended to be very careful not to cause them to break at her touch.

However, the protuberances were sharp enough to cut the skin on the tip of her index finger and draw blood. A small, round bead of blood began to form from surface tension.

Instantly, Hairu put Anna's index finger in his mouth to suck on it.* The taste of blood. Hairu felt a desire for this flavor.

What did it mean that he desired the taste of human blood?

He felt his consciousness separate from his body, as if seeing himself from a distance. Could this be called a feeling of dissociation?

Hairu felt that abnormal changes were taking place in his consciousness and his body due to these recurring dreams.

"I'm all right now, older brother. You will be contaminated."

"You need to get some proper first aid. I'm all right. You can go now."

"All right. And then I will bring you things. You need some fluids and a change of pajamas."

"Thank you."

In a few minutes, she returned to his bedroom with a fresh pair of silk pajamas and something to drink.

"I know how much you like milk, so I warmed some up for you," she said as she held out a mug full of hot milk.

■ Snake Eyes

"Whoa, your room's even more crammed full of stuff than Kousaka's. *Otakusai!*[†] I figured it would be."

* *Anna's index finger* This is supposed to be healing, not deviant.

[†] *Otakusai!* Such a cute pun on geeky and stinky that I couldn't resist including it in Japanese.

"Want me to open the window? Okay, I will. Gonna open it now."

"Not on my account. But if you leave it closed, you might get the scent of women all over your precious posters. You'd hate that, wouldn't you? Better open it."

"Oh, don't worry about things like that. These are just for looking at. That has already been taken into consideration, so don't trouble yourself. I have others for my collection, so it's all good. You may put yourself at ease as if you were in your own home."*

"Madarame, you're talking weird."

"R-really? Is this not how I always speak?"

"No, it's weird. Okay, right now I want to change clothes. My clothes are soaked and feel really uncomfortable. Do you have anything I could wear? Right now I don't care what it is as long as it's not wet."

"... I have something. I just happen to—"

"Why would you? Don't tell me. They're for you? You like that kind of thing?"

"No, no. It's a little sister mobile suit."

"You're kidding! I never heard you had a little sister."

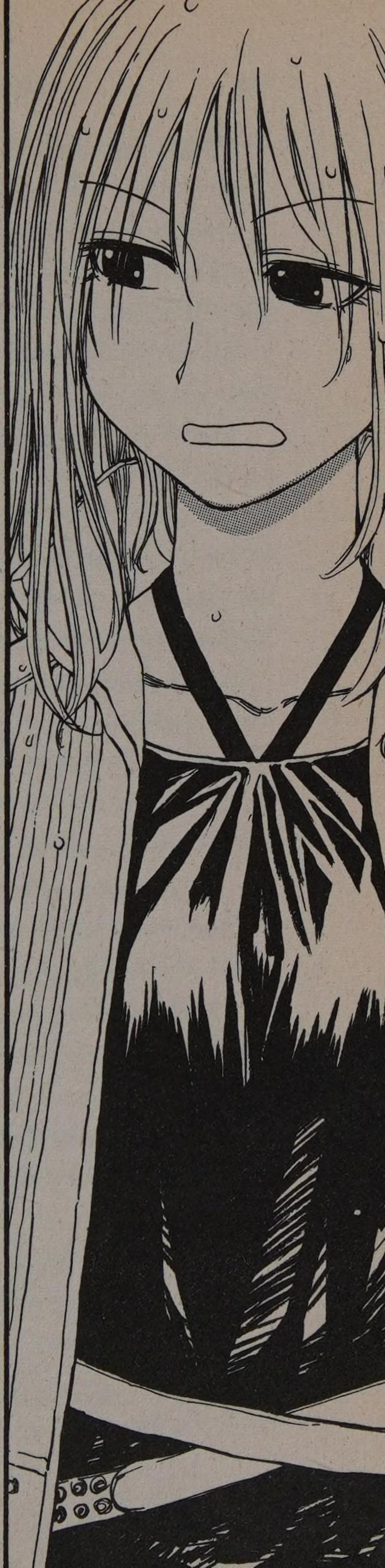
"Well, some things are better left unsaid. . . ." Harunobu Madarame had gone red to his ears. Out of a messy drawer he pulled a makeup bag and handed it to Saki Kasukabe.

"This is all new stuff. No one has ever worn it."

"No way am I putting it on if it's some of that weird cosplay stuff. A normal T-shirt'll be fine."

"Why would I have a normal T-shirt? Every one I have has an anime character printed on it. Wa-ha-ha!"

* *You may put yourself at ease* Madarame suddenly gets formal-sounding here. He must be playing a character.



"'Kay, I'm gonna use your shower. You should change clothes, too, before you catch cold."

"Okay. I'm gonna change into a weird T-shirt." Working to feign calm, Madarame felt something terrible inside his chest. If even for a minute he let his mind wander, he would lose it. Even though he'd done all that venting during angry-oke.

Madarame took out a brand-new towel he'd been storing for his collection and hung it nonchalantly at the entrance to the bathroom. He'd gotten this towel as a special bonus when he'd bought an erotic computer game. This towel had the heroine of the game printed on it in full color. To Madarame it was gorgeous. *And the print is life-size.*

Kasukabe-san is going to use this towel to dry herself off. And she'll be naked. At a time like this, I'd like to compose an appropriate haiku. It might be written during my last moments.*

But this is a state of emergency that is nearly unbelievable. Who knew Kasukabe-san would. Ever. Come. To. My. Place. By. Her. Self.

And that it would be late at night is beyond any expectation. I mean, this has got to be a dream. Maybe this is like that candid camera thing we do to new members of the Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture. But I'm not a new member; I'm the president!

What was that person that just went into my bathroom? What was she? An illusion? Or a ghost? Someone from the constellation Pegasus?

What I hear now is the sound of the shower. This is a sound

* *haiku* Usually, somewhat older, educated men pop out with an appropriate haiku when they are deeply moved, as Madarame is at this time. He might be talking like Amuro Ray from *Mobile Suit Gundam*, who comes up in Madarame's thought process shortly after this.

effect from a drama CD. What is a CD doing just playing on its own like that?

Kasukabe-san is humming. You can hum in my bathroom at this hour? And isn't that "Hana no Ko Lun Lun"?* Now that I think of it, it's Kousaka's ringtone, isn't it? Kasukabe-san likes it, "Hana no Ko Lun Lun." We have the same tastes. Or am I wrong? It's not "Hana no Ko Lun Lun" Kasukabe-san likes; it's Kousaka.

F-F-First Preside-nt!

He—lp!

What am I going to do after this? No, whatever I do, there's no way it would work. No way, no way. I mean, Kasukabe-san's right in the middle of getting her heart broken. She was crying until a little while ago. She may seem strong on the outside, but on the inside she's got to be ripped to shreds. She saw a woman come out of Kousaka's room. Must have been a shock. Heck, I'm shocked, too.

But in a romantic comedy, a young man and a young woman, just the two of them, in a little teeny space like this would be the climax. Not even a magician could make one bed into two. It would be the climax of the final act. Should I go for it? If I don't go for it now, when could I go for it? I mean, if it was a dud, the readers wouldn't like it. There'd be an explosion. That's how important the setting of the scene is right now. Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-shut uuup! Silence, silence, silence, silence! My brain can take a hike!

Either that or stay in the shower for a long time, Kasukabe-san. Until morning. Please.

"Ooh, that feels better! This outfit is cute! I could wear this anytime. Is this a special outfit for some particular character?"

* "Hana no Ko Lun Lun" "The Flower Child Lun Lun," in English.

Oh no, is she done with the shower already? She's already out? That was fast.

I haven't prepared myself yet. . . . Oh, hey! What preparations?! Why am I thinking about this kind of stuff?

Damn, now all I can do is play dead. I mean, I'm going to sleep. Whoever falls asleep first wins. If I sleep, I'll know I'm winning. Sleep's the only thing I can do. Good night. Zzz.

But I can't sleep. I have to say something very important to Kasukabe-san. There'll never be a chance as good as this again. "Kasukabe-sa-n."

"Mm!" Kasukabe was blow-drying her hair.

Say it, Harunobu Madarame! You must say it, Harunobu Madarame!

"—nasleepwithme!"

"Huh? What? I can't hear you over the sound of this hair dryer."

"Want to sleep with me?"

"Mm! What did you say? Wait a sec. I'm almost done."

An honorable defeat. I have done what needed to be done. You did well, Harunobu Madarame. You've done all you could do.

When Kasukabe came out of the bathroom, the lights in the room were already turned out. Madarame was curled up on the floor in a towel, snoring deliberately.

"You sleeping, Madarame?"

"Mm, oh, Kasukabe-san. I changed the bedsheets, so you can sleep there. I was so sleepy I didn't think I could get all the way over there to sleep, so I'm already asleep over here. Good niight. Zzzzz."

Madarame had thoughtfully made up the bed so that Kasukabe could use it comfortably. Although the crisply

starched sheets did have anime characters printed on them.

"Thanks for everything, Madarame. You really saved me. 'Night."

After a while, Kasukabe fell asleep.

He could hear her slow, regular breathing.

Madarame thought, *This is the same sound as when the Zakus invaded Side 7. Amuro's battle started with the intervention of the sound of breath. If it hadn't been for that sound, Amuro wouldn't have fought for one year, and he never would have taken on the attributes of a new type.*

Amuro's battle was a fight to acquire a place to go back to. Not a physical place but one where the injured Amuro could be warmly welcomed by his comrades.

My own battle may start due to the sound of Kasukabe-san's breathing. What will I be fighting against? What will I gain in battle?

For the time being, Madarame decided to meet Makoto Kousaka the next day to assess the situation.

■ Makoto Kousaka in the Box

The batteries in the alarm clock in Harunobu Madarame's room had long since gone dead. He had paid it no attention since then. Naturally, it neither functioned as an alarm nor even fulfilled its basic purpose as a clock.

He always awoke at the proper time. The only clock Madarame needed was his HDD recorder. Without this, he could not record late-night anime.

In the morning, Madarame woke up to the smell of eggs frying.

"Morning! Did you sleep well? Do you ache after sleeping on the floor all night?"

Saki Kasukabe stood in his kitchen wearing an apron. She seemed to be making breakfast. Naturally, underneath the apron she was naked. *Not!*

Her wet clothes from yesterday seemed to have dried in the dryer, and she was wearing them. Well, of course.

"Do you know a good way to cook eggs sunny-side up with the yolks runny?" Kasukabe added some oil to the frying pan and broke eggs into it.

"No. No idea."

"Oh great. I don't know either!"

"That's okay, no worries. Just do whatever works. Eggs are eggs, even if the yolks aren't soft."

"*Otaku* are pretty easygoing outside of their obsession, aren't they?"

"But, oh, those smell good. Bet they'll be delicious."

"You're talking normally, Madarame. You're normal now. Don't you get tired of playing a character all the time?"

"Not at all. Cuz I was a snake in my past life." Madarame ate up an egg in one mouthful like a snake would, but afterward his expression became serious. "Uh, y'know, I'm thinking I'll go over to Kousaka's place today, because I want to hear about whatever happened last night."

"You don't have to do that, Madarame. It's my problem. I'll go on my own."

"No, it stopped being just your problem from the time the Zakus invaded, Kasukabe-san. The civilians have to move."

"Huh? I have no idea what you're talking about. But it might be reassuring to have you come with me. There might be a little bloodshed. Save me if we argue and Kousaka and I come to blows."

"It'd be the other way around. In any event, it would be a good match. I'd get myself a ringside seat."

As he bantered, Madarame realized:

I'm in love with Kasukabe-san.

Now Madarame was clearly aware of his longing for Kasukabe.

The calm breakfast time was over too quickly. Now it was time to set out for Kousaka's apartment.

"Oh! My bike's fixed. Did you fix it in the middle of the night?"

"Wasn't me. Maybe some friendly dwarfs came and fixed it while we were sleeping?"

"Don't overdo it, Madarame." Hand open, she gave him a light punch. Yes, *that's the way. Be like that. Tears don't suit you, Kasukabe-san. What suits you is violence.*

"Let's ride two on the bike."

"Huh? Think it's okay? I'm heavier than you might expect."

"It's fine, Harunobu. Let's go!"

They pedaled for about twenty minutes before reaching the apartment building where Makoto Kousaka lived. The time he was in close contact with Kasukabe was, for Madarame, supreme bliss. Yet Kasukabe thought Kousaka had cheated

on her. Her mental state must be quite different. How must she feel? That was something Madarame, whose experience in love was extremely limited, could not even imagine.

In erotic video games, no matter what kind of trouble occurs, somehow everything works out fine if everyone gets together and makes love. This could never happen in real life. Nor would I want it to.

Without hesitation, Kasukabe took a copy of Kousaka's key out of her bag as she stood before his door.

To Madarame, this just drove home the severity of the situation. Cold water drenched the coziness he had felt when riding two on the bike. He had thought she probably had Kousaka's key, and wanted to make some witty remark about it, but he was still so shocked to see this that he missed his chance.

"Kousaka? It's me. I'm coming in," said Kasukabe into the intercom. From inside the room, there was no response.

The heavy curtains made Kousaka's room completely dark.

"He's not here. I wonder if he's with that woman. Oh, I *hate* this. I thought falling for Kousaka was a good idea because stuff like this would never happen. I'm reverting to my old pattern. Madarame, would you be my punching bag?"

Madarame, who had been examining the room, had noticed something. "Hey, Kasukabe-san, come over here. Look at this computer display."

The computer monitor in one corner of the room was making sounds like a sandstorm.

Sometimes operation lines would run through the noise, and at that moment an image could be seen.

It was Kousaka's face.

Kousaka's eyes were shut. He wore a peaceful expression. His face was almost life-size. It made him appear to be sleeping inside a box.

"What is this, Kousaka? Are you inside the computer? How can that be?"

Madarame played around with the keyboard but to no avail.

Suddenly, the Kousaka on the monitor began to laugh in a high voice like a young girl's. He said, "Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"What are you saying, Kousaka? Can you see me? Where are you now? Hey, Madarame, what is this? Do something!" Kasukabe was almost pleading.

"Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

Like a broken record, Kousaka repeated the same words over and over, indifferent to the pale and panicking Kasukabe.

"Kasukabe-san, try calling Kousaka on your mobile."

"Okay."

Kousaka's mobile phone rang on a table in the corner of the room. The phone was set to vibrate mode. Little by little, it moved until it fell off the table. The impact knocked the head off the little charm he'd had on the strap of his phone. It was the character Yoshitsune-kun from *Genjiten*. Kasukabe had bought it for Kousaka at a store in Akihabara because she thought it looked like him.

"Kousaka . . ."

Madarame pushed the Eject button on the computer. It spit out a DVD-ROM. Casually, Madarame placed it in his pocket.

"Let's go."

■ Ohno and Tanaka in Nippori

Ohno had decided to dress up at the next comic fest as the popular character Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times from the game and comic Fake/Stay Ill.

Today she had come to Nippori with Tanaka to buy material for her costume. There was a wholesale fabric district here where many different types of fabric could be purchased inexpensively. To cosplayers who liked to make their costumes from scratch, this place was the holy land.

This was a weekday and a day when the university was in session. However, today's lectures didn't start until afternoon, making this a good time for both of them to come to Nippori.

The two of them were Kanako Ohno, who became the character when she put on a costume, and Souichiro Tanaka, the maker of costumes and her *senpai* in the Genshiken.

A model like Ohno was called a cosplayer. Cosplayers can also be called just 'layers for short. Cosplay could be considered the serious version of what children are doing when they play "dress up" and dress as brides or Ultraman.

But Cosplay is not simply donning a costume. It is a competition based on how thoroughly the cosplayers become their characters. Subtle mannerisms such as facial expressions or posture can show how completely a cosplayer has internalized his or her character. In the event that more than one cosplayer dresses as the same character, it is these little things that make all the difference.

In this respect, Ohno had great success. Something of a celebrity as an accomplished cosplayer, she had many fans both inside and outside the university.

Perhaps the cause of her popularity was her innocent

baby face and curvy breasts, rumored to be of J League–level W Cup* size.

Naturally, the construction of the costume itself is also an important factor. Ready-made costumes do exist, but if a costume is sewn specifically for one person, the fit will be perfect, in every sense of the word.

Tanaka's fingers were nimble, and he was highly skilled with a sewing machine. He had made several costumes for characters before. As far as Tanaka was concerned, Ohno was the ideal model and a vital partner in the club. Ohno felt the same way about him.

That their relationship was not based just on a shared passion for cosplay but had developed into something more was evident to all. At least that's what the other members of the Genshiken thought.

Their meeting place was under an arch one signal past the turnaround in front of the station. On the arch were written characters reading "*Gai sen ripponi*."[†] This wasn't Ohno's first trip to Nippori, but she had never figured out what the characters meant.

She read them aloud a few times while waiting for Tanaka to arrive. But, as she had expected, the sign still didn't make any sense. She stared at it for a while before she finally figured it out. It made sense if you read it from right to left. "Oh, it says 'Nippori senigai.' I get it now. I didn't even think about reading it right to left because in English I

* *J League–level W Cup* Comparing the Japan soccer league's World Cup to Ohno's bra cup size.

[†] *sign on the arch* Contemporary signs in Japan read from left to right. More traditional businesses and neighborhoods take pride in retaining the original right-to-left style of older Japanese writing. Nippori is in the old section of Tokyo, and the sign is therefore written in the old style, which for a moment causes the Western-raised Ohno some confusion.

always read from left to right. Assumptions sure can steer ya wrong."

Just as Ohno solved the riddle of the characters on the sign, Tanaka came trotting up. "I'm sorry. Did I make you wait? I went down a side street and found a new shop I just had to check out, and it made me late."

"Oh no, don't worry. I had a challenging riddle to work on. Please don't trouble yourself."

"Huh? What was it? Tell me."

"Eh-heh-heh. That's my secret. I'd rather hear about this shop. Did they have anything we could use?"

"Yeah. It's a store that specializes in tacks and hobnails. Kind of surprising, isn't it? Piles of tacks and hobnails all over the store. I doubt anyone with a fear of pins and needles would be able to go inside. Of course, a lot of things come under the category of tacks and nails. Gotta give 'em credit. There are some shaped like pyramids, some that are rounded on the head, some in a diamond shape. Different lengths and different thicknesses, too. They're to pound into leather, so they're all made of metal; compared to plastic, they're definitely thicker and heavier, with good brilliance. We can certainly use them."

"Oh yes, please let's!"

"Great! Okay, let's go see what we came to see and then check it out afterward."

"Roger that!"

The back of her hand brushed the back of Souichiro Tanaka's as they walked. It was a large, soft, gentle hand. How strange it was that such big hands could do the delicate work required for sewing so flawlessly. *My breasts may be really big, but they are a nuisance. And they're the reason I can't do any Lolita character costumes.*

Ohno's face clouded over a bit. This subtle change was not lost on Tanaka, who followed at once with, "This costume we're working on now is definitely going to look great on you, Ohno-san. It goes with your body type, an element that's close to the character, so I know it'll be perfect!"

Together they walked through the shopping district in Nippori. A ramen shop, a beauty salon, and a glasses shop stood near the entrance. The street had a fair number of clothing stores, but it wasn't much different from any other shopping district. Gradually, specialty stores increased and the fabric shops started to stand out. A little farther along, there were more niche-market shops such as knitting shops, shops specializing in lace, curtain shops, and pattern shops. Fabric was displayed rolled on bolts standing upright. In this system, customers measured, cut, and paid only for the amount of cloth they needed.

Looking at the many bolts of cloth standing there, Ohno thought they looked just like tree stumps in a forest.

Now that I think about it, Tanaka does look kind of like a woodcutter.

When Tanaka noticed Ohno looking at him, he turned a little red.

To tell the truth, work on the Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times costume was almost finished. Today they were planning to purchase only one or two small touches like buttons.

There was really no need for both of them to visit Nippori.

Ostensibly, the reason for them to come here was to shop for cosplay, but this was, in reality, a date. The two of them were a bit immature and still needed this excuse to get together.

The area of Nippori was in the old part of Tokyo known as Shitamachi, or Low City, and it had retained an air of elegance not found in the enormous trendy areas such as Shibuya or Shinjuku.

Even if a shop looked handsome and well established, the prices were affordable to the working class. There was no need to dress up and put on an attitude.

"First thing you've got to do when you come to Nippori is eat some of this," said Tanaka.

"I agree!"

The two of them went into a *dango* shop on the street and ate one stick each of *mitarashi dango* and *anko dango*.^{*} The *mitarashi dango* was lightly toasted, the *anko* not too sweet. With it they had hot green tea. It was elegant yet without pretension, the very essence of Tokyo's Shitamachi condensed into this *dango*.

They arrived at the shop they had come here for. This shop was the favorite of cosplayers and for them the heart of the Nippori shopping district.

The shops on this street were mostly wholesale, so prices were generally lower than retail, but prices at this shop were by far the best. And it had an abundant selection of fabric types.

Not so long ago, this street had been where specialty buyers came to make purchases for their stores. It had been a

^{*} *dango* Plain sweet rice dumplings on a skewer or the same dumplings with red bean paste on top. Delicious.

place known only to a few handicraft enthusiasts. Then sharp-eyed cosplayers had discovered it. Word had spread, and by now it had become a place of pilgrimage for cosplayers.

Acquiring new customers had revitalized the Nippori shopping district. Nothing that resembled the waves of people going to Akihabara, but there were people shopping even on a weekday.

Many people were walking alone, and there were also many groups of twos and threes. Cosplayers and students from clothing fashion design schools said nothing when they passed each other on the street, instead doing battle by making eye contact to size each other up. This enthusiasm for clothing design enlivened the street.

"I thought this place might not be that great for buttons. There's not much selection," said Ohno.

"What we want is more of an emblem than a button anyway. Want to make it ourselves? We can probably manage to make something from plastic. But this remnant's a good deal. Let's buy it. We may not need it this time, but it may come in handy the next time around."

The two of them went to check out the shop with the tacks and nails, finishing up what had brought them here but somehow or other continuing to stroll. They exited Nippori and kept walking with no particular destination. They were happy to find such interesting and amusing names as Higurashi* Elementary School and Shichi-go-san† Street.

* *Higurashi* This is written in hiragana, so it could mean either "evening cicada" or "living hand to mouth." It also happens to be the family name of the heroine in *Inuyasha*.

† *Shichi-go-san* "Seven-Five-Three," which is the name of a festival during which girls who are three and seven and boys who are five go to the shrine to pray for a long life. All the cute kids in traditional dress make it the ultimate photo op.

Tanaka stopped before a stone monument and said, "Ohno-san, do you know what this is for?"

"Uh . . . is it for 'Yûyake Koyake'?"*

"Yeah. The Japanese song. They say it was written on the spot during the Taisho era.[†] It goes like this." Tanaka proceeded to hum the opening melody to "Yûyake Koyake."

"Oh, I know that! When I lived in America, there was an older Nikkei woman who lived by us who used to sing it. It's a beautiful song." Ohno hummed the continuation of the melody, thinking *This brings back memories. Y'know, this place seems to suit Tanaka somehow. It's quiet and peaceful. It's very calming here.*

Despite being in the heart of the city, Nippori was free of frantic urban bustle and untouched by change, the perfect place for a date.

The two of them had walked quite some distance. They decided to have lunch at a traditional Japanese restaurant in front of the station.

They ordered a ¥1,500 *matsu*[‡] *unagi*[§] *donburi* with eel liver soup.** Their usual budget for lunch was around ¥500, so this was more than they typically paid. However, the restaurant was a venerable establishment that had been in business for eighty years. They enjoyed every bit of the wonderful atmosphere. The *unagi* was fluffy, plump, and delicious.

* "Yûyake Koyake" Means "Fiery sunset." A popular children's song. It gets played over loudspeakers in children's parks when it's time to go home (5:00 or 6:00 P.M., depending on the season). Also a computer game.

[†] Taisho era 1912–26.

[‡] *matsu* Refers to a fancy *bento* meal. (Less expensive options are called *take* and *ume*.) Tanaka and Ohno are having deluxe sets.

[§] *unagi* Freshwater eel over rice.

** ¥1,500 About \$15. Very reasonable for this kind of meal.

"Oh, what a meal! Maybe a little extravagant, though," said Tanaka.

"But it was delicious. And worth it."

"This was the real thing. The *unagi donburi* at the school cafeteria doesn't even come close to this."

"I've never tried the version they have at the school cafeteria."

"Do they eat *unagi* in America?"

"Don't hear about it so much. I hear they do in Europe, though."

"Oh, Ohno-san, uh . . . Actually, before I found the tack and nail shop, I went to one other place. To a *washi** shop. Would you like this?" From his bag Tanaka drew a stationery set made of traditional Japanese paper, which he handed to Ohno. It was semitransparent, with a pattern of flowers that could be seen when light shone through it.

"Oh, how pretty! Is this for me? Thank you. When I send letters on this to my friends in America, they'll be so surprised. Wow, I thought they only had things like this in Kyoto."

"No, here, too. This is the center of culture from the Edo period."[†]

"I'll write a letter to you, too, Tanaka-san. But if I can't write a good one, I may not send it after all."

"I'd love to receive a letter from you."

Having finished their meal, they left the restaurant. They had finished their errands in this area, but they still wanted to stay here together a little while longer.

"Want to go over to the other side of the station? Are you okay with graves and stuff like that, Ohno-san?"

* *washi* Traditional Japanese paper.

[†] *Edo period* 1603–1867. Edo is the old name for Tokyo.

"Yes, I am. Why? Do things come out of them?"

"Maybe they do, but I've never seen it happen. Wouldn't mind seeing that, though. After you go through a big cemetery, there's a memorial park for someone I admire. His name is Tenshin Okakura."

Tenshin Okakura was an artist of the Meiji era who founded the Tokyo College of Fine Arts. He was a truly international person who sought a way to achieve the coexistence and coprosperity of both Eastern and Western cultures. It made sense that a person like Tanaka, whose ambition was balanced by his warm personality, would respect him.

"This cemetery is really big. I wonder how many grave sites* there are."

"I've never counted them, but if I had to guess, I would say over five thousand."

"Five thousand?! If you figure that at least two people have been laid to rest in each one, that means if they ever came back to life, there'd be at least ten thousand of them! Tokyo'd be taken over by zombies before you could blink, wouldn't it?"

Tanaka laughed. "The vast majority of Japanese people are cremated when they die, so I don't think they'll be coming back as zombies. The cherry blossoms in this cemetery are quite beautiful in the spring. It's a perfect spot for cherry blossom viewing."[†]

"Really? Having a party in a cemetery sounds like it

* cemetery Grave sites in Japan contain only the ashes of the deceased, so more than one person per grave is normal. The only graveyard I know of in Japan where actual bodies are buried is the foreigners' cemetery in Yokohama.

† cherry blossom viewing *Ohamami*, in Japanese. People picnic under the flowering branches, and social status does not matter.

might be fun. A little irreverent, too, though, don't you think?"

"Hm. I've never thought about it before. Graves are resting places for our ancestors, and every year during the *obon* season, we welcome them back and then bid them farewell, so they feel like part of our lives. I think they might enjoy a little noise and bustle now and then."

"Interesting. Then you wouldn't incur divine punishment for doing it, would you? Whew. Tanaka-san, when the cherry blossoms bloom, will you please invite me to a cherry blossom viewing party? I have never had the chance to attend one."

"Sure. We'll all come."

"With everybody?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, would you rather just the two of us come than to come with everybody?"

"Yes."

(Was I too pushy? Ohno wondered. But I'm happy you want to come, just the two of us.)

After Ohno and Tanaka had passed through Yanaka Cemetery and seen the Tenshin Okakura Memorial Hall, they strolled through the memorial park to come out at the plaza in which there was a statue of Takamori Saigo.*

"Oh, this guy has a dog with him. It reminds me of the statue of Hachiko[†] in Shibuya."

* *Takamori Saigo* A hero of the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877. His statue in Ueno Park is famous as a meeting place.

† *Hachiko* A famous dog with a famous statue near Shibuya Station that is an even more famous meeting place.

"Yeah. Hachiko was worried about his master not coming home, so he used the Ginza line to come from Shibuya to here to see him again. This statue is to commemorate that. Did you know?"

"Wow, now *that's* a faithful dog. He knew how to ride the subway? You're kidding, aren't you? I know about Saigo. You're teasing me, Tanaka-san."

"Guess I'm busted."

Laughing, the two of them left the plaza and walked down the stairs. A portrait artist was sitting about halfway down. Looking at his sketches, Tanaka thought Kugayama was better at capturing a likeness. Maybe he could get Kugayama to teach this guy a thing or two. When he sketched costumes, he could do better designs if he had Kugayama draw Ohno-san's face. That, and while Kugayama was drawing her, Tanaka could spend that time looking at her.

They soon arrived at Okachimachi Station. From here it was only one station to their favorite destination—Akihabara. A walkable distance.

They would not be going there today. This was because they were immersed in the mellow afterglow of the Nippori neighborhood. Both of them were feeling that way.

■ Igarashi-kun's Unsent Love Letter, Part 4

To Ohno-san of the bangs that are too long.

A-hem. I am Igarashi-kun of the Shiiou University Superior Seeds, abbreviated "SS." How have you been these past days, Ohno-sama?

Uh, announcing today's operation. It's called Operation

ke. It's top secret, but as proof of my love for you, I'll tell you about everything.

We will barricade the club building. Anyone who enters will be forcibly ejected!

Then we will thoroughly investigate every nook and cranny of every club from one end to the other. We will hit hard the rooms of clubs that I have mentioned previously. Because our amazingness was proved in Operation Roller School Go-Go, we're doing this. We will seize any material we think is degenerate material seized on suspicion of being degenerate material by Hairu-san. As soon as it is judged to be degenerate, it will quickly disappear from this world.

I am a member of the SS Standards Brigade, I'm at the forefront. Isn't that cool? Don't fall in love with me. What am I saying? Just kidding. It would not be wise to fall deeply in love with me. Because I am an SS Standards Brigade member. The elite of the elite.

I can determine the future of any club if I want to. Pretty much, I have so much power, isn't it? All the power I want! I'm not going to act high-handed about it, because I'm a *mononofu*. Sometimes you can read the characters for "mononofu" as "*mononofu*." I found that watching TV last time Ohno-san, you are a "*mononofu*" princess!

There is something I can only say here. Are there any clubs you hate? Tell me which ones and I will crush them.

And you say the misuse of power goes against the way of the warrior, even if done for love? What are you saying? Don't talk like you're only half warrior. That's heresy! You have a guy, don't you! I saw it. You were talking with that filthy guy with the messy hair. That's your friend, isn't he? You guys had that air of people who are serious. He ties his hair back behind him like it's some

kind of traditional samurai topknot! Ridiculous! What on God's green earth is so good about a guy like him? Is *that* your type? I don't understand your taste in men at all.

Damn it. You're a rotten couple. No. You bitch. I mean you, Kanako Ohno-san. I'm calling you a bitch. Me.

Uwaaaaan! You have a boyfriend, which makes me so, so sad I can't stand it! I am going to throw myself in the Imjin River!*

This may not mean so much to you, but for me it is a serious problem. Now for us there is only Ganryujima.[†] We must cross swords in a final battle.

Oooh. It makes me shudder to think of a duel to the death with you whom I love. I challenge you with my sword. Not a wooden sword, a real one. If we are unlucky, we could die.

If I win, please promptly break up with Mr. Tanaka. After that, I will die upon my own sword.

If *you* win, please promptly break up with Mr. Tanaka. After that, please die upon your own sword, too.

We have the tragic fate of being able to be bound only in heaven.

It is the tragic destiny of two swordfighters being born into the same age.

From Igarashi-kun, who desires to be your exclusive
beauty consultant.

PS: Y'know, your bangs really are too long in front. You should trim them a little. It'd make you look cuter than you are now.

* *Imjin River* The river that divides North from South Korea. "Imujin Kawa" was a song by an underground band from Kansai called the Folk Crusaders about the splitting of Korea. It's important in the movie *Pacchigi!* also known as *Break Through!*

† *Ganryujima* A small island between Honshu and Kyushu famous for the duel between Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojiro, Musashi's most famous battle.

■ The Fashion Show for Two

Kanako Ohno and Souichiro Tanaka arrived at Shiyou University that afternoon, having finished their errands in Nippori. When they looked at the notice board, they saw that the lectures for both of the classes they were taking had been canceled for the day. There were a fair number of notices reading "Today's lecture has been canceled." And there was an unexpected crowd of students on campus making an uproar.

"Why don't we get right to trying on that costume? Want to change somewhere?"

"Uh-uh. It's the first time I'll be putting the costume on, so I'm too embarrassed for anyone to see me. Especially if we go to the Genshiken room! Even under normal circumstances, Madarame looks at me with his eyes all creepy and narrow. It's not Madarame-san's fault or anything, but I have a hard time with that."

"According to him, he was a snake in a past life. He looks at everyone like that. I don't think he means anything by it. Cut him a little slack. People are always mesmerized when they see you do cosplay, Ohno-san."

"Mm, thank you for saying that. I will do my best this time! I've pretty much already created the character. The variations on the poses are already in my head. I will show you what I learned in my lessons."

"In that case, how about we go to the auditorium? The one in Sakunosuke Memorial Hall. It's a little far. But it's got good illumination, so we'll be able to take pictures, and it's perfect for seeing how it looks."

"Yes. Let's do that. Do you have the camera and the costume?"

"Yep. You never know what's going to happen, so I always carry a set around with me."

"That must be why your bag always looks so stuffed."

When they arrived at the auditorium, they found that, as they had anticipated, there was no sign of any people and the door was unlocked. They both went inside.

Tanaka closed the curtain to block the sunlight, placed the spotlights, and prepared the camera settings.

Ohno breathed deeply as she slowly and carefully removed her clothes in the dressing room, which was empty of people.

This new costume exposed so much of the upper half of her body that she could not wear a bra. Loosed from their bindings, her bountiful breasts swayed heavily. She removed the clothes below her waist. If any panty lines showed, the costume Tanaka had poured his heart and soul into would be ruined.

Finally, Ohno quietly closed her eyes to take off her usual Kanako Ohno self.

After a time, Ohno skillfully and eagerly put on her costume. The fictional Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times appeared in the modern world.



6

...

OPERATION
SPRING AWAKE

Uh, excuse me. I'd like to buy that sketchbook. No, the one next to it. Yeah, that one. The one with the brown cover.

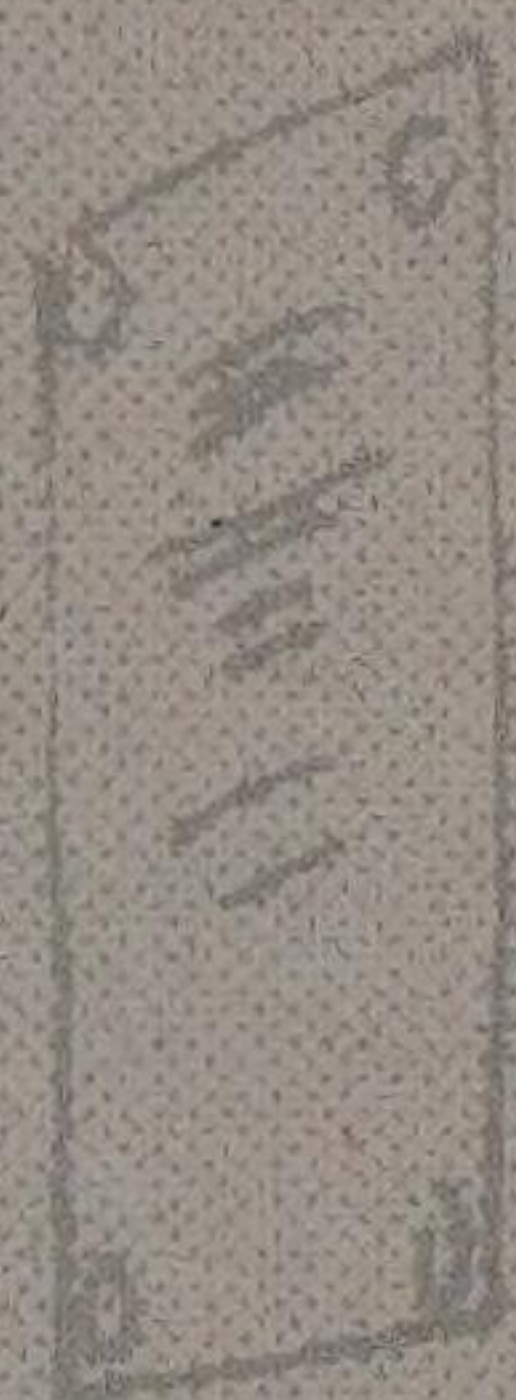
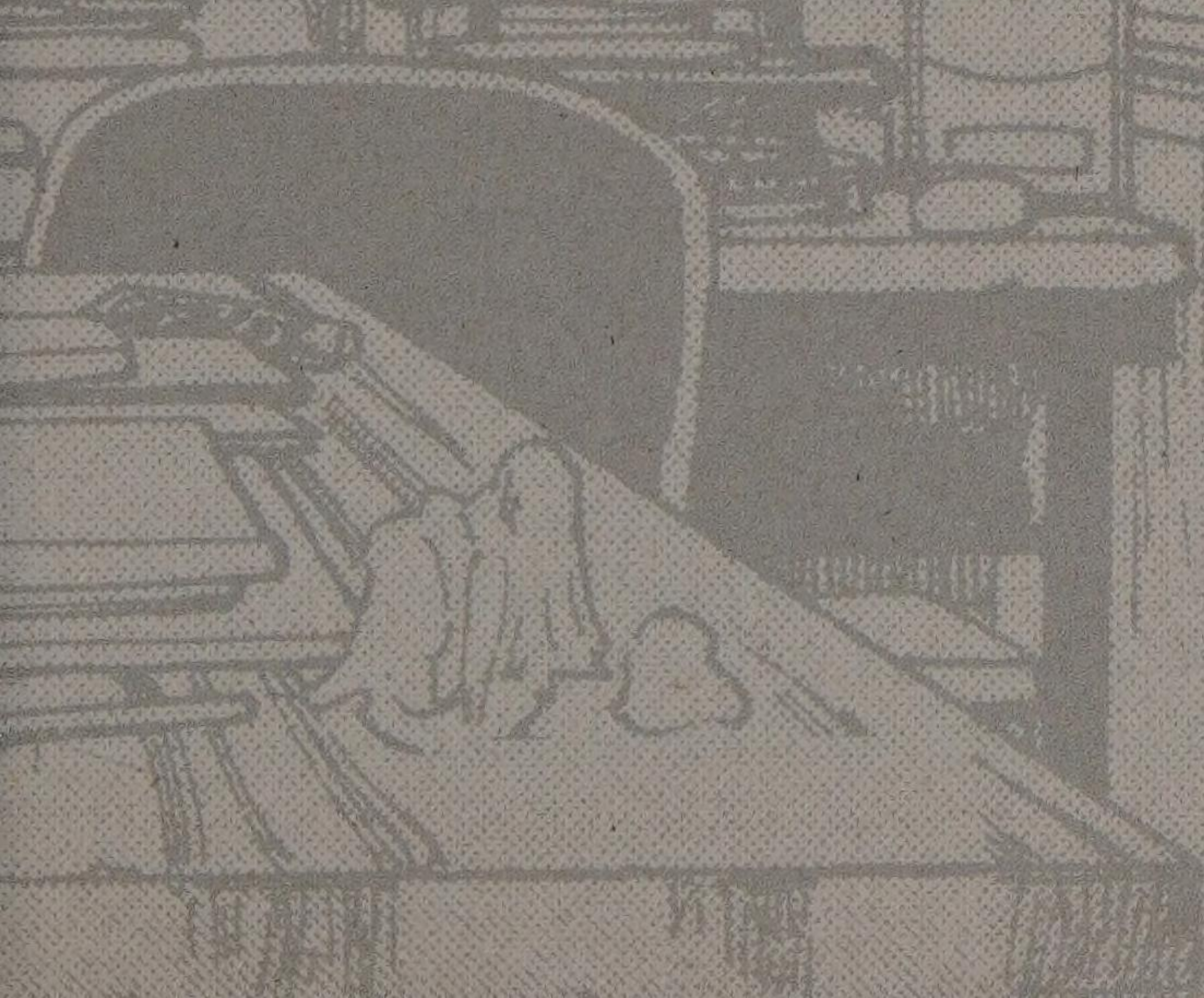
Now I have another sketchbook, totally blank, nothing drawn in it.

Despite this being only natural, white drawing paper appeared as he flipped the pages. He always bought them expecting to find something drawn on the pages, but they always ended up being blank.

Blank paper was horrendous. Because all by itself, it had perfect harmony.

Disrupting that was also horrendous.

It was all right if white paper got dirty. Thinking this, he spilled coffee on it, making a stain. A shape rose to the surface. It was the silhouette of a young girl. This was also terrifying, so he washed it off with cleanser. And that tore it. Of course it tore; it was paper. There were many sketchbooks in the bookcase. The number of blank sketchbooks with nothing drawn in them increased all the time.



■ Hairu's Forehead

Ranto Hairu stood alone in front of the bathroom sink looking at the two protuberances that had appeared on his forehead. Each day, while he suffered severe headaches, they grew a little more.

Anna would help him. He had to find the Jizo's other half, and fast. If this kept up, he would be consumed by the demon.

As of yet, no demon had appeared in his dreams as Sakunosuke said it had appeared in his. He had many things he wanted to ask it, even if it was a demon.

But this transformation in Hairu's physique was proof that his body now possessed the "demon's power." He was eager to find out what kind of power it was. The dice had been thrown.

Once Hairu had acquired the demon's power, what was the first thing he would do to bring about his ideal world? And then what should he do next? And after that? He became obsessed with the unending daydreams. What he should do now was not fantasy, it was action. He would no longer rely on Anna alone.

The club building was overflowing with large amounts of "stuff." Hairu resolved to completely do away with this practice. The SS would follow orders if he explained they were carrying out the expulsion of degenerate arts. And through experiencing the pleasure of gaining total control over their opponents in the next operation, the SS would become more stable as a military unit. Actual warfare was the best training. The current SS could become accustomed to rougher operations.

He needed to awaken the latent tendency to violence

possessed by each individual in the unit. This might unexpectedly turn out to be the demon's power, which would mean he had it already. Hairu considered this as he polished the plan for the next operation. How would the name *Operation Spring Awake* be for what he anticipated would take the SS as a unit to the next level? He twiddled his fingers around the protuberances on his forehead as he thought.

■ In Meeting Room 3 in Sakunosuke Memorial Hall

After the afternoon lectures had finished, the SS gathered in meeting room 3 in Sakunosuke Memorial Hall. The ranks of the SS had swollen to almost one hundred strong, more than three times the number of members at their first meeting. The Demon Jizo glowered from the front of the hall, where he was enshrined as the guardian deity of the SS. Igarashi-kun sat in a folding chair, eyes closed, arms crossed. His expression was grim.

At first glance, Igarashi-kun seemed unperturbed, but a closer look revealed that he was shaking slightly. No one was able to ascertain if he was trembling with excitement; needed to pee; was cold, hungry, or nervous; was straining himself unnecessarily; or was just unconsciously fidgeting.

Igarashi-kun was thinking about his letters.

From the beginning, letters had been born to convey words from one person to another. The standard letter was handwritten, with the assumption that only the person to whom it was addressed would read it.

Yet that assumption was tenuous. All it took was one quirky postal worker for the system to break down.

Quirky postal workers did exist. Everyone could agree on that.

Still, people kept on writing letters. Even after new methods like the telephone or e-mail were invented.

Was there anything as good as a letter? If there was, he didn't know what it might be.

So surely it must mean something to keep writing letters even if they never got sent. He wanted it to be like that. He wanted to believe it. *If I didn't believe that, I couldn't go on doing it, that's for sure. In other words, everything being in a state of flux means that there's at least that possibility, right, Miyamoto Musashi-san!?*

There he was. Igarashi-kun asked the question of the Miyamoto Musashi inside his mind. But Miyamoto Musashi took an ambiguous attitude toward his frantic question, not giving a clear answer.

It's always like this! That's how you are! Igarashi-kun shouted inside his mind.

This irritation with answering his own questions was the true cause of his body's shaking.

It was for this reason that Igarashi-kun had waited for someone charismatic like Ranto Hairu to appear. Unlike some vague Musashi, Hairu gave extremely clear answers and then acted upon them.

He outlined everything as clearly as if yelling "Action!" to announce that they were now making a Hollywood-style movie. Everything was refreshingly frank, straightforward, and inspirational.

And Igarashi-kun was not the only one who thought so. All the members of the SS gathered in meeting room 3 had been waiting.

Everyone had been waiting for someone like him.

From the hall came the sound of approaching footsteps. Solid, confident, decisive footsteps.

And then, with the best timing, the door everyone had been gazing at opened.

And, look, there was Ranto Hairu!

Okay, everybody, let's go!

"Let Operation Spring Awake begin!"

■ Sports Festival from Hell

The members of the SS paraded through the campus. In the ranks, Igarashi-kun wore his kendo uniform and carried his clothes box. Each participant wore the uniform of his or her club activity, making it look from a distance like a colorful and brilliant parade.

Yet the initials SS had been cut into their arms with a knife. The sight made it clear that this procession was anything but a lighthearted parade. In reality, the wounds were merely special makeup, created with a kind of paint that looked like blood. Even so, the imitation wounds made a powerful impact, strengthening the impression on those around them that this was a brutal and bloodthirsty group.

The people who encountered this procession shook with fear.

And each person had an implement he or she was used to handling. All were everyday objects that could be used to do a lot of damage. At the front of the line were members of the baseball club with their metal bats. The tennis club had the supports for the nets; the bowling club carried balls and pins. Eleven members of the soccer club carried goalposts on their shoulders. Even worse, each member was lifting and heading soccer balls for some dark, unknown purpose. There were

heavy metal shot put balls, javelins, and discuses. These were weapons in and of themselves and could not in any way be considered innocent sports club equipment.

Ranto Hairu and Anna were not present. They had a different task to perform.

The SS paraded once around the campus in a show of force before arriving at the club building. The member standing at the head of the group used a megaphone to read out a statement.

"This announcement is for all students inside the club building. We will embark on a forced search of the club building. We will take action to expose and confiscate any inappropriate material from any club activity. You must now vacate the building. Anyone who resists will be punished without mercy. This is your final notice. I repeat, this announcement is for all students inside the club building. We . . ."

After reading this announcement three times, he gave the following command: "Drum and fife corps, forward! Commence playing!"

The drum and fife corps that appeared from the ranks was a small brass band. They proceeded to play Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," as instructed by Hairu. The melody of this piece was strangely powerful.

The drum and fife corps played an arrangement in which the rhythm had been changed to a march, which heightened the melody's solemnity, heroism, and feeling of exaltation.

When Igarashi-kun had played a CD of the tune at the prior meeting, thinking it would work well, Hairu had ordered them to play it live.

I see. Playing it live like this makes the intensity totally differ-

ent. I can see how this instantly raises the brigade's morale. I'm so impressed. Hairu-san thinks of everything. Once again, Igarashi-kun was awestruck by Hairu.

A number of students came out of the club building to see what the fuss was about. The gaze of the SS settled upon them. Feeling an alarming pressure, the students hurriedly ran away.

In the end, the students who came out were the only ones who left. The intimidation hadn't been effective enough, thought Igarashi-kun, but if all the students had run away, that would have cut the fun by half. Igarashi-kun gave an inappropriate smile.

Eagerly, the members of the SS waited, shoulders squared, for the order to rush in. They had given the warning and conducted an impressive ceremony. Any minute now.

"Attaaaaack!" came the command.

Perhaps he'd tried a little too hard to sound forceful, for his voice cracked. But this was what the SS had been waiting for. They stormed toward the entrance of the club building.

Igarashi-kun dashed to the head of the line.

As he ran, Igarashi-kun was reminded of an enormous herd of buffalo. As a child in America, he had once seen a herd feeding in a pasture, and the scene had moved him greatly. Just the thought that he was leading a herd of buffalo was enough to tear a war cry from his throat.

It wasn't as if the door to the club building was locked, so all they would have needed to do was simply open the door, but Igarashi-kun took it upon himself to hurl himself against the glass with all his might, shattering it. One after another, the members behind him dove into the club building.

■ The Society for the Study of Group Intelligence Algorithms in Games

Just then the four members of the Society for the Study of Group Intelligence Algorithms in Games were in their room in the club building, engaged in a heated argument over the theme for the new game they were going to produce.

“What I mean is, just *moe* on its own won’t work forever. Competition’s fiercer than it used to be. In this age, people are looking for *moe* plus alpha.” The person who was quick to find fault was one of the group’s radicals.

“We know that. But what is this ‘plus alpha’? Give us something specific.”

“Uh, maybe *moe* 3.0?”

“Okaaay. I mean, I wasn’t thinking when I said that. Just because you put numbers after it doesn’t mean it makes sense. Have an opinion? Anyone?” The radical of the group had momentum, but that didn’t mean he had a concrete proposal.

“What do you think of ‘*Moe* 3.0, Campus Life’? So there’s this tree on this campus, and this guy makes a profession of love there, and . . .” The group became caught up in the game he was imagining. “And this guy returns to the point of origin as much as possible.”

As might be expected, the president was calm.

“Hey, hasn’t it been kinda noisy outside for a while now?”

“It’s probably just the light music club practicing. They’re always making noise.”

“I heard something that sounded like a speech, too.”

“That’s probably that stuff called ‘rap.’ ‘Light Music 3.0, Speech.’” This was from the group’s know-it-all.

“Enough already. Let’s stop this overreaching ourselves by

bantering about terms like *alpha* and 3.0 that we know little about. All we have to do is master *moe* times *moe*. That's all we can do. That'll be enough. This 'return to origin' is fine and dandy. I mean, we can do it any way we like." With this last remark, the president achieved consensus.

"True."

"Yeah, true."

"Yeah, that's true."

Just when they had finally reached a consensus, people stampeded in like a herd of crazed cattle. They moved more fiercely and quickly than people usually did. Before the members of the Society for the Study of Group Intelligence Algorithms in Games could comprehend what was happening, each and every member was hoisted into the air and unceremoniously deposited outside the club building. Some members took no notice at all.

Such were the agility and speed of the actions of the SS.

In the room now devoid of its owners, a member of the kendo team said something as he put a hand on a poster hung on the wall depicting a *bishoujo* game. The poster's design was somewhat provocative, causing some of those looking at it to scowl.

"This is without a doubt degenerate art. This is not allowed, not allowed. Let us rip it to shreds right here and now!"

Now Igarashi-kun suddenly raised his voice angrily. "Don't be stupid! It was decided that Hairu-san would dispose of such things. All we need to do is quickly carry out the mission we were given. All right, now on to the next room to kick out any remaining people!"

The occupation of the club building proceeded smoothly.

At the same time, a barricade was built to block the building's entrance.

■ Igarashi-kun's Unsent Letter, Part 5

Will you be my princess? To Kanako Ohno.

Hey, Kanako.

Sorry my last letter was so incoherent. I had no intention of being rude. It's just that I was so extremely shocked by the existence of Mr. Tanaka that I unintentionally ended up writing abusive things. I am truly sorry.

Operation Spring Awake is proceeding smoothly. We have succeeded in taking over the school club building. I worked unfalteringly. I'm writing this letter in the time I have before I get my next orders. This could end up being my last letter, or to put it another way, my last will and testament. I mean, it could be the case that during an operation, or maybe in a duel with you, I end up breathing my last. This is my fondest wish. And even if you lay down your life, no hard feelings. That's the way swordfights are.

The other day I was asked for a favor by Hairu-san's younger sister, Anna-san. See? I'm part of the Standards Brigade, so they trust me.

So they sent me to some Net café to move these things that looked like caskets from there to meeting room 3. Eight of them! Making eight round trips towing them with my bicycle was hard even for me. Anna asked for an awful lot. The caskets were all about the same size, but some of them were heavier than others. Some had stuff in them, and others were empty. If they *were* caskets, then why? Maybe that means eight people are going to die in the near future? Kanako, please don't die until I get a chance to have a bout with you. Of course, I don't know if what was in the caskets were bodies, because they were wrapped up in cloth.

And then, Anna told me I'd done a good job, and what did she give me as a reward but a sword! Not a bamboo sword either. Seriously, a real sword. Real swords glitter exquisitely in the sun, don't they? I bet this is a sword signed by a swordsmith handed down by the Hairu family. Having been given this sword for which I am so grateful, I shall challenge you with it, Kanako. I tested it on a straw bag, and it sliced right through it. Amazing.

Y'know, Operation Spring Awake was smoking-hot. We drove out the undesirable elements and paraded through the club building like we owned the place. We mercilessly tossed around anyone who resisted. I felt almost like a shogun or something. Human rights violations? Ha-ha. Running amok? Ha-ha. It was great, *great*! Letting loose the beast inside is the best there is! To celebrate, I'm going to open up a bottle of wine I've been saving. I have Camembert ready, too. I will give you a taste of the joy of waiting on the emperor.

From your Igarashi-kun, the second coming of
Napoleon.

■ The Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times

At the time Operation Spring Awake was being executed, Kanako Ohno and Souichiro Tanaka were in the auditorium of Sakunosuke Memorial Hall, located about three miles away from club headquarters.

Having turned completely into the Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times, Ohno was now standing by in the dressing room where she had changed.

After completing the settings inside the auditorium, Tanaka made his final checks in front of a control panel.

He had darkened the auditorium, turning off all illumination. This was to heighten the effectiveness of the spotlight.

In the middle of the stage, Tanaka had used white tape to make an X. If Ohno stood on the X, she would show up well in the spotlight and he could get a full-body shot of her in the frame of his camera set up on a tripod in the audience seating.

"Are you ready, Ohno-san?"

After a slight pause, Ohno answered, "Ready."

Ohno's usually soft voice was strong and clear. Fighting spirit rang out in her voice.

Tanaka pushed the buzzer that announced the curtains were opening. As there was no audience, there was really no need to do this, but pushing the button improved the ambience. Next, Tanaka pushed the button that raised the drop curtain, which scrolled upward. The show was on.

Now that Ohno had completely become the character of the Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times, she appeared from upstage and moved quickly to stand in the designated spot. Her back was straight, dignified. Her posture was good. Her placement of her center of gravity was as elegant as any professional model. The spotlight made her appear to be floating. She seemed every inch the Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times, called from a parallel universe.

This was good.

Tanaka gave a grunt of approval. While making the costume, he'd had Ohno try it on at several points so he could check every detail. He thought he'd gotten an accurate impression of his workmanship, but seeing it in this unique environment, his assessment was totally different. He re-

remembered how when he was making the armor, he'd forgotten to wear a mask because he wasn't used to using that particular resin and he'd been in danger of inhaling a large amount of toxic dust. Now all of his hard work had borne fruit. Tanaka felt an agreeable sense of exhaustion.

But they couldn't just stay here basking in the glow of success. He had to get those pictures taken. The feeling of presence given off by a real person was exceptional. People watching couldn't help being drawn into that world, like it or not. Life, it was magic. Creators of costumes could not give in to this feeling, however. In order to keep aiming for greater heights, they had to examine their work from an objective point of view one more time. For that, taking photographs was indispensable.

"Ohno-san, I'm going to start taking pictures. Get your pose ready." Tanaka came down from the wings and jogged over to where the camera was set up to look in the finder.

Ohno lowered her eyes to the camera. Now Ohno was not her usual warm and easygoing self.

She was the personification of the keen-eyed Sword-fighter Summoned from Ancient Times, ready to run her enemy through in an instant.

Sword brandished, she made a series of fluid moves in a magnificent sword dance that only rigorous training could have made possible.

Even as Tanaka felt himself becoming overwhelmed, he braced himself so as not to be swallowed up by Ohno's unfolding performance as he clicked away at the shutter. Again and again. He tried not to blink. He needed to capture everything Ohno expressed.

Okay, dance! Cut the bonds of gravity and fly through space with reckless abandon!

Now an extremely tense and concentrated air flowed between the two of them with which anyone would find it hard to interfere.

That is, until the appearance of an intruder with a buzz cut who didn't know what was going on.

Igarashi-kun had come to Sakunosuke Memorial Hall as a messenger in order to report that Operation Spring Awake was going smoothly.

On the way to meeting room 3, he had heard a sound from the auditorium, although there was usually no sign of people there—the sound of a camera shutter.

What on earth is that? thought Igarashi-kun. When he peeked into the auditorium through the crack between the doors, he saw a beautiful female swordfighter wielding her sword as skillfully as if it were her own hands and feet.

He was entranced by her loveliness. For five minutes, he gazed at her with rapt attention, at last understanding he was seeing a costumed Kanako Ohno. He forgot his original purpose for being there, believing instead that the time for his decisive match with Ohno had come.

■ Kanako Ohno versus Igarashi-kun

Concentrating on cosplay, Ohno and Tanaka had not realized that Igarashi-kun had entered the auditorium. Brandishing the sword he had received from Anna, Igarashi-kun crept up unnoticed behind Tanaka as he snapped the shutter of his camera, engrossed. The blow dealt was only with the flat of the blade, but Tanaka dropped like a bag of bricks, perhaps suffering a mild concussion.

The seating area was darker than the stage, so Ohno had

not yet noticed this alarming incident. Soon Igarashi-kun stood right in front of Ohno. She finally noticed the intruder with a buzz cut.

"Who are you? Identify yourself." Even her delivery was that of the Swordfighter Summoned from Ancient Times.

The two of them stood face-to-face illuminated by the spotlight.

"I am Igarashi-kun, your loving and faithful servant. That's not my real name, though."

"Tanaka-san!?" Looking toward the seats, Ohno saw Tanaka collapsed beside his camera. She shook with anger, no longer Ohno of the gentle soul.

"All right, we fight. We will have an electrifying bout. This is an act of love and our destiny as swordsmen, he-he." Here he giggled.

"I'll never let you get away with this!"

This was the event Igarashi-kun had been waiting for. He was able neither to conceal his delight nor to suppress his laughter. Ohno raised her sword like a consummate swordsman. The smile left his face as he came back to reality. *Who holds a sword like that?* he thought. *I've seen all kinds of swordsmanship in the many swordfights I've had, but this is the first time I've seen a sword stance like that. It must be a very old style.* Igarashi-kun had only ever practiced modern Japanese-style fencing. Igarashi-kun was generally familiar with varieties of swordsmanship from around the world, but he had no information on what appeared to be a sword style that originated in ancient times. He felt anxious.

He had seen from her sword dance earlier that the timing of her blade was quick. In contrast, the basis of his own school of swordfighting was one's own sword. Igarashi-kun

would have to risk all on this moment. When it came to handling, he was at a disadvantage. What should he do? How should he attack?

Igarashi grew tired of attacking. Ohno shifted to a different way of holding her sword and came at him tirelessly.

Mm, are you going to attack? When you do, should I ward off the first blow, invite an opening, and strike?

I can't read her strategy because I don't know anything about her peculiar way of swordsmanship.

Sweat beaded on Igarashi-kun's forehead. He felt under tremendous pressure.

I wish you weren't glaring at me so hatefully. Is Mr. Tanaka so important to you? I love you more truly than he does. And the sword I wield now is real. Normally, I have the advantage in swordfights, but my true love for you is making this difficult.

How impressively courageous of you. You recklessly abandon every conventional school of swordplay for your own primordial style that appears to have originated in ancient times. Your style is so original, it's as though it were born from the big bang. Could this thirst for blood I'm sensing be the essence of your primordial sword? I should fear it! Fear the primordial sword!

Of course, Ohno was only a cosplayer. She had no knowledge of martial arts. She was merely imitating the fictitious swordplay depicted in games and anime.

However, it was no exaggeration to say that her rage against the attack on Tanaka was all-consuming. From a psychological perspective, her fighting spirit was completely superior to Igarashi-kun's. And that Igarashi-kun had read too much into it worked to Ohno's advantage.

And then.

"Muun!" Igarashi-kun ran at Ohno.



He felt the edge of his sword make contact. Had he done it? He turned around as Ohno's bangs hit the ground.

Oh, so cute! I knew your bangs were too long! See? They look greeeat! Just like I predicted. I gave you this advice in one of my letters a while back, not that I sent it.

Oh, you look so cute! The more I look at you, the cuter you get! Oh, I am so in love with you! I love you! I love you so much!

"Got you!"

Ohno's broadsword came down on the crown of Igarashi-kun's head.

Igarashi-kun fell to his knees. The sword dropped from his hand and rolled across the ground until it finally came to a stop. In a contest to the death, throwing down one's sword signaled unconditional surrender. *I was not ready. I trusted too much in my sword. I, Igarashi-kun, shed tears for my worthlessness.*

"You win. . . ."

Tanaka, who had regained consciousness, rushed over to Ohno.

"A-are you okay, Ohno-san?"

"Oh! Tanaka-san! Thank goodness. I thought you . . ."
Tears flowed liberally from Ohno's eyes, perhaps because she let her guard down in relief.

Tanaka gently enfolded her in his arms.

■ Farewell, Igarashi-kun

For a moment, Igarashi-kun had been unable to move. Finally, he stood up and addressed Kanako Ohno and Souichiro Tanaka, who held hands tightly. "Ah, you win.

You definitely win. I have been defeated in the match and in love. It is regrettable and sad.

"But this is all right. I am glad. Because Ohno noticed me at last. Nothing good has happened to me since I was born. I couldn't help hating my complicated upbringing, and I thought this is all my life would ever be. Then I met you. My love was unrequited, but it made each day wonderful. It made me happy just to know you were near me. At first, I was satisfied with just that. But after a while, that was no longer enough. I wanted to know more about you. I wanted to touch you. I didn't know what I wanted, but I wanted all of you. That feeling quickly escalated. I couldn't even communicate to you that I existed, no matter how hard I tried. I wonder why. I'm sure it's because I had no confidence. Because I didn't love myself, in any sense. I only wrote you letters. And then Hairu-san found me. He said I was the standard people should be judged by. I was so happy. I mean, when someone else first notices you, suddenly you understand that you have your own worth. I believe it is a good thing that Miyamoto Musashi led me into doing kendo. I got to have a serious match with you, whom I adored, and I almost lost my life. But I feel as though something stagnant disappeared thanks to that. And now I can stand in front of you like this and tell you all my feelings. To you I must seem a terrible ruffian. A suspicious, lawless malcontent. I am deeply sorry. But now I feel wonderful. Because you noticed me. That's all I need. It's enough. Right now. But sometime in the near future, would you consent to be my bride? What about it, Kanako Ohno-san?"

Listening to him rush through his tale of the naked truth about himself, Ohno began to feel that Igarashi-kun wasn't so bad at heart. But on this reckless proposal of marriage, she turned him down flat.

"That is impossible."

Beside her, Tanaka gave a big nod.

Igarashi-kun laughed. "Ha-ha-ha. Sure. That's what I thought. If you won't marry me, will you at least be my little sister? Just for this moment. I want you to call me older brother just this once. Please? I beg you."

Igarashi-kun bowed his head deeply. He was surprisingly flexible, so that his head nearly touched his stomach. He waited for a time in this pose.

But neither Ohno nor Tanaka reacted in any way. *She turned me down this time, too*, thought Igarashi-kun.

He turned to leave, head bobbing, dejected.

Actually, Ohno herself was not particularly averse to calling him *onii-san*. This was because she liked a particular *kyokisa** in Akihabara. A *kyokisa* was a variant of a maid café; new ones had been springing up like bamboo after a rain. At a maid café, the waitresses welcomed the customers respectfully by speaking as a servant would: "Welcome home, master." At a sister café, the greeting was more family-style: "Welcome home, *onii-san*."[†] In Japan not many families employed maids, but younger sisters were easy to imagine. The intimacy and gentleness of a family relationship was the attraction of a sister café.

Still holding her hand, Tanaka signaled with his eyes. *Huh? Tanaka-san? Say it? Is it okay to say it?* Ohno asked back with her eyes. Tanaka moved his head side to side two times. One . . . two . . .

"*Onii-san!* Good luck!" Tanaka called out with her at Igarashi-kun's retreating back. Surprised, Igarashi-kun

* *kyokisa* Short for "sibling café."

† "Welcome home, *onii-san*" "Welcome home, big brother."

turned around. He seemed a bit startled, even though he himself had asked for this.

"Wow, both of you. And in harmony. Oh, but thank you. It makes me glad. You've touched my heart. It's a warm feeling. Oh, wow, it's nice, it's a really nice thing. Now I can do my best. I will work hard to be an upstanding human being. Thank you. Thanks, both of you. Okay, 'bye. Thanks!" Igarashi-kun left the auditorium with a heretofore unseen cheery expression on his face. It was as if with one little phrase an evil spirit had fallen away.

Operation Spring Awake and the existence of Ranto Hairu slipped completely out of his head.

This could have been due to a feeling of relief after the match, the power of Ohno and Tanaka's words, or temporary brain damage.

Right now, Igarashi-kun was thinking *I will become a stronger person. I will become a better person. That is what the way of the sword is for. I will go on a quest to pursue more training.* He was overflowing with these types of positive thoughts.

After Igarashi-kun left, looking cheerful, Ohno and Tanaka realized they'd been holding hands all this time, and both abruptly let go. They smiled, embarrassed.

Thinking that he had better tidy up, Tanaka went over to pick up his camera and tripod—and discovered two PC notebooks that someone had set up. The opening sequence of a game he had never seen before was on the display. Ohno came up close to him and peered over his shoulder to see what was on the monitor.

"What is this?" she asked. "It looks like a *bishoujo* game."

"When did this get here? It wasn't that guy with the

igakuri buzz cut who set it up here, was it? He didn't look like the type who has anything to do with computers. But if it wasn't him, then who set this up, and why on earth—?"

Neither of them had touched the computers, but both screens changed suddenly. A girl appeared on the monitor and said, "Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

Watching the screen, Ohno felt all the strength drain out of her. Noticing something wrong with Ohno, Tanaka turned and reached out to catch her, but suddenly he himself was overcome by a feeling of intense light-headedness.

The two of them collapsed in a faint.

Out of nowhere, a girl in a red kerchief appeared to collect the PCs. "There is not much time. I must hurry."

The background of the entire page features a dark, textured charcoal or pencil-style illustration of six anime-style characters. They are arranged in two rows of three. All characters have their eyes closed, giving them a peaceful or perhaps somber expression. The top row shows a boy on the left, a boy in the middle, and a girl on the right. The bottom row shows a boy on the left, a girl in the middle, and a girl on the right. The drawing style is minimalist, with fine lines and shading that blend into the dark background.

7

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KYODAI ★ KENKA

I'm awake. I'm not sleeping! My eyes are open and everything! Ohhh, I'm not so sure of that. I *could* be sleeping. Am I asleep? I mean, where am I?

It's because I haven't gone home in a long time. I don't know where it is anymore. I have no feeling of home. But not having one's totally okay with me because, in my case, I have no sense of attachment to place.

Who is it that's talking to me? Ah! I see you! The little girl over there! How cute you are! What's your name? Yeah? You have an older brother? Oh, you're fighting? It'll be okay. It'll be okay even if you fight. I don't know the facts about why you're fighting, but it'll be okay. I have no basis for saying this, but it'll be okay, really okay. Shall we go home now? What? You have no home to go to? I don't either. We're the same. Okay, shall we just live here together?

Someday I'd like to have a shop. When I do, I'll dress you in cute clothes.

■ Ranto Hairu, Anna, and Kyodai ★ Kenka

Meeting room 3 was upstairs from the auditorium in Sakunosuke Memorial Hall, which had been the scene of the major confrontation that had just taken place between Kanako Ohno and Igarashi-kun.

Objects that had been confiscated from each club by members of the SS under suspicion of their being degenerate art were laid out on the meeting room table.

Ranto Hairu and Anna looked at these things from a small window in the anteroom to meeting room 3. "You mean what the Jizo is searching for, whatever it takes to control the demon's power, is here? It looks like just a bunch of rubbish. Do you feel anything, Anna?"

"No, nothing."

"How is it going with the Genshiken, the 'Society for the Study of Fantasy Visual Culture'?"*

"We already control three of them: Kuchiki, Sasahara, and Kousaka. I just acquired two more: Ohno and Tanaka. They are now being initiated. If we can get these five to work, we can use the power of their dreams to create the specifications of the thing the Jizo is looking for. Three members of the Genshiken are still at large. If we can get them all to work, there will be a greater degree of accuracy."

"I don't know if I can wait that long. . . ."

"I will hurry. How are you feeling?"

"All right. Things seem to have subsided."

The protuberances on either side of Hairu's forehead

* *Society for the Study of Fantasy Visual Culture* Here Hairu refers to the Genshiken but replaces the kanji for "modern" with the kanji for "illusion/fantasy," which explains why he thinks he can use the club members to obtain the demon's power.

were now as long as the distance to the first joint in his thumb.

“What effect does Kyodai ★ Kenka have?”

“The flicker effect and subliminal message embedded in the opening sequence are what do the job. They ensure capture.”

■ Assault on and Defense of the Club Building

It was evening when Harunobu Madarame and Saki Kasukabe arrived at Shiiou University.

The two of them had panicked when they saw Kousaka's face on his computer monitor. They searched for him in several places. Unable to find any sign of him, they decided the next step would be to check at the university. He could have been calmly playing games in the Genshiken room, although they didn't expect this to be the case.

“Did Kousaka get inside the display somehow?”

“How could he? I don't remember hearing news of anyone's having invented a computer that eats people. That screen saver is just somebody's bad idea of a joke.”

“But we checked all the places Kousaka might be, and he wasn't at any of them. He doesn't answer his mobile either. I wonder if it's because of that woman. The one in the red kerchief. Ah, my feet hurt! I feel like I shaved three centimeters* off my heels just today! If he's not at school, I don't know *where* he is! I feel sick to my stomach!”

“I never would have thought that Kousaka would cheat on you. Well, maybe with someone two-dimensional. Oh,

* *three centimeters* Slightly over an inch.

but what if it was a character like you, Kasukabe-san? Does that fall into the category of cheating? Would you be jealous of a two-dimensional woman?"

"Well, I know the difference. Between the way he loves two-dimensional women and real women."

Madarame made no reply.

Ker-wham! It was Kasukabe's first real punch in a while. Madarame felt glad that Kasukabe was slowly returning to her normal self.

"Now that you mention it," he said, "I haven't seen Kuchiki or Sasahara for a while either. I wonder where they are. Tanaka and Ohno said they were going to première a new costume today, so I bet we'll see them later."

"Oh, hey, it's Kugappi!" She laughed. "He's eating something. Yo, Kugappi!" Genshiken member Mitsunori Kugayama was sitting on a campus bench, a *yakisoba* sandwich* roll stuffed in his cheeks.

"Oh, Kugayama. Nice to see you!" Madarame hadn't seen the other members of the Genshiken and was quite relieved to see Kugayama. In his relief, he put his arms around Kugayama in a big hug before stopping to think.

"L-let go, Madarame. I'm not into that, and we're in public."

"I know, I know. But deal with it. I'm so happy to see you."

"Uh, Kugappi, things seem kind of strange here at school. Did something happen?"

"Y-yes, Kasukabe-san. Actually, this weird group called the SS took over the club building. They threw me out.

* *yakisoba sandwich* Slightly larger than a dinner roll, stuffed with fried noodles in sauce. Starchy but good.

That's why I'm eating my sandwich out here.* I'd much rather be eating it in the Genshiken room."

"I don't understand a word you just said. Anyway, want to go to the club building? Kousaka might be there. Come with us, Kugayama."

"N-n-no! The group's dangerous! I'm scared! Kousaka's n-n-not there. I was the only one there today."

"C'mon, Kugappi, get up! If it looks like things are going to get dangerous, I'll take care of it." Kasukabe motivated Kugayama sufficiently for him to lumber to his feet and start off.

When they arrived at the club building, they saw a sturdy-looking barricade made of piles of scrap wood from desks and chairs, and countless students milling around in bemusement. "What's with this barricade?" Kasukabe demanded. "Let me through."

They dove through the crowd of people only to find at the entrance that muscular members of the American football club were standing in formation, arms locked and heads down. There was no way they could get inside the club building like this.

"Hey, what did I tell you? Let's just give up for the day and go to Akihabara."

"Don't be stupid! Our Genshiken room is in that building! We can't just let this happen! That room is our very identity, which we inherited from the age of the First President!"

* *eating my sandwich out here* A popular saying in Japan is that only beggars eat outside. It's a big deal for Kugayama to be eating outside.

"Y-y-yeah, I know, but h-h-how are we supposed to get through that?"

Next to Madarame, Professor "One Puff," who taught Kasukabe's Japanese literature class, grinned broadly as he stood looking at the barricade. "It's nice to see one of these. I haven't seen one in quite some time. But the density of that one's not very good. If you smash out the bottom, getting through will be easy. Still, it was pretty pathetic that none of the people who got thrown out put up much of a fight. It would be a shame if we didn't get to make even one Molotov cocktail."

Madarame overheard Professor "One Puff" talking to himself. Making peace signs with both hands, he said, "Professor, teach me. How to make a Molotov cocktail, I mean. We have to break through this barricade to recapture our fortress."

"Ah, you're going to go for it, are you? You seem ready. Okay, to make a Molotov cocktail, first you do this, and this."

Taking a pad of paper from his pocket, Professor "One Puff" drew Madarame a diagram while giving him instructions.

"Ha-hah! I see. It's pretty simple if you have the materials."

"Uh-huh. Wait just a minute." The professor pulled a tote bag and a piece of what looked like a four-by-four out from under a nearby thick growth of plants. "These are my gift to you. Put these on and hold this. I've already made some Molotov cocktails."

When Madarame opened the bag, he saw a towel, a helmet, and several Molotov cocktails. With inexperienced

hands, he put on the helmet, covered his nose and mouth with the towel, and picked up the heavy piece of wood.

"Looks good. You're a little skinny, but it looks good on you. These are the three sacred treasures used by a brave man who was known as the Che Guevara of all the demonstrations at Shiiou University. This is the much-feared Staff of *Gewalt*,* which can break through any polycarbonate shield; an unbreakable helmet, which prevents injury no matter how many times you are hit by batons; and a no-tear gas mask towel."

"This towel reeks of mold," said Madarame, whose voice was muffled by the towel.

"That mold works as a natural filter that renders your enemies' tear gas useless. It has been said of these things that if you have them, you have all you need to take on an entire squadron of riot police. All right, now that you've been reborn as a revolutionary fighter, tear down the barricade and let the winds of freedom blow through the university once again!"

He's nothing like his lecture persona. Professor "One Puff" is totally dynamic! In her mind, Kasukabe gave him this compliment, like the straight man in a comedy duo.

"All riiight! Let's get this done! Kugayama, Kasukabe-san, Professor, I'm counting on you! See you in the Genshiken room!"

"I don't f-f-feel like fighting, but I'll go along with this. I-i-identity is important!"

"Okay, Madarame, give 'em hell!"

* *Gewalt* The Japanese word is from the German word used to mean violence on the part of political radicals.

"Aim . . . fire!" Taking aim at the football players behind the barricade, Madarame lobbed a Molotov cocktail.

The strength and angle of his first throw were out of balance, landing it short, in front of the barricade. There was a sharp pop as the Molotov cocktail struck the ground, then it burst into flames.

The football players quaked with fear, wondering where this pillar of fire had come from all of a sudden.

In a flash, Madarame threw the second. "Nice one!"

This time his aim was true. The Molotov cocktail sailed over the barricade to land just in front of the football players before bursting into flames. Bewildered by the unexpected attack, the players broke formation.

"Well, lemme take a look." Bravely, Madarame clung to the barricade to whack at a flimsy area with the wood.

"Wow, Madarame. You're doing it! Let me help!"

"I'm g-g-gonna throw some!"

Kasukabe and Kugayama began throwing Molotov cocktails to cover Madarame. Professor "One Puff" went around handing out more Molotov cocktails and four-by-fours.

Inspired by the efforts of Madarame, Kugayama, and Kasukabe, other students decided to fight and picked up weapons. Soon the students thrown out of the club building had banded together to become the Otaku Alliance.

"Tear up the paving stones to throw, too. Throwing stones, get it? These are also good. Anything can be a weapon. Okay, let's fight for freedom! Fight the power!"

"Woo-hoo!"

"Here we go!"

The usually docile students joined forces to oppose the occupation of the club headquarters building.

"Get 'em!"

"Pound 'em!"

"Whack 'em upside the head!" came three familiar voices.

Professor "One Puff" was really getting into the spirit of the event, stirring things up as he swam through the crowd.

"Fights and fires are the flowers of Edo.* This is what university is all about. Do it! Go! Get 'em! Down with the Establishment! Hell no, we won't go! Solidarity, not solitude!† Let's go, let's go!"

The Otaku Alliance was winning the game of numbers against the SS. At this unanticipated counterresistance, the American football team was routed and ran inside the club headquarters. Now they could concentrate on breaking down the barricade.

Kugayama used his enormous body to clear away the barricade of desks and chairs. If a news crew van had been on the scene, the reporters would have nicknamed him "the Human Bulldozer" for his enthusiasm. He was so fast that it was hard to believe how slowly he usually moved. Kasukabe couldn't help admiring him as she stood next to him lobbing Molotov cocktails.

"Wow, Kugappi, you're doing great!"

"It's kinda fun. Really fun." At some point, Kugayama's stutter had disappeared.

Actually, Kugayama had made considerable progress on the barricade.

* *Fights and fires* . . . Edo is the old name for Tokyo. He means that without fights and fires, Tokyo wouldn't be Tokyo.

† *Down with the Establishment!* . . . The original Japanese are protest slogans. The first is from China, the second is against the Japan-America security agreement, and the third is an actual translation.

"We've broken through!"

"Yay!"

"Don't go through yet. Make the hole bigger first." Madarame gave instructions to the students around him. "We're not as strong as those football players are, so we'll get 'em with our numbers!"

"Yeah!" The barricade was being cleared away at a good clip. The Otaku Alliance gathered at the entrance to the building.

At some point, other students had obtained towels and helmets.

"Hey, where'd you guys get those? Are there any more?"

"Ordered 'em online. Used my mobile phone. A three-piece *gewalt* set."*

"They sure got delivered fast."

"Cuz they've got same-day delivery."

Before the football club was chased into the building, the players had fortified the entrance. The two groups glared at each other.

"Here's the gist of what we're going to do. We're going in all at once in a combined force. On the count of three. One, two . . ."

No football player can stop a crowd running wild, no matter how muscular he is. In addition, each group in the Otaku Alliance had powerful motivation for retaking the club building.

The members of the American football club tasted fear. Once it had taken root inside their heads, they were unable to deny the fear of the battlefield.

Members of the Otaku Alliance won the pushing match

* *gewalt* set. Could also be "violence set."

at the entrance because of their superior tenacity of purpose.

The American football club members scattered out of the club headquarters building like so many baby spiders.

"Woo-hoo! Success! We're in!" came the Otaku Alliance's cry of victory.

"What's next, Madarame?" Kasukabe asked Madarame, excited to know what he was going to do next.

"We'll use our momentum to take the head of our enemy's shogun."

When Madarame and the others set foot inside the club building, the outrageous destruction the SS had left behind rendered them speechless.

"Yikes! This is awful! Looks like the ruins of Somalia. Did they bomb the place or something?" Shards of rock were everywhere, as if they'd used hammers. If the entrance looked like this, then what kind of shape was the Genshiken room in? The room packed with so many precious things. It was frightening to imagine.

Wary of the SS, the Otaku Alliance advanced cautiously into the club building. "Watch out when you go around corners in the hallway." "There's no cover on the landings in the stairwell. You're a big target." "Stay calm." "Don't move around on your own." "Be sure to move in teams." Madarame took control of the situation, issuing precise directions as the need arose. All the strategies and tactics he had learned were finally serving their purpose.

Experience on the battlefield is more important than muscle. Good thing I played all those battlefield scenario games.

A soccer ball came flying down the hall with enormous force. It hit Madarame's helmet hard before bouncing off at an odd angle.

"Ow! The soccer club's up ahead, everybody! Charge!" Adrenaline coursed through Madarame's veins. Could this be the return of Shiiou University's Che Guevara? He advanced upon the soccer club with the destructive force of an angry god, defeating them. *I am matchless. Matchless is me!*

This was how it went from Madarame's perspective, but in truth, and with the help of the Otaku Alliance members, the number of soccer players they defeated was two or three.

Still, a victory was a victory. With this force, they would take back the club headquarters building! The strength of one individual was limited, but now the Otaku Alliance was a team. Surely this strength would overwhelm the SS. The inside of the club building fell silent. No doubt the fight against the SS continued somewhere, but there was no sign of it here.

Members of the Otaku Alliance dispersed, each to check on their own club room.

Under the direction of Madarame, the Genshiken members proceeded cautiously toward their room in a focused patrol mode.

"Put this on, Kasukabe-san. Just in case." Madarame handed his towel and helmet to Kasukabe.

"Thanks. Don't need this towel, though. It smells like mildew." Kasukabe bunched her hair into a ponytail and put the helmet on. Just then the SS track-and-field club pole vaulters came charging toward them, wielding their vaulting poles.

"Look out, Kasukabe-san!" Pushing Kasukabe out of the way, Madarame took the assault. The impact sent Madarame's glasses flying.

"Oww!"

"Are you all right? The lenses of your glasses are all

cracked." Kasukabe ran over to Madarame's glasses to pick them up and put them on his face. A pleasant scent not at all displeasing to Madarame lingered around Kasukabe.

By pooling their strength, the Otaku Alliance had taken back the club building without incident. Their return was triumphant.

"This was a good lesson. Oppressed students stood up to fight for their rights. That is important." From a spot a little distance away, Professor "One Puff" exhaled smoke contentedly as he watched the fight.

■ Nobody

"Kousaka, are you in there?" Kasukabe reached the door to the Genshiken room and threw it open hard. Makoto Kousaka was not inside. "Not here?"

The club building had been occupied for only four or five hours but, inside, the damage was terrible. It looked as if it had suffered a direct hit from a tornado. The club rooms were empty. Everything had been taken. Exclamations of dismay could be heard from every room.

The Genshiken room was no exception. Much had been removed from the room. All the desks, drawers, and bookshelves had been ransacked, the contents scattered everywhere. It would take at least a day to see what was missing and what remained.

"Boy, they certainly did a job on this place. I sure wish there was some evidence that Kousaka had been here, though. Hey, where's Kugappi?"

"He went to the bathroom."

"He did? Hm, maybe I should go check my makeup. There was so much dust!"

"Do it here. You shouldn't go by yourself. We don't know yet how safe it is. Some of those weirdos might still be around."

"It's not something you do in front of people."

"You don't need to wear any makeup, Kasukabe-san. You're pretty enough without it."

"You say the damndest things. Thanks, but a girl is naked without her makeup."

"But I have a really bad feeling about everyone being gone. I'm worried we won't find Tanaka or Ohno-san either. Where are they?"

"Okay, I'll be right back. It won't take long, and if I see anything dangerous, I'll come back immediately, so don't worry."

"I could go with you if you're okay with that."

"Oh, what are you saying?! I'm more worried about your glasses. Are they broken?"

"It's okay. I'll manage. The frames are twisted. But no big deal."

"Madarame, thank you. You saved me, and you looked so cool. 'Kay, back in a flash!" Tiny pouch in hand, Kasukabe left.

Harunobu Madarame tidied up some of the things scattered about the room. Then he pulled out a folding chair and put it in his usual place. It had gotten twisted in the violence, making it unsteady, not a good place to sit. There was a rattling sound. No one was there.

The sun went down. Night fell. Madarame turned on the lights.

He recalled the times he had spent in this room chatting about nothing much with the other members of the Genshiken. It hadn't been long since he'd done that, but it sure felt like the good ol' days now.

Still, no one was there.

He must have nodded off for a moment. Neither Kasukabe nor Kugayama had come back. Both had been in the bathroom for way too long.

Everybody had gone.

Madarame was attacked by demons of uncertainty.

■ All Gone

Once he had finished in the bathroom, Mitsunori Kugayama felt hungry. While he was washing his hands, he remembered he had eaten only one *yakisoba* roll. He'd left another in his bag inside the room! He'd eat that. It would be really sad if Madarame had already eaten it. But he'd been on the rampage big-time, too, so he must also be hungry. Kugayama could forgive Madarame if he'd left half.

At times like this, he sometimes saw food when he stared into the mirror. But he couldn't live on illusions; he knew he'd better eat. He couldn't just keep on swallowing saliva. If he did, he'd be taken to the land of the dead. At least that's what his grandmother used to say.

Just as he recalled this, he saw it. In the mirror. An *umeboshi*.^{*} Unconsciously, he started to salivate. *If I s-s-s-s-swallow saliva, I will die. I will die for sure.*[†] He gulped. *D-d-did I die? No, I'm all right. It hurt when I pinched my stomach.*

^{*} 93. *umeboshi* A pickled plum or apricot used to flavor food. The good ones are very good.

[†] *odd word breaks* His words are broken up like this in the original Japanese.

My grandmother was wrong to tell me that. It scared me big-time, too!

“ . . . brother, what . . . ?”

“Oh, Grandma . . . It’s been a while since I’ve seen you. What? S-s-s-say that again?”

In the mirror, Kugayama’s grandmother said to him, “Older brother—”

“I-I-I-I’m not your older brother!?” Kugayama had his grandma on the brain, so he had failed to notice that it was not an old woman murmuring in the mirror but a young girl. But there is some argument as to whether the faint reflection in the mirror looked human at all.

Kugayama heard a buzzing deep in his ears and crouched down.

And then lost consciousness as if he’d fallen asleep.

Mitsunori Kugayama vanished.

After she’d fixed her makeup in the mirror, Saki Kasukabe went up to the rooftop of the building. She wanted to sort out her feelings about Kousaka’s whereabouts.

Kousaka, where are you? It was really scary breaking down that barricade.

Although the fighting wasn’t scary. I totally enjoyed it. I’ve never thrown a Molotov cocktail before. They start small fires and I’m deathly afraid of fire, but today I conquered that fear. Ha-ha.

But I’m not the only one who enjoyed it. Madarame and Kugayama definitely enjoyed it, too. I could see it in their eyes.

Kousaka, if I hadn’t fallen in love with you, I never would have known how fun it was to throw a Molotov cocktail. I can’t be a normal girl anymore. It’s all your fault! You need to take re-

sponsibility. Oh, I can't think anymore. I have to teach you how that professor taught us to make Molotov cocktails.

Okay, Kousaka: come out, come out, wherever you are. Your time is almost up. I'm going to start shaking things up. I'll break up with you. But that'll be fine with you, because you have a ton of other lovers, right? With names like Loliko and Loliemon.*

I only have you, Kousaka. So come on out. Show me your gentle, smiling face. Quickly.

Kasukabe sighed. Why did this happen to me? I've always believed in being an independent woman. I can't believe I've lost out to a two-dimensional image. I'm so disgusted. I wonder if Madarame does that, too. No, I can't believe he does stuff like that. Are there any other good men out there? Besides Madarame? Hey, hey, don't get carried away with illusions, Saki-chan. Poke me in the forehead with your finger, Kousaka. Make me snap out of it. You weren't in the Genshiken room after all. That really scared me.

A woman stood on the rooftop. How long had she been there? She wore a red scarf.

This sparked something in Kasukabe.

"Oh! Oh! It's you, the woman I saw coming out of Kousaka's apartment! What were you doing there? Tell me! Hey, don't just stand there. Answer me! Where is Kousaka now?!"

Anna said nothing but opened the PC notebook she held in her hands. The opening scene for Kyodai ★ Kenka was on the screen.

"Hey, older sister." Up till then, Kasukabe had been shaking with anger, but at this strong image, something gave

* *Loliko and Loliemon* Saki is making puns on *Loli* from *Lolita* games and traditional Japanese names: *-ko* for a typical girl's name and *-emon* for a boy's name.

within her stomach. An unpleasant feeling started to churn inside it.

Then everything became dark.

Saki Kasukabe vanished.

■ Anna in Hairu's Arms

In meeting room 3, Ranto Hairu writhed in convulsions of pain.

His head hurt—hurt as though it would crack open.

Actually, his head *was* cracking open. The protuberances on either side of Hairu's forehead grew longer and longer. But when they were growing bigger, it felt more like they were splitting his forehead open from the inside to get to the outside. Hairu's pain was an infinite hell in which, unable to stand the torment, he lost consciousness only to be awakened again by the same excruciating pain.

Hairu's twisted grimace as he convulsed caused him to no longer bear any resemblance to the handsome youth he had once been. On the table was a stone statue almost one foot tall: the Demon Jizo.

"Elder Brother, I have captured two more members of the Genshiken, the Society for the Study of Fantasy Culture. Setup is complete. I will now engage. Please bear with me."

Please, Genshiken, give us the strength to dream and be powerful, Anna prayed as she turned on eight PC notebooks. A face popped up on seven of the notebooks: Manabu Kuchiki, Kanji Sasahara, Makoto Kousaka, Kanako Ohno, Souichiro Tanaka, Mitsunori Kugayama, and Saki Kasukabe. All the images were life-size. One of the PCs remained blank.

In unison, all seven inside the PCs said, "Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

As if in answer to this question, the Demon Jizo on the other side of the display cried out.

The sound reverberated eerily in the large room. One could almost believe that it came from the world of the dead. Droplets flowed from the Demon Jizo's eyes. They were tears.

Hairu pressed his hands hard to his forehead, his face twisted in anguish. The protuberances seemed to have become a bit longer.

"I will stop it." Anna forced the switches off.

"Do you mean this isn't what the Jizo wanted? Then this means—"

"No, you mustn't. You must not get up and walk in this condition."

"But—"

"I will protect you even if it costs me my life. If you were to turn into something ugly, I . . . I . . ." Suddenly, Anna was in Hairu's arms, stifling her sobs.

■ The Game in the Pocket

"Kasukabe-saaan, Kugayamaaaa, Kasukabe-saaan!" Desperately, Harunobu Madarame searched for the two who had gone to the bathroom and not come back. Thinking they might have returned by a different route, he kept checking the club room, but it remained deserted.

He searched every nook and cranny of the building.

Hesitantly, he checked the girls' bathroom. By this time, it was quite late, and there were no students anywhere. Perhaps they had gone home exhausted after taking back the club building from the SS. From the club building, he expanded his search to the rest of the campus. But he could not find a single clue as to where they might be.

No one was answering their cell phones. His battery went dead from all the calling he had done.

He never should have let Kasukabe go to the bathroom on her own. He'd had a bad feeling about it. He should have listened to his inner voice. He should have followed his instincts no matter *what* Kasukabe-san said.

Now, filled with bitter regret, Madarame sat chewing his lip in the Genshiken room.

He had thought the Genshiken would last forever. Those calm, uneventful days in which things rarely happened had been extremely precious.

Now that he had lost it, he could see.

He wanted to be in this room with his fellow Genshiken members and laugh, fight, play games, watch anime, and read manga. He'd thought those days would go on and on and on.

Of course, unrelated to this train of thought, he knew that time marches on. In the near future, he would graduate from Shiiou University and get some kind of job, and his place would no longer be here.

But none of this was supposed to have happened.

Why had all the members of the Genshiken vanished?

When had this strange incident begun?

Madarame thought. He thought, but his head wasn't working well. He thought about that, too.

Becoming calm, he thought back on it.

What had started this whole thing?

The new chairman of the on-campus club organization committee.

Kasukabe had been extremely interested in checking him out.

Ranto Hairu.

He had no positive proof, but he was sure the cogs had started to slip out of alignment when this guy had made his appearance at Shiiou University.

This guy's showing up had also fomented disturbances like the SS.

Mm. And now what do I do?

The police . . . That might work.

He could file a missing-person report with the police. And then wait for the results of the investigation. What good would it do to wait? While he waited, the situation could get more and more serious. If the rumor was true that Hairu was from some kind of *zaibatsu*, then maybe they had already won the officials over with bribes.

This is my problem. I have to find everybody.

Because I see the Genshiken in my dreams.

Because the Genshiken is my safe place.

"This is an impossible situation." He heard someone's voice. He looked up to see the First President. How long had he been there? He was living up to his reputation of

turning up at the most unexpected times in the most unexpected places.

“At a time like this, how about playing a game? Sometimes we can find the truth in play. Try engrossing yourself in this. But don’t get totally involved in it, or you may lose yourself. Really and seriously. Go for it. I’ll be here to cheer you on.” From his bag, the First President drew a notebook PC, which he handed to Madarame.

“Oh, and when you get to a dead end, just go back to where you started,” the First President said as he held out “Introduction to Joining a Club at Shiiou University.” This booklet had been how Madarame had found the Genshiken after coming to Shiiou University.

Then the First President vanished, as if he had never been there.

Madarame remembered he still had the DVD-ROM he had taken from Kousaka’s room in his pants pocket.

He hoped it hadn’t been smashed when they stormed the barricade.

It was okay.

He had a hard time believing that playing a game was what he should do at a time like this but decided to trust in what the First President had said.

“Allrightie, then, let’s give this a whirl.” Madarame pushed his broken glasses up on his nose and rolled up his sleeves.

■ Madarame Looks for His Glasses

Harunobu Madarame carefully started up the PC to install the game program.

Kyodai ★ Kenka was written across the surface of the

DVD in marker. This was that fantasy game that everyone on the Net was talking about. Madarame himself had been interested in this game. He had researched it thoroughly, but acquiring a copy had not been in the cards for him.

Now that I think of it, Kuchiki looked for this game in Akihabara, didn't he?

A copy of this game was in Kousaka's room when we discovered he was missing. That must mean that he played it, too. And then he disappeared. That woman that Kasukabe-san saw: Maybe she was the person who delivered this software?

Could it be that this game has something to do with why the members of the Genshiken vanished one after the other?

Like the president said, I have to proceed with caution, caution, and still more caution.

Madarame stretched out his back, clicked the mouse, and started up the game.

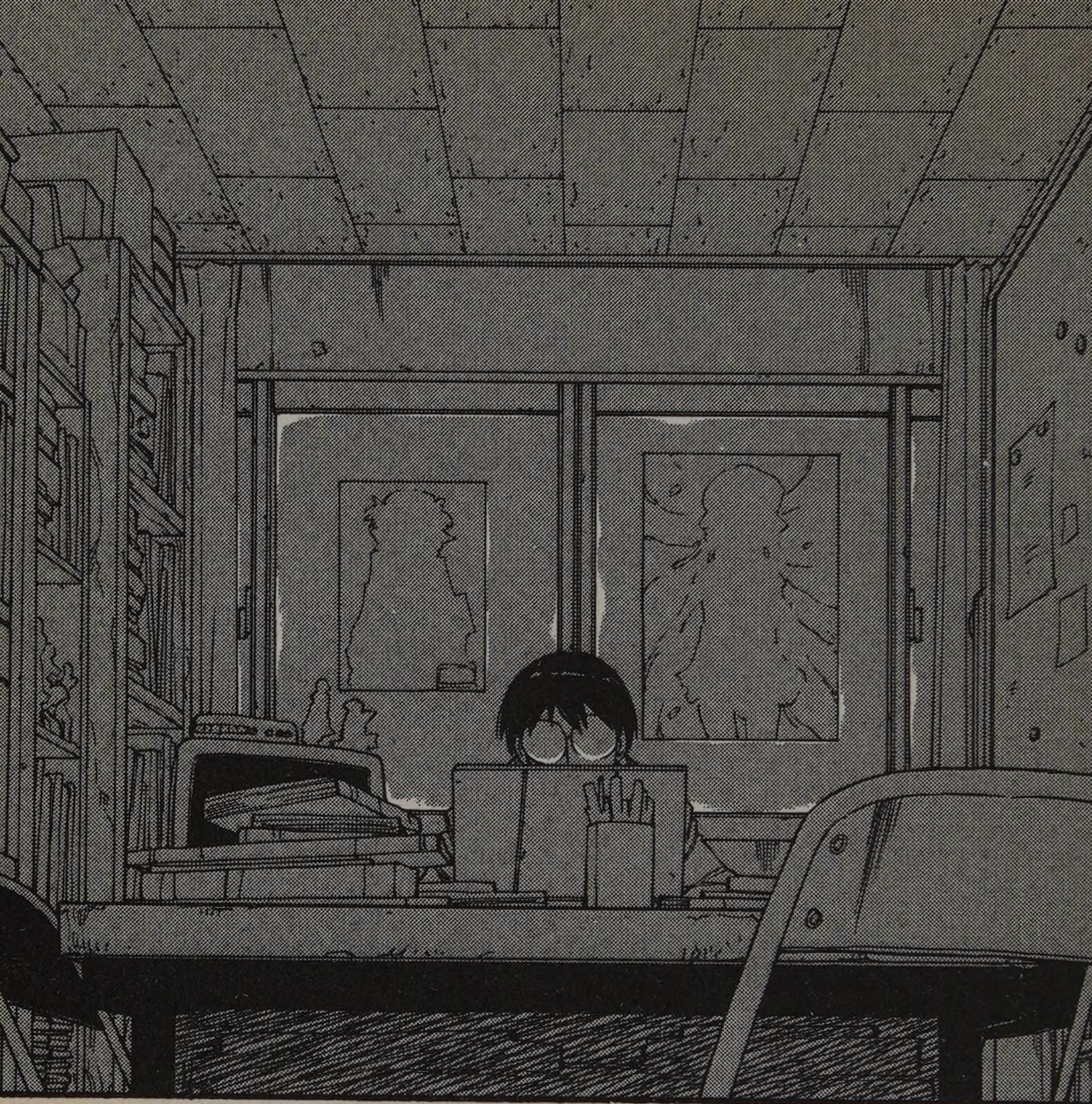
Just then his almost-broken glasses slipped off his nose and fell onto the floor.

"Oops! Not good. Glasses, where's my glasses?" The game continued while Madarame searched the floor. The little-sister character faced the player and said, "Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

"Dream? Dreams are fine, but what I need is my glasses! I can't see a thing!" Madarame's eyes were extremely bad, and it was true that he could see nothing without his glasses.

Letting the game run on without him, Madarame desperately searched the floor again.

"Oh, there they are!" He untwisted the frames and set



them precariously back on his nose. However, they weren't steady, and the lenses were now cracked, making it hard to see. Wearing them was better than nothing, though just barely. But now he had to concentrate on the game.

"Dreams? Of course I dream." Madarame sat up straight to face the screen.

At the time, Madarame did not realize that, thanks to the accident with his glasses, he could play the game without passing out.

■ **Kyodai ★ Kenka**

Harunobu Madarame managed to proceed through the game, though with difficulty. At times, he could see; at other times, he could not.

Kyodai ★ Kenka was essentially a novel that used a gamelike interface. It had almost no options. The only interaction consisted of clicking to make each sentence appear.

Could clicking on a prompt to reveal the next screen of text properly be classified as a game? This had been widely debated, but Madarame thought that it could. He felt this was better than believing that a game requiring only simple calculations was good for your brain.

At the funeral of their grandmother, a family that almost never gets together gathers in the funeral hall. Six sets of brothers and sisters are there, each nursing a separate rivalry.

As is customary in this family, all of them must stay on the family property for three days after the funeral. A bizarre murder takes place in the mansion. This family has been keeping a terrible secret: A mysterious ritual in which only women are allowed to participate. A tragedy at a fireworks

display. An old man obsessed with reconstructing the human body. Twins connected by handcuffs without a keyhole.

As these fragmented episodes are read, the tragic fate of this family is revealed.

This was the basic concept of the game.

Or course, playing in a hurry with his glasses in disrepair meant Madarame did not necessarily grasp all the points.

No sign could be found of the rumored snuff film. *I just played normally. I'm still in the middle of it, though. There sure are a lot of manifestations of fraternal love. But what does the stuff happening in this game have to do with what I need to know? I sure don't see a connection right now. I don't get it, First President. Ungh. What'll I do? Stick with it a little longer?*

Two hours later, it was dawn. How could he just sit here playing a leisurely game when what he wanted to do was find the members of the Genshiken as quickly as possible? A feeling of irritation enveloped him and tied his stomach in knots.

How many times had the ending credits gone across the screen?

Madarame looked up just in time for a familiar name to catch his eye.

"Zutoshi Iidaka."

Oh, hey, I know this guy! He's the author of an arcade game from about ten years ago. I played March of the Pigs a lot! Kind of a strange game, though. I'm pretty sure I heard he had to leave the gaming world over some kind of trouble with women and fled overseas. So this is what he's doing now. But if he's involved with this, this can't be all there is to it.

Zutoshi Iidaka had often stirred up public discussion in the past. Once he had recorded a dummy track of a protest

song at a frequency below the range of human hearing, used it as background music, and then announced that he'd created the game for dogs. It was called Pet Game. The song criticized the maker of a game he'd been involved with. Right before he'd disappeared, he'd been sued for inserting episodes that imitated actual murders into games. This, not the alleged women trouble, could have been the real reason he had been banished from the gaming scene.

So if that's true, the snuff film may well be more than a rumor.

Madarame checked the details of the game in the installation folder. Surely there would be a file for the actual murder of the little sister. Though if it was only the theme song for the game, he was making a fool of himself.

He *was* making a fool of himself. There was a compressed file not used by the game, but when he uncompressed it and opened it, it turned out to be a sound file of the game creator singing and playing folk guitar. *He must really like it. He's not even very good. Guess he wants to stand out, kind of like my "angry-oke."*

Then he found it. This time it was *bingo!*

Deep in the directory was an .exe file separate from the game. It could have been a virus, but since this PC belonged to the First President, who cared?

When he clicked on the file, a different scenario for Kyodai ★ Kenka started up. A hidden scenario.

■ The Demon Jizo

This is a tale from long, long ago, when the world was teeming with battles.

There were a brother and sister who lost their family and their house in the battle between two countries.

The brother's name was Ranmaru. The younger sister's name was An. The brother was eight. The sister was seven.

The two of them had no relatives to take care of them, so they decided to go live in a remote valley.

There was another battle. And another.

More children in the same circumstances came to live with Ranmaru and An.

So many children arrived that Ranmaru and An decided to call their valley "Land of the Children," a place where there would be no war. Of course, with only thirty of them there, it was something of a stretch to call it a "land."

The reason they wanted only children to live in this country was that if adults came, war would also come. They wanted to plow their fields, hunt, and live in peace.

And so, "Land of the Children" was born.

But in reality, it was a pitiless place.

The Land of the Children had been uninhabitable. The soil was poor, and the children were unable to raise crops.

The children lacked the weapons to hunt large animals like deer or bear. All they could do was catch fish from the river that flowed through the valley.

Ranmaru thought about what he could do to give the children in the Land of the Children a good life.

They could travel to places where battles had been fought and steal weapons and tools from the corpses scattered about. By selling these to merchants, they could buy enough food to eat.

An was against this. In the end, was this not the same as depending on war and adults? Where had the dream to which her brother aspired gone? She had once asked Ranmaru exactly this.

Ranmaru had answered that it was only until they were able to plow their own fields and raise their own crops.

Although it was true that they were relying on adults and war, for the first time in their lives, the children in the Land of the Children were happy, for they had enough to eat, and they had one another.

The hidden scenario was of a brother and sister born in Japan's feudal era, also known as the era of the Warring States. The screens appeared in black-and-white monotone, giving the game a sharp seventies touch.

But in the middle of the game, it went to static, like a channel that wasn't broadcasting.

What is this? Is the graphic data working?

For a time, the display was unstable, with lines of static rolling up the screen, but after a while, he saw a grainy black-and-white photograph of a typical modern home. It was utterly unsuited to a period drama like the one he'd been watching.

After a time, the story of the siblings resumed.

One day the battles ceased, because the shogun of one of the lands now dominated the entire country.

The Land of the Children could no longer maintain itself. The children were growing. The food they had stored was gone in a twinkling.

Ranmaru and An did not know what to do. Everyone was hungry. The smallest and weakest of the children would starve.

In the Land of the Children, among the weapons that the children had stolen from corpses were swords and spears. If they used these, all they had to do was steal food from farms that seemed easy targets. The adults were the ones who had caused the war, after all. The children were just doing what the adults did.

Thinking in this way, Ranmaru spoke to everyone.

The children were all hungry and had no choice but to agree.

Ranmaru and the others waited for nightfall to attack a farm. They may have been children, but they had weapons. What's more, there was a group of them. Ranmaru and the others were able to obtain food without trouble.

It was their first food in some time. Everyone ate happily. The youngest children who had almost died became lively again.

Only An made no move to touch the food. She was dedicated to the idea of a land for children in which there was no war and thus did not wish to eat their ill-gotten gains.

Again the screen turned to static, and the image from inside a modern home could be seen. It was a house like any other. An entryway, hallway, kitchen, bathroom, living room, parlor.

From time to time, a girl came into the image. Finally, the image of the girl occupied the entire screen.

From above, from below, close up, far away. The girl was captured from various angles. The girl did not seem to realize that she was being photographed. She never faced the camera.

Madarame thought her face looked familiar. He'd seen her somewhere before, but where . . . ? He could not recall who she was.

While he was absentmindedly lost in a sea of thought, the children's story started again.

But one day the food they had obtained by attacking farms in this way was also gone.

The crops had failed, and the farms had no food either. Ranmaru wondered what he could do. He hit upon the idea of attacking the people who lived on the farms. One day he and a group of children attacked the house of a husband and wife. And then they had their first taste of the meat that must not be eaten, human flesh.

The children who had hesitated at first decided to eat rather than starve to death.

Something else was worrying Ranmaru. His younger sister, An, ate none of this food. When Ranmaru brought her food and fed her forcibly, she vomited it all back up again. It was harder for him to watch his own sister wasting away before him than it was for him to go hungry himself. If this kept up, An would soon die.

Desperately, Ranmaru explained to An that this was ani-

mal meat that he had not stolen. He ate some himself to show her. He told her that thanks to eating this meat, he had grown in size. An thought that Ranmaru did in fact appear more robust than before. At last An tasted the meat and ate it without vomiting.

The photographs of the lone girl being followed relentlessly continued. All the photographs were taken inside the house. They merely appeared on the screen and had absolutely no link to the game scenario.

A photo of her singing into a microphone in a room with a mirror.

A photo of her serving cake and eating it.

A photo of her on the bathroom scale, smiling.

And a picture of her patting her belly.

But this life did not last for long.

The famine continued, and the farmers breathed their last.

One by one, the children in the Land of the Children died, starting with the smallest and weakest.

There was no meat. Still, Ranmaru gave An meat to eat every day.

After a time, An became healthy again. Wondering what the meat was that Ranmaru had been giving her, one day she sneaked after him. And then An saw what Ranmaru had been doing.

She saw Ranmaru looking inhuman as he killed their comrades from the Land of the Children. The meat An had been eating was the flesh of the children.

An screamed in surprise. Slowly, Ranmaru turned toward her. What she saw was not the handsome face of her brother but that of a demon.

For the first time, the photos—which had up till now been shot inside the same place—moved to a different location. These were taken inside a clinic. A women's clinic. There was a delivery table in the center of the room. A girl was on the table. It was the same girl who had been photographed in the house up until now. The examining doctor could not be seen.

Madarame felt uneasy. He'd never gotten this far into a game and started to hate it. He was totally disgusted by the creator's abominable taste in making a montage of horrible murders and the delivery table where people are born.

Now that he had been seen in the shape in which he least wanted to be seen by the one he most loved, Ranmaru became a demon. He forced his arms around An as she tried to run away. Arms drenched in the blood of their murdered companions pinned her arms behind her back. He had the strength of a demon. An could hear her bones breaking.

As she lost consciousness, An reflected that she might have driven Ranmaru to this by refusing to eat any food. Before her strength was gone, she circled her arms around the demon's back and wished her brother to be as he once was.

In this way, the Land of the Children perished. Perhaps the land was doomed from the beginning. On top of a hill, Ranmaru and An stood with their arms around each other. An died. The demon Ranmaru cried as he clung to her lifeless body.

The girl on the delivery table looked alarmed.

Then he remembered. This girl had been a victim. She'd been the victim of a murder committed by her own brother. The rumor was true.

Madarame realized that the photographs he had been looking at were of the girl who was murdered in the women's clinic.

For ten days, the demon cried.

And then, when he had no more tears to shed, howling like an animal, he died.

After the demon died, the wailing continued.

Even after twenty years, after thirty years, the sound still persisted.

Madarame felt as if he could hear the demon's wail right now. Not from the computer but from someplace nearby.

When a priest at a temple heard the tragic tale, out of sorrow and compassion, he made a Jizo for the brother and sister.

The Jizo was lovely and sweet, made in the shape of a brother and sister.

People who had heard the demon's wail gave the Jizo an emotional burial.

And thus, the brother and sister were finally able to rest in peace.

The wail of the demon has never been heard since.

Suddenly, the images changed from static to moving. The murdered younger sister was on the screen. The carefree smile on her face was darling. She appeared before the murder, happy and healthy.

For the first time, she faced the camera straight on. "Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"

Here the screen changed to one for the player to enter an answer.

This was a game. It was seeking the correct answer.

This was not a game. It was not seeking a correct answer.

This was not a question for the player of the game; this was a question for the person called Harunobu Madarame.

With an earnest feeling, Madarame typed slowly, firmly, and carefully.

"I dream we're together forever."

The game ended.

The two girls appeared by turns while the credits rolled. Both women were smiling. Madarame thought the expressions on both their faces were lovely. Seeing these extraordinary smiles released him from the oppressive feeling he had had while playing.

■ *Moe Jizo*

Harunobu Madarame closed the game file.

He could hear the demon's wail. This was not some kind of auditory hallucination. He could really hear it.

He felt compassion, pity, and sadness.

Love could be all these things. But people were compelled to love other people.

Saki Kasukabe was Kousaka's girlfriend, and Kousaka was Kasukabe's boyfriend. *I wouldn't destroy that relationship. Which is really loving. Which is really maddening.*

I will save them.

I will save everyone in the Genshiken.

I will save myself.

I will dream with the Genshiken "forever."

But what should he do next? Madarame tried clicking the Help icon on the First President's notebook PC.

The First President appeared in a movie file.

"Looks like you finished the game, Madarame-kun. This file won't open unless someone clears the game.

"I don't know everything about this. I have only a little more information about what's going on than the rest of you do. Just the advantage of age. It's not that I'm testing you. If you don't solve the problem you're wrapped up in right now, you won't be able to resolve things either. Because what you are asked is something only you are asked.

"Okay, time for a little quiz. If you answer correctly, a hidden door will open and something will come out of it: the thing the Jizo is looking for."

The screen changed to ask for a password. Madarame had been able to guess the answer in the game, but here he had

absolutely nothing to go on. *I'd put in the First President's birthday, but I don't know what it is.*

He remembered the First President's words: "When you get to a dead end, just go back to where you started."

Madarame flipped through "Introduction to Joining a Club at Shiiou University" to find the page on the Genshiken and what was written there. *These words were what united me with the Genshiken.* And even now that Madarame was a member, these words were still used in the guide.

The words that made up the warp and woof that wove the Genshiken together.

With confidence, Madarame entered the password.

"Here."

The president inside the computer produced a sketch of the room and pointed to a dot. "Correct. I'm proud of you for knowing. There is a small door here in the wall. Open it."

Madarame had had no idea there was a door there.

Behind the door was a small chamber in which a Jizo about eight inches high had been placed.

A Jizo of a young girl, with a mild and gentle face.

It was the Moe Jizo.

Beside the Moe Jizo was a scroll. Madarame unrolled it.

I used to stroll around the campus in the early morning while dreaming up the concept for the Genshiken's limited-circulation magazine *Mebae Tame*.

We had settled on cute illustrations of Romu-chan, a demon girl with two horns on her head, for the feature in our special issue. It was okay to have a demon called Romu-chan. She was a nice little devil, like the one in that song by the Candies pop singer trio.* She was partly cute, partly evil, very hip, and very eighties.

I was mulling over different things as I walked around when I noticed a lovely little statuette on the ground underneath some bushes. Wondering what it was, I picked it up to take a look and found it was a Jizo of a young girl. Well, it was a Jizo, but with one look, I could see it had been made with the same care as an *otaku* puts into building a model.

It looked to be very old. I thought my discovery might be historic. My heart was thumping.

This figure could be proof that the Japanese people loved to create figures long before the Edo era. This could be a significant find with the potential to overturn the basic assumptions of the world of *otaku*! It could show that we *otaku* are following an ancient Japanese aesthetic tradition.

I thought this should be preserved very, very carefully until the time was right.

The First President

This Moe Jizo is the foundation of the Genshiken's existence.

This Moe Jizo is the Genshiken's guardian deity.

This Moe Jizo is our core, our mother.

Her demon brother was wailing. He wailed as he searched for the little sister from whom he had been separated.

He wailed as he searched for the Moe Jizo.

* song by the Candies "Yasashii Akuma." The girls wore red leotards and black boots in the video. Like Lum from *Urusei Yatsura* but without the stripes, ears, and fangs.

Wrapping both hands around the *moe* Jizo, Madarame ran off in the direction of the demon brother's cry.

When he went outside, the sun was rising.

■ Embodiment

Meeting room 3. The intensity of the Demon Jizo's wail increased even more.

Ranto Hairu's agony became proportionally more acute.

"Elder Brother, let's stop this," Anna called out to Hairu. She could stand it no longer.

"Any more of this is too dangerous. Your breathing and pulse are unsteady. Your life is in danger." Anna moved to get Hairu's shaking under control, but he waved her away.

"You have lost yourself, older brother. You are obsessed with the power of the demon. What good is there in obtaining it if you make innocent victims of the Genshiken members? You can aspire to the ideal even without the demon's power!"

Gasping for breath, Hairu managed to answer. "Together with you, I want to create a world of like-minded noble people."

"I would gladly join you in pursuing the goal you imagined, Elder Brother. But your dream now is . . . the demon's power itself. What you are trying to obtain . . . is completely different from that ideal!" Something she had never allowed to show before floated to the surface of her unblinking gaze. It was compassion.

As if to block out Anna's words, the cry of the Demon Jizo grew stronger.

Hairu's body bent backward like a bow, momentarily floating in midair.

"Why do you not understand?"

It came out as a loud cry that made the air shake. It was not the voice of a human but rather the howl of a beast.

The protuberances on Hairu's forehead had grown longer than ever before.

All over his body, his muscles bulged and his school uniform with the white collar ripped.

Hairu had turned into a demon. With a gigantic hand, he seized Anna's pale neck.

■ Harunobu Madarame versus Ranto Hairu

Harunobu Madarame ran toward the sound of the wail. The *moe* Jizo in his arms pulled him with unseen power.

Madarame ran, guided by the invisible power. Now he thought of nothing. Things were dropping away from him—things that made him Madarame.

Bit by bit, his knowledge, information, and desires drifted away. Without trying to gather them, Madarame ran.

He only ran. He was no longer Madarame now, just a human being who was running.

The next thing he knew, he had run away from campus and found himself in front of Sakunosuke Memorial Hall.

The source of the wail.

It was here.

The demon brother was here.

Ranto Hairu was here.

Everyone from the Genshiken was here.

It is here.

A sudden gust of wind struck Madarame. His clothes

flapped in the wind. Something like sand stung his exposed skin.

Fighting against the wind, Madarame entered the hall.

The demon's cry increased to an earsplitting thunderous roar. The roar continued, echoing off the walls. Layered bass sounds shook the air. He could see it. His vision blurred. Madarame crouched low, climbing up the stairs step by step.

Countless scratches covered his face. They stung. Still, he climbed the stairs. Cautiously, one step at a time. He must not drop the Moe Jizo. The nagging wind was a burden; his feet felt like lead. Many times he fell over backward. Yet he did not let go of the Moe Jizo. He crawled up the stairs on his hands and knees. Desperately.

Finally, he arrived at meeting room 3. The door was heavy and would not budge. Was it locked?

From inside the room, he could hear the screams of a man and a woman mixed with the howl of the demon. Was the woman Kasukabe-san? If it was, something serious must be happening. He had to open this door *now*!

Madarame pushed on the door. It did not move. He needed more strength. Madarame pushed against the door with everything he had.

"Open!" he yelled without thinking. Hardly to his surprise, the door opened.

Madarame saw.

All the goods that had been confiscated on suspicion of their being degenerate art.

Madarame saw.

A big, black evil shadow.

Madarame saw.

Three meters long, a being entirely covered in fur, giving off the stench of a beast. Two sharp horns protruded from its forehead. Its mouth was a gash that stretched from ear to ear, spittle trickling from the edges. A long forked tongue like a snake's flicked from its mouth.

The demon's arms—thicker than logs—were at a woman's throat. The tragedy of the brother who became a demon and his sister was playing out again before Madarame's eyes.

Madarame looked inside the room. The faces of the members of the Genshiken could be seen on the computer displays. Now he knew they were here.

Manabu Kuchiki was here. Kanji Sasahara was here. Makoto Kousaka was here. Souichiro Tanaka was here. Kanako Ohno was here. Mitsunori Kugayama was here. And Saki Kasukabe.

Kasukabe-san was here.

I've come to get you.

The Fantasy Shiken, the power to see dreams and become strong. By using the power of the Genshiken, Hairu wanted to ingest the power of the demon and become the man who could take over the university—no, the world. However, that had ended in failure. Hairu himself was ingested by the demon.

On the displays, everyone said in unison, "Hey, older brother, what do you dream?"



Clearly, carefully, with effort, Madarame said, as if speaking to a small child, "I dream we're together forever."

Two bodies, one set. A brother-sister Jizo that needed to be back together.

Gradually, the howl faded.

A long silence.

Hairu and Anna dropped into sleep.

Eight capsules had been set up in the corners of meeting room 3.

Each was just the right size for a person to lie down in. The size of a casket.

With a sound like the hissing of steam, the canopy of one of the capsules opened.

Kuchiki's face poked out from inside. With sleepy eyes, he stretched and climbed out of the capsule, then stumbled toward Madarame.

Electrodes were attached all over Kuchiki's body. Red and blue cords dangled down. "Mmm, I slept well. Huh? I was in the desert and got bitten by a camel. It was terrible! Where am I? Ah! Madarame-san. What is this, this squishy thing at my feet? Don't tell me it's a person!"

"That's Hairu. Try not to step on him."

Hairu and Anna were collapsed in a heap at Kuchiki's feet. Their sleeping faces were peaceful.

Next Sasahara woke up. Kousaka woke up. Tanaka woke up. Ohno woke up. Kugayama woke up.

"Wow! I woke up in a room full of treasure! What luck!"

"Only about one-sixteenth of this was ours to begin with.

The rest belongs to other clubs, like the manga club. Take a better look. That sign with a station name on it must belong to the railroad club."

"What's a brother-sister Jizo doing in a lecture hall? Is that some kind of modern work of art?"

"No, no. It's neither modern nor art."

Why can't you guys get a grip? Keep out of this was what Madarame wanted to say, but just when he was about to, he got too worried that Sleeping Beauty had not yet opened her eyes. . . . *Kasukabe-san, Kousaka's here! Although he's still kind of out of it. Hey, Kasukabe-san! Ka-su-ka-be-san! Ka-su-ka-be-sa . . .*

Madarame felt himself fading out. (*Y'know, I never did get any sleep. . . .*)

Ker-slap. A smack from a warm hand. Madarame jerked awake.

Kasukabe stood before him.

And she smiled.

Outside the lecture hall, the sun had risen. The sky was blue; the air was clear.

Soon everyone would be awake and saying the greeting with which it was proper to start a new day.

"Morning!"

■ Another Day

A brother and sister got off the Tokyo Rinkai line at Koku-sai Tenjijo Station and headed toward Tokyo Big Sight. They were there to look at comics.

It being their first comics event, the two were utterly bewildered. Not only was it thronged with people, but this was

their first time seeing cosplay, and they couldn't understand why people were dressed up in costume if it wasn't Halloween.

Desperate to buy a copy of a certain *doujinshi*, the older brother-younger sister combo braved the jostling crowds of people and succeeded in making their purchase.

At a break area inside the exhibition hall, they opened the volume they'd just bought. The younger sister peeked at the illustrations and turned bright red. The older brother peered at it, wondering what this was about. When he saw the illustrations, his eyes turned to slits.

"I *knew* this was degenerate. I'll burn this! I'll burn this right now!!" It was Ranto Hairu. The horns on his forehead were long gone, but the horns on his character seemed as long as ever.

■ Yet Another Day

"But I cannot accept that end result. The mystery goes this long, and then suddenly, 'Pow'!"

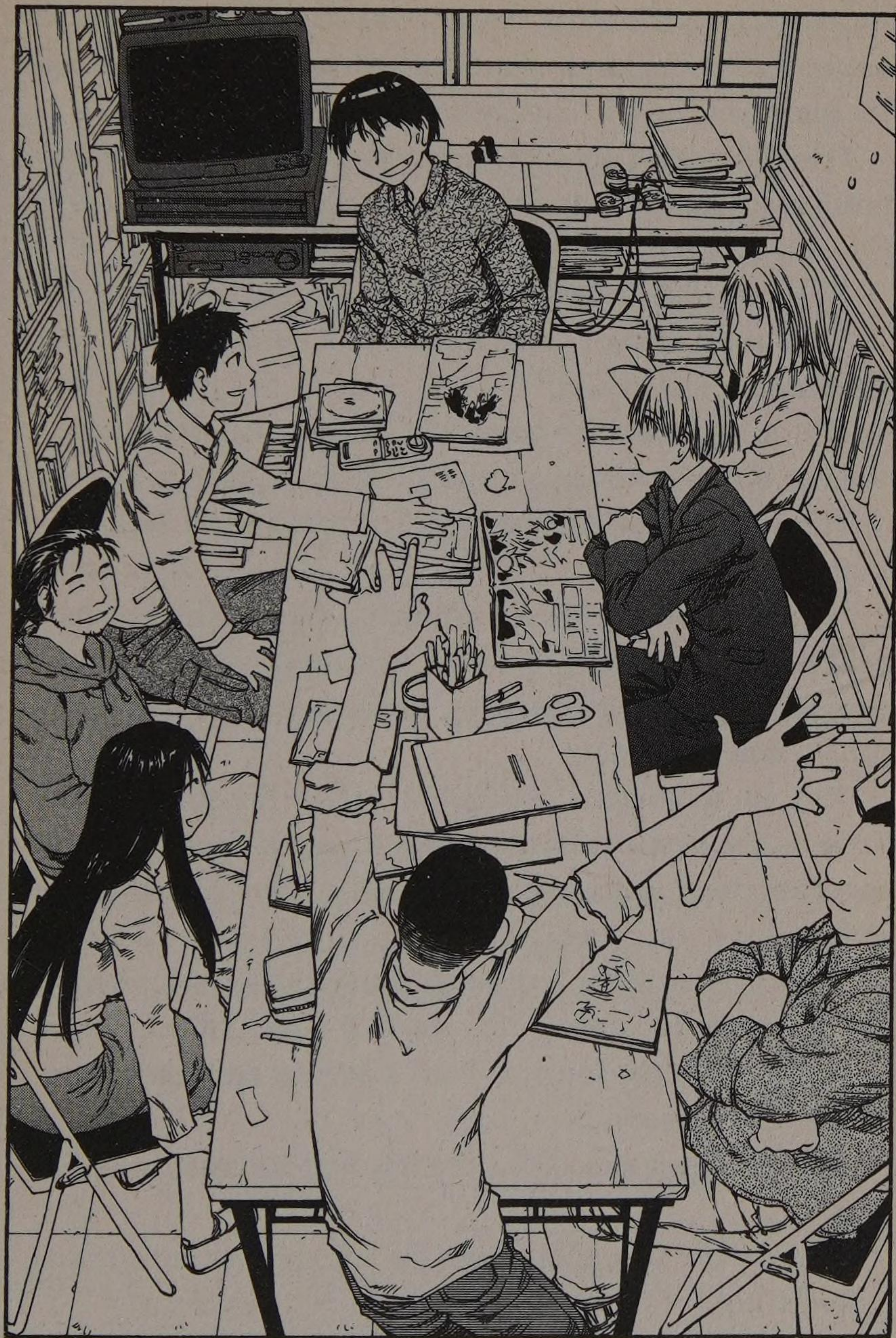
"Well, isn't keeping it simple and clean better than forcing closure?"

"So if the characters are cute and the fight scenes are cool, then anything goes? If we allow things to be that simplistic, then some other bozo is going to show up to call it degenerate art again. Sometimes you just have to speak frankly."

"Y-y-you can say that again."

"Speaking of that, what is Hairu up to these days?"

"Seems he's holed up in Kamakura reflecting on what happened. I heard he went to the comic fest with Anna but didn't understand it at all."



"He went to the comic fest just like that? He can be so extreme. It's hard to just jump into everything at the deep end. It's sometimes best to comprehend things in stages."

"He's like some kind of manga or anime character. Impossibly handsome but with a fascist obsession. The kind of character you can't totally hate even if he is a bad guy."

"If he was a character, he'd be like Desler."*

"Not even Desler!" said Kuchiki. "I mean, I knew it! I have an interest in him!"

"Hairu may not be so bad. Oh, he sent us something. I wonder if he's giving us something to apologize? All it said on the outside of the box was 'A Small Token of Appreciation.'"

"For real? What is it? Pudding? Crème brûlée? Maybe gelato?" Saki Kasukabe had been looking at a fashion magazine but chose this moment to lean forward and contribute to the conversation.

"It's an assortment of dried fish from Enoshima.[†] And some of the fresh sardines that Enoshima is famous for. He says they don't keep, so eat them today. Hey, Kasukabe ate some."

"These're snacks to eat while drinking alcohol. He may be cute, but he thinks like an old man. I'll eat them, though." Kasukabe sat back with a *whump* and returned to her fashion magazine.

"Well, he meant well. . . . I'm glad he said that to everyone."

"Oh, by the way, Ohno-san. Do you still get letters from Igarashi-kun?"

* *Desler* The Gamilon leader in *Uchuusen Yamato*. Wants to rid Earth of pesky humans in order to enable his people to migrate to our world from his dying planet.

[†] *Enoshima* Right next door to Kamakura, famous for its fish.

"About once a month. He seems to be working really hard at kendo. He said he's aiming for a gold medal in the next Olympics."

"Huh? Is kendo one of the official Olympic sports?"

"Dunno . . ."

"Igarashi-kun who?"

"Did Igarashi-kun ever tell you his real name?"

"No, not yet."

" . . . Igarashi-kun who . . . ?"

"Okay! Time for the viewing fest!"

"Yay!" He switched on the television.

But the channel gave no signal, showing only static.

"Nnngah! It didn't record!"

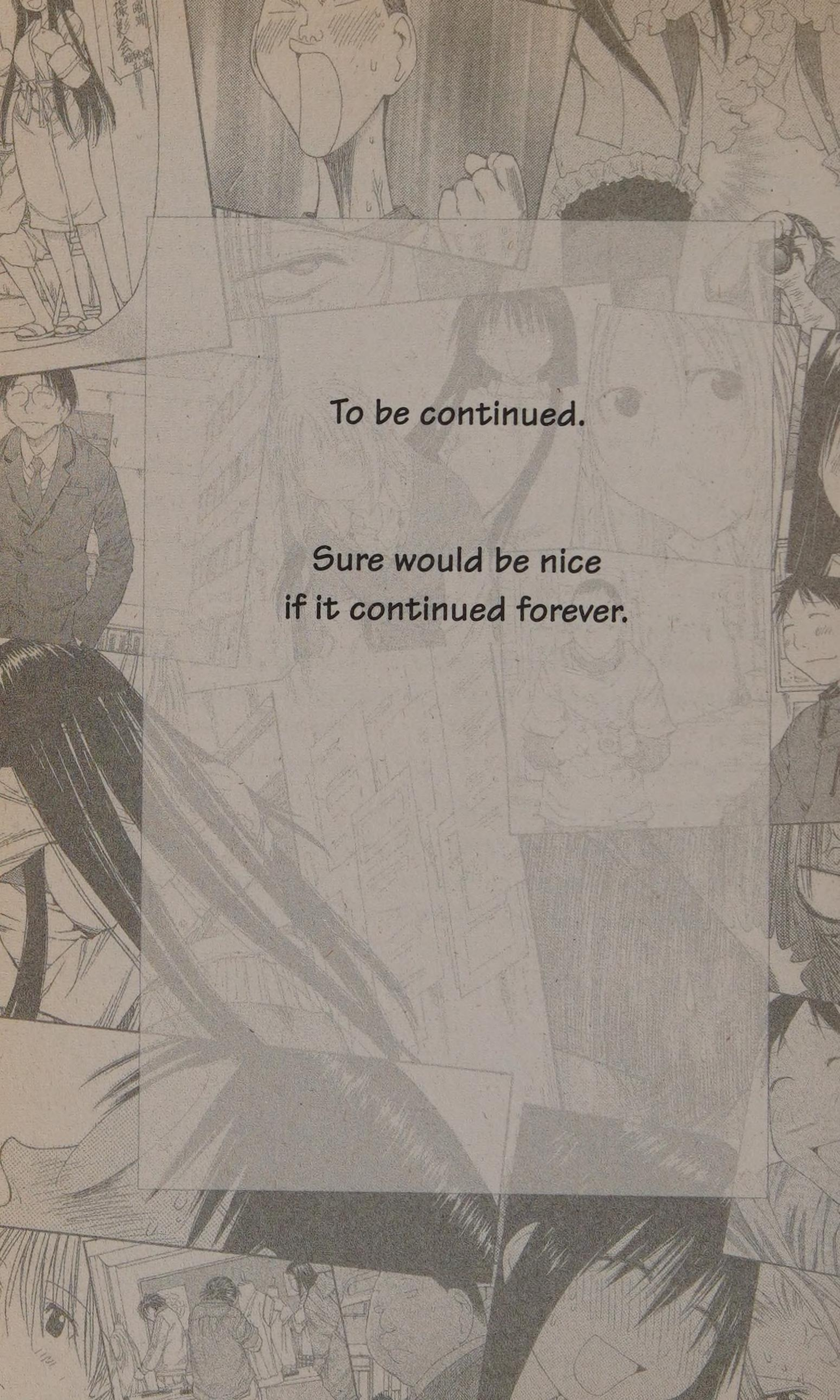
"Kasukabe-san, please!"

Not looking up from her fashion magazine, she let loose with a splendid uppercut, catching Harunobu Madarame on the chin.

"That. Hurt."

"You promised. You blew it!"

"His nose is bleeding! Look, blood!" Kasukabe passed a handkerchief to Madarame. Taking her eyes off her magazine for just a moment, she shot him a tender glance.



To be continued.

Sure would be nice
if it continued forever.

About *Genshiken*, the Novel

Genshiken has already been lucky enough to be in several formats: anime, OVA, and a drama CD.* This novel came out in a completely different stream.

Unlike the visual form in which many people are involved, the novel is written by only one author, Iida-san! How is *Genshiken* portrayed in a novel that is truly a one-man work? If I said as the original author I was terribly excited to see it, and it was almost no work for me, well, I'd be wrong because I did the cover and the illustrations, and it was a lot of work! Naturally, I was the one who drew it, though. . . .

But don't worry about that stuff. Just enjoy yourself as the reader. Without a doubt, this is *Genshiken*. It belongs here.

—Kio Shimoku, December 2007

* *drama CD* A companion CD to the manga that includes narration of the story with sound effects.

About the Creators

Author: Iida Kazutoshi

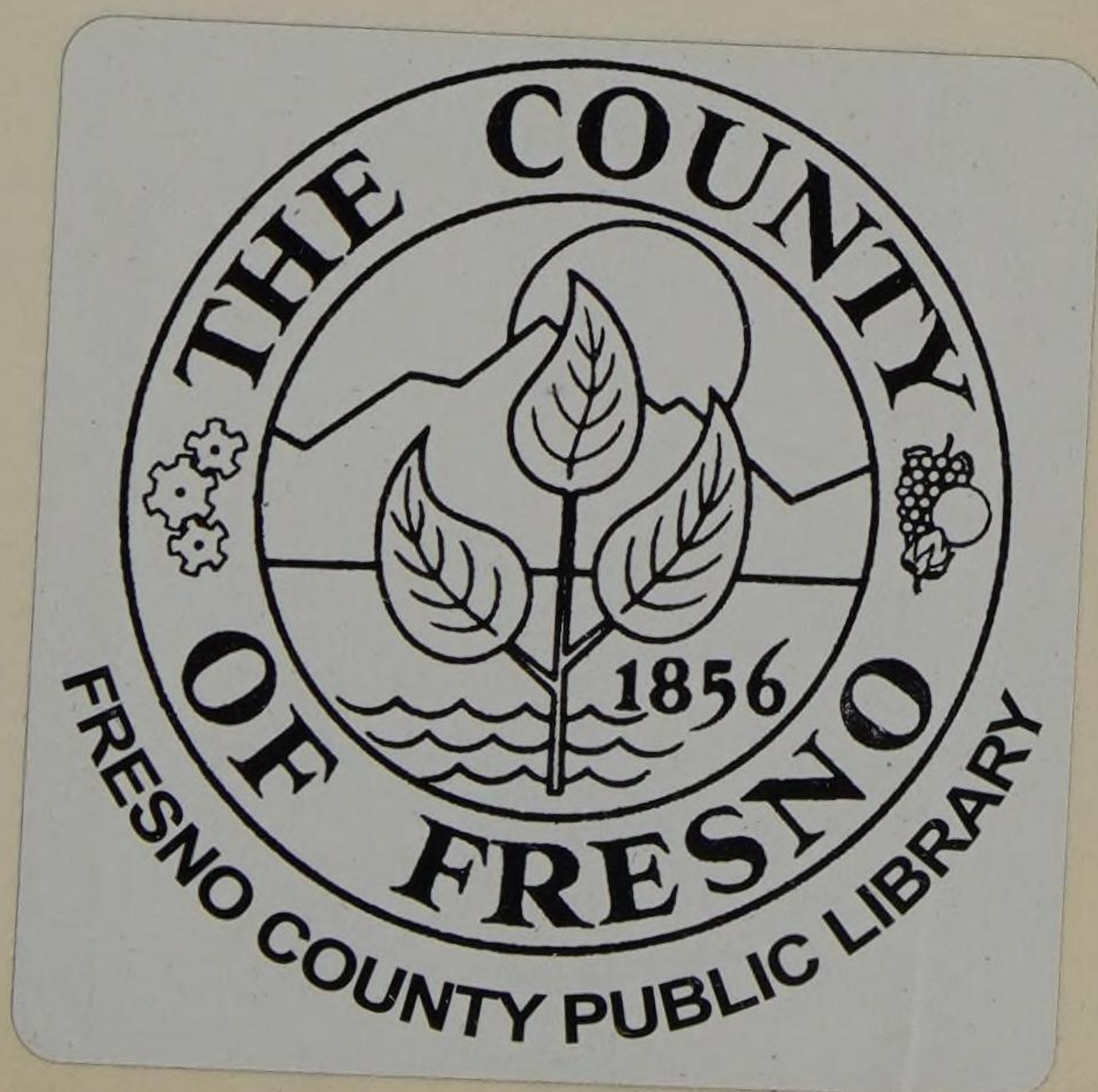
Iida Kazutoshi was born in Tokyo in 1968. He is a game developer and a professor at Digital Hollywood University. His games include *Aquanaut's Holiday*, *Tail of the Sun*, *Doshin the Giant*, and others. He is the author of several game-related books: *Nihon Bungaku Fumki*, *Spindoru-shiki Kitaenai No*, *Renai Shosetu Fumki*, and others. He directed the vocals for Rock Band's "The Riot."

"Kazutoshi Iida's Magnificent Blog BGK ★ BLG"

blog.excite.co.jp/kiida/

Creator: Kio Shimoku

Kio Shimoku was born in 1974. In 1994 his debut work *Ten no Ryoki* received an Afternoon Shiki Prize in the Shiki Prize summer contest. Since then he has published *Kagerou Nikki* and *Kagerou Nikki 2* (these first three works were published together under the title *Kagerou Nikki*). In 1997 he began publishing *Yonensei* (one chapter in total) and *Gonensei* (a total of five chapters), all of which appeared in *Afternoon* magazine. He drew a total of nine volumes of *Genshiken* from 2002 to 2006. In 2006 he began to publish as original creator and director *Kujibiki ♥ Unbalance*, the manga from *Genshiken*, as an independent title (illustrated by Keito Koume).



COOL NEWS!

The smash hit Genshiken manga series may have ended, but your favorite characters live on in this exciting new novel with never-before-seen illustrations by Genshiken's original creator!

GENSHIKEN: RETURN OF THE OTAKU

The deafening *whack-whack-whack* of a helicopter above campus is the first indication that the balmy tranquility of the Genshiken Club is about to be disturbed.

The chopper brings handsome Ranto Hairu: transfer student, scion of a powerful Japanese conglomerate, and newly named chairman of the on-campus club organization committee.

Hairu has strong ideas about the kind of clubs that deserve to survive (earnest, industrious) and the kind that don't (arty, frivolous), and he's a big fan of brute force. For Madarame, Kousaka, Ohno, and the others, the idea of losing their cherished club is the ultimate nightmare—but it's only the first of many.

Fortunately, the Genshiken boys and girls have a few tricks of their own, including a certain swordfighter summoned from ancient times who could prove very handy.



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