



OUR
CRAPPY

SOCIAL
GAME
CLUB IS

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Oriori Siki

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GONNA
MAKE
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Illustrator/Azuri Hyuga

Chapter 1 - No Place for Me Here

Click. The instant the door opened, the chatter between the club members that filled the conference room died down into silence. Kurenai Akane, the club's president, had long, straight black hair that hardly curved as it slipped down to her waist. She remained at the center of that silence, and her footsteps rang out clearly as she entered the room.

For a brief moment, Shiraseki Kai met her gaze when she looked his way. He hurriedly averted his eyes, because there was nothing else he *could* do. He would have liked to run away, had it been possible, but knew someone would simply pin him down for his troubles if he tried.

There was a large, circular table in the room, alongside a whiteboard (as opposed to a blackboard, which most classrooms were equipped with). With her back to the whiteboard, Akane took the central seat and began to speak immediately. "My apologies for being late," she began. "Now, let us begin our weekly meeting."

She had, in fact, arrived late to the 6:00 P.M. meeting by about 30 seconds. It wasn't enough to warrant an apology, but she was the type to be stricter with herself than she was with the rest of them. Of course, she still expected a great deal from others; winning their president's approval was the goal of every club member.

"We may have more eyes and ears on us than we normally do," she continued, "but that does not change what we must accomplish. As per usual, I would like to hear Team 1's report first."

"Understood."

There were ten other students at the table.

If the vast majority of the members in the clubroom were to be considered unrecognized by the president, then those ten at the table would be the exceptions to that rule—those whose achievements she had already

acknowledged. Each one of them was a director responsible for supervising the development and management of a social game created by the Tsukigase High School Social Game Development Club.

The male student acting as director of Team 1 pulled a springing cable out of the center of the table toward him and plugged it into his laptop. Shortly afterwards, a projection of his presentation appeared on the whiteboard.

“Team 1, reporting: Team 1’s *LW* released a new gacha as of yesterday,” he said. “As you can see on this graph...” The presentation document showed a line graph accounting for all sales in the past week, with an uptick on the previous day’s sales. “These are fairly good numbers for an initial release. However, we implemented a popular character, so this is within expectations. As far as noteworthy points—and while this is my personal opinion—it does seem that the ARPPU trends upwards when we release a loli character who resonates with the users—”

“Gahaha! What kind of bull are you spouting?!” said the large, bearlike director of Team 3, cutting him off with a laugh. “There’s no way lolis were the root of those sales! You added a big titty elf character alongside them! That’s obviously what won the users over!”

The director of Team 1 sighed, “Thank you for your opinion. However, it seems clear to me why *your* project, *BloodSat*, has an overwhelming number of reviews claiming that ‘All this game has is big-boobed girls.’”

“Huh?! What are you trying to say?!”

“I’m sure you know exactly what I’m saying. Why else would you react so excessively?”

The social game developed by Team 3 was known as *BloodSat*, short for *Blood Satisfaction*. It was a game in which the main character had been confined in an abandoned castle by the Queen of Vampires in an attempt to understand human society. While locked up, the main character would then interact with a variety of vampires in a galge-influenced RPG. Those interactions often included suggestive fanservice scenes, and almost all of the vampires laid claim to a beautiful face and a remarkable figure... that is to say, they had large breasts. It was a social game intent solely on targeting a certain demographic of users.

“I do not need idle talk.” One icy warning from Akane was all that was needed for the two directors to shut their mouths. “There is no need for the two of you to give your personal opinions,” she lectured sternly. “Further, there is no need to add anything to your presentation just because your subordinates are here today. Report the objective data first. We can hear your opinions afterwards.”



“...My apologies,” said the director of Team 1, who swiftly resumed making his report on the topics he had prepared. Team 1’s project, *LW*—also known as *Last World*—was the longest running title in the Tsukigase High School Social Game Club. The game itself was a simple turn-based fantasy RPG, but the addition of co-op play and consistent updates to take advantage of trends allowed it to garner a large user base.

After the first team came the second, then the third, and so on. Normally, the only people who were allowed to participate in the weekly Friday meetings were Akane (the club’s sole producer) and the ten team directors. But today’s meeting was different, in that all club members were being allowed to participate. This meant that over 300 people had been jam-packed into the conference room, and was also the reason Kai was present, although he would have been called in even if the meeting hadn’t been open to all of the club’s members.

The real reason that all of these members had gathered for the meeting was simple. It was to hear the report from Team 10—the team Kai was in—and nothing else. The presentations went on and on until the time came for Ginjou, the director of Team 10, to make his report.

“Team 10 reporting... We have a lot of things we must report today,” Ginjou began. “First, our sales: we at Team 10 began the week by launching a one year anniversary event in *Rondo*. Thanks to our pre-event promotion, we saw a spike in active users and expected to see our highest proceeds yet... But as of now, we have yet to garner any sales.”

The large conference room stirred as it filled with murmuring. ‘Yet to garner any sales’ meant that they hadn’t made *anything*, and for a team in the Tsukigase High School Social Game Club, that was unthinkable. And it had been *Rondo*, to boot. *Girls’ Symphonic Rondo* had been second only to *LW* in sales during the previous month. Now, suddenly, it had dropped to zero? A drop in sales would be understandable, but earning *nothing* would simply never happen under normal circumstances.

‘Under normal circumstances,’ indeed.

“Silence,” Akane demanded. “I do not remember allowing buzzing insects into

this conference room. The numbers do not lie: if you are a member of this club, recognize the truth for what it is. Ginjou, continue your report.”

“The underlying reason is that there was an accusation that claimed, ‘*Rondo’s* gacha rates are being rigged,’ on the day before the event began,” Ginjou went on. “It should go without saying, but this is completely untrue—a fabrication—and there is no such rigging going on.”

“But the users believed it,” Akane interjected.

“...To support their argument, the accuser leaked our master data, which led to a general opinion that the accusation was true,” said Ginjou. “That data is carefully controlled, so it’s unthinkable for it to have been stolen by an outside actor. I requested the security team to perform an investigation, and there seems to be no trace of hacking, either. The only possibility that remains is... I’m sorry, I can’t pursue this any further.”

Kai winced at his team leader’s performance, which was obviously fake; Ginjou was the type of person who put on this sort of act. His top priority was to climb the club’s ladder, and he was willing to do anything necessary to achieve that goal. His actions were calculated to ensure that people’s opinion of him would never drop. He’d leave the act of finding the culprit to Akane because he himself was a passionate man who’d believe in his teammates until the bitter end—or at least, that was presumably what he was going for.

The leak contained insider information, alongside top secret master data. The culprit was obviously a club member. They were most likely in the same team, as well. For security reasons, each team’s data was only accessible to the members of that particular team. The other club members already knew this and had a culprit in mind.

But still, even then, he wouldn’t sell out his friends; that’s the act Ginjou was putting on. So naturally, he couldn’t utter the name “Shiraseki Kai,” as if he had ever considered him a friend to begin with.

“...Shiraseki, are you present?”

“I am,” he answered, standing when his name was called, all while keenly aware that his movements were being followed by the stares of everyone in the room.

“Keep your answer clear and concise,” Akane instructed him. “Our investigation has made it apparent that the accusation was written with the computer that you use within our club. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“...No.” His response sent another wave through the conference room. Akane waved her hand as if she were conducting an orchestra and killed the chatter instantaneously.

Kai closed his eyes. He already knew the words he needed to say, but they kept getting stuck in his throat. He couldn’t tell if it was because he wasn’t producing any spit, but for some reason, his mouth felt dry all the way to the back of his throat, and it took him a while just to get a breath in.

He took that deep breath and then opened his eyes. He gathered all the moisture in his mouth and quietly cleared his throat. “The message on that computer... was mine,” he admitted. “I am the culprit.”

He’d already known what he had to say by the time he entered the meeting, and with the first bit out of the way, the rest of his words continued to flow out. “With this in mind, I, Shiraseki Kai of Team 10...”

All that was left was for him to say his goodbyes.

“Will withdraw from the Tsukigase High Social Game Club.”

Chapter 2 - Misako, First Thing in the Morning

“This dream again...” Kai squinted his eyes at the light leaking in through the gaps of his curtain. The spring sunlight felt warm and soft, but the terrible dream had ruined it for him. There were still ten whole minutes before his alarm was set to go off. He unset the alarm on his smartphone and sluggishly got up. How many times would he have to relive that dream?

“...gh.” Kai covered his mouth as his nausea began to swell up. Whenever he dreamed about that school or thought back on it in any way, his stomach would begin to turn, or he’d become unbearably dizzy. He’d run from both his club and his school, but couldn’t even get away in his dreams. What was he meant to do, then?

Slowly, and as deeply as possible, he breathed in and out to clear his mind. “Phew,” he finally exhaled, letting out another deep breath. After a moment of staring at the pitch black screen of his phone, Kai finally calmed down, and then it was the time he’d set his alarm for in the first place.

Figuring he should wash his face, Kai got out of bed and went into the living room. There was no need to turn on the light, since it was already on. There in front of him was the very image of someone who had just woken up; dressed in a jersey and watching TV, Kai’s older sister, Misako, was loudly slurping a cup of tea.

She pushed up a pair of strong glasses and looked over at him with a dead gaze. There were huge bags under her eyes. Usually, her long, silver hair would be running wild due to bed head, but today it seemed soft and obedient. She probably hadn’t slept at all.

“Good morning, Kai,” she said.

“What are you doing, nee-san?”

“I’ve made so much progress with my work that I figured I needed something to do with all my spare time,” Misako explained. “So I figured I’d come check in

on my little brother, who's not used to living by himself yet."

"I keep telling you this," he retorted, "but I think your manuscript will stay white as snow if you come over."

Misako froze solid and began staring without saying a word. She then knocked back the rest of her tea and silently took off her glasses. The eyes behind the glasses were almond-shaped and, along with her slender face, gave off a fox-like impression.

"Don't take off your glasses just to glare at me..." he told her.

Her squinting eyes made a deep wrinkle in her brow, wasting her pretty face just for the sake of glaring. If Kai tried something like that, he'd probably look like a crumpled up persimmon.

"Kai," she said icily.

"What?"

"You better apologize quickly, or else..." Misako smiled, as if she were about to unleash her hidden trump card. "Your older sister's gonna... cry."

When foxes play tricks on humans, this must be the look on their faces. That's what her smile made Kai think.

"I'm gonna cry, I'm about to cry!" she wailed. "I'm gonna cry in three seconds! Oooooone, twoooooo, th—"

"I'm sorry," Kai quickly apologized. "I went too... well, I didn't go too far, but maybe I shouldn't have said that."

"Splendid," said Misako, contentedly replacing her glasses. "Now, allow me to prepare a portion of tea for you. But first, I do implore you to go and wash that uncouth look off of your face."

It seemed that her current novel included characters that were something like nobility or knights. Misako changed her speech mannerisms at the drop of a hat depending on her mood and, being a novelist, the stories she created.

"Thanks."

"What's this, mademoiselle?" Misako asked grandly. "Have you fallen for

me?”

“I’m a guy, remember?” Kai was about to tell her that she should wash her face too, but managed to stop himself. Conversations with Misako tended to go on and on once they started. Instead of just blabbing on one-sidedly, she had a habit of wrapping the other person up in the conversation as well, causing it to drag on endlessly. Instead, Kai sighed as he finally made his way toward the washroom.

That being said, it wasn’t as if his home was exceptionally large. There were only two rooms: the bedroom, which held his bed, and the living room, which currently held Misako. Other than that, there was only a hallway connected to the living room, which in turn led to the powder room, laundry room, and bathroom. It was more than big enough for a high schooler living on his own.

Living alone cost money, so Kai initially planned to live in a smaller one-room apartment. However, Misako (who had already been living in the area) put up a lot of resistance to this notion, so he’d scrapped the idea. According to Misako, Niigata was a snowy region, and its winters were much colder than anything in Tokyo; a single room wouldn’t retain warmth without a vestibule, no matter how long you ran the heating unit.

In the living room behind him, Kai could hear Misako humming as she made tea. He listened to her strange humming all the way to the washroom, where he pooled the water flowing out of the faucet into his hands and splashed his face vigorously. The Niigata tap water soaked into his mouth; its flavor was far removed from his slowly fading memories of Tokyo. For the first time, Kai felt as if he could wake up from his nightmare.

“Did you *need* something?” he asked, upon returning to the living room.

In response, Misako shrugged her shoulders in such an exaggerated motion that it looked like they were about to fall off. “Don’t be so cranky,” she reprimanded him. “I’ll have you know that your parents have kindly asked me to watch over their precious son.”

“And they told me to look after my careless sister,” he retorted.

“It goes without saying that I care for my baby brother every day,” Misako went on, completely ignoring his rejoinder. “But of course, today is the day my

brother sets out on his journey in a new world! This calls for..."

"For...?"

"A prayer that you'll screw up your first impression spectacularly!"

"You're terrible..." he muttered. In all likelihood, this was the true purpose behind Misako's visit, which is why it wasn't funny. She was definitely being serious, because it'd be more fun for her that way.

"I mean, you didn't really need to leave your school in Tokyo to come out to the country in the first place, did you?"

"...Why are you asking that now?"

"It might be the start of a new year, but it's your second year... Everyone else has already spent a year together, and they probably at least know the faces of the other people in their year. Plus, they have connections through their clubs. Is it really possible for a new student to fit in like that...?"

"Can you quit building up my fears like a nervous monologue?" Kai asked bitterly.

"Haha! Make sure to screw up as spectacularly as you can," Misako advised him. "If you half ass it, it'd be too normal to even laugh at." Then, the lips that were so happily teasing Kai stopped, and Misako gave him a puzzled look.

"You're not gonna do that thing?"

"What thing?"

"The ritual where you line up a bunch of smartphones in front of a laptop," she reminded him. "You used to do it all the time, remember?"

"Ritual...? It's not that big of a deal," he told her, although even now, he had four smartphones. Of these, he used one as his main phone for calls and text messaging. The other three were used only for smartphone game applications—that is to say, he had them to play social games with.

Playing a lot of social games made his mornings very busy. There were daily login bonuses (presents that you can get just for opening the game every day) that he needed to collect, play points (points needed to play the game, usually called stamina or something like that) he needed to use up so as not to waste

any, and events he needed to run. Every morning, he'd do all of this with four phones in order to maximize his efficiency. The laptop was to log his data in.

Kai supposed that lining four phones up on a desk and robotically tapping at the screens all while logging a bunch of data into an Excel spreadsheet could seem like some sort of religious ritual, from someone else's point of view.

"...I don't feel like it today," he admitted, knowing that it was all because of that dream.

He'd already been feeling down because it was his first day as a transfer student, but that sort of nightmare was a death blow first thing in the morning.

"I see," Misako observed neutrally. "'Today,' huh?"

"Is that really worth noting?" Kai asked.

"Yup, it's important. It might just be some weird ceremony to me, but to you, it's a precious piece of your everyday life."

"...Don't just decide that on your own," he told her.

"Are you gonna join the social game club here, too?" she asked next.

"...No." He'd transferred from Tokyo just so that wouldn't happen. Kai never intended to step into the developer's side of social games ever again.

"I see," said Misako, nodding with a gentle expression.

Kai couldn't think of anything to say in the face of her sudden change in demeanor, and he turned on the TV once he could no longer bear the silence. What he'd thought was going to be the morning news was, for better or for worse, a ranking list of the top smartphone games as of this morning. First place was *StrikeMon*, second was *D&P*, third was...

Social games had completely permeated normal society. At the very least, they had enough influence to have a morning TV show with a time slot dedicated to their sales rankings.

Most of the younger generation played them, and ever since social games had been directly tied to children's schooling, their parents had begun to care, as well.

The reason social games had grown to this point was because of what the government called the “IT Facilitation Act,” a piece of legislation that had established an Information Technology Facilitation Program and led a push toward students developing social games as a club activity.

“I have no clue what I’m looking at,” Misako remarked. “But the game you were working on was on this ranked list before, right?”

“...A few times,” Kai admitted modestly.

“That’s incredible,” she said. “I mean, there are game companies that even I’ve heard of on this show.”

There had been a lot of progress made in the realm of game development, and now there were student-made social games that were close to the same level as corporate titles. In particular, the high-performance game creation engine, Alchemia, raised the bar on student-made games as soon as it appeared on the scene. Its creator was unknown. The only thing anyone knew about the developer was that he called himself “Gacchaman.” The circumstances were as suspicious as they come, but even a corporate-led security analysis confirmed it wasn’t some sort of malicious virus, and the engine itself was so phenomenal that a large number of social games currently used it as their development engine.

From the corporations’ perspective, the increased number of students with immediate working knowledge of the field led to these top-tier IT companies sending out unofficial job offers to those who put out good results. And up until a few months ago, Kai had been at one of the most distinguished high schools for social games in the country. Now that he’d transferred, though, that was in the past.

Hey, wait a second. Kai rewound his brain a few steps. There was something peculiar about the news show he just watched. *That’s it! D&P was second?! Nonononono, it was number one for three months straight! I can’t imagine D&P’s team dropped the ball anywhere, so StrikeMon must have done something. What kind of plan did they put into action? I need to check—*

“‘...I’m not going to join the social game club,’ was it?” Misako asked.

“I-I was just curious because I happened to see it on the TV and—” Kai

stopped his hand from unconsciously reaching for the phone in his pocket, and Misako giggled the way a child laughs at a prank.

Kai's new school wasn't in a big city to begin with, so it was doubtful they even had a social game club. IT companies generally based themselves in urban areas, and social game clubs were mostly prevalent in Tokyo. A smaller city like Niigata would probably have people who played social games, but on the creator's end of it, any social game club here would pale in comparison.

Misako had said that he didn't need to come out to the country, but that rural environment is exactly what Kai had been aiming for: he wouldn't have anything to do with a social game club. That's the entire reason he'd run away from Tokyo in the first place.

"...I won't join it," he declared adamantly.

Misako was clearly getting tired of him, but she still gave him a dampened smile. "It's not that easy to throw away your everyday life," she told him.



The school was about a twenty-minute train ride from Niigata Station, and the train was full of students, all of whom were wearing the same uniform as Kai. *It must always be like this around the time school starts*, he thought. The train car was alive with the loud back and forth of high schoolers talking, and the few cleanly dressed adults on their way to work looked hideously uncomfortable.

Despite having the same uniform, Kai also had no one to talk to, and he felt closer to the suit-wearing adults than his fellow students. He stuck a pair of earphones in and joined the businesspeople in grimacing while the train swayed back and forth.

Meikun Private High School's motto was "Pen and Sword." With the creation of a middle school branch a few years ago, it became a combination school available to both age groups. From Kai's research online, he'd found that the big points of interest were their large variety of club activities and the fact that the declining birthrate had led to issues with a shrinking student body.

The school itself was surrounded by rice fields in every direction, and at the end of those fields lay a mountain ridge, unobstructed by man-made buildings.

Kai stopped for a moment to think that this may have been the first bit of country scenery he'd seen since moving to Niigata.

He stopped by the teacher's lounge before heading towards his classroom. Even if he'd wanted to go straight there, he wouldn't have known where it was. When he explained his situation to someone at the lounge, he was sent over to an older teacher with deep wrinkles and grizzled hair. He was probably only a few years away from retirement.

"When didja move over here?" the old teacher asked.

"Well, I've been here since March," Kai told him.

"So I guess you've had some time to get used ta living around here. Ho ho ho!"

The way the old teacher laughed was the spitting image of a cheery old man. His name was Haimura. He taught classic literature, and apparently, some students called him Hai-jii. His old man accent felt a bit exaggerated, but strangely enough, Kai thought it fit him well.

"You can call me by whatever name you'd like, son," Haimura offered generously.

"Understood... Haimura-sensei."

"Aw shucks, you're no fun," the old teacher sighed. Kai thought that maybe Haimura had been trying to ease his nerves with a light joke while walking down the hallway together. As they approached class 2-D, he shot Kai a glance as if to double-check something. "Are ya all readied up?"

"Yes, I'm ready," Kai affirmed.

"...You sure? There's uh, that thing, right?" Haimura asked, hazarding a guess. "If you muck up your high school debut nowadays, it's a whole mess, ain't it? You'll get canceled on Twitter and RNR'd on LINE, and, uhh, what else was there?" It wasn't quite what you'd call working knowledge, but he at least seemed to be familiar with a lot of slang terms. To think he'd have to keep up with all of that at his age, teaching must have been a busy job.

"...I think I'll be fine," Kai replied.

“Alrighty, let’s go on in.”

When Kai followed Haimura in, it felt like he was being skewered alive by everyone’s gazes. He thought he’d seen the “transfer student at the beginning of a semester” trope enough times in manga and anime to be sick of it, but being put into the hot seat himself was something he could only describe as a living hell.

First of all, the staring was relentless. That alone was already painful and exhausting. It wasn’t often that he’d been judged by others so extensively. Next, once Kai took his place on the teacher’s platform, the stares were coming from right in front of him. There were two girls sitting next to the window who exchanged glances, and Kai read their lips to figure out that they were saying, “He’s kinda average.”

I’m sorry for not being hot, he replied mentally. Just let me off with the fact that I’m not a horrible person, okay... Wait, I don’t have time to be apologizing in my head. Everyone’s waiting on my self-introduction.

Akane’s teachings suddenly flashed across his mind. “—Clear, concise. Listen up, Shiraseki. A planner has to converse with many different developers. It’s common to present your plans to them, too. The most important thing you can do in a situation like that is to explain yourself in a clear and concise manner. I won’t tell you to make it interesting or funny. Clear, concise. That’s all I want you to keep in mind at first—”

...Clear and concise. He repeated the phrase in his head and took a deep breath. Then, he slowly opened his mouth. “M-My name is Shiraseki Kai. Before I moved here, I went to high school— Er, well, I mean that was obvious but, uh, I-I went to high school in Tokyo. It’s only been a month since I moved, and I still, uh, don’t really know anyone... T-Thanks for having me.”

A few stray claps went his way, and he responded to them with an awkward half-smile.

He’d originally planned to smile normally, but his mouth just wouldn’t move into position. From his classmates’ perspective, it was doubtful if they could even tell if he was trying to smile or not.

“Look, see? I told you you’d mess it up,” said his inner vision of Misako,

looking smug.

What the hell, Kai internally castigated himself. What do you mean, “I don’t know anyone, so thanks for having me?” Thanks for what? Why?! Couldn’t you at least have said, “Let’s get along?!”

No, well, I was planning on saying something like, ‘I don’t have any friends yet, so I’d like to get along with you.’ He had even practiced the night before while taking a bath. Still, the words just wouldn’t come out when he got up for the real thing, and the end result was a “Thanks for having me” devoid of any actual meaning. All he’d managed to do was to let the world know that he didn’t have a single friend in Niigata. This wasn’t clear nor concise at all!

Kai took his seat in the far back, next to the window, and let out a heavy sigh. If he could have gotten away with it, he would have liked to bury his face into the desk.

Chapter 3 - Aoi Nanaka

Kai couldn't decide if he should be happy or sad when it seemed that his classmates realized he wasn't anything all that special, due to his mess of an introduction. At first, he was bombarded with all sorts of questions about Tokyo and his old school during every single break, but by the time lunch ended and afternoon classes were in session, the questions had stopped.

His classmates made their own little groups with clubmates or friends they knew from last year. Of course, Kai didn't have anyone like that. He quietly played social games at his desk, and the school day was over before he knew it.

He'd planned on going straight home, but Haimura called him over as soon as he stood up, so off to the teacher's lounge he went. "I almost forgot to give you one a' these," he said, handing Kai a single slip of paper. "It's a club registration form."

"I don't plan to join any—" Kai tried to object.

"That's a crying shame. Hohoho," the old teacher said with a laugh. "All of our students have to join a club unless they're in the honors program."

"I... see," said Kai, with great difficulty. Classes A through C were considered honors classes at Meikun High for each grade level, and only included students with good grades. Classes were re-sorted at the end of every semester exam and students who fell through would automatically be sent to class D or lower. Being in class D, Kai had no choice but to join a club.

"Don't scowl like that, boy," Haimura lectured him. "This is your only shot at youth! Your sweat, your tears—"

"Sensei, I brought the class journal!" said a voice from behind Kai, accidentally cutting Haimura off mid-lecture. The girl took a surprised step back, and her short, sandy blonde hair swayed softly. The eyes just below her bangs were large and round. Her nose and mouth were more reserved, but still came together very well. To put it bluntly, she had a cute face, and what's more, she

seemed bright and cheerful.

“Ahh, Aoi,” Haimura said cheerfully. “You came at the perfect time.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’ve got something I need to ask of you. Here,” he said, slapping Kai on the back.

Aoi looked at him curiously. No matter how much she stared, it wasn’t as if Kai understood the situation himself. All he could do was act confused alongside her.

“Wouldja mind showing him around?” Haimura requested.

“Around the school, sir?”

“Nope. I wantcha to show him our clubs.”

“Ohh, I see.”

“Alright, I’ll leave ya to it,” said Haimura, who seemed to have no further intention of looking after Kai. Instead, he pulled out a desk chair and began to sip at his tea. Kai silently exchanged looks with the girl, the sound of Haimura slurping tea ringing out in between them.

“Okay, Shiraseki-kun,” Aoi told him. “I guess we better get going.”

“A-Alright...” Kai found himself agreeing automatically. Then he said, “Wait, how do you know my name?”

“Huh? That’s because... Oh, right! I haven’t introduced myself. Let me go ahead and do that,” she said, and then laughed. “I’m Aoi Nanaka. I’m in your class! I hope we can get along!”



So bright. Kai wasn’t thinking about the light of the setting sun when he thought this. For him, the existence of someone like Aoi Nanaka was simply too bright.

Nanaka had dutifully shown him around every single club that Meikun High School had to offer. She didn’t just stop at showing him the outside of each clubroom, but went as far as to prepare a small tour for every club and

participated in those tours with him.

Think about that for a second: every single club. Even if he had another three—no, another thousand attempts to relive his life—Kai figured he would never have enough friends to be able to go to every club and say, “Hey, I know this is really sudden, but...” No, in fact, he knew that it’d never happen. He was sure of it.

Nanaka could do just that, though. They lived in different worlds, and she was clearly in a bright, sunny place. Despite the fact that a teacher had forced this whole exercise onto her out of nowhere, she was bright, cheerful, and didn’t look upset at all. Compared to someone who stared down at his phone whenever he had time to spare, she was different in every single way.

“The literature club we just visited was the last one,” she told him with a slightly nervous expression. “Was there any club you’d be interested in?”

“...There wasn’t,” he had to admit, all but screaming on the inside. He didn’t want to make trouble for her. What to do? To be honest, there wasn’t much he *could* do.

“...R-Right. I figured.”

“.....I’m sorry,” said Kai, apologizing profusely. The gloomy back-and-forth just served to further dampen his mood. *I’m sorry for everything!* He wanted to just lay everything out on the table and apologize so he could be done with it. She went out of her way to spare precious time for him, but as they pointed out in their conversation, he still couldn’t find a club that interested him.

He had absolutely no talent for physical activity, so athletic clubs were doomed to begin with. He was tone deaf, so music clubs were out. He couldn’t draw, couldn’t write. There was nothing, nothing that he could do. The entire time they’d spent looking around only served to beat that point into him.

At some point on their tour, Kai wanted to start crying, but he figured even Nanaka would be troubled if a new student in her care suddenly burst into tears. He used that thought to just barely hold it in. He’d left the one thing he did every day behind at his old school; perhaps this was an obvious outcome. Nevertheless, he was already causing Nanaka trouble, and he wanted to keep it to a minimum.

“Ah!” Nanaka suddenly stopped, clapping her hands together in front of her chest as if she were about to start eating. She coupled that gesture with a twirl to look back at Kai, and he found himself charmed by how oddly cute it was. “I forgot to ask an important question,” she declared. “Were you in a club at your old high school?”

“Yes, but— Well, no, I was in the... go home club,” he told her, making something up on the spot.

“O-Oh, I see... But schools with mandatory club membership are really rare these days!” Nanaka said cheerfully. Seeing her try to force the conversation along made Kai feel more and more apologetic. To make matters worse, he’d lied to her!

At that moment, an abrupt blipping sound came out of Kai’s pocket. In his mind, he was surprised enough to jump up and stick his head through the ceiling, but somehow he managed to keep his cool on the outside.

“The teachers will get mad if you don’t put it on silent, you know?” Nanaka advised him.

“Sorry.”

“I forget all the time too. Depending on the teacher, they might even take up your phone, so it’s a big hassle.”

The origin of the sound was Kai’s smartphone which, apparently, he’d forgotten to switch to silent mode earlier in the day. He pulled it out now and saw several push notifications from different social games. They were all notifications for new gacha events. The evening is a great time to play on your phone, especially around the time that everyone goes home from school and work. Naturally, that leads to a bunch of different game notifications overlapping during this time frame.

There was no need to look through the notifications immediately, so he put it back in his pocket. But as he did, he noticed Nanaka was in an excited frenzy in front of him. Her beige hair flopped up and down as if to emphasize how frantic she was.

“Um, um, um! I didn’t mean to peek, it just happened to come into view!” She

beamed with so much excitement that her eyes appeared to be shining. “Do you like playing games on your smartphone?!”

Chapter 4 - Here Again

“Whew, that really surprised me.”

Nanaka took a light step forward and smiled. “I don’t really know how to describe it, but Shiraseki-kun... you give off a cool impression, so I thought you wouldn’t have any interest in phone games.” In other words: dark, gloomy, low energy, hard to talk to, disinterested even when you *do* talk to him... she saw someone with all the qualities of a rock on the sidewalk and had optimistically translated that into ‘giving off a cool impression.’

Kai knew he would probably never learn such powerful conversational arts. How impressive. “...Aoi-san, you don’t exactly look like you’d play them yourself,” he told her.

“Oh, s-sorry!” she exclaimed. “I know it’s wrong to judge a book by its cover.”

“N-No, I wasn’t saying that so you’d apologize, I just... Sorry.” This reply was met with silence, and Kai followed after her quietly without bringing up any conversational gambits of his own, figuring that at this point, it was probably best to avoid saying something strange. He sealed his mouth shut like a clam and decided not to open it, even if he were asked. Eventually, he’d forget how to speak altogether and turn into a stone statue. Surely at that point, the people around him would also understand him to be a statue; it’d be meaningless to talk to him, and so nobody would. If he opened his mouth, it would just be a trick of the mind. Statues don’t open their mouths. No one would get hurt, and no one would be troubled. Perfect.

While Kai was daydreaming like an idiot, the pair reached their destination, and Nanaka pointed at the door in front of them. “This is the club I’m in,” she announced.

“I thought the literature club was the last one?”

“I’m so sorry, I completely forgot about my own club.” She let out an awkward laugh and scratched her head like she was petting herself. “Anyway,

come on in!”

The door opened, and he—could not follow her in. The path was blocked. First of all, there were volumes of manga and magazines all over the floor. A stack of flyers must have been wedged between them because they, too, could be found scattered about, leaving them no bare floor to walk on. There was a table with snacks, drinks, and assorted merchandise and figurines messily laying atop it in the middle of the room, and two computers in the back, with two girls lined up shoulder to shoulder sitting at them.

“Geez!” Nanaka fumed. “Why is it so messy *again*?!”

One of the girls turned back to look at her with a weary look. “Yo,” she said. “Culprit here, reporting for duty.” There were light bags under her eyes, and her height when standing was absurdly short; she was probably under 150 centimeters. Despite there being school regulations against it, her hair had been dyed blonde and was tied up with black ribbons into a pair of twintails that swayed perkily. Her clothing was even more of a mess, with it being debatable whether she was wearing her uniform or whether she had it draped over her shoulder. Strangely enough, she didn’t seem scary or particularly delinquent-like, but it went without saying that she had her own set of issues.

The person next to her continued staring at her own monitor without saying a word. The white headphones she had on sandwiched her voluminous black hair. It seemed like she couldn’t hear anything.

“Hmmm-huh?” said the blonde girl, looking at Kai. “Who’s he?”

“Oh, that’s right.” Nanaka had been picking up the flyers on the ground, but stopped to wave Kai in as if she’d remembered he was there. “Shiraseki-kun, please come in,” she invited. “There should at least be enough room near the entrance to stand in, now.”

“...R-Right.” Once he’d stepped in and closed the door, the clubroom felt incredibly cramped.

“This is Shiraseki-kun,” Nanaka told the other two members. “He’s a transfer student who came to check out our club!”

“...H-Hi,” greeted Kai.

“Nice to meetcha,” said the blonde girl. “I’m Oushima Aya, but people call me junkie. It’s super rare to transfer schools, yeah?”

“J-Junkie...?” Kai stammered.

“‘Gacha over three meals a day, I might throw up and die, but a junkie pays to play.’ It’s a nickname I lovingly got from that. I’m a gacha junkie, so they call me junkie. Where’re you from, senpai?”

“Ah, right,” said Kai, reassured to know that she was just a gacha addict. “I went to a school in Tokyo called ‘Tsukigase High School.’”

“Tokyo, huh?” she commented. “Must’ve been rough mov— Wait, Tsukigase? Like, *the* Tsukigase?”

“*The* Tsukigase?” Upon hearing that, Nanaka tilted her head inquisitively. “Is it famous or something?”

“Nana-sen, *you’re* asking *me* if it’s famous? For real? I was so shook I almost gacha’d,” said Aya. Kai had noticed that she was tapping on her phone while they were talking, but apparently she’d almost rolled in a gacha. “Tsukigase is Tsukigase, the top of the top of all social game clubs in the country. Nana-sen, don’t you play *LW*? They had that whole shebang with *Rondo* a while back, so now they’re crashing and burning though. But well, you know, if you’re here ‘n all, you were probably in the social game club, right? Way to go, Nana-sen. You scouted out someone who’s battle-ready.”

“U-Um...” said Kai. *Battle ready?* he wondered. “What club is this?”

“Huh? Duh, it’s the social game club,” said Aya. “I’m a programmer.”

“.....Social game club?” he repeated.

“Social game club,” she affirmed. “Technically it’s the Meikun High School Social Game Development Club.”

But Kai knew that already. Of course, he knew. It went without saying, it went without being said, that he knew. He knew so well he hated it. After all, he hated it to the point where he ran away, quit school, and transferred here. But, even so... “This is the social game club?” he said again.

It was different in every way, shape, and form from the social game club he

knew, which is why he hadn't been able to tell what club it was at a glance. Aya had kindly explained a good amount to him, but there was no trace of any kind of management or development being displayed on her monitor. The display had a popular browser game running on it. She must have been eating snacks and lazily playing games.

The one who didn't even turn around seemed to be an illustrator, and she was busy drawing away on an electronic drawing tablet. At the very least, she wasn't playing around the way Aya was. She was, technically, drawing. But no matter how Kai looked at it, she clearly wasn't drawing an original character, but rather a fanart of an anime that had recently aired. Even from afar, he could tell that the drawing itself was extremely good, but it was safe to assume that she wasn't drawing it as a part of her club activities.

"...! Dear me, I've done it!"

"Wha...?"

Suddenly, that very same girl put her pen down and stood up, screaming in exultation. She raised both her hands toward the ceiling and kept repeating, "I've done iiiiiiiiiiiit!" over and over. The force of her movements knocked her headphones off, and they caught themselves on her neck. Her violently swaying black hair was nearly as long in the front as it was in the back, and it covered half of her face, leaving only one eye barely peeking out. That singular eye was wide open, staring off somewhere that wasn't quite here while she continued screaming, "It has arrriiiiiiiived!"



“Watch out!” said Nanaka, instantaneously jumping to her side.

“Dear me, this is my greatest work yet!” the illustrator gushed. “Cute, cute, so CUTE! Ah, ahh, ahhh... agh?” Suddenly, she collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Nanaka was ready and waiting behind her, as if she knew this would happen, and firmly caught her as she fell. “Phew...” she sighed. “Oh, sorry, Shiraseki-kun. That must have been surprising.”

“Um, no— What’s going on?”

“What a pain. Why’s she always gotta be like this?” said Aya, who’d been covering her ears, and now shook her head disapprovingly. “Don’t worry about her too much,” Aya told him. “Whenever she draws something hella good, she’s got a habit of getting too excited and knocking herself out. All the important bits of her brain keep getting siphoned off by those stupidly big knockers.”

Upon hearing that appraisal, Kai’s vision unconsciously went to check. He hadn’t noticed earlier because of the energy in the room, but the illustrator’s breasts were indeed very large. It might have been because Nanaka’s arms were accentuating them, but their plumpness almost transcended to the level of being powerful.

The girl herself hadn’t so much as budged, and was instead foaming at the mouth like a crab. *Interesting*, he thought. *It seemed as though she really had fainted*. Kai felt like being told not to worry was a bit of a stretch. Or maybe this was normal here?

The double whammy of a gacha junkie programmer who stared at the gacha screen while talking and an illustrator who fainted after completing a good drawing. That was what counted as normal here? It really was different from the social game club he knew in every conceivable way.

Every day spent in the development and management for a social game was simultaneously a constant battle against the users’ expectations and a race against time. Break time aside, there was no time to spare for playing around on the clock.

Wait, no, he reminded himself. *I’m done with all of this anyway!* “E-Excuse

me!” he managed to stutter, knowing that he couldn’t stay in a place like this for long. “I’m going home!” He grabbed a hold of his bag and flew out of the clubroom and into the hallway. He thought he heard Nanaka calling out his name, but he ignored her and kept running. He clambered down the stairs and nearly rolled into the front entrance, where he paused just long enough to change his shoes. Afterwards, he booked it to the station at full speed and jumped into the train which had just arrived.

It was still early into spring, but Kai was drenched in sweat while he swayed along to the rhythm of a train car bound for Niigata Station.



“.....What are you doing, nee-san?” he asked wearily. Kai couldn’t quite think of what a little brother was meant to do when he opened the door to his own home and his older sister came running out to greet him in a naked apron. He figured no one would have come by, but it was enough for him to wonder what she was planning on doing if someone other than himself opened the door.

“Oh, um... Ahem... How was it?” Misako replied.

“You ask me that now...” he grumbled, thinking to himself that the pink apron went well with the field of posies in his sister’s head. Well, at least he was used to it.

“You’re a boy in the middle of puberty,” she told him. “Don’t you feel sexually aroused?”

“By my sister?”

“Those words stand to pit you against every only child in the country who laments their birth and longs for a mischievous older sister!” Misako declared.

“Right... whatever,” said Kai, too tired to argue. “Can you put on some clothes?”

“Fufu, don’t you worry,” said Misako, twirling around.

“Woah!” Kai cautiously opened the eyes he’d closed in order to avoid seeing his sister naked, only to find Misako grinning from ear to ear. She wasn’t naked

at all—he could see that she had cleverly hidden her shirt and hot pants so they were only visible from behind.

“Our bit doesn’t end until we get to the punchline!” she sang out.

Kai wasn’t in the mood to keep playing along, so he slipped past Misako to head towards his room, where he hurled his bag onto his bed and pulled his phone out by force of habit. That just reminded him of Nanaka asking him if he liked smartphone games with beaming eyes, so he tossed the phone onto the bed, too.

“What happened?” asked Misako, leaning against the door frame.

“Nothing,” he told her shortly.

“I told you that our bit is important!” The sadness in Misako’s voice was sincere. “You know, I planned on doing the whole ‘Dinner, a bath, or me?’ schtick when you got home, but your eyes looked so dead that I couldn’t pull it off. There’s no way it was nothing. Look in a mirror; you could leave a raw fish out for three days and it still wouldn’t look as bad as you.” Next, Misako keenly eyed the smartphone on the bed. “Did they have a social game club?” she asked knowingly.

“.....How?”

“My little brother is so easy to understand.” Misako snickered as she sat down on the bed and picked up the phone. “You know,” she said, “I don’t think it’s a mistake to run away.”

“What’s with you all of a sudden?” asked Kai, sounding exasperated.

“I’m not saying the people who grind away at their bodies and souls to face their problems head on are wrong,” she went on. “But not everyone has the heart to do that; a newborn soul is like an untouched stone. The things that happen in our everyday lives chip at that stone until each one of us arrives at a shape we can call our own. But if the scar goes too deep and the rock crumbles... there’s no going back. That’s why running away to catch your breath for a moment isn’t a mistake.”

“...Then leave me alone,” Kai begged.

“I can’t do that, either. Listen to me, Kai: to run away, it has to be momentary,” Misako emphasized. “If you keep running, one day you’ll find that instead of running to escape something, you’ll be putting in effort or fighting just to run. It’s strange, but that’s how it is. You begin by running because you can’t fight anymore, so if you start fighting just to keep running—aren’t you putting the cart before the horse?”

Kai quietly accepted the phone that his sister handed him, and Misako smiled gently in response.

“And that concludes my excuse to my editor while I ran away from my manuscript and the lecture I received afterward,” she declared.

“What a waste...”

“Haha! If I got my beloved little brother’s mind off his problems, I can’t ask for anything else,” said Misako, springing up to her feet. “Alright! Let’s go buy some groceries for dinner. It’ll be my treat.”

“Are you planning on eating here *again*?” Kai objected.

“So what? For me, this is my safe space where I can run away to.”

“Like I said before, the manuscript you left at home isn’t going to write itself.”

“Nope! Can’t heeeaaaar yooouuu!” Misako sang out. Then she dragged him out of the house by his hand, and the two went to shop in front of the train station, where the deep color of the setting sun made Misako’s silver hair shine like a star. Kai initially thought that was the reason people kept staring at them, but when he looked again, he realized that Misako was still wearing her imitation naked apron. No wonder people were staring! He hurriedly tried to get her to take it off, but Misako had set her trap and was waiting for him to notice so she could gleefully run away, drawing even more stares than before.

They kept causing a scene until they reached the grocery store, where the siblings decided that buying ingredients and making something from scratch was too much work. Instead, they bought some bento boxes from a chain restaurant and went home. Misako went home immediately after dinner, possibly because her deadline really was that bad.

“...If you’re that busy, you don’t have to force yourself to visit,” Kai grumbled

after her. Once he was alone, he opened the BOX with his phone. The BOX was a government initiative, undertaken to create a unified distribution platform for all smartphone games in the country. Both corporate games and student-made games were distributed through it.

He opened his home page and noticed that he had received some points. It seemed to be for his final semester test at Tsukigase High. When the “IT Facilitation Act” began pushing students to develop social games through club activities, one of the biggest issues had been spending. Even before the system came under examination, there were plenty of stories of students using their parents’ credit cards to rack up a massive bill.

In order to make the act more than a fairy tale, the government had set about solving this issue, and their solution was very direct. They would monitor students’ phone terminals through the school system and disallow in-game purchases through the BOX. If you couldn’t buy anything, there shouldn’t be any issues. There were a handful of loopholes, but it was a simple solution. In exchange, students would receive points they could use in the BOX based on their contributions at school.

Basically, students were rewarded with points if they did well on exams or in their clubs and such. These points were usable in any application that was available through the BOX, and it was even possible to use them for shopping.

There were criticisms at the time that the system impeded on students’ freedom, or that students would simply use their money to fool around. However, the schools that implemented the system saw noticeable increases in academic performance. Perhaps the concept of being rewarded with points through studying offered an easy answer for the many students who asked themselves, “Why am I learning this?” As more and more schools adopted the policy, national test averages had risen proportionally, and the voices of dissent gradually faded away.

“...Phew.” Kai made it a daily routine to keep up with all of the games in the top 100 rankings. Of course, he also updated the log on his laptop while doing so. All of that combined made up his daily chores. Finally, he finished up his work and turned off his computer. He was about to turn off his phone as well when his hand stopped.

“...” He mulled it over for a second, and decided to look it up after all.

Kai laid down in his bed as he searched for Meikun High School in the BOX and got a single hit: it was a social game called *Miracle Stage*, with magical girls and idols as the motif. It was also pretty close to being dead last in the rankings. The game’s art was astoundingly good, but the lack of any gameplay screenshots in the introduction page gave Kai a bad feeling. There were as many “art trap” games as there were stars in the sky.

He felt a little disappointed as he tapped the download button.



By the time he realized it, there was light pouring in from underneath his curtains. It was morning. “...What am I even doing?” he asked himself. He remembered rolling around in bed, playing the game. But before he knew it, he was at his desk with the laptop open.

This was his first lesson from Akane: “Play a social game, but do not let that be the end of it. Keep a record of what you thought, of what you felt, of its strengths and weaknesses. Play it again. Record again. Pile on more and more until it becomes a treasure you can store and pull out at any time. That treasure will be yours and yours alone.” She had spoken that last line with some sort of conviction.

That was a major reason why his routine now included data logging in addition to merely playing social games. The spreadsheet on his screen was full of analyses on everything to do with *Miracle Stage*.

Kai checked his watch and realized that it was almost too late to make it to class on time. He quickly washed his face and got himself ready before heading out to school. The sunlight stung painfully in his eyes. During his time at Tsukigase, it was common for him to pull an all-nighter to fix in-game bugs, but he hadn’t done so in so long that his body had forgotten the violence of the morning sun.

Kai slapped his wobbling legs into shape and hurried onward. The number of Meikun High uniforms grew as he approached the station and by the time he was on the train platform, he was practically drowning in them. Out of that massive crowd, he saw Nanaka from behind. Considering what happened

yesterday, he couldn't bring himself to talk to her. He knew they'd see each other in class, but he wanted to put it off as long as possible.

Just as he tried to slip away from the line of people waiting to board the train, she turned around and made eye contact. Kai wasn't the only one to notice; he recoiled and his body started running out of reflex as Nanaka hurried to close the distance.

"Shiraseki-kun!" she called out.

Kai heard her call out to him from behind, backing him further into a corner. He was already past the ticket gate by now, so it wouldn't be easy to get back outside. His only choice was to go back up the stairs to a different platform.

"Please, wait!" she begged.

"Why?!" he cried out, wondering why she was chasing after him in the first place. When Kai was a child, he once ran away from a large dog because he was scared. The dog chased him down and pushed him over. At least then, the reason had been obvious: the dog wanted to roll around and play.

Then what was the reason here? Why was she chasing him? Surely, she didn't want to roll around and play with him; Nanaka probably didn't even have any positive feelings toward Kai. He'd run home despite the fact that she did her best to show him around, after all.

Did she want to complain? Did she need to get all her negativity off her chest by scolding him? He would understand, if that were the case. Human beings were a life form surprisingly full of complaints. Kai had more than his fair share of that during his first job at Tsukigase, where he'd worked in user support. A single bug could lead to a torrent of insults and abuse sent through support tickets, as if there were people lying in wait for them to make a mistake.

That had been... rough. The ones that said things like "unplayable," "I want a refund," or "give me back my time" were manageable. But sometimes, there would be messages that just casually said, "I hope you die." No matter how hard you worked, there would still be voices calling your management trash or your game dog shit.

Nanaka must have wanted to say something like that. There's no other reason

she'd chase after him so desperately. But Kai didn't want to hear it; he didn't want to be called shit, or trash, or to be told to die. The only thing he could do was run aw—

"Huh?" He'd been so lost in his thoughts that he kicked his foot into a step on the stairs at full speed. He managed to regain his balance by spinning his arms around in a windmill. Even though he somehow avoided falling over, he didn't have time to relax as his phone fell out of his pocket.

Right before it hit the staircase, however, a light hand slipped into view and caught it. "Um..." Nanaka stretched out her hand to give him the phone in a way that looked like she was still trying to feel out the situation.

"Here."

"T-Thank... you very much," said Kai, reaching out to take his phone. But Nanaka didn't let go; instead, they locked into a small tug-of-war. "Aoi... san?"

"Do you hate me?" she blurted out.

"...What?"

"You ran away so suddenly... so I thought maybe I did something yesterday to make you hate me..." she panted.

"W-Wait, wait wait wait, no, that's not it!" As a matter of fact, Kai thought *she* was the one that hated *him*. How had she come to that conclusion? ...*Wait*, he realized. *She tried to talk to me and I ignored her. On top of that, I ran away as fast as I could. It wouldn't be a stretch to think that I hated her. Not at all. Huh. So that's how she felt.* Kai was in the wrong after all. "Yesterday, I... well, I was a bit surprised..." he tried to explain. He wasn't lying. There *was* a lot to be surprised by.

"I... see," said Nanaka, breathing a sigh of relief from the bottom of her heart. Then she waited for Kai to put away his phone and tried to muster up her resolve. "Um, Shiraseki-kun. If you wouldn't mind... would you please join the social game club?" She bowed her head and further added, "Please." In her outstretched hands was a single piece of paper. Kai had seen it before. At the very top were the words Club Application Form, and the Club Name field had the social game club written in.

He slowly reached for the paper, but pulled back his hand before he could take it. "...I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I... can't join the social game club."

"Is that because... we're not good enough?" she guessed.

"Huh? No, that's—"

"It's not true!" She must not have meant to shout, because she gave a small apology right away, and then took a deep breath to control her emotions before continuing. "Those two are amazing. It's just... I can't do anything. I'm the club president and the planner, but I don't know anything about social games. I didn't even know what an amazing school Tsukigase was... That's why they don't have anything they can work on. I know it looks like they're playing around..."

Nanaka thrust the club application form toward him again. "Please! I'm... not good enough. Please lend us your strength...!"

Kai wanted to start running, vault over the ticket gate if he had to, and get away from her. But when he noticed how her hands were trembling, whether out of anxiety or plain nervousness, his own legs wouldn't move. This wasn't something he could run away from. Her words had moved him. He wanted to respond to her earnestness with honesty of his own, even if his answer wasn't a good one.

"...I ran away from it all," he admitted. "I didn't want to join the social game club again... I don't have the right to. So... I'm sorry."

Chapter 5 - Don't Screw With Me

"Young man, are you stupid?" Haimura sighed when Kai handed him a club application form with 'go-home club' written on it.

"No good?" Kai asked in resignation.

"Of course it's no good," the old teacher scolded him. "Were you listening to what I said yesterday?"

"You have to join a club no matter what at this school," Kai quoted.

"So you *do* understand."

"...No matter what?"

"We do have a few exceptions, but I haven't heard anything from your folks. You're gonna have to join a club."

Kai heaved a heavy sigh.

"You're too young to be sighing like that! Go on, go look around at some clubs," Haimura ordered him.

Kai bowed once before excusing himself from the teacher's lounge. His eyes naturally fell down to the floor. He unconsciously let out another sigh and sluggishly began to walk down the hallway. Now, what was he to do? There weren't any clubs he wanted to join. Not a single one, as he'd found out yesterday. Plus, after getting a tour once, it was hard to force himself to go ask again.

As he walked along with his head down, a voice came out of nowhere.

"Oh!"

He knew there was someone else in the hallway, but didn't go as far as to check who it was. There were two girls standing there. One had blonde hair and the other had black hair, and the pair were definitely familiar. The two of them were in the social game club room yesterday.

“It’s you, senpai.” Aya lazily waved her hand as she walked over to him.

“And who on earth would this be?” said the other.

“Whaddya mean... Oh, right,” Aya commented dryly. “You climaxed yesterday before you noticed him.”

“Don’t call it ‘climaxing’! It is a graceful ascension of my dear soul!”

Privately, Kai had to admit that he couldn’t really tell the difference between climaxing and ascending.

“This is Shiraseki... Uhhhh...”

“...Kai,” he finished for her.

“Ahh, yup, that’s right,” said Aya. “This is Shiraseki Kai-paisen. Nana-sen brought him to our club yesterday.”

Disregarding Aya’s introduction, the girl glared at him like she was eyeing a suspect. Her long bangs completely covered her left eye, but the look coming out of her exposed right eye was sharp enough to pierce through him.

“...Kuroba Eru.” She mumbled like she was talking to herself, so it took a second for Kai to realize that she had told him her name.

“...Oh, uh, I’m Shiraseki Kai,” he said, attempting to introduce himself.

“I’ve already heard as much from that fool over there.”

“A-Ah, that’s right. Sorry.”

Perhaps she lost interest in him then, because she switched her gaze to the door of the room in front of them. The nameplate above the doorway read “Student Council.”

“By the way senpai, I heard you rejected Nana-sen,” said Aya.

“...Huh?!”

Eru’s ice-cold expression exploded in response to Aya’s sudden statement. She made her way toward Kai like she was about to strangle him at any moment. “You!” she hissed. “What is the meaning of this?!”

“W-What?!” said Kai, attempting to defend himself. “I just told her I wouldn’t join the club!”

“Ahh, then I guess the three of us got rejected together, huh?”

“No, that’s not what I’m trying to say!”

“Then why not join? Nana-sen’s in crazy trouble, so couldn’t you at least put your name down as a no-show member?”

“...In trouble?”

That very instant, the door in front of them opened, and Nanaka came out as pale as a ghost. She muttered, “Excuse me,” with all the power of a mosquito and closed the door behind her.

“Oh man, Nana-sen, that’s an awful look on your face.”

“...They said no.” Nanaka was all but whispering at this point.

“No to what?” asked Kai, jumping into the conversation without thought.

But Nanaka was so out of it that she didn’t stop to realize that Kai was the one to respond to her. “...They’re disbanding us.” Her words rippled through the hallway like a spilled droplet of water, and the entire group stood still in shock for a moment.

“C-Come on, Nana-sen,” Aya scoffed. “That joke was so out of character that we all forgot to laugh.”

“...I’m not joking,” said Nanaka, opening her mouth again to squeeze out the words. As she did so, a single marble-sized tear flowed out of her right eye and rolled down her cheek. The setting sun shone through the window as the tear stroked the outline of her jaw and fell to the floor, where it silently shattered.

“Dear me, I’d appreciate it if you stopped messing around,” Eru practically spat out the words as she tried to push Nanaka on the shoulder to move her out of the way. She seemed intent on going into the room. Nanaka came to her senses and wiped the corner of her eye before pulling Eru back.

“Why must you stop me?!” Eru demanded to know.

“Eru, you’re going to go on a rampage again!” Nanaka protested.

Again, Kai noted, which meant that she’d already gone on a rampage at some point.

Eru contorted her body like a bucking horse, trying to shake Nanaka off. She must have been stronger than she looked, because Nanaka lost her footing and Kai subconsciously moved to help her so she wouldn't fall.

"Thanks..." Nanaka mumbled, and then stopped in realization. "Wait, what? Shiraseki-kun?"

"Oh, uh, it's just a coincidence... Um, anyway." It really was nothing but a coincidence.

"Be a dear and unhand me!" Eru demanded again.

"You know we can't do that!" Nanaka yelled back at her.

The door opened with all the vigor of a clap of thunder. "Hey! You idiots are way too loud!" A single male student stood in front of them. He had a perm, and his blond hair had been styled with wax. He looked very well put together, all told, and he'd look like the foreign prince of a fantasy novel if he kept his mouth shut. But his aura of pride was so massive that it swallowed that initial image whole and still had room to spare.

Behind him was a female student who carried herself like a secretary. She had long hair and a good sense of fashion, putting on an air of maturity. Unlike the first boy, she stayed silent and observed the situation with a keen eye. Kai's initial impression was that she seemed like the tutor who kept the prince in line.



“Oh, you were still here?” Asked the pretty boy, eying Nanaka and speaking with disgust.

“I see you’ve assembled everyone here, and for what? To fool around? Go, quickly, return to your club room and clean it. A club room used by morons like you must be in a filthy state of ruin.”

“Th-That’s not! ...Not, true.” Nana started speaking with a burst of energy, but it petered out when she glanced at Aya. Kai thought back to the condition of the club room he saw yesterday and couldn’t fault her for it.

“Listen to yourself hesitate,” the boy scoffed. “This is why I hate conversing with buffoons. You lot were squatting in that room to begin with. Make haste and leave!”

“That’s the social game club’s club room!” Nanaka protested again.

“How many times must I repeat myself before you understand? The social game club has never been recognized as a club. A club must have a minimum of four unique members who are not part of any other club. How many do you have? Can you not even count that high?”

“Well, we...”

“Then that is not your clubroom,” the boy told her flatly. “You lot are a gaggle of all-natural imbeciles who aren’t a part of any club. Just as it is the responsibility of a citizen of our nation to work, so too is it a responsibility of a student at this school to join a club.”

Kai finally understood what was going on. He didn’t know who the arrogant boy was, but it was clear that he was saying the social game club didn’t have enough members. Since it didn’t have enough members, it wasn’t an official club. Thus, the disbandment. He finally tied it to Nanaka’s earlier statement.

“I’ll dearly have you know that you ought to shut your mouth!” Eru said threateningly.

“E-Eru! Stop!” Nanaka just barely managed to stop Eru, who tried to grab the boy’s collar.

“Eek!” The boy jumped back, cowering pathetically. He seemed genuinely

relieved to realize that she couldn't reach him. He reset his expression and once again stepped forward with arrogance. "What am I to do with you savages? I know that you call yourselves the social game 'club,' but what worth is there to such club activities to begin with? Games are made for fooling around in the first place, and social games are even more worthless than that. It simply burns time. Wouldn't you call something like that garbage?" he demanded. "Each and every one just aims to make money with their gachas, so they decorate themselves into a deluxe trash can. Well, people like *you* are making it, after all. Trash begets trash as a simple matter of course. Garbage should be properly disposed of, so you can move onto something more productive with your lives."

Aya had been relatively removed from the conversation up until this point, but the boy's last statement made something inside her snap. Nanaka's eyes were wide open in shock and Eru was clearly displaying an even more heated look of rage than before.

Kai was no different.

"You—" Aya started, but before he knew it, Kai's emotions were leaking out of his mouth and he cut her off.

"Don't screw with me!" The world around him moved in slow motion, and his legs moved forward on their own as the distance between the two boys closed.

"—Listen up, Shiraseki. Don't forget to look people in the eye. It's good to have your materials on hand. But when you talk to someone, talk while you look them in the eye. Intent resides in the eye, emotion sprouts there, and it will bring life to your words. At times, a planner must butt heads with others. When those times come, the words you speak while maintaining eye contact will carry your emotions with them. That, and sometimes it's useful when you need to overwhelm someone. That being said, it's better to avoid situations where you'd have to overpower someone to begin with." —Akane's words floated in Kai's mind as he looked the boy in the eye. He was glaring.

The boy jumped back in a panic yet again. "A-And who might you be?! I haven't seen you around! ...Yup! Never seen you! I know the names and faces of every student in this school! It's my responsibility as student council president! But I don't know you. Is this some twisted trick you pulled knowing

that I, Ryuugamine Takeru, am the student council president?!” Remarkably, the boy turned out to be the student council president.

The girl behind him stepped closer. “President,” she said. “He is the transfer student I informed you of yesterday. I informed you again today, so that even someone as bird-brained as you wouldn’t forget, but to think you had already forgotten.”

“I-I did no such thing, Shizaki-kun! Of course, *he’s* the transfer student! His name was Sekkai Seki-kun, right?” The careless misnomer insinuated that said transfer student was made of limestone.

“It’s Shiraseki Kai, Your Fowlness,” the secretary corrected pointedly.

“Your Fowlness?! As in, king of fowl?!” the student president protested vehemently. “I’m the leader of students, not the leader of chickens, okay?!”

“He came from Tsukigase High,” she went on, “which is famous for its social game club program.”

“...Oho. I see, I see. Birds of a feather flock together, I see.” The president nodded like he’d figured everything out.

“The social game club is being disbanded because it doesn’t have enough members. Is that right?” Kai asked.

“Indeed—” the president began to say, but that affirmation was all Kai needed. He completely ignored the president as he tried to get another word in and pulled out a slip of paper from his bag. It was the club application form he received from Nanaka in the morning. He’d refused to join the club, but she kept pushing and pushing, and he finally relented to at least take the form with him.

Kai now used his bag as a surface upon which to write his name in a single motion across the form. His handwriting was remarkably messy, but he figured it was legible enough to be used. He tried to slam the paper into the president, but the girl named Shizaki intercepted him, causing him to step back.

“This is incomplete,” she told him calmly. “Mark here.”

He didn’t carry around his stamp with him. Of course, he didn’t have an ink

pad for one, either. Before Kai could even think, his hands were moving; perhaps that was proof enough of how much blood was rushing to his head. He forcefully sank his teeth into his right thumb. The blood flow was more intense than he expected, but he pushed his thumb onto the page where she asked him to mark.

“I’m joining the social game club,” he declared. “There shouldn’t be any problems now, right?”

“Indeed, we accept your application.” The girl’s answer was calm and collected, and her expression didn’t change a bit. In that moment, Kai felt all the strength leave his body.

“...Shiraseki-kun?”

“I—” I’m sorry for deciding everything on my own! ...is what Kai wanted to say, but his voice wouldn’t come out. It felt like the air around him had turned into water and his balance turned to slime, and he was having a hard time keeping himself upright. It was like he was in zero gravity, and his vision went white. Despite this state of affairs, he felt clear-minded, and could tell that blood was still pouring from his thumb. Now that Kai thought back on it, he had pulled an all-nighter and hadn’t slept at all. He was already stumbling on his way to the train station. Even then, this shouldn’t have been enough to make him anemic...

An overwhelming whiteness and the feeling of being dragged down by gravity enveloped him as he lost grip on his consciousness.



When he woke up, the first thing he saw was still white.

He cleared his vision after blinking a few times. The blur of white he was looking at was a ceiling, and the surface he was laying on was a bed. He looked around without getting up and noticed he had been sectioned off by a cream-colored curtain, and the smell of medicine drifted to his nose. It seemed he was in the infirmary.

When he opened the curtain, he saw the white coat of the school nurse, who was sitting at her desk. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “You’re awake.”

“...Yes.”

“Do you remember passing out?”

“I do,” he told her.

“Good. You should be good to go then.”

The evening sun was still shining through the window. It was further sunken than before, and it wouldn't be long before it was engulfed by the horizon. Still, it didn't look like he'd been out for very long.

“You had a pretty light case of anemia,” the nurse told him, “so you should be able to get home, but I can call your parents for you if you want.”

“No, I'll go home on my own,” he told her politely. “Thank you very much.”

“Be careful on your way back.”

Kai thanked her and left the room. Next, he found himself in a hallway dyed crimson by the deep scarlet rays of sun that were pouring in through every window. But there was a single black shadow stretched across the scarlet floor. A girl was looking down at her phone and took a moment to notice Kai. “Shiraseki-kun!” she exclaimed. “Are you okay?!”

“I-I'm fine.”

Nanaka rushed over to him and took his right hand, and a small jolt of pain reminded him that he'd bitten into his thumb. He looked down and realized that it had been wrapped in white gauze, in addition to the standard band-aid.

“Does it hurt?” she asked anxiously.

“I-I'm okay... So... could you... let go?” Kai suggested. No girl had ever held his hand before. Not once, not in his entire life. Frankly speaking, he found it embarrassing. If he included his sister, then there were plenty of times when she'd held his hand or he'd held hers, but that didn't count. She was a species called ‘sister’ which was definitively, fatally, and fundamentally removed from a girl his age.

Nanaka may have noticed that his face was red for reasons other than the setting sun, as she herself made an embarrassed face and let go. “S-Sorry. I, um, I was worried. L-Let's go home!” she declared.

“Y-Yes,” Kai shakily agreed.

The two walked side by side to the front entrance, changed shoes, and left through the school gate. It seemed like the majority of students were still in the middle of club activities, and they could hear the mixed sounds of various clubs from the school building.

After walking a good distance without saying a word, Nanaka nervously opened her mouth.

“Are you... really going to join?”

“Oh,” he had completely forgotten. “Yes, I will. I mean, if that’s okay with you. Sorry for deciding everything on my own back there.”

“Why are you apologizing?! I’m really happy! But I thought you didn’t want to join the social game club again.”

“...I don’t.” That was the entire reason he moved, but even so... “Even though I don’t like the club... I do like social games,” he explained. “That’s why I hated what the student council president said even more than the club... So, I just kind of blew up. Like, so what if I like social games? ...Aoi-san?”

Nanaka stopped in her tracks and looked at him. “Shiraseki-kun,” she said, “you really love social games, huh?” Kai had a hard time reading her expression as she said that. It was a complex face that seemed happy but also surprised—and even melancholic.

“No, well, uh—” he cut himself off, unsure of what to say.

“...Aww man,” she quietly let out a sad sigh.

“Huh?”

“Nevermind, don’t worry about it! Anyway, I really like that! So what if you like social games!” Nanaka looked like a child, singing as she walked along repeating, ‘so what, so what,’ and putting it into verse. Then, she turned toward Kai and smiled as she thrust out her right hand. “Well then, from the top! I’m Aoi Nanaka, the president and planner of the social game club. Let’s do our best together!”

“...Yeah, let’s do our best,” Kai agreed, timidly grasping her hand as he

answered back. Her hand was thin and small, and his heart started pounding when he touched it, so he pulled back right away.

They lined up again as they walked toward the station.

“Shiraseki-kun,” she asked, “where do you live?”

“Uhh, it’s a short walk away from Niigata Station,” he told her.

“From the North gate?”

“Yes.”

“Oh! I’m glad. I go the same way, so I can send you home.”

“.....Send me home? As in... you’re going to walk me to my house?”

“...Yes?” Nanaka tilted her head, as if she couldn’t think of any other possibility. “Shiraseki-kun, you fainted earlier, you know? I’m worried.”

“N-No, wait!” he tried to protest. “I’m good!”

“You’re not good! I’ll walk you home whether you want me to or not!” She didn’t have any intention of backing down.

Kai found it difficult to continuously shut down someone that was truly concerned about him, so he ended up agreeing to let her follow him. When they reached the train platform, it was overflowing with Meikun students. A train headed for Niigata Station pulled up at just the right time, and they barely had to wait before getting aboard.

He had planned on buying a bento for dinner on the way home, but couldn’t bring himself to walk around the shopping district with Nanaka in tow. Instead, Kai headed straight home from Niigata Station. By the time he got there, the sun was almost completely out of sight and night was beginning to fall around them.

“Um, Aoi-san,” he said. “This is my house, so... I’ll be fine from here.”

“Huh?” Nanaka had probably imagined a normal family house, and she was noticeably surprised to see a small apartment building made for single residents. “...Do you live alone, by any chance?”

“Yes,” he answered simply. His sister’s face flashed up in his mind, but Kai

waved it away in a puff of smoke. It wasn't as if they were actually living together.

"...Shiraseki-kun, you really are amazing," Nanaka said. "I feel like you're able to live your life on your own... Everyone is so amazing."

"I don't think..." he started to say.

Nanaka seemed a bit down, but she caught herself and brought back a smile to her face. "Alright Shiraseki-kun, I'll see you later!"

"Ah, right," he agreed. "See you tomorrow."

Nanaka waved her hands back and forth goodbye, and showed no signs of stopping until she saw him go inside. He bowed his head slightly and unlocked the door. He glanced back and saw that she was still waving to him, so he nodded toward her again.

He got a bad feeling as he opened the door: there were shoes. They were not Kai's shoes. If they were not Kai's shoes, then there was only one other person who would leave their shoes in this household. He could hear the loud, obviously forced sound of someone running toward him as his blood ran cold.

"Welcome back, darling~~~ You're so late! Are you hungry? Or do you want a bath? Or maybe—" Misako came out in the same pink (fake) naked apron look that she had prepared the day before. She nearly got her whole spiel out in one breath until she noticed Nanaka behind him. "Huh?" she blinked. "A girl?"

Slam. Kai didn't bother saying anything and slammed the door shut. The lock clicked as he relocked it, took a breath, and pretended he didn't see anything. He did not see anything. Nothing. Therefore, by inductive reasoning, the girl standing behind him hadn't seen anything, either.

"U-Um, Shiraseki-kun... Who was that?"

It hadn't worked, he thought.

"Kai! Who's the cute girl?!" The front door opened, and Misako rushed out in her imitation naked apron.

Stuck between the two girls as they exchanged surprised looks, Kai wanted to go dig a hole somewhere and die in it.



Chapter 6 - Letter

“...I sincerely apologize for my behavior.”

“...”

“After half a year of being hunted down by my editor day in and day out, I finally completed my manuscript,” Misako humbly explained, “and I was simply elated.”

“...”

“I wished to share that joyous feeling with my beloved little brother, to have him enjoy the happiness I was enjoying,” she continued. “Then, with the power of alcohol flowing through me, I wanted to run it back with the surprise naked apron bit so I could have fun teasing you... That was the only thing on my mind.”

“...Your true thoughts leaked out at the end there,” Kai observed.

“Um, Shiraseki-kun, I think this is enough...” said Nanaka. At the end of her worried gaze was an older sister who had been forced to kneel on the floor and reflect on her actions.

It was difficult to tell from her face whether or not Misako was truly sorry, as she trembled on the ground. Apparently, her legs had fallen asleep. When she’d jumped out of the house earlier, Nanaka had been stunned; after all, a woman in a naked apron emerged from her classmate’s apartment, where he supposedly lived alone. As a result, Misako had seized the chance to barrage Nanaka with a flurry of questions: name, date of birth, height, weight, zodiac sign, hobbies, favorite food, favorite song, and even her three sizes and the color of her underwear were all asked about before Kai slapped his sister’s head.

After that, Kai made Misako kneel in the hallway. He supposed that it made sense that her legs would be asleep by now. “...Fine,” he said reluctantly, “you can move now, nee-san.”

“Pfwaahhh! My legs!” she moaned, stretching her limbs in every direction as she began to flail about on the floor. “Thanks, Nanaka-chan,” she said next. “You saved me. If I’d had to kneel there for another second, I would only be able to move like a fish on dry land by now!”

“You’re already doing that,” Kai pointed out.

“A-Ahaha...” said Nanaka, before trying to change the subject. “Um, Misako-san, you’re Shiraseki-kun’s older sister... right?”

“That’s right! And from today onwards, let me be your older sister, too! So come on, ‘Misako-san’ makes it sound like I’m a stranger or something. Call me onee-chan and—”

“You *are* a stranger,” Kai told her bluntly. “It pains me to admit, but nee-san’s my older sister. Thankfully, Aoi-san, she’s not *your* older sister.”

“Did you hear that?” Misako whined. “He’s so cruel. But listen up, Nanaka-chan; don’t get the wrong idea. My brother is shy, you see, and most of what he says is just to cover up his embarrassment. So please take those big, cute, pure eyes and see past it to find out his true feelings!”

“Anything and everything nee-san says is a pile of nonsense, so you should forget all of it,” Kai advised Nanaka.

“Kai.”

“What?”

“I’ve told you this before,” Misako said dramatically. “If you treat your older sister too poorly... I’ll cry, you know?”

Kai was the one that wanted to cry.

“Still, that surprised me,” Nanaka said. “A beautiful older girl came rushing out of your house in... um, an incredible outfit.”

“Looks like my first impression was right on target,” Misako put in.

“If you were targeting a train wreck,” said Kai.

“Oh boy,” sighed Misako, “I was shocked, too... In the blink of an eye, my little brother had become a carnivore who’d bring a girl back to his house on the

second day after transferring schools... I guess boys really do grow into men if you don't see them for three days!"

"That's not what that means," he said shortly.

"...Am I in danger, too?" she wondered next.

"Not a chance."

"Woah! A response that disdainful is sure to hurt your sister's feelings, don't you think?" Misako asked him sulkily.

Misako's feelings could be as hurt as she wanted, Kai thought. His head hurt so badly that it felt as though it'd split in two... Emotionally speaking, of course.

"...Pfft." Out of nowhere, there was a small laugh from Nanaka, who couldn't keep it in any longer. "I'm sorry. Shiraseki-kun, I didn't know you could talk like this," she tried to explain. "It's kind of fun and... pfft." It seemed that Nanaka couldn't hold herself back after all, and she continued to snicker happily.

No one ever feels good when they're laughed at, but watching her smiling face as she tried to suppress her soft laughter made Kai want to start laughing along with her.

"Nanaka-chan, can I ask you just one more question?" said Misako, her expression now so serious that she seemed like a completely different person. "I know very well that Kai isn't the type of person who could find a girlfriend right after transferring schools. That being said... what's the relationship between you two?"

"Um, well, Shiraseki-kun and I are classmates, and, um—"

"...I joined the same club as her, is all," said Kai.

"Hm? Club?" Misako asked next. "What club?"

"...The social game club," he admitted reluctantly. "I joined it."

Misako froze for a moment to digest his words, and then hopped up to her feet with great intensity. However, her legs were still asleep, and her shaking muscles made her look like a newborn fawn as she stumbled toward Kai and latched onto him.

“W-What are you—” said Kai, who hadn’t expected her to put all her weight on him like that and barely managed to keep them from falling.

“...I see, I see,” she said, completely ignoring his question.

“H-Hey, nee-san!” Kai tried to force her off, but Misako didn’t have the faintest intention of letting him go. Instead, she grabbed him from the front with both arms and held him close. As a result, his face was buried in her chest, which was soft and conveyed a raw warmth. She clutched him tightly enough that he could hear her heartbeat, all while Nanaka was looking on, and he couldn’t help but feel extremely embarrassed.

Misako didn’t seem to care one bit, and after holding that position for a while, she suddenly and unceremoniously let go of him. “Wait here for a second,” she said, heading towards the far side of the living room. She began rifling through her bag, which was resting on the wall, and when she found whatever it was she’d been searching for, she headed back towards Kai. In her hand was a single manila envelope.

“What?” he asked, taking the envelope. Then he realized it had been addressed to ‘Mr. Shiraseki Kai.’ The postmark was from Tokyo. At this point, Kai had a bad feeling. ‘Tsukigase Private High School Social Game Club President, Kurenai Akane,’ was what he saw when he flipped over the envelope to check the sender. He had seen this handwriting many times before. Every time he’d handed in something for Akane to check, his document would come back filled with red corrections written in this handwriting. There was no way he’d ever mistake it.

“...What is this?” he asked.

“This came in a little while ago,” Misako admitted, “but... I couldn’t decide whether or not you should see it. I’ve been holding on to it.”

“Is that from... a friend from Tokyo?” asked Nanaka, hesitantly making her way into the conversation and cautiously feeling out her approach. For a letter from a friend, Kai’s reaction was dull, his face was stern, and the atmosphere around him was somewhat heavy. Kai knew that despite all of this, she likely couldn’t think of any other explanation, and was trying her best to inquire.

“No, um... This person...” He showed her the name on the sender’s address.

“She’s the president of the social game club at Tsukigase, my old school... To me, she’s sort of like a god.”

“God?” asked Nanaka, clearly surprised.

Perhaps that had been dramatic, thought Kai. But that was just how distant, and bright, and unforgettable Akane was to him, even now. “When I was at Tsukigase,” he told her, “everything I learned about what a planner should do, I learned from her.”

“Wow...” Nanaka marveled. “She must be really amazing!”

“...Yes,” Kai agreed. Although he recognized that Nanaka was being considerate with her cheery response, he could only muster up a short reply, and his gaze naturally fell to the letter in his grasp. The weight of it rested in his hand, and he felt like it was heavy—heavier than any one envelope could be.

“Hey, Kai! How could you be so cold to such a beautiful girl?!” Misako scolded him. “You’ll regret this in ten years, I’m sure of it!”

“Nee-san,” he said, “that’s just *your* experience.”

“Kai, you’re thinking too much about it,” his sister lectured him. “It might not even be something you need to worry about. It might be a ‘How are you,’ or a seasonal greeting letter. If it were for me, the letter would start like that and then progress into a cruel demand for me to complete my manuscript... but that shouldn’t be the case for you. I haven’t looked inside... You can leave it for another time when you feel like reading it. Now! Let’s forget all of that, right, Nanaka-chan?!”

“H-Huh?!”

Misako completed her perfect fake out by suddenly hugging Nanaka. “There’s still a ton of stuff I want to ask you!” she cried happily. “Come on, come here! Let me prepare scones and black tea for you!”

“We don’t have that here,” said Kai, who caught on right away to the fact that Misako was acting livelier on purpose to cheer him up, just like Nanaka did. Misako said this and that about black tea, but what she ended up bringing out from the kitchen was a bottle of sake. It looked like she planned on savoring a conversation with Nanaka alongside her alcohol.

Kai had no intention of letting Nanaka get dragged that deep into Misako's plot. He peeled his clingy sister off of her instead, and managed to let Nanaka make her escape. Once they were out of the house, he realized it was darker than he'd expected. The surrounding area was already completely under the veil of night.

"Shiraseki-kun!" Nanaka stopped under a streetlight outside of his house and turned around. "See you tomorrow!"

"Y-Yes. See you... tomorrow."

"Yup!"

Before he could ask if he should see her off, Nanaka energetically swung her arms in a "bye-bye!" motion and ran off. When he couldn't see her anymore, Kai opened up the palm of his right hand, which he had been subconsciously swinging back at her. *When was the last time he had waved "bye-bye" to someone?* Kai wondered. He felt a warm, fluffy sensation—quite different from embarrassment—lingering on the palm of his hand.

When Kai went back inside, he found himself welcomed into a living nightmare where Misako was drinking straight from the bottle and bemoaning Nanaka's departure. He explained to his sister that Nanaka had a lot of friends, and that she was a completely different type of person from him, all while Misako clung to him drunkenly. She gleefully cackled at his story for a bit, but fell asleep very quickly. Misako liked alcohol, but she was also very weak to it. The fact that she knocked out as soon as she crossed a certain threshold was, in Kai's mind, her one saving grace.

Kai dragged the spare futon out into the living room and laid Misako on it before heading back to his own room, where he sat down at his desk and tried to open the envelope, only to find that his hands simply would not move.

He knew very well that Akane was not the type of person to write down her complaints and send them in a letter. If she wanted to do that, it wouldn't have been a stretch to expect her to come to Niigata to say it in person. Still, even then, he was too afraid to confront the contents of the letter and couldn't move his hands. Far from opening the letter, he was struggling with the same nausea that came up the morning he'd had that awful nightmare of the day he'd quit at

Tsukigase.

“...I’m sorry,” he finally said.

In the end, he couldn’t bring himself to read the letter.



When he woke up in the morning, Misako was already gone, and her now-empty futon had been neatly folded up.

He ate breakfast, went to school, and spent his time the same way he had yesterday.

He didn’t have any classmates he was friends with and, as a result, sat at his desk all day. Nanaka tried calling out to him a few times, but was intercepted by a different friend of hers each time she tried, and the two ended up not talking at all. He just played social games, ate lunch, went back to class, and repeated this process until school was over.

The only thing that changed from the day before was that Nanaka walked over to him as soon as class was over. “Shiraseki-kun,” she said, “let’s go!”

“O-Okay,” he agreed.

Of course, there was no way that something as unusual as this would be missed, and a curious group of classmates nearby brought it up. They were all girls, and Kai wanted to run away at full speed but couldn’t for obvious reasons.

“What’s this? Nana, you and Shiraseki-kun got a thing going on?”

“It’s not a thing,” Nanaka told them. “We’re going to our club.”

“Club? Oh! So Shiraseki-kun joined the same club as you.”

“...Huh? Wait, Nana, what club were you in again?”

“The social game club! I keep telling you!”

“Ahh, that’s right, that’s right.”

“Speaking of, we gotta go to our club too... Ughhhh...”

“Bye, Nana. Let us know if Shiraseki-kun does something funny.”

Their classmates waved their hands casually and left like a fickle breeze.

Nanaka waved back, too, but once they were out of view, she made a serious face and began thinking out loud. "...Do you think they'd be surprised if I told them about how you bit your thumb yesterday?" she wondered, thinking about their request to share whenever 'Shiraseki did something funny.'

"Um, please, don't," he muttered back. It was true that signing his club application form with blood and ultimately fainting from anemia was a story complete with its own punchline. Between funny and not funny, it was very clearly an amusing story to anyone but himself. To top it all off, there wasn't a hint of exaggeration to the story, which only served to trouble him more. He knew the blood had rushed to his head and all, but his actions yesterday were still a bit much.

"I'm kidding, kidding," Nanaka told him with a laugh. "I won't tell them. After all, that wasn't a funny story, that was you being coo—"

"...Coo?"

Nanaka stammered out, "N-Nevermind," as if to pull the emergency brake on her statement, and then covered her face in embarrassment.

As the pair headed toward their clubroom, they caught the other two members, Aya and Eru, in the hallway right before their destination, and the four moved to enter the room together.

"...Huh?" Nanaka tilted her head with a puzzled expression as she tried to unlock the door.

"What's wrong?" asked Eru.

"I think... it might have been unlocked," Nanaka told her uneasily.

"Oof, did ya forget to lock it yesterday?" Aya suggested.

"Even if I did... I think the school officer would have locked up afterward," Nanaka theorized.

They figured out why the door was unlocked as soon as they entered. "Hello," said the girl who'd been standing next to the president yesterday, and who was currently standing inside of their clubroom. "I'm Shizaki, the student council vice president," she said, introducing herself. "...Perfect, it seems you're all

here.”

Shizaki moved her gaze from person to person, as if to confirm their presence. “I am here in the stead of our busy student council president to offer you a message,” she informed them.

“Um... If this is about our disbandment, then it should have been resolved with Shiraseki-kun joining, right?” Nanaka asked.

“Yes, we did indeed receive his club application form. We have no issues on paper...” Shizaki explained. “However, the president has said that, ‘Their disbandment was already set in stone. There’s no reason to go back and overturn that decision.’”

“Oh dear, it’s like he wants us to march back into his office with how badly he’s screwing around,” said Eru, her ladylike tone taking on a menacing air.

“He is not screwing around,” said Shizaki, with an exhausted shrug. “Rather, this was a first-class, ridiculous ploy he came up with to protect the small rat heart which he calls his ‘pride.’”

Kai couldn’t figure out whose side Shizaki was on. Technically, she was in a lower social position than the president, but yesterday it had been made apparent that she walked all over him.

“However, the president’s statement does hold some water,” Shizaki continued. “It would be an issue for a decision, once voted upon at a student council meeting, to be so easily overturned.”

“Dear, whose side are you even on?” asked Eru, who looked like a delinquent picking a fight as she closed the distance between their faces.

“I would appreciate it if you refrained from being so agitated. I, too, described it as being one of the student council president’s ridiculous ploys... So, I put a word in of my own.” Shizaki smiled as she said this, but the expression on her face was absolutely not a kind one. Rather, she was conveying the tension of a predator, having sighted its prey. “The particulars behind the disbandment of the social game club included not only a lack of members, but also a want of any sort of achievement from the club,” she went on to explain. “As the majority of this school’s students are required to participate in club activities,

we have no leeway to allow the continued existence of clubs with no substantial activity, regardless of how many people they gather. However, if you were to prove your diligence to us, I'm sure an opportunity for your club to be officially allowed to continue would present itself."

"So, what does that mean?" Kai asked next, pressing her for a conclusion.

Shizaki turned to him with the same terrifying smile. "In one month, there is supposedly a routine competition among social game clubs," she told him. "If you lose, your club will be disbanded immediately."

"T-That's so soon!" Nanaka wailed in shock.

"For a social game club, the routine competition should be something to be perpetually prepared for," Shizaki pointed out. "If you are unable to respond to that challenge, then would it not mean your club has *not* been engaging in substantial activity...? Is that alright with you?"

Kai more or less had this girl figured out by now; there were a few of these people at Tsukigase, as well. She was probably the type of person who enjoyed watching someone squeal as she handed them an impossible task, which would also explain why she made fun of the student council president at every opportunity.

The sight of Nanaka, who was silently panicking, deepened Shizaki's terrifying smile to even further depths. "Well then," she said brightly, "I wish you the best, and can only hope you put up a good fight." With those final words, she finally left the room.

"...What should we do?" Nanaka squeaked, unwittingly letting out her true feelings of panic.

"Welp, there's only one thing we *can* do here, y'know," Aya said philosophically.

"T-That's true!" Nanaka said, perking up a bit. "Let's all work togethe—"

"Hold it, dear." Eru cut Nanaka off as she tried to frantically rephrase her statement. Then she took a step forward and swung herself back—and began to glare at Kai. "So," she said coldly, "this man actually joined our club?"

“Yeah... Is something wrong, Eru?”

“‘Planner’?” Eru asked pointedly.

“Y-Yes, that’s right,” Kai told her, his voice cracking under the pressure of Eru’s stare.

“...I see.” Kai thought she seemed faintly happy when she heard his reply. But that didn’t last for long, and a scowl quickly returned to her face as she moved her intense line of sight toward Nanaka. “And Nanaka, dear,” Eru said sweetly, “what are you going to do?”

“M-Me too! I’ll do my best as a planner too!” Nanaka said hastily. “I’ll have Shiraseki-kun teach me and—”

The instant she heard those words, Eru’s face clouded up again. This was no regular cloudy expression, either—her face was a pitch-black sky, and just at that moment, it foretold rain and thunder. She didn’t so much as let Nanaka finish before raising her hand to cut Nanaka off again. “...You’re all liars,” she said flatly.

“Huh?” asked Kai, now thoroughly confused.

“You!” said Eru vehemently, her eyes returning to Kai. “At your previous school, you published a big lie online and were chased out all the way here.”

There was only so much Kai could have prepared himself for, and Eru’s sudden accusation was so out of the blue that it left him petrified, as though he were physically bound. *She knew of his incident at Tsukigase*, he realized quickly. It’s not as if he could’ve hidden it, though; a quick online search for his name would return a result that branded him as being the culprit behind the *Rondo* leak and the ensuing chaos. Eru must have found something like that.

Everyone reacted differently to Eru’s accusation:

“...A big lie?” Nanaka repeated, tilting her head. She didn’t seem to know anything yet, and therefore couldn’t quite understand the meaning behind Eru’s words. Aya was harder to read because of her carefree manner, but the fact that she wasn’t surprised or confused meant she most likely already knew about his past.

Kai felt like his heart was about to be crushed by the weight of the words “big lie.” But that was the truth: from the results alone, the gacha did indeed work as advertised, which meant that Kai’s statement had been nothing more than a lie. And now, in this moment, there was no power behind his words. He had nothing to say in his defense.

“...For a liar to learn from a big liar... Oh dear, how stupid! How stupid!” Eru shouted in their faces before heading for the door, only to stop right before making her exit. “Nanaka, if that’s your plan... I couldn’t care less what happens to this club.” Then, having said her piece, Eru flounced out of the room.

“Yowch,” said Aya. “Man, there’s nothing we can do about *that*.”

“W-We have to go after her!” Nanaka bleated.

“And whaddya gonna do if you catch up?” Aya asked bluntly. “I think you’d just make it worse if you tried talking to her now.”

“...I’m sorry,” said Kai. “This is my fault.”

“N-No! This isn’t your fault, Shiraseki-kun!” Nanaka said, trying to reassure him. “You see... Eru’s been mad at me for a long time... I’m trying to act as a planner, despite not knowing anything about social games... That’s why Eru’s upset.”

“Welp, it’s true that Nana-sen’s a bit too out of the loop,” Aya observed, before turning to leave herself. “Mmkay,” she decided. “Well, I’m gonna go home for today, too.”

“Huh?!” Nanaka cried out. “Ah-chan, you too?!”

“Ahh, well, you know, I’m working more part time jobs for the summer swimsuit gacha rush and I’m SUPER busy right now!” Aya explained. “I’m like a normie!”

“B-But you heard what that girl said, right?” Nanaka asked insistently.

“Mmm... but I’m a programmer,” Aya told them. “If the planner doesn’t hand me a plan with specifications, there’s not much I can do. So even if I stayed behind, there’s nothing for me to do today. Plus,” she declared, “my number one priority is definitely gacha! Aight, see you tomorrow! Later!” Aya didn’t give

any more openings for questions or concerns as she struck an enthusiastic salute and left the room.

Before they knew it, Kai and Nanaka were the only two in the club room.

“...I’m sorry, Shiraseki-kun,” she told him gloomily.

“I don’t think you did anything you’d need to apologize for,” Kai told her. “Besides, I understand where Oushima-san is coming from.”

“You... do?”

Kai nodded at her question. It wasn’t as if Aya had been completely correct, but she certainly wasn’t altogether wrong, either. “Oushima-san is a good person,” he told her.

“...Huh?” Nanaka asked, tilting her head in confusion again. It would seem she didn’t get it, but Kai’s reasoning was simple.

“There are some programmers out there that won’t listen to you even if you bring them plans or specifications,” he explained, “until they feel like you’re worthy of being listened to. But what Oushima-san said earlier means that she’ll hear you out, as long as you’ve done your share of the work.”

“...I see!” Nanaka said, sounding relieved. “Yeah, Ah-chan might be a bit weird, but she’s a good person! So if we put together a proper plan, she’s sure to work with us!”

“That’s what I believe too,” Kai agreed.

It had been rough back when Kai was at Tsukigase. There were a handful of people who’d hated his guts, solely because Akane—the club president, in other words—had taken a liking to him. When he’d try and talk to those people, they’d give him the cold shoulder. They’d judge everything from his font choice to singular numbers if he somehow dragged them into a meeting, and would ignore him if anything at all didn’t seem up to their standards.

As far as he could tell, Aya was not one of those people. “So, first... let’s do our best as the planners,” he decided.

Just as Aya said, the programmer and illustrator had nothing to do until there was a plan. Getting both her and Eru back into the club room was important,

but if there was nothing for them to do once they returned, it'd be meaningless anyway.

So first, Kai and Nanaka—the two planners—needed to do their best. On top of that, if Eru truly was upset at Nanaka because of her inability to play her part as a planner, it was all the more important that they did their job before attempting to call her back.

“Alright!” Nanaka declared, slapping her cheeks to bring her mood back up. “Let’s do this, Shiraseki-kun!”

Kai responded with a strong nod.

Chapter 7 - Management and Development

“Is the next routine competition in management?” Kai asked. “Or is it in development?”

“I think it was management,” Nanaka told him hesitantly.

“In that case, we still...” *have a chance*, he trailed off into his own thoughts. Had it been a development competition, there wouldn’t have been anything they could have done.

Every social game club in the country with an application registered in the BOX participated in routine competitions with the goal of improving the development capabilities of all parties involved. Clubs were pitted against other clubs of roughly equal skill, using their BOX rankings as a matchmaking metric. There were two types of competitions: management and development.

The development side required each team to create a new application from scratch in a short period of time. It was similar to a hackathon, where programmers and graphic designers would gather into small teams to develop software. Both teams would receive the same basic prompt and development deadline, and would have to develop a new game based on those guidelines. Of course, creating a new app from scratch would be both physically and mentally exhausting. For the Meikun High Social Game Club, in its current state, this would have been akin to being sent off on a death march before they’d even started.

However, that didn’t mean that the management competition was going to be easy; it absolutely wouldn’t be. In the case of a console game, if you lived up to all the promises on the box and finished developing all necessary features for it, that was generally the end. Nowadays, there were often patches to fix critical bugs or additional downloadable content that still needed to be developed. But, at the very least, the latter case was often planned for from the time development started.

In that regard, social games were crucially different. There was no end to

development; there was a perpetual stream of new content to create. Every month—in some cases, every week—there was a new time-limited event to run, or a new main story chapter to add, all while continuing to fix issues reported through user feedback. If a game continued to run for a long period of time, you could even expect a massive update at some point that overhauled core game mechanics in order to prevent things from getting stale. All of the work that went into keeping a social game alive was neatly wrapped up under the term “management.”

As such, a management competition was based off of a pre-existing application registered in the BOX. While there was still a development deadline, there was no prompt to dictate *what* had to be done, since the users of each title would want something different from that game’s management. Some schools might choose to implement a new gacha banner, while others might opt for an event. If a game had balance issues, then overhauling the level design of the game would count toward the competition.

In the end, the two teams would be judged by professionals working in the industry. Whichever school was judged to have managed their game best would win.

“Aoi-san,” said Kai, “what do our most recent management plans look like?” Typically, it would be considered bad practice to alter management plans just because a routine competition was coming up. However, this time, the circumstances were different: losing in the competition had been tied directly to the continuation of the club. The club disappearing, in essence, was the end of the game as a service. With stakes that high, it was necessary to revise any previously made plans.

In order to do so, Kai needed to know what plans had already been set. “...Aoi-san?” he asked again.

Ever since Aya and Eru had left the room, Kai and Nanaka had been sitting face to face, across the table from one another. But since he’d asked this question, Nanaka refused to look him in the eye. She looked like a sad puppy being scolded.

Kai felt a sense of déjà vu, as if he’d seen this scene before. Around the time

he'd first joined the Tsukigase social game club, Akane told him to come up with ten different plans for an event, but he was only able to come up with half that number. He only realized he was seeing himself in Nanaka when she raised her head and said, "Sorry... We don't have anything."

"...What?" he asked.

"We don't... have any plans," she admitted, somehow managing to shrink even smaller as she went from 'scolded puppy' to 'salted slug' before his eyes.

"I-I'm not trying to criticize you!" Kai said, hurriedly reassuring her before she could melt away and disappear entirely. Then he asked for details and found that the Meikun High Social Game Club had absolutely no management plans, just as she'd said.

To begin with, their game had been released only a few months prior; they'd barely squeezed it out before winter break. Apparently, talks of disbandment had started around then and they somehow forced a release before the break in order to keep it from happening.

But there was no way anyone could make a good game with such a brutally forced release window. Deadlines were important, and it wasn't uncommon for a stroke of genius to appear with the stress of a close deadline, but that was a separate issue from forcibly terminating development. And as a result, Meikun High's social game, *Miracle Stage*, was close to being rock bottom in the ranking list.

"...The truth is, I don't really play social games," Nanaka admitted. "I mean, I've played RPGs on the TV and stuff, but..."

"Um... Then why did you join the social game club?" Kai asked, and then instantly regretted the way he'd worded his question. He thought Nanaka would find a way to make herself even smaller than before.

But contrary to his expectations, she didn't seem down at all. In fact, she looked the slightest bit happier as she got up from her chair and turned on one of the computers at the back of the room. It was the one Eru had been using before, so apparently the passwords were communal knowledge.

The desktop booted up to reveal a wallpaper that was a drawing of two

extremely cute girls. Even the background had a lot of love poured into the details, and the image's quality was so high that it wouldn't have been a stretch to use it as a game's key visual.

"Isn't it cute?" Nanaka asked.

"...Yes, I think it's cute," Kai agreed. He'd never seen these characters before, so he surmised that they were originals.

"Eru drew this, you know," she told him. "I've been friends with her since we were little kids. We used to play games and draw, and we were just always together. Back then, we made a promise to make a game together."

"And that's why you two joined the social game club?" Kai guessed.

"Yep. But... Even though Eru's trying her best, I can't do anything..." Nanaka said sadly. "That's why..."

"That's all the more reason to give it our all," he said, thinking back to the words Eru had spat out as she'd left the room. She had called Kai a big liar, but added that Nanaka was a liar, too, because she hadn't done her job as a planner despite promising to make a game together. Thus, he figured, it really wasn't just him—Nanaka was also a liar.

"Yep! I'll do my best!" Nanaka agreed, earnestly responding to him like a young child.

Kai almost felt embarrassed when he saw her unshackled gaze. *That won't do*, he decided. *Nope, that won't do at all*. Here Nanaka was, opening up her heart to face the club's problems head on, so as her partner, Kai thought it was wrong to look away. He took a deep breath to restore his peace of mind, and decided that he'd keep the conversation as professional as possible in order to keep himself straight. "...Alright," he finally said. "First, I'd like to get a handle on our current situation."

"What do you mean?" Nanaka asked.

"The key to a management competition is implementing appropriate improvements and repairs," Kai explained. "To that end, I'd like to first get a grasp of our current DAU and other such quantitative metrics."

Kai didn't think he'd said anything too out there, but there was a giant question mark popping out of Nanaka's head. At least, that's what her expression seemed to suggest.

"Um... Do you have an admin view page?" he suggested.

"Admin view?"

His intuition let him know that *oh, this is bad*. But it was too late to run away now, and he had to push forward. "...Aoi-san, I'm going to give you a few acronyms here," he told her. "Would you mind telling me what they stand for?"

"Huh?" said Nanaka. "A pop quiz?"

"First: KPI."

"Hmm, maybe... Kappa Power Island?" said Nanaka, hazarding a guess.

Kai felt dizzy. He'd never expected her to name a Japanese mythical being. *What would Kappa even mean in English*, he wondered. "...Next is DAU," he said out loud.

"Oh, you said that one earlier... Uhhh, Dragon!" Nanaka said brightly. "And... Uncle?" Maybe it was because she had confidence in her answer, but there was a good oomph behind the word 'dragon.' Of course, that wasn't correct, but still.

'Dragon and uncle,' Kai thought wryly. It sounds like some sort of fairy tale. Then, he pushed on with the quiz, saying, "ARPU."

"Ay-arr-pee-you?" Nanaka repeated back at him. "I think the 'R' and 'P' are probably role-playing, but..."

"...Thank you very much," he said. "That'll be fine."

"You don't look very fine to me, Shiraseki-kun! D-Did I really say something *that* weird?"

There wasn't any helping it, Kai decided. *After all, Nanaka had said as much herself: she really didn't know anything about social games.* In that case, it would have been weirder if she'd understood the management jargon. So this wasn't strange at all. It wasn't strange by any means, but—

“This... might be tough,” he mumbled under his breath, so that the worried Nanaka wouldn’t hear him.



They decided to do some research on their opponents before getting into their own prep work... Or, that had been the plan, but it didn’t amount to much in the end.

The opposing club was from a school in the Aomori prefecture, and their social game was clinging to the bottom of the rankings. The details of rank calculation weren’t made public, but the data analysis team at Tsukigase estimated that it looked at net revenue as a base and then included active users and new unique users, as well.

Kai was a bit worried that they might run into some sort of clerical error and be put against a team that was way above their league, but seeing this brought him some small reprieve. If their teams were both around the same rank, that meant the starting line was the same. Now, they just needed to do whatever they could.

“The DAU and ARPU things I was talking about earlier have to do with KPI analysis in social games,” Kai explained.

“...Professor, what’s ‘kay-pee-eye analysis?’” Nanaka asked in a pitiable voice.

“KPI analysis is... This is a bit of an oversimplification, but let’s say your goal is to bring in 1 million yen worth of revenue,” said Kai, trying to explain. “In order to reach that goal, we collect data on the people who play our game and analyze it to figure out what we need to do.”

“So that’s what KPI analysis is,” she mused. At some point, Nanaka had pulled out a notebook and begun taking notes on what he was saying. Kai didn’t think he was saying anything all that special, so it was a little embarrassing for her to take notes and call him ‘Professor.’

He waited for her to finish writing before he moved on. “I’ll try and make my analogies as easy to understand as possible,” he promised. “They’re just analogies, though, so the nuance is a bit off from the actual thing. Aoi-san,” he said next, “how many points did you get on our most recent mock exam in

Japanese?”

“Uh, well, um...” Nanaka’s eyes swam around as she stammered. Come to think of it, she was in the same class as Kai, and the smart students were generally placed in the honors classes at this school. Basically, since she wasn’t in one of those honors classes... well, it went without saying.

“...Um, if you don’t want to tell me,” Kai said gently, “it doesn’t have to be Japanese.”

“My other subjects weren’t any better— 62 points,” she finally blurted out. When she realized, mid-sentence, that she’d said more than was necessary, Nanaka buried her face in her hands.

Knowing that they were in the same class, Kai didn’t stop to laugh as he continued on. It wasn’t as if he was in a position to mock her. “This is just an example, but pretend for a second that your goal is to get 80 points on the next mock exam,” he said. “This final goal is what we’d call ‘KGI’ in social game management. It stands for ‘Key Goal Indicator.’ It’s simply a measure of what we have to accomplish.”

“...Is it like the KPI from earlier?” Nanaka questioned.

“Let’s see... The KPI follows from here,” he said. “The mock exam for Japanese is always composed in the same way: the first section is critical essay interpretation, the second is prose interpretation, and the third and fourth sections are for classics and Chinese classics, respectively. Does all that sound correct?”

“Yep.” Nanaka agreed.

“In order to achieve the 80 point KGI we set, this hypothetical Aoi-san would need to break it down into concrete steps.”

“Concrete... steps?”

“Um... well...” said Kai, who was beginning to flounder. Nanaka clearly didn’t quite get what he meant, as she had a confused expression on her face, which was slightly tilted to one side. He knew that leaving her confused at this point would mean she’d never become a proper planner.

Kai figured she just didn't have the image in her mind yet, so he racked his brain to make it easier to understand. "To put it simply, you'd make smaller goals for yourself," he said. "For example, maybe you'd say that you'll 100% get every question that has to do with vocabulary on the classics portion; something like that. It's like building up to the big goal one step at a time."

"Oh, so that's what that means!" Nanaka exclaimed. "Like to diet before summer, you could cut out any snacking between meals."

"Exactly," he agreed. "That's how we take the big goal—our KGI—and break it down into smaller, more readily completable goals known as 'KPI.' This one stands for 'Key Performance Indicator,' and is a parameter for measuring achievement."

"Um..." said Nanaka, trailing off uncertainly.

"We can think of the KGI as the goal and the KPI as signposts leading us on the road toward the goal."

"...So if we manage to do all of the KPI, then does that mean we finish the KGI?" asked Nanaka.

"That's correct. But if we could easily complete all the goals we set, we wouldn't have any difficulties at all," Kai told her. "So, for all our goals—our KPI—we perform analysis on how best to complete them."

"Ah! That's how it connects back to KPI analysis." Nanaka beamed, clapping her hands in epiphany, and Kai nodded in response.

"Let's return to social games," he suggested. "Management competitions are a contest to see *who can improve their game more*, so it goes without saying that we need to improve *MiSt*. This may be sudden, but Aoi-san, what do you think *MiSt* needs to become a better game?"

"Hmm," Nanaka let out a contemplative hum and began to think. Kai thought she'd never reach an answer at that rate, but then she reached out to a tablet on the table and began tapping away at it as she played *MiSt*. She was lost in thought for a bit as she played, and then suddenly stopped her fingers.

"I can't... I don't know how to explain it, but I feel like *MiSt* is harder to play than other games," Nanaka said.

“.....I see,” said Kai, so surprised that his reaction to her statement was more delayed than he’d meant it to be.

Nanaka took his pause to mean that she was wrong, or that he was sick of her answers, and panicked to try and save face.

But when Kai followed up with “I think so too,” she looked incredibly relieved. “It’s just,” he continued, “I’d like to make it a little more concrete. Thinking backwards here, what parts of other games do you find *easy* to play?”

“I play *LW*, too, and... even though this game has a ton of different things going on, I don’t feel like it’s hard at all,” Nanaka admitted. “It’s like I can easily tell what’s where... Hmm, maybe it’s like they’re making it so you can play even if you don’t know what you’re doing? Or... something?”

“That essentially means the UI and leading lines are well made,” Kai told her.

“Oh, oh! I know ‘UI’!” Nanaka said. “That’s ‘User Interface’! In *MiSt*, that’d be like this button that says gacha... But I don’t think I’ve heard of a ‘leading line’ before.”

“In *LW*, there’s a Leveling menu and an Evolution menu, right? You can’t evolve a character until they’re max level, but have you ever noticed that a button appears to take you from the Leveling menu to the Evolution menu if you max out a character’s level on the Leveling screen?”

“I have!”

“That’s what we call a leading line,” Kai explained. “*LW* has many mechanics, so if the UI wasn’t good, it’d be impossible to tell what’s what. On top of that, they lay out a path to make it easier for the user to do what they want to—wanting to evolve after maxing out a character is an obvious one—and all of that makes it easier to play.”

“Wow!” said Nanaka, and she began clapping her hands as if she’d seen an amazing magical illusion.

This would have been common knowledge for anyone at Tsukigase, so being showered with admiration for explaining it made Kai feel like he really *was* using some kind of an illusion to trick Nanaka.

“...And in the case of *MiSt*...” said Kai, moving on as he picked the tablet up from the table. Nanaka had said that she didn’t play social games much, but he figured that she must have played a lot of console games. Otherwise, it’d be very strange for her to say that *MiSt* was ‘difficult to play.’

What’s more, she was exactly right. When Kai pulled an all-nighter playing the game yesterday, he’d been surprised with every fiber of his being. The leading lines of this game couldn’t be described with words like ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ it was—holy shit, it just *was*. Oh, and the UI was weird, too.

“First,” he said, “you tap on the title screen and get sent to the home menu... but no matter how you look at it, the button to move to the gacha menu is way too big, don’t you think?”

MiSt was made to fit a landscape format, and on its home screen, the left side was reserved for character splash arts. There were also buttons for the main menu, lined up across the bottom of the screen. This could be considered a standard template, if it weren’t for the weird gacha button.

The menu list at the bottom had things like Concert, Lessons, Member List, and Shop. This was only proper, since those things were parts of the game. But among them, there was one button—labeled ‘Gacha’—that was larger than the rest. It wasn’t just one size larger, either. It was at least three sizes bigger than any of the other buttons.

“Let’s move onto character leveling...” said Kai, pressing forward. “Here, let me try leveling someone. *MiSt* has the same concept as *LW*, where a leading line guides the player after they level a unit.”

He tapped the Lessons button and moved to a different screen. After he leveled up a unit—oh, what might this be?—a button to take the user to the gacha appeared.

Nanaka put two and two together and buried her head in her arms, knowing that if you’d seen one menu in *MiSt*, you’d seen them all. And it wasn’t limited to the leveling screen: after completing a story chapter; after evolving a unit; after playing a concert... no matter what, the gacha button was inevitably there, waiting at the end. In essence, the gacha was being pushed too hard. So hard, in fact, that you’d think the people who’d made *MiSt* had a screw or two loose.

“Aoi-san,” Kai agreed, “like you said, it makes perfect sense why this game is hard to play.”

“...Yeah, it does.” Nanaka looked so dejected, Kai could see her spirit leave her body. The root of the issue was probably that gacha-crazed programmer, but the fact that the planner couldn’t rein her in meant some responsibility fell on Nanaka, too.

“But now that we have such a glaring issue, that means our goal is all the more simple to set up,” he suggested. “Aoi-san, do you think you could define our KGI and KPI now?”

“Oh, right! Umm... the KGI would be ‘Make the game easier to play,’ and the KPI would be ‘Improve the UI’ and ‘Reorganize the leading lines’... I think.”

Ideally, the KGI and KPI would be set more concretely, as more quantitative goals, such that they could be broken down into numbers and digits. For example, “Increase sales by 20% compared to last month” would be a perfect goal. Analysis was impossible without those kinds of numbers, and it wouldn’t be certain whether or not the goal had been reached.

In the case of Nanaka’s idea to “reorganize the leading lines,” there necessarily should have been research to see how many times users accessed each page to then see if their goal had any significant effects. From there, the number of things to look into would cascade out like a set of dominoes. In order to understand user access count, they’d need to know how many people played their game every day—their Daily Active Users (DAU)—and so on. From there, they’d continue to find more detailed things to analyze.

Generally speaking, the KPI analysis conducted in the development and management of social games was founded on statistical metrics, such as the DAU, in order to analyze performance. In fact, those metrics were the only thing that could be considered a signpost, calling back to the way Kai explained things to Nanaka earlier.

At the most basic level, numbers do not lie. Even if there were to be a huge positive response to some improvement or fix on social media, if that fix was actually ineffective, then the numbers behind the KPI would be less than flattering. There were cases where people would interpret the numbers

incorrectly and implement misguided changes, or put too much confidence in the numbers and get burned for it. But as a general rule, the numbers do not lie, which was why there was such a need to break the KPI down into numbers wherever possible.

However, there was no reason to point that out to Nanaka just now, Kai decided. After all, it wasn't as if her answer had been wrong. It was merely that there was more to it that could be expanded on, and that could always be learned as they went along.

So instead, Kai gave a deep nod to Nanaka's answer, and she gave him a happy smile in return.



The two of them continued their conversation in the clubroom until half past six, and then headed home together.

To get to Niigata Station from Meikun High, the only real option was to ride the train. There was technically a bus that ran that way, as well, but the nearest bus stop was further away than the nearest train station.

Yet even then, that very same train station had its own issue, which was that the number of trains coming and going were shockingly low. To top it all off, the train only had a few cars, so it was always tightly packed with students.

Had this been the Yamanote Line in Tokyo, they could have simply waited a few minutes for the next train to come, but in Niigata, that wasn't an option. If they missed the 7 P.M. train to Niigata Station, they'd be stuck waiting nearly thirty minutes for another train. That's why their route was always packed with students, who were on their way home from club activities around this time.

"Thanks, Shiraseki-kun," said Nanaka, who caught Kai off guard when she suddenly thanked him as the pair walked home.

He turned to his left to look at her and caught an eyeful of setting sunlight. The sun was caught on the ridgeline of the mountains, and illuminated the rural landscape that encircled the school. Around him, the shadows of students on their way to the station stretched out, swaying back and forth on the path.

"Um... What are you talking about?" asked Kai.

“All the stuff you taught me today!” Nanaka exclaimed. “I realized... I really don’t know anything after all.”

“It wasn’t anything to be thanked for,” he grumbled in embarrassment.

“No, that’s not true! Shiraseki-kun, whenever I got the tiniest bit stuck, you made up an analogy right away so I’d understand, right? I think that’s amazing!” she declared earnestly. “It’s like you were saying, ‘This is what it means to be a planner!’ It’s more than just making up the plans!”

“It’s true that that’s a common misconception,” Kai agreed. Coming up with plans *was* an important part of being a planner, but having a plan sit there wouldn’t do anything for anyone. It could be numbers, or words, or anything, but only by fleshing the concept out logically could the vague image of a plan be turned into a functional blueprint. Only then could other team members come to understand the meaning behind a plan. Then, and only then, would the planner be able to proceed with their first task. It was unthinkable to end the planner’s responsibilities at just coming up with a plan.

After they’d decided to focus on UI and leading line fixes—in other words, Usability Improvements—for the competition, Kai had explained some important jargon words Nanaka would need to know while developing social games. She’d had no working knowledge, as Nanaka had said herself, and Kai found teaching her to be a rewarding task.

He regretted the fact that he couldn’t explain things like DAU and other KPI-adjacent terms with real numbers to show, but unfortunately, Meikun High’s social game club didn’t have so much as an admin view page. The features available on an admin page differed from development team to development team. But generally speaking, there would be some means of monitoring and updating in-game notifications, as well as an easy means of checking the stats necessary to measure KPI, like DAU.

Admin view aside, they didn’t even have a separate testing environment in which to test new patches before release. The club was full of missing things. And then there the cherry on top: thinking ahead, the biggest issue was that the sole illustrator of the club, Eru, was too upset to work.

“Do you think Kuroba-san will come to our club properly?” Kai pondered.

“Hmm... I think she’ll be fine after a while,” Nanaka said. “But if worst comes to worst, I’ll do something and convince her!” Perhaps she herself was uncertain if this plan would pan out, because Nanaka’s lower-than-usual energy betrayed the positive implications of her statement.

If they had time to spare, then the hope was that Eru’s wrath would ebb with the flow of time. With the competition right in front of them, though, they didn’t have the time with which to leisurely wait her out.

“If we’re going to improve the UI and leading lines, we absolutely need new graphical elements,” Kai warned. “If our illustrator doesn’t show up, we might not be able to do anything.”

“Oh, in that case, we’ll be fine!” Nanaka responded casually. “I was the one who drew all the UI and stuff, so I can do it.” Then she added proudly, “That’s why I knew what UI meant!”

Kai paused for a moment in shock. “...Aoi-san,” he finally asked, “you can draw?”

“Not as well as Eru,” she told him. “But... I can manage the UI and that kind of thing if I try.”

Kai thought back on how she’d told him the two used to play and draw together as children. *MiSt*’s UI was by no means of poor quality; it took a floral motif from its magical girl theme and mixed it well with the realism of its idol theme to blend in well with the game’s worldbuilding. It was beyond the level of someone who only sketched every now and again, so maybe Nanaka had drawn a lot when she was little. Maybe she drew every day, even, just like Eru.

Since there were so many students on the path to the station, they were forced to walk slowly and had only just arrived when the train rolled in. Luckily, they found two persons’ worth of sitting space and sat down together in the train car.

The car was packed from end to end with high school students, so there wasn’t much leeway when they sat down. The outer edge of their thighs were stuck to each other, and Kai could feel the faint warmth of Nanaka’s body temperature past the fabric of his trousers.

Bad, he thought uneasily. *This is bad*. The more he noticed it, the more that sensation of warmth engulfed his thoughts, so he decided to talk about something else in order to get his mind off it.

Of course, there was no way that he could say anything meaningful with that kind of energy. “Aoi-san, you’re amazing,” was the best he could manage.

“Huh?” she said. “What’s this, out of the blue?”

Somewhere inside him, the word “amazing” had run off and managed to escape his mouth, where Nanaka could now pick it apart for being devoid of meaning. But rather than picking his words apart, Nanaka looked to be curious as she peered into his face. She was slightly shorter than Kai, and so naturally looked up toward him.

Cute, Kai thought. *That was the only way to describe her*. Unable to meet her gaze, he intentionally stared straight ahead as he explained, “The fact that you can draw, I mean.”

“...That’s not true,” Nanaka protested. “Eru’s so much better than me. I don’t match up at—”

“You’re wrong,” said Kai, cutting her off, and Nanaka seemed somewhat surprised by his refutation. “For a planner like you to draw up graphics of that quality really is amazing,” he told her earnestly. “All the high level planners I knew had some kind of secret weapon: some had overwhelmingly convincing presentations; others had the ability to build rich and exciting worlds... The specifics were different for each person, but... Aoi-san, you have a weapon. That’s why, you’re, well, amazing.”

The responsibilities of a planner were diverse, and there were even people who went so far as to say that everything that wasn’t art or programming fell under that category. Kai could understand where these people were coming from. Rather, it’d be more fitting to say that anyone would come to understand if they’d worked as a planner for a social game. Thinking up plans, ironing out specifications, presenting materials, communicating with outside teams, and responding to users were all to be expected from a planner, along with level design and master data management.

Some people viewed this pessimistically and simply referred to planners as

‘handymen,’ which wasn’t wrong in any way; there *was* an element of being a handyman to the role of a planner.

But when he was at Tsukigase, each planner who’d made him think *this person is amazing* had a weapon that pushed them to a level beyond that of being a mere handyman. It was a given that they could do anything, because they’d each had a unique weapon that let them stand out from their peers.

The UI that Nanaka had created was high quality, and only possible with a deep understanding of the game it was tailored for. She bemoaned her lack of skills as a planner, but that was only because she’d never had a chance to learn the basics, and it was a problem that would sort itself out with more experience and study.

But Nanaka already possessed a skill that other planners didn’t—the skill of drawing. She already had a weapon to defend herself from those that would reduce her to a mere handyman, and that was unmistakably amazing.

“It’s really embarrassing when you praise me so suddenly...” she mumbled.

“I-I’m sorry,” Kai apologized unwittingly. As he watched Nanaka’s cheeks go red with embarrassment, he found it mysterious that he, himself, was growing even more embarrassed than she was.

“Ah—” Nanaka tapped her fist into her palm like she had an epiphany. “Then, Shiraseki-kun, what’s *your* weapon?”

“I...” he said, trailing off.

There was no ill will behind Nanaka’s question. She had a purehearted belief that he, too, had an amazing weapon. After all, he’d previously been a planner at the best social game high school in the country.

“I... can’t draw,” Kai brought himself to admit, thinking back to his first day after transferring, when Nanaka had taken him around to see all the different clubs. There wasn’t a single club he’d wanted to join, nor anything he could do: that was the person known as Shiraseki Kai.

“I can’t write a story that will hook users,” he continued. “I don’t have an analytical mind that can predict the success of a game based off a slight shift in KPI, and I don’t have the feel of how to design a level that everyone would

enjoy.” Then he pulled out a laptop and four smartphones from the bag on top of his lap. This was Shiraseki Kai’s everything.

“—Listen up, Shiraseki,” she’d lectured him. “You ought to enjoy social games more than anyone else. Every day, countless apps repeat a process of trial and error. Let your heart be moved by each and every one. The most important point is to be moved, and to not forget that you were moved. I cannot promise you it will become a weapon, but it will become a path that is yours, and yours alone—”

Kai still remembered Akane’s words.

“I decided to be with social games more than anyone else,” he told Nanaka. “To play them more, to be moved by them more, to admire them more, to be envious more, and to enjoy them more than anyone. This laptop has the records of my daily reports of every social game I play. It’s not all that grand, but... this is my weapon.”

For a planner on Akane’s level, Kai’s weapon probably wouldn’t even be worth the effort to steal. If their weapons were missiles and firearms, then his was a knife at best. And even then, it’d be a tiny, dull, chipped little knife that couldn’t be used for much at all. Still, Kai held onto it as tightly as he could, and rose up. Through all the time he’d spent around the talented geniuses at Tsukigase, his will and his pride had never changed.

“Shiraseki-kun...” Nanaka began to ask, resting her hand on the laptop. “Hey, can I see?”

“Huh? But this is something I wrote for myself,” he protested, “so I don’t think it’d be fun to rea—”

“I want to see it! Oh, but if you don’t want to show me, that’s okay. It’s your precious weapon, after all.” All Nanaka had done was to say something she’d found obvious, and to her, it had been an ordinary statement.

—But Kai was moved beyond belief. He had something that wasn’t worth the effort to steal, and yet, she’d recognized it as being a weapon of its own. That realization soaked down somewhere deep in his chest.

In response, Kai put up the smartphones and opened his laptop. The tiny

sound of the computer starting up quietly was drowned out by the clacks of the swaying train. “Um... For example,” he said, “this is a report on *D&P* events.”

“How much is there?” Nanaka wanted to know.

“I have everything, from the first event to the latest one,” Kai told her. “I make it a point to log everything I can. For events, I analyze them holistically, and then continue with the design of ranking rewards and how menu screens flow into each other... If there’s something I can log, I make sure to leave a record of it.”

“W-Wait, you’re *this* detailed about it?!” she squeaked.

The spreadsheet he had on screen contained numbers, graphs, and screenshots, all with subtext attached and crammed together. He’d designed it to be readable for himself, so it wasn’t exactly a well-made document, but Nanaka stared intently at the screen.

“What about this file?” she asked.

“That’s data on *StrikeMon*’s gacha.”

“... Does this one have everything from release, too?” she questioned.

“Yes. This is all that I could do, so...”

“...A-And all these other files, they’re all as long as these?”

“Yes, they are,” Kai admitted.

“That’s amazing!” she burst out, loud enough to cause the other students around them to look over, but Nanaka herself was too hyped up to notice. “You said I was amazing,” she gushed. “But Shiraseki-kun, you’re way more amazing than I am!”

Chapter 8 - The Reason Behind Those Tears

“I’m gonna stop by the bookstore on my way home,” spoke Nanaka, as soon as they exited the ticket gates at Niigata Station.

Kai knew that there was a sizable bookstore below ground floor in the building directly next to the station and figured Nanaka was planning on going there. But that meant he’d need to make it all the way over to the other end of the train station to join her. There was a stairway that acted as a shortcut to her destination, so Kai decided to walk with her until that point.

“Alright then,” he said. “I’ll see you.”

“U-Um!” she called out to him as he was splitting away and stopped him in his tracks. She was standing still in front of the staircase with a troubled expression on her face.

Both of her hands were gripping tightly at her skirt like she was wringing out every ounce of courage she’d ever be able to muster. “The reason you said I was amazing earlier is because I’m a planner,” she said. “...Right?”

Kai had braced himself in anticipation, but all that came his way was a confirmation of what he had said earlier. *Why would she bother to confirm that?* he wondered. He found it a bit strange but, on second thought, noted that there might have been something that Nanaka personally found important.

“Like you said yourself, your illustrations aren’t quite as good as someone like Kuroba-san,” he told her. “Still, I think it’s more than enough for a planner to wield as a weapon. At the very least, it’s a weapon I don’t have.”

Kai had no intention of lying or embellishing his praise any more than necessary. He thought that Nanaka simply lacked confidence in herself due to her inexperience as a planner. This was exactly why he’d wanted to let her know that she had an edge which other planners didn’t.

...And yet, why? Why were there tears flowing out of her eyes as she stood before him?

“I-I’m sorry,” she said hastily. Nanaka seemed startled herself, like she didn’t expect her own reaction. She turned around and dashed up the stairs. Her unwiped tears were shaken off by the momentum of her movement and danced through the air, illuminated by red rays of the nearly set sun.

Kai didn’t understand the reason. He didn’t understand, but knew he needed to chase after her. Yet the moment that thought crossed his mind, his vision blacked out.

The dull sensation of impact slowly caught up to him, and an intense pain spread throughout his face, particularly near his eye. As he held his hand to the source of his pain, Kai finally realized that something had hit him in the face. He pushed through the pain to look down and noticed a pack of sasa dango laying at his feet.

‘Sasa dango’ was about as literal as a name could get; it was dango wrapped in bamboo leaves, where ‘sasa’ simply meant bamboo. It was one of the most famous Japanese sweets in Niigata, although Kai only knew this because Misako brought some for him to eat when he first moved.

Of course, there had been no sasa dango at his feet just a moment ago. He didn’t quite know where they came from, but he figured that was what hit him in the face.

Kai was bending down to pick it up when a shadow appeared over his outstretched hand, and a pair of loafers stopped directly in front of the dango.

He picked up the sweets and looked up to see an enraged Eru standing tall before him. “Go find a way to drop yourself into hell, will you, dear?” she said challengingly. Which meant that she was the one who threw the sasa dango at him.

“How... sudden,” he managed to say.

The scene of their standoff was in the middle of a busy passageway during rush hour, so a large crowd of people seemed annoyed as they made their way around them. Eru didn’t seem to care one bit. Her right eye, uncovered by her long bangs, was bathed in a fiery rage of vengeance.

“Might I ask why you’re helping her?” she asked venomously.

“...You mean, Aoi-san?” Kai replied.

“I’m certain you have some ulterior motive.”

“Huh?”

“How unsightly,” Eru said. “I’ve seen so many boys get the wrong idea with her. It’s been this way since we were little. My dear Nanaka is cute, is a good person, and treats everybody kindly. It’s my role to chase off the moronic monkeys that fall in love and find themselves infatuated with the fantasy that she’s especially fond of them.”

“That’s not what I—” Kai tried to say, before Eru cut him off.

“Oh, then I’m sure you don’t like her, then?” she taunted.

“Well—”

“I’m sure you don’t like her, then?”

“I—”

“You don’t like her, then?” Eru insisted a third time.

“I... don’t know.” Kai wanted to tell her she was wrong, but the words wouldn’t take shape in his mouth. Nanaka was cute; that was a fact. When he’d first met her, he thought that they lived in completely different worlds. If they didn’t have social games as a middle man, they probably never would have had a conversation. No, *definitely*.

Yet now, Kai found himself talking to her in a fairly close manner, and it would be a lie to say that he wasn’t happy about that. Maybe “infatuated” was a fitting word after all. But to ask him not to feel his heart throb when talking to such a cute person—and seeing her cute smile—was simply an impossible task.

It was just that... he wasn’t sure if that was what constituted “liking” someone else. Kai himself thought that it was only natural that he didn’t get it. While all his classmates gossiped about love, he was off on his own playing social games. There was no way he’d understand the finer subtleties of an emotion like that. So, with all honesty, he didn’t know whether the beating in his chest when he was with Nanaka was him “liking” her or not.

That being said, Eru seemed to have come to a conclusion of her own, and the

look in her eye had switched from wrath to one of sneerful disdain. “I don’t care if you’re from Tsukigase,” she said, “or wherever else. If you’re helping her out of some unbecoming ulterior motive, then I’ll have you disappear, quickly.”

“That’s—not it,” Kai said. This time, the words came out reflexively. “I’m not helping Aoi-san for an ulterior motive.”

Eru likely hadn’t expected that response from him, because she flinched lightly in response. “T-Then, why are you helping my dear girl?”

“...I just couldn’t leave her be,” he admitted. Initially it all began with anger; Kai couldn’t forgive the Student Council President when he casually remarked that social games had no value. That man didn’t understand how *much* went into creating a single social game and had the nerve to spit on it anyway. Kai couldn’t stay silent in the face of that.

And because of that arrogant idiot, Kai found himself unable to leave a social game club on the brink of ruin—to leave *Nanaka*—alone. Like and hate had nothing to do with it.

“I don’t think I’m a particularly talented planner...” he told her slowly. “But if I’m able to help in any way, even the slightest amount... I want to. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“...You truly should find your way to hell,” said Eru, whose emotional state seemed to go past anger and wrap back around to disinterest as her expression cooled to a cold stare. “If you continue to help her, my dear Nanaka is going to cry again.”

“What do you mea—” Kai tried to ask, but she had no intention of staying any longer.

“I only bought these because Nanaka likes them...” Eru grumbled. “How detestable.” She snatched the sasa dango out of Kai’s right hand and quickly turned her back to him, signaling that their conversation was over. She didn’t so much as glance back as she walked out of sight.



Kai was a bundle of nerves when he got home.

Nanaka had already given him her contact information, and it would have been easy for him to text or LIME her. He wanted to ask her one simple question: why did she cry? Of course, he wouldn't have been out of sorts to begin with if he had the courage to ask.

In the end, his worries amounted to nothing as he failed to bring himself to do anything by the time the next morning arrived.

Nanaka was nowhere to be found along the route to school, even inside the train station. When Kai made it to his classroom, she was already there, happily chatting away with her classmates. There wasn't the faintest hint of yesterday's tears in her voice and expressions.

"Ah! Morning, Shiraseki-kun!" She called out cheerfully.

"G-Good morning," he cautiously replied.

On the contrary, she gave Kai a cheerful greeting as soon as she noticed him. Kai didn't get it. What was he supposed to do? With his troubled mind, his classes in Modern Japanese, Mathematics, and English all sounded as though he was listening to an unknown alien language.

From Kai's seat in the far back next to the window, he could see Nanaka's back and a tiny glimpse of her face from the side. Based on what he could observe, she wasn't any different from her usual, bright self. In fact, it was almost as if what occurred yesterday had been some sort of illusion—like he had dreamed the whole thing up.

But when class let out for the day and Nanaka walked over to him, he noticed something. "Let's go to our club, Shiraseki-kun."

"...Um, aren't you tired?" he asked. Until she walked up to him, Kai had only viewed her from a distance. However, once they were right next to each other, he could see the differences in her face. Because of her fair skin, they stood out even more: two deep bags underneath her eyes that hadn't been there the day before.

"Uhh, well... A bit," Nanaka admitted. "That doesn't matter, though. C'mon, let's go." She pulled him up to his feet by grabbing onto his sleeve.

Usually Kai wouldn't have been able to keep himself calm if something like

that happened. But now, the thought didn't even cross his mind.

Something's off about her, he reaffirmed. Then out loud, he said, "Hey, Aoi-san."

"Hm? What's up?"

"Well... It's about yesterday."

"...Yesterday?" Nanaka said. "Did something happen yesterday?"

Kai couldn't bring himself to speak as Nanaka stopped to twirl around and smile at him in the middle of the hallway as they walked to the clubroom.

No. Kai *couldn't*? It was more that Nanaka *wouldn't let him*. The smile on her face was different from anything that Kai had seen on Nanaka before. It had the message, "I won't tell you anything," plastered all over it.

"Let's go," she said, and began walking before Kai could respond.

At that exact moment, Aya appeared at the other end of the hallway walking toward them. "Ohhh!" she said. "Nana-sen, nice timing!"

"Oh? What's up, Ah-chan?"

"I won't be showing up at the club no matter what for a bit!" Aya told them breezily. "Alright, see ya!"

"Huh?"

"Wha?"

Kai and Nanaka had the exact same reaction.

"Weeeeellll, I got home yesterday and bam, HUGE SHOCKER! A buncha gacha that I *have* to roll on came out at the same time...!! So, if I have time for club, then I have time to work! A job! I already work a lot at my part time job but now I gotta do even more!"

"B-But we—our club, we need to win at the next competition or—" Nanaka stammered.

"Mmm, that's true! That's a yikes! But if I don't roll now, this gacha might never come back!" Aya said dismissively. "This is why! This is why time-limited gacha are so...!!!"

“That... might be the case, but...!” Nanaka tried to retort.

“Anyway, that’s how it is, so I’ll catch you later!” Aya finished her last statement with a smile and went on her way like a tornado tearing through the hallway.

“...L-Let’s just go to the clubroom for now.” Nanaka said after Aya left.

“Y-Yes, let’s.”

They went to the clubroom just as they said they would, but it wasn’t as if that changed anything about their situation. Thinking back on Eru’s actions from yesterday, if they played their cards wrong, it wouldn’t be a surprise if *she* didn’t come to the clubroom for a while, either.

Kai and Nanaka took their seats across the table from each other and sighed.

“...What do we do?” The words quietly slipped out of Nanaka’s mouth, so that must have been how she truly felt.

“Let’s do what we can,” he offered.

Nanaka was a little surprised, as she hadn’t expected an immediate answer.

If sitting around sighing together progressed their plans for the competition, then Kai would have loved to do so. That wasn’t a possibility, though. You had to walk to arrive somewhere, and only then would the view around you change.

Besides, Kai knew that this kind of thing happened in social game clubs. Sometimes a bug would appear and the programmer responsible for that code would be sick with the flu, causing everyone to lose their minds while trying to contact him. Other times, an illustrator would get art-blocked right before the release of an event and wouldn’t have anything to turn in. Sometimes, a planner would go in circles trying to figure out the specifications and nothing would get started. No matter the situation, you had to do whatever you could.

“Yesterday, we decided what we’re going to change, correct?” he said.

“Y-Yeah,” Nanaka agreed. “We said usability improvements, right? Specifically, the UI and leading lines.”

“However, we didn’t decide *how* we’re going to change it. So, starting today —”

“Oh, wait!” Nanaka thrust out her hands to stop him and continued where Kai left off. “We’re going to make a specification document. Right?”

“Y-Yes,” Kai agreed in surprise. “That’s correct.”

A huge grin emerged on Nanaka’s face as she heard her answer was right. “That means even if Ah-chan and Eru aren’t here, we can keep working!”

“Exactly.”

When it came to the management of social games, the most crucial part of a planner’s job was the specification document. There were many people who thought a planner’s job was to come up with a proposal for “what kind of game to make,” but the reality was slightly different. The idea that a planner would come up with a new game from scratch was well-spread but uncommon in practice.

Especially in the field of social games, where the basic goal was to continue managing a single game for an extended period of time, a planner’s job often revolved around management skills as opposed to development skills. This meant that writing up proposals and specification documents detailing in-game events and feature updates were the main duties of a planner.

Usually, a required step in the process would be to take your event or feature update and explain to upper management: “This is what our next event will look like,” or “These are the features we’ll change.” If they gave the go-ahead, then you’d round up the programming and graphic teams to explain the gist of your plans. Finally, after all that was said and done, you’d begin writing a formal specification document.

So the truth was, Kai wanted Aya and Eru to show up at the club by now. There was the chance that a programmer might look at a planner’s proposal and say “No way, this is impossible.” The illustrator could offer similar resistance. The planner’s proposal could cause strange screen composition, or their ideas could be difficult to fit into the game’s graphics.

In order to avoid such risks, he wanted to have everyone together as soon as the initial proposal was set in stone so they could figure out what was in the realm of possibility and share points of difficulty or concern before moving forward.

But there was nothing he could do about it now. Seeing as Aya and Eru weren't there, what would likely happen was that Kai and Nanaka would make a best-case-scenario specification document and then they'd complete whatever they could afterward.

"Could it be that you've made specification documents in the past?" he ventured.

"No... That's not quite it," Nanaka answered bashfully and reached over to the bag sitting on the chair next to her. She took out five books and laid them out in a line across the table. They all had to do with game development, and specifically the planner's role in game development. A handful of tags stuck out the top of each one, letting Kai know that she had carefully read through every book.

"Shiraseki-kun, you taught me a lot yesterday. And I thought to myself, 'I'm no good as I am now.' I didn't know anything... Being taught is good, too, but I figured I needed to study on my own first."

"...Huh?" said Kai. "Are you telling me the reason you went to the bookstore yesterday..."

"Yup, it was so I could buy these. I was reading them last night, and it was morning before I knew it, so the bags under my eyes are crazy. It's a bit embarrassing...ahaha."

Kai couldn't take his eyes off of Nanaka and her sheepish, laughing face. *I'm sure you don't like her, then?* In his mind, the words Eru cast over him yesterday came back to life. He hadn't known how to answer that question then. But if he were to be asked the same question again now, he'd know his answer. It was harder *not* to like someone who'd give it their all like Nanaka.

"Oh, also! I read a lot, so there's also a lot of parts that I didn't understand," she said in a rush. "All the parts I marked with tags are things I didn't get. If you'd be willing to help me with them, that'd make me really happy."

"So long as I know the answer, ask away." Kai's response was so fast that it was basically a verbal pounce.

Nanaka was taken aback with how enthusiastic he was. "Y-Yeah, thanks..."

Shiraseki-kun, are you okay? You seem kind of into it right now.”

“I just... I realized that I want to give it my all, too,” said Kai. After seeing what Nanaka had done, there was no way he *wouldn't* be inspired.

Her eyes opened wide for a moment, and her face morphed into a beaming smile. “I see! Then let’s do our best together!”

After that, Kai prioritized answering Nanaka’s questions over writing up the specification document. His reasoning was that some of her questions were directly linked to writing a specification document, and he wanted to clear up any confusion before they began, as that would let them create a better final product.

One by one, they went through each book and Kai answered as many questions as there were tabs sticking out of the book. But when they got to the final book, his hands stopped. The title was *A Planner’s Job*. The author was the president of the Tsukigase Private School Social Game Club—Kurenai Akane.

“This is the person that’s like God to you, right?” Nanaka checked. “It’s amazing to think that she even has her own book.”

“...Yes. The reason I know enough to work as a proper planner is because the pres—because of her,” Kai admitted. “I showed you the data I logged on my laptop before, but Kurenai-san was the one who told me to do so in the first place...”

A terrible aftertaste sank into his chest after he almost called her “president,” because he didn’t have the right to call her that anymore. He took more of her precious time than anyone else, and yet he didn’t manage to pay her back any of it. All he managed to do was drag her name through the mud and run away.

—*Oh, this is bad*. By the time he’d had that thought, it was too late; that terrible feeling came rising up through his gut all at once. Kai tried to regain his composure, but the awful chills were too much. At the very least, he tried to hide his face.

“Sh-Shiraseki-kun?!” Nanaka exclaimed in concern.

“I... I’m... Fine...” he said weakly.

“You’re as white as a sheet! There’s no way you’re fine! W-What’s wrong?! Is it because of the book?!”

“...No, it’s not. I’m merely feeling a bit under the weather... Don’t worry about me.”

“Don’t worry...?”

Kai could tell what she was trying to say. He’d seen himself in the mirror when he was like this in the past. At the time he’d thought to himself, *This guy might die*. His face had been white as death, drained of all its color. He knew his face now was probably something like that. Being told, ‘Don’t worry about me’ by someone who looked like that was unreasonable.

Even so, that was what had to be done. “Let’s continue,” he said doggedly.

“N-No! We can save it for tomorrow, okay?”

“There’s no school tomorrow... We have to do it today.”

“That’s true, but—”

“Among all the books you have, that one is the one you need to read the most.” As he spoke, Kai noticed that he was slowly calming down. He took deep breaths and reset his breathing.

Alright, he told himself, *I’m okay*. Out loud, he said, “So, let’s give it a go.” Ignoring the worried look on Nanaka’s face, he reached out to open the cover. And as he went on to explain the details of a book he’d read countless times before, their time after school went by in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 9 - There's Nothing Like It

In the end, all Kai did was answer Nanaka's questions until it was time to go home.

"I wonder if there's anything we can do on the weekend?" she asked.

In response, Kai put her in charge of finding the specific points they needed to improve upon as preparation for writing the specification document. Of course, he planned on doing that as well, and wanted to compare their suggestions to each other afterwards.

However, there was another issue. As the planner's side moved forward, there was more and more need for Aya, their programmer, to come to the club instead of her part time job.

But seeing how resolute she was in her decision, Kai couldn't think of any way to convince her. It wasn't as if she didn't know that the club was on the brink of disbandment; she knew, and she'd *still* made that choice. And the biggest hurdle for him was that... he sort of understood how Aya felt.

"...Mai deeah burazaah?"

"What's wrong, nee-san? What's with the broken English?" When Kai got home, his front door was unlocked and Misako was there waiting like she always was.

He figured she had some kind of reference material for her novel, because she was waiting for him in a frilly apron dress—something one would only expect to see in a maid cafe. The absolute territory on her slender legs and her artificially emphasized bust might have had him the least bit excited if she hadn't been his sister.

Unfortunately for him, it was his sister. Kai thought he heard her say something like, "Welcome home, young master," in a very respectful tone of voice, but it was a pain to play along with every gag she came up with—and more importantly, his top priority was to figure out a way to get Aya to come to

the club—so he ignored her.

He ignored her as he locked the front door, put his bag up in his room, poured some coffee, and opened up his laptop in the living room where he began to search his brain for ideas.

The entire time, Misako seemed to want attention and tried tailing him through the apartment. She made a ruckus when she walked in front of the living room table and purposefully tripped, but Kai ignored her. He completely ignored her. After a while, ignoring her became so natural that he forgot she was even there.

“Do you know why rabbits die?” she suddenly asked.

“...Malnutrition,” he answered shortly.

“Close! You’re one word off! Rabbits die due to malnutrition—that’s right, which means they basically die from loneliness! Your sister is but a rabbit! I’m —”

““Loneliness is malnutrition of the heart,”” Kai quoted. “Should an author really be using such run-of-the-mill metaphors?”

“.....” Pure silence. Misako fell into a silence so deep that Kai couldn’t even hear her breathing, despite the fact that she was directly behind him.

It wasn’t that he didn’t care at all, but he knew that paying her any attention would play into her trap, so he continued to ignore her.

“...”

Now, the issue at hand was Aya, whose resolve was steadfast. Exceedingly so, and that was a fact. Usually, students would be unable to spend a lot of money in games if they played through the BOX.

“...”

But there were loopholes to any rule, and the simplest way around it would be to have a smartphone that wasn’t registered as a student phone. That would be enough to bypass the spending rules. By choosing to not link your terminal through the school network, you wouldn’t have any restrictions on her spending. Of course, that also meant you wouldn’t get any of the free points

related to school activities, so you'd have to spend your own money no matter what. That meant most students wouldn't bother doing so.

"..."

In Aya's case, the points afforded through the system weren't even close to being enough. Instead, she chose a part time job and opted out of linking her terminal. So, then she'd be able to use her paycheck on games. What on earth was he supposed to do in the face of such enthusiastic whali—

".....sniff..."

—Huh? Out of the blue, Kai heard the sound of someone crying behind him. And sure enough, when he turned around, his older sister was crying. She looked like a flooded wreck with how badly she was bawling, and Kai felt guilt well up inside him just from looking at her.

"N-Nee-san?" he ventured cautiously.

"...sniff... Wahhhh... Hic..."

There was no sign of her stopping. Quite the opposite, in fact. When he tried talking to her, she started crying with even more intensity than before.

"But I... I worked so hard... on my... sniff... on my manuscript... so I could come over... and I was so excited... but you... ignored me... sniff... you said I was a... sniff... failure as an author... sniff... so mean... sniff..."

"I-I didn't call you a failure or anything!" said Kai, attempting to defend himself. "I was—"

As soon as he began panicking to try and calm her down, her sobbing cleanly stopped, and Misako's face sported a mischievous grin. "Were you worried?"

"...I mean, yeah," he admitted.

"Hmph. It's your own fault for treating your sister so poorly. By the way, I really was hurt when you ignored me," Misako lamented. "The defendant ought to tread more carefully in the future."

"Then as the defendant, I'd like to request a defense attorney."

"Huh? You want to see your older sister dressed up in a suit like an ace

attorney?”

“...*Sigh.*”

“Stop that. That sigh was so heavy it could split the Earth in two,” she said accusingly. “Anyway, what have you been mulling about since you came home?”

“It’s not something you’d understand, nee-san.”

“Oh boy! I wonder why! Maybe it’s because I cried earlier! Your sister feels like she’s being treated like a nuisance and her cute little brother won’t talk to her so I’m sure she’s gonna cry again! Wahh!”

“Oh, *fine!*” He didn’t have any other choice, so Kai explained everything about the situation with Aya to his sister.

But Misako didn’t play social games at all.

In fact, she barely played *games* in the first place, so her reaction was just as Kai expected. “Yup, I don’t get it,” Misako cheerfully admitted. “She’s got so many screws loose that it sounds kinda fun.”

“I told you you wouldn’t understand,” Kai grumbled at her.

“I like people who are true to their desires, but to say that she’s too busy at work to come to your club when it’s about to be disbanded... That takes some will. Still... is that gacha thing *that* important?”

“Yeah, but I’m sure you wouldn’t get it, nee-san.”

“It’s just a game, right?”

The way she phrased it caused something to snap in Kai. “... Look. I know it’s ‘just a game’ to you, and even I think Oushima-san is going too far... but I know where she’s coming from, a bit. Just the tiniest bit. I know the feeling of despair when you don’t have enough currency on hand to roll the gacha and you miss out on the swimsuit version of one of your favorite characters. That alone would be fine, but after that you find out that the character you missed was really strong and it becomes a human-rights-character for a while and then you can’t bring yourself to look. Oh, a human-rights-character means that ‘Any player who doesn’t have them doesn’t have human rights,’ because they’re so

much stronger than other units... well, just think of it as a super powerful character. Then, once you realize what you've missed out on, you get this sense of, 'I'll never go through this humiliation again!' But no matter how hard you bite your lip in frustration, that character isn't coming back, and it doesn't change the fact that you missed them. Reality is cruel. Every time you log in to that app, you see your friend list full of that character, and it's this endless torture of inferiority..... That... is not a good feeling... Ah—”

Damn, I said too much. Kai instantly regretted it as he thought of the ways Misako would tease him, but all she did was flash him a gentle, happy smile. “...Basically, it's really important,” he finished, “depending on the person.”

“Hm, I see. If you know that much, then the answer is simple. I don't really get it, but there's nothing like it for you to substitute, right? Then the only solution is to give her the money that she's after. Wouldn't everything wrap up if you gave her money?”

“Nononono—” Kai rushed to say.

“It's not that crazy of an idea—or, so I'd say if this were a business. My editor pays me a fee to receive my manuscript. In the same way, you pay her a fee to have her program for you... ideally, at least.”

“...We're a club, though.” It was against the regulations for a social game club to hire help with actual money.

There were cases when schools would cooperate and call upon outside developers, but that never involved liquid capital. It was done through non-monetary bartering, where a school might borrow a programmer and in exchange lend out one of their illustrators down the line.

“...Hm?” he said after a moment. “...Substitute?”

“What is it, Kai?”

“It's nothing... Hmm, but, I see. Of course. That's... the only way.” He couldn't believe it, but this mess of a conversation with his mess of a sister had led him to an answer.

Misako caught on and presented him with a smug grin. “See, what'd I tell you?” she said. “Happily chatting along with your sister led you to the answer,

didn't it?"

"...This time, and *only* this time, I can't say you were wrong," Kai was forced to admit.

Thinking too hard can lead to inflexibility, and the flow of new ideas can get clogged. Taking a moment to relax and talk it out with another person is important, was a lesson that Akane had repeated to him many times. Kai tended to have a bad habit of thinking himself into a corner on his own, according to her.

If he hadn't spoken with Misako, his solution wouldn't have come to him so easily and he would have gotten lost in his own thoughts. "...Thanks, nee-san."

Despite his sincere words of thanks, Misako played up a surprised expression and started cackling with laughter. Kai was so embarrassed that all he could do was look away.



Since he had a plan in mind to convince Aya, Kai was able to spend his weekend focused on pinpointing the issues they needed to fix.

He would have liked to have statistics on hand detailing the number of views on the Gacha and Leveling menus, or data on how many times the links that made up their leading lines were accessed to find out what parts weren't acting as intended. However, that data didn't exist, and the only person that could get that data was spending all her time at her job.

It was sad how much of a pipe dream getting information was. But at any rate, he still had a decent estimation without the numbers.

The access stats on the Gacha page would be either significantly high or significantly low. Increasing the amount of leading lines to the gacha meant that—if everything went well—you were increasing the number of pathways to the user's destination. Kai thought they must have taken it for granted that they'd get a large amount of traffic, but if that were the case, a planner's job would be easy as cake. It was like how if meat buns were pushed with every purchase at a convenience store, the customers' demand for meat buns would fall. In essence, it was important to know one's bounds and to take everything in

moderation. If leading the user toward the gacha made them roll, there wouldn't be a single social game with profit issues on the face of the planet.

They'd remove all the excess links leading to the gacha and replace them with links to more suitable places. Kai used this as the underlying basis to weed out all the issues he could find. As he lost himself in his work, the weekend came to a close.

On Monday morning, Kai woke up earlier than usual. Before he went to school, he wanted to print out the Excel spreadsheets he'd prepared at the convenience store. He could have simply used a printer at school, but for whatever reason, he wanted to do it at the store.

The reason was probably because he was excited. Kai made these documents nearly every day when he was still going to Tsukigase, but since he'd moved and transferred schools, this was the first time in months. The inconcealable truth was that he wanted to see his work take physical form as soon as possible.

He was about to leave his house one hour earlier than usual, when—*ding dong*—the doorbell rang out of nowhere.

Kai subconsciously tilted his head. If the person outside his front door was his sister, then she wouldn't have rung the doorbell. In fact, the doorbell button hadn't so much as been touched by Misako the entire time that he lived in this apartment. Still, he couldn't think of anyone other than his older sister that would be there. It was too early in the morning for it to be a delivery man, and he couldn't think of anything he'd ordered recently.

He figured that Misako must have *wanted* him to think all that and had in fact rung the bell on a whim. Kai wrapped it all up in his mind and found himself sporting a half-exhausted expression as he nonchalantly opened the door to a huge surprise to start his morning.

"Ah, morning!" She raised a single hand to greet him. Her smile was brighter than the morning sun after an all-nighter.

"A-Aoi-san...? G-Good... morning?" said Kai, completely caught off guard. *Why? Why was she here?*

"Sorry for coming out of nowhere... Wait, were you about to leave, too?"

Nanaka asked. "Isn't it kinda early?"

"I was going to stop by the convenience store on the way to school," he admitted.

"Oh, I see. Let's get going then."

Kai didn't understand how this situation came to be, but the two ended up going to the store together.

The convenience store was on the way to the train station, and there were a few students in jerseys buying breakfast on their way to their morning training.

Kai didn't have any plans to shop, so he went straight to the printer. He pulled up his phone and sent the data he'd prepared over to the machine. He initially put in a request for one copy, but he caught a glimpse of Nanaka peering over him into the printer and changed it to two copies.

"What are you printing?" she asked.

"I, too, conducted a search to find places that we should improve," Kai told her. "Also, I had some extra time, so I went ahead and wrote up some specifications for a few parts."

One completed copy came out of the printer as they spoke. Kai tapped the papers together to align them and secured the corner with a stapler he brought from home. He double-checked to make sure there weren't any printer errors and handed the copy to Nanaka.

"Here you go," he offered.

"T-Thanks!"

Nanaka took the papers with all the grace of a nervous student receiving their graduation certificate up at a podium in the school's gymnasium. She gave it her full attention, burning a hole through the document with her gaze as she carefully began reading it, page by page. Kai was happy that she was reading it so earnestly, but she was so serious that he began feeling embarrassed.

Even after he'd finished printing his own copy and they'd left the convenience store, Nanaka was still engrossed in her reading.

"Shiraseki-kun!" she exclaimed.

Just as Kai was about to call out to her to say, “Let’s go,” she whipped her head up at him.

“Can I have this?!” she wanted to know.

“O-Of course.” That was the plan all along, so Kai had no objections.

“Um, and...” Nanaka timidly pulled out a similarly stapled document from her bag. The first page read, *MiSt Improvement Document*. As soon as Kai noticed that, a massive voice inside his mind screamed at him that he’d screwed up.

He screwed up. Big time.

“Um... I tried making my own this weekend... But I’ve never made one before, so, um, I didn’t know how I was supposed to do it and it’s not as nice as—”

“That’s fine!” He stopped her mid-sentence and took the document without waiting for a response.

On Friday, the only thing Kai asked of Nanaka was, “I want you to make a list of as many points you think we should fix as you can think of. A bullet point list is fine.” That was more than enough to figure out what they wanted to do. He wanted her to use the document he just printed as a reference when they started on the actual organization of those points into a proper specification document. That was the whole reason he’d included a few examples where he wrote up specifications.

It was called a “specification document,” but the contents were complex, and it could be written any number of ways depending on a variety of factors. Handing a beginner developer a blank sheet of paper and telling them to “write a specification document” would only lead to bewilderment. Even if they had ideas of what kind of screens they wanted, what kind of features they wanted, they didn’t have the necessary knowledge of how to format those as a document. Unless they were intensely passionate, they would probably run face first into a wall and sit there with stars in their eyes.

That’s why, now, Kai found himself hideously embarrassed. Somewhere in his heart, he’d figured she didn’t have that kind of zeal—he’d marked her motivation off as being less than what it truly was.

In Kai’s case, he could simply take the format he used at Tsukigase and change

the content to fit *MiSt* to get a perfectly presentable document, as he did here. But Nanaka didn't have that experience to fall back on. So, he thought she could simply find the places she wanted to fix over the weekend and use his document today to begin writing up her own. That would be more than enough, and he'd decided on his own that that was the pace they'd take.

He decided that, even though he saw her pull an all-nighter reading reference books just the other day.

"Um, uhh, it's probably really hard to read." Nanaka said apologetically.

She was right; it was hard to read. But that was a given. More importantly, the essential information was all detailed and sorted out in her own way, to the point that it touched Kai's heart. The itemized list of all the potential improvements Kai asked her for was at the beginning of the document, and she had even written specifications in her own way on how to solve those issues. An emotion that you could only call *passion* flowed throughout the document.

It'll all work out. That thought naturally came to him.

"Leave Oushima-san to me," he said out loud.

"Huh?" Nanaka asked in confusion.

If Nanaka had this much grit and passion, he could have faith in her, Kai decided. Even if he wasn't there, she would definitely complete the specification document.



"What is this? It's almost like you're making me out to be the big bad villain or something, pwahaha!" Aya found something about the situation comical, because she started laughing and grinning all on her own.

After school, Kai and Nanaka worked together to capture Aya as she tried to run home at the speed of light and brought her back to the clubroom. Kai and Aya sat at the table across from each other, and Nanaka was in charge of guarding the door so she couldn't escape.

Kai dropped the stack of papers he received from Nanaka onto the table with a thump.

Nanaka blushed and looked down like she was still embarrassed to show other people her work.

“What’s this?” Aya asked.

“It’s still a work-in-progress, but this is our current specification document.”

“Wow, you really are a planner from Tsukigase!” said Aya. “You work fast.”

“I didn’t make this,” Kai told her. “Aoi-san did.”

“...Huhwha?” Aya couldn’t believe it. She darted her eyes back and forth from Kai, to the document, and then to Nanaka. She froze with her eyes and mouth wide open.

“Nana-sen... wrote a specs doc...? You mean *the* Nana-sen who showed me an illustration and said ‘I want it to be like this!’ back when we were developing *MiSt* made a... specs doc...?” Aya asked again, truly shocked.

“Um... I really didn’t know anything back then...” Nanaka mumbled. “Ughh... I’m so embarrassed...”

Kai could see the scene play out in front of his eyes. Aya would ask “What are the specs like?” and Nanaka would show her a picture. It wouldn’t be too far-fetched if she were an illustrator doing character design, but that was awful for a programmer who wanted to know implementation details. Actually, it was terrifying to think that they somehow managed to finish their game. It was pretty much a miracle.

“Lemme see it,” said Aya, taking the specification document to flip through while Nanaka watched her with bated breath.

Kai wanted to praise the fact that Nanaka hadn’t run away; the first time he’d handed Akane a specification document to check over, he’d cracked under the pressure and fled to the bathroom in the middle of her review. He got scolded hard for reasons completely unrelated to the contents of his document.

“...Uh-huh.” Aya tapped the papers onto the table to realign them. “You’re serious about winning the next competition, aren’t ’cha?”

“That’s a tentative plan. We’ll add more to complete the document over the next few days,” Kai explained.

“But I still can’t help,” said Aya, swinging both her arms into a giant X mark in front of her. “C’mere, lemme show you something.” She pulled her phone out of her skirt pocket and began tapping on the screen, which was filled to the brim with countless social game app icons.

“From here to here are the games where I have to get 100% of the characters that come out in the gacha,” she explained. “And then from here to here are the ones that I roll for characters that I think are cute until they come home. And then, from here to here...” Aya went on and on about her gacha plans.

The concept of a gacha was fundamentally luck-based. There were some games that had an upper bound where you were guaranteed something if you rolled a certain amount, but even then, it cost an exorbitant amount of money to reach that point. To put it simply, Aya’s gacha plans were insane. If she didn’t skip the rolling animations, it’d take her a whole day to *roll the gacha*.

And of course, that wasn’t even scratching the surface of the *money* it’d take.

“And that’s why I have to devote myself to my part time job,” she finished.

“That... won’t work. Please reconsider.” Kai locked eyes with her and didn’t look away. He knew that looking away first in these kinds of scenarios never panned out well. A sly smirk emerged on Aya’s listless face, as if to ask him, ‘And?’

“...Oushima-san, you need money,” he said. “Correct?”

“I mean, that’s what a part time job is for,” she told them.

“Then if you could get money without working, you wouldn’t need a job anymore, correct?”

“...What are you trying to say?” she asked suspiciously. “Is this some kinda sketchy deal?”

“Your part time job...” Kai knew he couldn’t just say, ‘Please quit.’ That wouldn’t mean anything. She wouldn’t have money. She wouldn’t be able to roll the gacha. That wasn’t the way to win her over.

In that case, there was only one thing he could say: “I’ll do it for you.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Aya and Nanaka’s befuddled voices rang out together.

“I, too, have experienced the sadness of not being able to roll on a gacha I really wanted to roll on. So... I can’t bring myself to reject your reasoning. After all, you can’t roll if you don’t have money. That’s why I’ll work instead. In exchange, Oushima-san, please do your part as a programmer. You’re the only person in this club capable of doing so. You’re the only one who can do it.”

Kai couldn’t draw. He couldn’t write. Of course, he couldn’t code, either. But he could probably work a part time job. He never had before, but he figured that if Aya could do it, then he could if he tried, too.

He was originally worried about the specification document, but Nanaka’s vigor put him at ease. At that rate, Kai wouldn’t need to do much for it to take proper form. As long as the job wasn’t too tough, he thought it would be possible for him to double-check her progress as he worked.

Kai’s proposal was so out of left field that Aya had the same shocked expression on her face as when she saw the specification document Nanaka wrote. Then, as if she couldn’t hold it in any more, she burst out laughing with her hands on her sides. “Ahahahahahahahaha! What the hell! What the hell is that?! Senpai, are you telling me you’ll give me your paycheck from your part time job?!”

“Precisely,” he agreed.

“Seriously...?! Oh my God, this dude’s for real...! Aha... haha... ha, phew. Oh man, that was a good laugh. Unfortunately, senpai, you’re a biiiiiit off the mark.”

“Off the mark?” he questioned.

“You want me to roll with someone else’s money? Come on, what kinda crap is that?! Senpai, you don’t have a clue about the joys of gacha! Listen up! The gacha doesn’t mean jack if you roll with someone else’s money! You pour your blood, sweat, and tears into work you don’t wanna do, but you grit your teeth and do it anyway! The money you save up through that grueling pain gets sucked up into the gacha—in an instant, that utter garbage turns into treasure. That moment is what’s important! That moment is everything! There’s no

pleasure or joy or bliss to be found with someone else's money!"



Aya's deplorable speech left Kai's mouth aghast. He had expected something like, "What's the point if I don't get the character I want with my own effort?!" but that wasn't it. What he got was a manifesto by a junkie, for a junkie, and only comprehensible to other junkies. She said he was off the mark, but at this point he didn't want to be anywhere near it.

"Welp, that being said," she told them, "I'll still write the program."

"...Huh?"

"What are you acting all surprised for?" Aya wanted to know. "That was the whole point, yeah?"

"T-That's true," Kai agreed, "But... is... that okay with you?"

"Mm, well, if it was anything like old-Nana-sen's requests, then I'd say no... but," Aya said, tapping Nanaka's specification document with her finger. "This has passion in it. Can't ignore that."

"...Ah-chan." Nanaka was on the verge of tears.

"Also, senpai," said Aya, "you're a real playboy."

"Huh? Me?"

"Saying that you can't refuse my thinking 'cause you know what it's like to wanna roll... not even my parents have said something like that to me."

Kai thought to himself that it made sense that any respectable parents wouldn't be able to understand their daughter if she chose to work at her part time job over helping at her nearly disbanded club.

"That made me a teensy bit happy. That, and..." Aya sped up her words in embarrassment as she added, "Programmers are creators, too. There isn't any creator dumb enough to throw something out after being told that 'You're the only one who can do it.'"

Chapter 10 - A Night to Remember

Why?

“Ah, Shiraseki-kun.”

How?

“For the layout of this button over here...”

What on earth happened that—

“...? Heeeeey? Shiraseki-kun?” Nanaka’s hand waved back and forth and brought Kai’s fleeing consciousness back to reality.

“Y-Yes?!” he said abruptly.

“Whoa! You surprised me. What’s wrong?” asked Nanaka. “Are you tired?”

“N-No, sorry,” said Kai. “I was just spacing out.”

“I see. Ahaha, so you have those moments too.”

“Well, of course...”

“Oh, it’s already this late?” said Nanaka, with dawning realization. “You wanna take a break? I’ll make some coffee.”

“Wait, if it’s coffee then I can—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” she said. “Wait here for a bit.” Nanaka got up and headed toward the kitchen. Every step she took was accompanied by the quiet sliding sound of her socks rubbing against the floor, and the room was otherwise so silent that Kai could hear them peculiarly well.

From the living room, Kai could see Nanaka’s back as she went through the motions of making coffee. She opened the lid of the electric kettle, turned on the tap, poured in some water, and flicked the switch on. While she was waiting for the water to boil, she took two cups and—

“Shiraseki-kun,” she asked, “is this the one you usually use?”

Nanaka suddenly turned around and held up two cups in front of her chest. She raised one up slightly higher than the other and tilted her head to the side.

“Y-Yes! That’s the one!” he said.

After getting a response, this time she raised the other cup.

“Then, can I borrow this one?”

“B-By all means,” Kai answered formally.

“...By all means,” Nanaka mimicked, stifling a laugh. “Okay, I’ll borrow this ‘by all means.’” Then she twirled back around, returning to the task at hand. The skirt she was wearing was shorter than her uniform, and the motion of her turnabout gave it a light fluff of air, causing it to broaden outwards. Her white thighs and knees graciously displayed themselves.

Bad. Awful, thought Kai, who was basically ogling her at this point. *Not good. This is not good.* Despite that recognition, he couldn’t pry his gaze away from her. Nanaka was looking all around the kitchen for the tin containing his instant coffee. When she realized it was in the cabinet right beside her leg, she bent over to get it.

It was a simple story: if Nanaka bent over, her skirt would rise up. Video games often had gimmicks that would allow the player to uncover such a hidden scene within a stage. In this case, the hidden part was underneath her skirt and—before he could catch a glimpse, Kai’s reason came back to him and he whipped his line of sight away with enough force to snap his neck.

His averted gaze wound up on the clock, which pointed to a little past nine. On the coffee table in front of him were his and Nanaka’s laptops, surrounded by a bunch of printed documents.

Why? How? Those doubts returned to run amok in his mind. What on earth happened that led Nanaka into his home on a Saturday night? The answer—or rather, the source of the issue—laid with Aya.

On the day they convinced her to help out, Kai wanted to discuss what Aya could realistically accomplish by the competition—that is to say, he wanted to know how many improvements were feasible. Writing up an impossible specification document was meaningless, and regardless of how cooperative

Aya was, their time was limited; they had next to none of it.

This rang especially true for the programmer, whose role came later in the schedule. That was exactly why Kai wanted to discuss how many improvements Aya could implement, and then they would only write specifications for the ones they could complete. And yet...

“No way, that’s bad practice,” Aya protested. “It’s like you’re half-assing it somewhere. You gotta give it your all, your all! You can straight up ignore how long it’ll take and how realistic your plans are. Put everything you want to change in that specs doc,” Aya insisted, full of overly optimistic ideals.

“But, look,” Kai tried to say, “if we can’t actually implement it, then...”

“Senpai? If you’re not gonna hit me with your best shot, then I’m not gonna work,” Aya insisted stubbornly.

With that having been said, Kai didn’t have any means to object. But, again, they clearly didn’t have time to spare. They agreed to hold their next meeting on the following Monday at the latest, so now he and Nanaka were in a frenzy to finish the specification document on time. He thought they’d finish by Friday, if all went well. But at some points, he’d had to pause to teach Nanaka about something while they worked, and they hadn’t been able to progress as quickly as he would’ve liked. By the end of school hours on Friday, they had more than a little ways to go.

“...Hey? Shiraseki-kun, you don’t have to say yes if you don’t want to...” said Nanaka, whose statement had begun fairly innocently. “But I could stay over at your house on the weekend to finish up together... if that’s okay with you?”

“No,” was not something Shiraseki could say. He couldn’t say it. There was *no way* he could say it. As a result, Nanaka explained to her parents that she was staying over at a friend’s house, he subsequently welcomed her in, and the two had silently worked away until this point.

Which brought him to the present moment.

“Here you go!” she announced cheerily.

“Thank... you,” said Kai, gingerly accepting the cup of coffee.

“Please enjoy,” Nanaka teased, “by all means.”

“Ah, I will, by all means...”

“...Pfft... Ahaha!” Nanaka tried to stifle it, but her laughter slipped out anyway. She always had a bright expression during class and club time, but she’d never burst out into laughter before. Another small laugh leaked out as she tried to hold it in. “Writing the document is tough,” she admitted, “but this kind of thing is fun.”

“I’m sorry,” said Kai. “If only I were able to explain it better...”

“...”

“Um... Aoi-san?”

Nanaka had frozen in place with her lips still on her cup, and her gaze was similarly frozen on Kai. She didn’t budge an inch. He tried talking to her a few times and even waved a hand in front of her, but she had turned to stone and wouldn’t move. Her large eyes simply continued to deliver him a disagreeable stare. “...Did my anger get through to you?” she finally asked.

“...Um, no. You’re angry...?” he asked. “I-I’m sorry.”

“That!!” she shouted.

“H-Huh?!”

“Shiraseki-kun,” said Nanaka, putting her cup down on the table and fiercely pointing her finger at him. “You haven’t done anything you should be sorry for. Right?”

“Uh, is that... so?” he ventured cautiously.

“That’s so,” she insisted. “Look...” Nanaka cleared her throat with an *ahem*, before putting her hand down and fixing her posture. She now knelt in a properly formal seiza position. “Shiraseki-kun... You didn’t want to join the social game club, so you rejected us once, but *even then*, you were nice enough to join us. I... was really happy,” she clarified. “On top of that, you spent hours and hours of your time teaching me... This also made me really happy. I’m happy now, too, and I’m super, super grateful to you! I’m grateful!”

Nanaka showed him a shy, happy smile. “So... I wish you wouldn’t apologize,”

she told him. "If anyone needs to apologize here, it'd be me."

"T-That's not true!" Kai replied. "Aoi-san, you're giving it everything you can! That's the whole reason why I wanted to try my best, too!"

"O-Oh," she mumbled. "So that's how it was...? Th-Thanks... Am I supposed to say 'thanks' here?"

"Y-Yes," Kai affirmed. "I think that's okay."

Neither of them could find a way to continue the conversation, and they both looked away in different directions.

What was it? Kai mused. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he felt like their conversation had been incredibly embarrassing. So much so that he might roll around the ground in shame every time he thought back on it.

Kai wasn't the only one who felt that way. After a few seconds of silence, Nanaka began vigorously waving her hands in front of her face to hide her troubled expression. "Th-This conversation is over!" she cried out. "Over! Alright! Once we finish our coffee, let's get back to it! Woo!" Her face was faintly red as she raised her fist in the air and urged Kai to do the same.

"W-Woo?" he tried.

"Shiraseki-kun, put some more oomph in it!" she insisted emphatically. "Woo!"

"W-Woo!"

"Woo!"





This Woo!-ing they did with raised fists injected them with forward momentum, and then the two of them began working on their own parts of the document without further delay. Nanaka's sections still weren't quite perfect, so Kai periodically checked on them whenever she came to a good stopping point. If he found any issues, he would let her fix them and check over her work again. As they continued their back and forth, the pile of completed specifications slowly grew.

At 11 P.M., 50% of the specification document was completed, and they redistributed the workload.

At midnight, 60% of the specification document was completed. Nanaka washed the creeping sleepiness off her face and came back with vigor. On the other hand, the nocturnal Kai finally turned on the afterburners and began to quicken his pace as they moved to clean up whatever remained.

At 3 A.M., 90% of the specification document was completed. Nanaka's eyes were practically closed as she clapped to celebrate their progress.

At 4 A.M., Kai noticed Nanaka's faint breathing and realized she was asleep. He grabbed a blanket from his room and draped it over her. Then he double-checked the last part she'd been working on to confirm that nothing was wrong with it.

At 5 A.M....

"It's done," he announced. The specification document was finally finished. A sense of exhaustion spilled out across his shoulders and he surrendered himself to it, falling backward. His head hurt a bit from when he'd hit the ground, but the pain was overwritten by a fulfilling sense of accomplishment. Not only had he finished writing the document, he also had already looked over everything, including Nanaka's portions. All that was left was to print it out and bring it to Aya.

"Mew..." Kai heard a soft sound, like that of a small animal, as Nanaka roused her upper body. She was still asleep. The right side of her face was resting on her laptop, and she was gently breathing in and out. She may have felt a little

discomfort, since she made a little chewing sound with her mouth before she turned the angle of her head.

“Ah—” Kai hadn’t meant to wake her up, but his hand shot out instinctively.

Nanaka’s coffee was still right next to her, and had been about to fall when she moved her head. Kai reached over and grabbed the cup from above. He managed to stop it from falling over and had a moment of relief, but then gulped when he realized his new situation.

The position Kai was in was one where his arm extended directly across his sleeping guest. He hadn’t gotten a good look at Nanaka’s face before, but now it filled his entire line of sight. He could clearly hear her steady breathing. From the side, he was able to see her long eyelashes, which almost seemed too pretty to be real.

And now, the eyelids they were attached to slowly opened. “...Huhhh?” Nanaka mumbled sleepily, gently straightening herself out as Kai moved back in sync.

“G-G-Good, m-morni-ning,” he stammered.

“.....Huh? Huh?! Five A.M.?! D-Did?! Did I fall asleep?!” Nanaka asked, sounding horrified.

“It’s okay,” Kai said reassuringly. “The specification document is completely done.”

“Shiraseki-kun, were you awake this entire time?!” Nanaka wailed. “And I just fell asleep on my own?!”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about that,” he told her. After all, Kai was the one who hadn’t woken her up. “Aoi-san,” he went on, “you finished all of the parts you were responsible for, and by the time you fell asleep, the only parts left were things I needed to do. Also...”

I was happy just to have you here. The words almost came out of his mouth before he slammed on the emergency brake. When he used to stay the night at Tsukigase to finish something, Kai hadn’t wanted to trouble anyone, so he’d always ended up alone; the only thing lighting up the dark club room would be the glow of his own computer. He never knew that it would be so different to

ride out a night with someone else beside him.

“Anyway,” he went on, “there’s really nothing you need to worry about. This,” he said, showing her his laptop, “is the specification document that you and I completed together.”

“...The way you said that is so unfair...” she grumbled. “Geez! Fine, if you’re gonna go that far, I won’t worry! Good job, us!”

“G-Good job.”

A bright, yet dry clapping sound rang out as Nanaka raised her right hand and Kai responded with a high-five.

“...Hm? Whoa!” said Nanaka, who noticed something as her hand brushed across her head from the high-five. She had been sleeping on the right side of her face the entire time. She probably wouldn’t have minded so long as her hair went neatly downward, but reality was not so kind, and her hair was now a spaghettified mess as a result. She repeated, “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” while attempting to comb it down with her hands to no avail.

“Plus...” she added, sniffing at herself. Nanaka closed her eyes and nodded her head with some sort of determination. Then, she took a step back to open up space between herself and Kai.

“...Shiraseki-kun,” Nanaka said, “I, um, have a request.” She held down the worst of her bedhead with her right hand and spoke with downcast eyes. “As you can see... my bedhead is always super strong,” she explained. “I need to shower to fix it, and... well, I always take a bath first thing in the morning.”

“R-Right,” Kai agreed shakily.

“...Can I borrow yours?” she asked.

For a second, Kai had absolutely no idea what she’d said. Then he clarified, “You mean... um... uhh... like... my bath?”

She responded with a nod.

“I-I’m totally fine with it, but—” Kai figured there would be a bunch of points she *wouldn’t* be totally fine with.

“It’s okay!” Nanaka said reassuringly. “Shiraseki-kun, I know you’ll be okay

with that kind of stuff. I trust you!”

“I-I see...” Kai was happy that she trusted him. But that trust also left him with a strange sense of disappointment, causing him to be unable to decide whether he should be happy or sad.

With all that having been said, Nanaka headed toward the bath. There was a changing room in front of the bath with a door leading into it, but it didn’t lock. Were someone to, say, try and peek on her...

If someone wanted to do it, they could. Which meant that Kai’s self-control was the only lock to that room. At first, he began meditating to silence his thoughts, calm his heart, and make his way to a land of nothingness. However, it was so quiet that he could hear the sound of Nanaka showering, so he gave up. He gave up instantly. That didn’t mean he had any alternative solutions, though.

What to do, he wondered. *What was he to do?* He could burst out into song, but that would be strange, and he didn’t want her to hear his tone-deaf singing.

I see, Kai thought stoically, and resolved himself to simply wait outside. He’d found his answer after some deliberation, but the moment he did...

“Morning, Kai! You up yet?!” Misako sang out. “Nee-san’s here!”

A calamity descended at the worst possible time.

“Oh, you *are* awake. I’ve never seen those shoes before, is someone... hm? What’s wrong? Not even a murderer caught on-site would look as obviously nervous as you do—what’s this?”

Misako made her way to the living room, looked at Kai, looked at the table, and looked at Nanaka’s bag sitting next to it. She took another step forward and put her hand onto the spot Nanaka was sitting in. “...It’s still warm,” she observed.

“Nee-san,” Kai said, all while thinking, *something. He had to do something*. Kai heard a sound when that thought came to mind; it was like the sound of a distant waterfall, brought to his ear by the whispers of the wind. The sound of water hitting a surface was noticeably different from that of rain and filled the air around the two siblings.

In an instant, Misako shot forward at full speed. Her hand was a hair's breadth away from the door leading into the bathroom when Kai grabbed it and wound his arms around her to hold her back.

"Hey...! Stop!" he cried out. "Nee-san, wait!"

"Kai! Why are you stopping me?!"

"You know why!"

"Do *you* know what you're doing?!" Misako demanded to know. As soon as she'd grasped the situation, she made off for the bathroom with all the flexibility of a wild beast.

"I know!" Kai yelled back, knowing that it would be catastrophic if he let this sister of his have her own way. *Extremely* catastrophic. If Kai hadn't happened to have already been in her way, he wouldn't have been able to stop her, and he'd probably be suffering serious damage by now. Like to his dignity, or the trust he'd received from Nanaka.

"Kai," said Misako.

"What?"

"Let me say this again," she continued. "Do you understand what you are doing right now?"

"I'm going to send those words straight back to you," Kai replied.

"Listen, I won't pry on the details—well, no, I'll ask about those later," said Misako, "like why Nanaka-chan is taking a bath here to begin with. But right now, I don't mind putting the particulars off for another time. What's important now is time and speed. What if she has some quick-shower-technique and comes out?! Every minute—every second you stop me here bears the potential to throw away something you'll never get back! Do you understand?!"

"I'm stopping you *because* I understand!" Kai insisted.

"You don't! You don't understand the *sanctity* that comes with a chance to peek on your hot classmate...!" Misako wailed.

"Whoa!" said Kai, who felt Misako suddenly increase her strength as he held her back. He was using his entire weight to restrain her, but Misako's ridiculous,

animalistic power caused his feet to float off the ground.

Up he went.

“Ah—”

“Wha—”

Without his footing, Kai’s body was jerked forward by Misako’s forward momentum. They started in a sort of piggy-back-ride position, but Kai ended up nearly somersaulting forward off of his sister’s back—causing him to kick open the door and roll into the bathroom. All at once, his field of view flipped about, pain ran through his body, and time froze while his vision settled.

Nanaka must have just gotten out of the bath. Her hair was soft and damp, sensually dying her neck a light beige. Luckily enough, the bath towel she was using to dry herself barely managed to hide her. But, of course, a single piece of cloth wasn’t enough to cover everything: her shoulders, back, stomach, arms, legs... The color of flesh burst out past the cloth and burned into his eyes, grinding his thoughts to a halt.

“Kyaaaaa?! ”

The scream that came from Nanaka’s beet red face rebooted Kai’s frozen brain. “I-I’m sorry...!!!” he yelled, slamming the door shut and turning around. His sister had passed out, standing straight up with her right fist pumped in the air and blood coming out of her nose.



Afterwards...

—Nanaka got one absolute command. That was the deal that Kai and Misako struck in exchange for forgiveness. In the first place, Nanaka wasn’t upset with Kai—who was only trying to stop his sister—but the responsibility of his failure wouldn’t fade away. And in the end... the fact that he saw a little of this and a little of that wouldn’t fade away, either. While Kai was kneeling and bowing in apology, she suggested the condition, “You have to do one thing for me, whatever I say.” Then, turning to Misako, she said, “Oh, but Misako-san, you should think about your actions, okay?”

There was nothing jolly about Nanaka's tone of voice as she used Misako's order up on the spot. They ended up having brunch at the most expensive restaurant around the train station to celebrate the completion of their document—as Misako's treat. She started spouting more nonsense, saying, "An absolute command from a high school girl... O, Lord, is this truly punishment? Nay—" so Kai couldn't tell if it was sufficient punishment.

"It wouldn't change anything if I ordered you to forget... hmm. I'll decide your order some other time, Shiraseki-kun!"

"O-Okay," he agreed.

"Alright, see you tomorrow!" Nanaka told him.

With that, Kai's order was put off and Nanaka went home with a full stomach.

Chapter 11 - Impeccable Skill

Oushima Aya was a monster.

The specification document ended up covering a wide range of topics and the total number of issues marked for improvement rose to 70.

Seventy. Despite being the ones who'd made it, Kai and Nanaka were in despair.

There were exactly 30 days left until the routine competition. Basic math told them that, in order to complete all 70 improvements, they would need to complete a *minimum* of two per day, and for ten of those days, they'd need three per day. This was assuming that they focused solely on development, which was a ridiculous notion. If you could say, "There, it's finished," and be done with it, no developer would ever cry over bugs again.

To see your work reflected in the game, you would first need to debug the code. Of course, that meant you needed to check every single improvement that was made. If they were to implement 70 changes, Kai would want at least two weeks—and even that would have been cutting it short—set aside for debugging. So if they spent, say, 15 days debugging, that would only leave another 15 days to finish the programming. Furthermore, any bugs they found would require even more time to fix, and they'd need to double-check them *again*, and—all this essentially came back to the fact that they had no time.

This was impossible.

"Give it your best shot." Those words were fundamentally correct, but sometimes a thing's technical correctness could be the very reason it was also a mistake. This was one of those times. Kai was sure that Aya would see the reality of the situation and agree to find a compromise they could both be satisfied with... That was what he believed.

"I seeeeeeeee..." Aya said, looking through the completed document. Then she said, "And? When do you want this done by?"

“When do I—” *If I said today, would she finish it today?* Kai managed to stop himself from asking such an aggressive question. Instead, he took a deep breath and collected himself before explaining their deadline to Aya. The fact that they only had 30 days, that they really had less than that because they needed to debug, and how that meant they should—

“That’s super easy!” Aya scoffed. “Man, it woulda been pretty tight if you said today, but I can finish this much if you gimme three days. Oh, for the UI elements that we don’t have yet, I’ll just make a mockup and we can adjust it whenever Nana-sen finishes her end, cool?”

“Th-Three days?” asked Kai, in shock.

That was ridiculous.

Kai absolutely could not believe her and told her as much.

To which Aya replied, “If you gimme one day, then I’ll put your mind at ease.”

So he decided to let her have her way for a single day. The result was that nearly half of the improvements they’d compiled had been completed by the following day, and that Kai had nothing more to say. He felt as if he’d met a UFO, or a monster, or a yokai... something he wasn’t meant to understand. All he could do was space out with his mouth agape. He couldn’t believe it.

“...Shiraseki-kun? Is Ah-chan... actually incredible?” Nanaka asked timidly.

“If I had to choose between ‘incredible’ and ‘not incredible’...” Kai trailed off before finishing, “she would definitely be incredible.”

...What the hell, he thought next. *What the hell is this person?*

“I... I see...” Nanaka said uncertainly. “So then, the fact that she coded *MiSt* in one month... is that incredible, too?”

“O-One month?!” Kai spluttered.

MiSt was legitimately a very well-made social game, akin to a dish made with high quality ingredients that fell short on the seasoning and presentation. The graphics and systems that made up the core of the game were well put together. They took Eru’s amazing character designs and based the entire game around the core concept of “show off cute girls.” You were meant to explore

the world in a fantasy RPG and mix and match the costumes you got from your adventures to dress up your characters as they danced on stage like an idol group. Two separate ideas were connected by this concept of showing off cute girls.

While it was simple to explain in words, it meant there were basically two games that had to be made in tandem. It was one of the charms social game clubs had over industry professionals that this sort of wacky (and probably unprofitable) concept would be considered, but they usually failed before ever taking form. The project would collapse and disintegrate before coalescing, without ever seeing a proper release. That would have been completely normal.

Forget failure, though. Aya had made it in a *month*?

“...Who are you?” Kai demanded. He got to hear the answer directly from Aya after she finished implementing all 70 changes.

“Mm... I know Nana-sen prob doesn’t know,” Aya said carelessly. “But senpai, you’ve heard of Alchemia, right?”

“Well, of course,” he replied.

The open source game development engine, Alchemia. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that social game clubs were only here because of its release. In extreme cases, even someone with almost zero programming knowledge could create a simple game using Alchemia. It lowered the initial difficulty barrier of game development all on its own.

“And you know how the developer’s name is a pseudonym, right?” Aya continued.

“Yes...?” Kai said.

The developer called themselves ‘Gacchaman’ and no one knew their true identity. There were rumors that they were probably Japanese, or at least they were a fan of Japanese superheroes. But in the end, they were such a mystery that there were only rumors based around speculation on their name.

“That’s me,” Aya said nonchalantly.

“...?” It wasn’t as if Kai didn’t understand what she said, but rather that he

couldn't accept it.

"Like I said, the person who made Alchemia? That's me," Aya said again. "Making a game is a whole 'nother beast from making an engine... but that explains why I'm pretty good at programming, see?"

"No, what, but there's no—" Kai stopped talking, but finished his thought with, *There's no way that's possible.*

"The name of the developer is Gacchaman, right?" Aya pointed out.

"Th-That's right," Kai agreed.

"It's 'Gacchaman' because I love gacha," Aya explained. "...Oh, this is a secret that almost no one on the planet knows about, so keep it on the hush, okay?"

Kai couldn't sense a hint of falsehood in Aya's nonchalant demeanor as she spoke. "...Is that... true?" he choked out. On the other hand, it didn't seem to have clicked for Nanaka, and Kai couldn't help but feel jealous of her. This was far beyond his emotional capacity for surprises.

"Why is someone like that... here?" he asked next.

"Mmm, long story short... I hate things that are a pain in the butt," Aya told him wearily. "It's not like I had grand ambitions when I made Alchemia. I just thought, if more people can make social games, then I'd get to roll the gacha in more social games. That's why I made it."

"H-Huh?"

"But then, I started getting a huge mountain of requests for development work," Aya continued. "I let a few of my friends know it was me, but I shouldn't have; boy, what a screw-up. At first, I was kinda cool with it since I got more gacha money, but the boring work just kept piling up and I got sick of it. So, I tossed it all out and here I am!"

"I... see?" Kai ventured. He didn't quite know *what* it was that he was seeing, but it was all he could think to say.

"Ah, the part time job I'm working now is outsourced stuff from pro game dev teams," Aya said. "Looks like you wouldn't have been able to work in my place after all! Senpai, you can't code, can you?"

“N-No, I can’t...” he admitted.

Aya seemed to be having fun as she said, “I figured,” and began cackling.

Kai’s head was spinning with all the nonsensical information he’d acquired, which was banging around inside his skull. He’d found out that all the companies Aya was working with were big name brands, too. At this point, she was less of a genuine high schooler and more of an impeccably skilled freelance programmer who just so happened to feel like experiencing high school life.

“I wouldn’t want you to think I’m *just* another gacha junkie! I can handle server management, front-end stuff, you name it! Lay it on, you can leave it to me!” Aya said as she smugly thrust out a victory sign.

Kai and Nanaka were overwhelmed as they looked at each other and began clapping.

“Plus, if *MiSt* starts bringing in the big bucks, it’s all-you-can-roll gacha!” Aya crowed.

“No,” Kai protested. “That should go back to development fees...” He felt like he was going to trip over her junkie-as-usual quip, but nevertheless he couldn’t help but smile. The same *we’re going to be fine* sensation he had when he saw Nanaka’s passion resurrected within him.

For the Meikun High Social Game Club on the brink of disbandment, surely there was no one else more dependable than her.

Chapter 12 - Rain Falls, Rain Stops, Next to You

The improvements moved forward without a hitch; in fact, they progressed at nearly ballistic speeds.

On May 13th, three whole days before the May 16th deadline, all of the improvements were completely implemented. Kai and Nanaka were in charge of debugging, and they finished on the same day.

Horribly—truly, there was no better word—they didn't encounter a single bug the entire time. The only issues they found were things that emerged from the specifications themselves, and the code had absolutely nothing wrong with it.

Apparently Aya had already been certain of that, because after she'd finished programming, she said, "There's no way my code would have any bugs, but if you hit that one-in-a-million chance, lemme know!" and then diligently began working on her job in the clubroom.

How they'd gotten there aside, the end result was that the time they'd set aside for debugging had been unnecessary, and they had completed their work early by a significant margin. They were in a situation where they could throw up their hands and celebrate.

However, after their last day of development, Nanaka wore a sullen expression on the way home.

"Is... something wrong?" Kai mustered up the courage to ask as they walked home from Niigata Station.

Nanaka frantically waved her hands at him and pasted a smile on her face. "Ah, s-sorry! I shouldn't be like this when we managed to finish up so nicely..."

"Is there something we left undone?" he asked.

"...No, that's not it," Nanaka denied and hesitated a bit before clenching her fists. "If I worked faster," she finally said, "then couldn't we have made more improvements?"

“Well...” Kai trailed off. No matter how skilled Aya was as a programmer, she wouldn’t be able to deliver a finished product without the necessary UI elements. Nanaka had done her best to make them, but ultimately, the majority of Aya’s time was spent waiting on Nanaka.

“That was just because Oushima-san is so amazing,” he told her. “Usually, she’d still have something else to work on while you were drawing up the UI.” Come to think of it, *usually* the programmer wouldn’t have been able to finish all that work ahead of schedule on their own.

But whether Aya was normal or not didn’t have any bearing on Nanaka, who felt as though she was holding her back. So, Kai said, “Aoi-san, I understand how you feel. Back when I was at Tsukigase, I used to feel the same way.”

“You mean, with the club president who wrote you the letter...?” Nanaka asked.

“...Yes,” Kai admitted. When he’d first joined the club, Akane beat all the fundamentals of being a planner from A to Z into him. After being thoroughly educated, he was assigned to the *Rondo* team. If she hadn’t spent the time training him, he wouldn’t have been able to keep up when working on the actual development team.

Akane’s regimen was simple; the two of them would both do the same tasks. They’d finalize specifications, draw up plans, and everything in between. Once they were finished with their work, Kai would check his against Akane’s.

Where Kai would spend five days designing a level, Akane would finish in three. Where Kai would take three days to complete a specification document, Akane would take one. If Kai needed a day to finish a handful of small tasks, Akane would be done before he knew it. There wasn’t any task he managed to complete faster than her, up to the very end.

“—Admiration, unneeded,” Akane had told him. “I have meetings and such that take up my day. As a result, I learned to work more quickly. You will be able to do the same, in time.” Kai took an extra layer of damage due to how nonchalant she was about it.

The daily schedule of the club president was worlds apart from that of a mere club member. Kai could wholly devote the time from when classes let out to

when he went home to his assignments. However, Akane could not. Most of her day was taken up by meetings, which left her with little time to sit down at a desk and work. In the face of all that, she completed her work with overwhelming speed.

She was like the sun to him.

When you look at something intensely bright, your vision is swallowed up by the light, leaving you unable to see anything. It wasn't any different from being blind in pitch black darkness.

"...gh," Kai made a sound of pain, inspired by that last memory.

"...Shiraseki-kun?" Nanaka asked.

I messed up. Whenever Kai thought back on those times, he always found himself feeling terrible soon after. He stood still and waited for the nausea to pass over him. "I'm sorry... I'm okay," he told her.

I probably don't look okay, he thought next. It was easy to guess as much from how alarmed Nanaka looked. Kai tried to force himself to start walking to calm her down when he noticed something. *Drip.* A sound rang out from the top of his head. The little raindrop passed through his hair and slid down his face.

"Rain," Nanaka muttered as the shower suddenly ramped up in intensity. What began as a dripping sound progressed into a dull pitter-patter, and finally into the loud constant sloshing of a harsh storm that pounded the asphalt around them.

They looked around for somewhere to take cover, but since they were in a residential area, couldn't find a good spot. They tried raising their bags over their heads, too, but it did nothing against the relentless downpour. Nanaka's soaked hair began clumping together in front of her eyes, and the portions of her blouse that were uncovered by her blazer began sticking to her fair skin.

The terrible feeling in Kai's gut was washed away by the rain. "Let's run for it...!" he yelled, taking the lead. He tried to think of places where they could hide from the rain, but the only spot he could think of was his own home.

The two of them dashed forward as soon as the crosswalk signal changed. Kai

could hear the splashing of Nanaka's footsteps as she followed behind him. They had been running for less than five minutes, but by the time they reached the eaves of his apartment, they were soaked to the bone.

"Ahaha, wow, this is some crazy rain," Nanaka observed.

The first thing Kai noticed when he moved from Tokyo to Niigata was the volatility of the weather. It wasn't as if it were always raining; rather, there were a lot of cloudy days on which you could expect sudden showers that began and ended unpredictably.

"The storms in Niigata sure do start and stop abru—" Kai began to say. He'd wanted to say so to Nanaka, but his train of thought had completely stopped in its tracks when he'd turned toward her so they could talk. He hadn't meant to *look*.

Nanaka had taken off her ribbon because it felt gross when her wet collar clung to her neck. Now her white blouse was peeking out through the gap of her unbuttoned blazer. Soaked with rainwater, the blouse was clinging to her shapely chest, which was not-quite-large, and yet not-quite-small. When he caught a glimpse of Nanaka's sky-blue undergarment through the transparent shirt, he froze mid-sentence, still staring directly at her. The scene from his bathroom flashed back into his mind.

Not even Nanaka would fail to realize what happened with a reaction like that. She frantically crossed her arms in front of her with a set of rosy cheeks.

Her movement brought Kai back to reality.

"W-Wait here for a second!" he stammered, unlocking his front door to run inside. He grabbed a bath towel and rushed back to the entrance. "H-Here," he offered awkwardly.

"...Thanks." Nanaka accepted the towel with a bewildered expression as Kai nearly busted down the door with his momentum.

"Um... Would you like to come inside?" Kai didn't have any ulterior motives when he said that. Even though there was a roof above her, the eaves of his apartment were still outdoors; one small gust of wind could easily blow the rain her way. That being the case, drying herself off with a towel would be akin to

using a bucket to scoop water out of a sinking ship, which was why Kai had offered to let her come inside.

It wasn't until the words had already left his mouth that he realized Nanaka might not want to enter a boy's house in this particular situation, but it was too late now.

Kai knew himself to be on the slow side already, but it was especially bad today. The cause had probably been the faint, light blue color he'd seen earlier. Plus, his memories of the bathroom were paying him a vivid visit. He desperately waved away those thoughts in an attempt to keep a straight face.

"...Then, just until I can dry off... Can I come in?"

Kai figured she would say no. That's why, despite being the one who suggested she come in, it took him a moment to process her response. "Y-Yes! Of course...!" His answer was a beat behind the conversation as he opened the door for her.

Watching as Nanaka struggled to take off her soggy shoes, Kai began to wonder if his home was presentable for a visitor. Last time, when Nanaka came over to work on the specification document, he'd spent the entire day prior to her arrival cleaning every nook and cranny, and had even done a final check on the day of before welcoming her in. He wasn't ready for a pop-quiz like this. *Ahh, geez*, he thought. Kai had been on the back foot for a while now. He felt like he was stuck in an awful loop where he'd fix a bug only for another to pop up, and yet another while he was working on the new one.

There was no use in worrying now, though. It was too late; Nanaka had already finished the battle with her shoes. It's not as if he had the leeway to rush ahead and clean up now. *It would be fine*, he told himself. *There wasn't anything he needed to hide. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.* For once, he felt grateful that Misako always barged into his room unannounced to try and uncover some kind of porno mag.

"Excuse me," Nanaka sang as she walked inside slowly, with her shoes and socks in hand. Kai noticed she had taken off her dripping socks at the same time as her loafers. She probably did so to make sure she wouldn't get the floor wet.

"This might be a little too warm, but..." After directing Nanaka to take a seat

in the living room, Kai brought in a fan heater that he hadn't cleaned up since winter. It was a gift he'd received from Misako upon moving in. He didn't use it at all anymore, but putting it away was so troublesome that it ended up staying out. Every now and again he'd use it when he needed to dry his clothes quickly, and that was exactly what they needed now.

Kai handed her a dryer from the powder room as well, and then headed toward the kitchen, where he filled his electric kettle with water and flicked the switch to get it boiling. While doing so, he noticed that his own hair was just as soaked as Nanaka's and went to grab another bath towel.

On his way, he saw that Nanaka was sitting directly facing the fan heater, and had laid out her socks and ribbon to dry in front of her. Kai wanted to say something, but he couldn't think of anything and ended up quietly walking back to the kitchen while wiping his head down.

His plan was to fill the two cups he'd taken out with coffee before he remembered that Misako drank a ton of it a few days ago, and that he was now out of instant coffee. The only alternative he had was hojicha—a green tea, made unique by the slow roasting of the leaves—so he made some of that and brought it out to the living room.

"Thanks, Shiraseki-kun," said Nanaka gratefully.

"We're out of coffee... Sorry, I wish I could give you something better." As soon as he'd said that, Kai put his hand to his mouth. *'Something better'? Does that mean, basically, I, essentially, want to show her my good side? Did I want to look cool?*

Kai hadn't intended to say anything of the sort, but even *he* was able to read between his own lines. He must have subconsciously thought that the hojicha wouldn't be impressive enough.

"...It's so warm and tasty," sighed Nanaka, who seemed oblivious to Kai's internal confusion as she took a moment to relax. Seeing her like that, in turn, was Kai's saving grace.

".....Shiraseki-kun," she said suddenly.

"Y-Yes?"

“This goes back... to what we were saying earlier... Are you sure we didn’t need to do more?”

Kai finally understood why she was being so harsh on her own shortcomings: Nanaka was worried. What she was really asking was, *Will this many improvements be enough to win the competition?*

“It’ll be fine,” Kai said, although he hadn’t said it in order to console her, because it was almost guaranteed that they’d be winning the upcoming routine competition. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say their biggest obstacle was getting their programmer to work with them. Now, seeing Aya go beyond his wildest expectations solidified his confidence in the outcome of the match.

“For a routine competition, our opponent is chosen based on our rankings,” Kai explained. “It’s not exactly something to be proud of, but our game, *MiSt*, is near rock bottom. Therefore, our opponent’s social game should also be near the bottom of the rankings.”

“So you’re saying... we shouldn’t be worried because our opponents aren’t a big deal?” Nanaka wondered.

“To put it bluntly, yes. There’s a reason why the bottom ranking social games are where they are,” he answered. “Around the very bottom... most of them don’t really manage their games. In the event that they do implement some improvements, I predict that they’d implement three at most.”

Kai had already taken a look at all the social games near *MiSt* in the ranking boards. Of course, that included their opponent’s game. There weren’t any schools that had zero updates, but the updates were usually limited to once a month; the games could hardly be called social games.

Kai could empathize; managing a social game was most definitely not easy. It wasn’t as if your hard work would automatically raise your rank or receive praise from your users. To implement a single time-limited event required planning, specifications, material design, programming, debugging, *etc.* It brought down an avalanche of things onto your to-do list. For a club that only sort of wanted to create a game, it was hard to force yourself to continue with management.

The social games at the bottom of the rankings were often those who saw

that reality and burned out, so it was unthinkable for a club in that position to suddenly implement seventy improvements. That wasn't to say that numbers guaranteed victory, but against a school that had given up, it was safe to say they'd win. It was only natural.

"...I see," Nanaka muttered.

"Are you worried?"

"Nope," she said, and flashed him a light smile. "If you say we'll win, then I can rest easy... I think."

"...Right." Kai couldn't think of a way to continue their conversation, and he felt something swelling up in his body, so he hid his mouth with his right hand and turned away. *What is this?* He wondered. *What is this feeling?* Kai never knew that being trusted could feel this way; that there would be a little, squeamish feeling in his stomach that'd make him want to run off somewhere. But... when he saw Nanaka smile that way, he couldn't help but remember a certain scene.

On that day in front of the station, lit by the evening sun, why had she cried? Kai thought about it every time he saw Nanaka. He wanted to ask, but never found the courage to do so, and had dragged his feet to the present moment. When they were writing the specification document together, he kept thinking that he'd ask at some point, but never managed to take the plunge. Now, they happened to be alone. If he missed this opportunity, he might never get another chance.

"Ah!" Suddenly, Nanaka raised her voice. She shouted in the very instant that Kai resolved himself to ask about the reason behind her tears, so that his heart practically jumped out through his mouth.

Nanaka rose up to her feet and hurried over to Kai's bag, which had been casually tossed onto the floor.

"What's wrong?" he wondered.

"Your bag!" she exclaimed. "Shiraseki-kun, you left your laptop in your bag! Won't it break?!"

Oh, I did, Kai thought to himself. Out loud, he said, "That's not an issue." After

picking up his bag, he noticed that the handle, the front, and pretty much the entire thing was soaked with rain. The laptop aside, his notebooks and other papers might have been ruined.

However, it wasn't as if he'd simply left his laptop in the bag as-is; it was carefully tucked away in a waterproof case. The computer might not have stood up if he'd dropped it in a river, but should have been fine with a little rain.

Kai presented it to Nanaka as if to say, "See?" but she was crouched over with an envelope in her hands. He hadn't been able to bring himself to look through it or to leave it in his room, but neither could he bring himself to throw it away, so he'd left it in his bag. It was the letter from his former president—from Kurenai Akane.

"Is this... the letter from before?" Nanaka asked wonderingly. "You still haven't read it?"

"I'm sorry!" Kai blurted out an apology devoid of meaning before snatching the letter out of her hands.

"Ah, hey, don't do that!" she protested. "It's wet, so you have to be careful with it!"

"It's fine," he said quickly. "I can lay it out in front of the heater and—"

"You can't do that either! If it gets all stuck together inside you won't be able to read it! I'll get you some scissors!" Nanaka quickly pulled out a pair of scissors and handed it to Kai.

"...Shiraseki-kun?" she asked uncertainly. Her thought process was that he could use them to carefully open the envelope and confirm that it was still okay, so Nanaka seemed puzzled as Kai froze with the scissors in hand.

Of course, she would be, Kai thought. To her, it was but a simple letter. It was important to make sure it was okay so it wouldn't become jumbled and illegible. She hadn't meant anything more than that, and Kai would only worry her if he stopped now.

He took a long look at the scissors and envelope in his hands to calm his restless heart. *This is nothing,* he told himself. *No matter what's written in here, it has nothing to do with me now. I quit the club. I left the school. We're*

strangers now. So, no matter what is written in this letter, I don't need to worry about it. That was how it was meant to be.

Kai began cutting into the paper. A straight line across the top cut nicely, but the middle portion was wet, and just as Nanaka said, it stuck together too much for him to pull out the letter. He carefully resumed his scissor work and cut around the edge of the envelope, opening it like a book from the side to remove the letter. Gently, to ensure it didn't fall apart, he opened it.

"If you should wish to, I plead that you might speak with me." There was only a single line written there, which ended quite abruptly. The tail of the letter contained Akane's signature and what seemed to be her personal email address. She probably wanted him to contact her through that.

The loud, nearly explosive thumping sound of Kai's heart began to settle down. *She... pleads? To speak with me?* he wondered, and that was indeed the case. After all, the letter had been sent to Kai, so there was no one else she could be addressing.

Kai wondered what would happen if he contacted Akane. Was there something she wanted to discuss? After declaring that he'd quit, he'd avoided the clubroom and never saw her again at school, either. He'd ended up transferring without having spoken to her a single time. Thus, there was a reasonable chance that Akane had something she needed to talk to him about. There was also a chance that this wasn't the case. Kai was the one who'd bit the hand that fed him. Who could assure that she wouldn't simply denounce him, asking, "Why did you do it?"

"What's wrong...?" Nanaka wanted to know.

"Oh, um, no, it's... it's nothing... at all," Kai managed to tell her.

"...Really?"

Kai noticed that he could no longer hear the sound of rain pounding on his window. It seemed the storm was over.

"Shiraseki-kun, why... did you do something like that?" Nanaka's voice wavered with a slightly pained expression as she asked.

Her question wicked away at Kai's body heat, and he felt chilled.

“Um, I’m sorry,” she went on. “I got curious about the ‘big lie’ Eru was talking about... So, I looked it up. The stuff with your old school... B-But! I don’t think you’d do something like that without a good reason—”

“...I’m sorry. I can’t... tell you.” Kai was surprised at how low and cold his tone of voice was as he shut her down.

Nanaka attempted to continue, but ultimately tightened her lips. Then, she shot up with vigor. “Our promise!” she declared.

“...P-Promise?” As he peered into her determined expression, Kai had no idea what she meant. Then, immediately afterwards, he realized that she was talking about the promise he’d made that he’d ‘do anything she said’ for peeking in on her shower.

“I’m using that,” Nanaka declared, “right now!”



What happened at Tsukigase? Tell the whole story, the whole truth, down to every detail. That was the order Kai expected to receive.

However, that wasn’t to be, as Nanaka simply said, “Come with me.” She put on her socks and immediately went outside, so Kai followed suit and headed for the front door.

The rain had already stopped. But the cloudy sky remained unlit by the sun and had filled with a mass of black and gray rain clouds, which were floating in place.

Nanaka was waiting a short space away from his door and continued walking once Kai caught up to her. She headed to a bus terminal near Niigata Station. The two hopped onto the Route C22 bus that happened to pull in as they arrived. Kai hadn’t ridden a bus since he moved to Niigata, so despite knowing which route the bus was running, he didn’t know where they were going. Nanaka gestured him to a seat and the two sat down, side by side.

After a bit of waiting, the bus set off along the street and crossed a large bridge. Through the window on his right, Kai could see the dark gray of the clouded sky reflected in the river. He snuck a glance to his left, where Nanaka sat in the aisle seat facing straight forward.

The bus rocked them back and forth for twenty minutes before they got off. Kai noted that they were near the aquarium, but it didn't seem to be Nanaka's intended destination. He followed behind her as she took the lead.

He had a feeling that he knew where she was headed by now as they continued down a path overflowing with greenery, with a windbreak made up of trees on either side of them. As the two walked in a line together, eventually the scenery opened up all at once.

The ocean.

Thinking back on it, Kai hadn't come to visit the ocean after moving.

While Nanaka kept walking forward, Kai spaced out, surrendering himself to the sea breeze until she turned to wave him over. He hurried down the path and dropped down to the shore. It wasn't quite the right season for a beach trip, and there wasn't a single soul in sight. There was a seaside clubhouse in view that was, naturally, closed for business as Nanaka strolled through the quiet atmosphere with an air of familiarity. She stumbled her way across the soft sand to the water's edge and then jumped up onto a concrete block that was laid out in a way that made it look like it was sticking out of the beach. Nanaka walked up to the edge of the concrete and finally came to a stop.

Once Kai caught up to her, she said, "After you," and gestured with her hand toward the ocean.

"...Huh?" he asked in confusion.

"Well, we've come this far," Nanaka told him. "So there's only one thing to do, right?"

"...I-I'm not sure if we should jump in," Kai said uneasily.

"Huh?!" Nanaka exclaimed. "Isn't it still a bit cold for that? You'd get sick."

Thank god. Kai was happy to hear that she didn't intend to make him throw himself into the ocean for his brooding attitude.

"Okay, fine... Here, can you hold this?" Nanaka handed him her bag. Then she planted her newly freed hands on her waist, stretched out her back, and took in a huge breath, before expelling it all at once.

“Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!”

The harsh, breaking waves of the Sea of Japan, the shattering sea spray of water colliding with concrete, and her voice, wrung out for everything she had, all blended together and echoed beyond the ends of the ocean. “Pfwah!” She coughed, and then turned towards Kai. “Okay, Shiraseki-kun, your turn!”

“What?! Me too?”

“That’s right!”

Beckoned by Nanaka’s powerful gaze, Kai couldn’t bring himself to refuse. He didn’t know what the proper form was for screaming into the ocean—there probably wasn’t one, he figured—but just in case, he copied Nanaka’s actions from earlier. He stretched out his back, took in a massive breath, and expelled it with all his force. “Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!” Kai screamed out all the air in his lungs.

When he looked over to Nanaka, she was standing beside him with the most shocked face he’d ever seen. “Sh-Shiraseki-kun,” she said, “I didn’t know you could yell that loudly...”

Hey, you’re the one who told me to, Kai thought. Despite that thought, he himself couldn’t remember raising his voice this much before. It might even have been the first time he’d ever done it.

“You know,” Nanaka mused, “that wasn’t as refreshing as I thought it’d be.”

“No, it wasn— Wait, what?” Kai paused for a moment. “Aoi-san, you’ve never done this before?” To himself he thought, *Then why did she think to do this? Why did she think to make me do this?*

“No,” admitted Nanaka, crouching down to stare out at the sea and waving her left hand up and down to get Kai to join her. “Why do you ask?”

The ground was still wet from the earlier rainstorm, so he squatted down carefully. The sound of the crashing waves found its way to his ears more clearly than before, Kai realized. As he gazed far out into the ocean, he caught a glimpse of the setting sun through a faraway gap in the clouds. The light of sundown grew stronger as the clouds drifted along. The sky above him was the same dull gray, but off in the distance, a beautiful scarlet light created a

stairway to the heavens.

“You see,” Nanaka explained, “whenever I’m feeling bottled up, I come here.”

“Bottled up?” Kai questioned.

“Like with rumors, or love, or my future... or my dreams. There’s so much, you know? So, when I feel bottled up, I come out here and just stare off into the ocean,” Nanaka told him. “The ocean is actually really expressive. Sometimes the waves are high, or the ripples are especially white, or if it’s sunny I can see distant islands... Days like these where it’s sunny, but only far away, might be kinda rare. And, well, when I sit here and stare for a while, eventually all that stuff stops mattering. I take that as my sign that I’m better again and go home.”

“I... see,” Kai said neutrally. His first impression of Nanaka had been that she lived in the sun, that she was different from him, that she lived in a world without shadows. That was “Nanaka” to Kai. Even when he saw her in class, she was always talking to her friends with a smile on her face. He didn’t think she would be someone who would worry, feel anxious, or bottle up her emotions.

“I won’t ask,” she announced. By the time Kai noticed, Nanaka’s eyes had moved from the ocean to him. “There are things I don’t want to tell people. Shiraseki-kun, I’m sure you have some too. So, I won’t force you to tell me.”

“Aoi-san, you have things like that too?” he wondered.

“...Yup. But if you keep it bottled up like that, it’s really stressful,” she told him. “When you said, ‘I can’t tell you,’ earlier, your face was... something. I wanted to show you that when I feel that way, this is how I deal with it.” Then, she suddenly raised her voice like she remembered something. “Ah, I’ve never told this to anyone before! So, it’s a secret! Okay?!”

“O-Okay.” Kai nodded, and Nanaka’s expression changed into a bashful smile.

They stared off into the sea for a little while longer until Nanaka got up and said, “Let’s go home.” The two of them got off the concrete block and went back to the beach the way they’d come.

Kai wanted to just tell her everything already. Yet, in the end, he couldn’t bring himself to call out to her as she walked on ahead of him. Nanaka turned around after passing the concrete and peered at him curiously while he stood

still.

Feeling rushed by the sound of the breaking waves, he started after her without saying a word.

Chapter 13 - Where Guilt Resides

Perhaps it was because of his conversation with Nanaka.

As night fell and Kai's consciousness drifted away, he had a vivid dream of that day.

It was a day that had an upcoming event for *Rondo* biting at its heels, and Kai had planned to stay the night at school to work on the game. He'd get in trouble if it affected his performance in class, but figured he'd be okay so long as he took a quick cat nap. No other members of the team were scheduled to come in on the night before their first anniversary event, which went without saying. If they had required that sort of plan, it would have meant they wouldn't make the release on time.

"Development Hell" was a term that generally described the days leading up to a release, since it would be too late if you were to scramble something together on the final day. At Tsukigase, in particular, Akane would refuse to sign off on a release unless all the work (debugging included) was done before the date of release, and would instead opt for a delay.

They hadn't had any major issues this time, and had managed to wrap everything up. All that remained was to update the application when club activities began the next day. Other than Kai, who had been driven into working on the *next* event, no one needed to be in the club room that night. That was how it was meant to be.

However, when he swiped his student ID card through the card-key reader to enter the room, he heard the *click clack* of someone typing at a keyboard. There was someone there.

The club room was dark; none of the lights were on. In the very back of the room, near the far wall reserved for the newbie freshmen, he could clearly see a computer monitor radiating blue light.

He walked over slowly.

Kai didn't exactly sneak up on her, but the girl desperately typing away at her keyboard failed to notice him even when he was directly behind her. She must have been in dire straits, because it looked like she was about to cry at any moment as she gritted her teeth and continued to work.

As a result, even a non-programmer like Kai had plenty of time to discern what she was doing.

"Itou-san," he said.

"Wah!" When he called out to her, she literally jumped out of her chair.

"You're Itou-san, right?" he checked again.

She was a first-year student who had recently joined the club, and her name was Itou Haruka... or at least, Kai was pretty sure.

It hadn't been long since they'd begun working together, so Kai had to concentrate to recall her name from somewhere in the fog of his memory. She was still inexperienced when it came to coding, but she loved social games. She was overflowing with cheerfulness and passion, and she wanted to learn how to create social games as a programmer no matter how hard it might be. Kai had never gotten a chance to talk to her, but he liked her for her unrestrained work ethic.

"Y-Yes, that's me," Itou answered him with swimming eyes, and her voice trailed off quietly, like a child who was trying to hide something that would get them in trouble. In fact, that was basically the situation she was in.

"What's the meaning of this?" Kai asked. He specifically didn't ask what she was doing, because the program she was tweaking was the script that handled the first anniversary gacha that they were going to release tomorrow. That program was not something she was responsible for—and even if it was, there had been no mention made of any last-minute revisions.

Where she looked like she was going to cry a minute ago, her face now was drained of all color. "U-Um, I, I-I-I, I di-I didn't, um—"

"...Please calm down." Kai ordered her to take a few deep breaths while he focused on staying calm himself.

After she had calmed down a little, she spoke in a frightened tone. "...I was changing the gacha pull rates."

I knew it. Kai nodded silently, having surmised that she was implementing an algorithm to alter gacha rates per user. The moment the gacha was rolled, the user would be filtered into one of a few different spending brackets. They would lower the rate of the rarest SSR units for their big spenders and lock them out of an SSR entirely until they spent a certain amount. It meant they would advertise one rate and then tweak the back end to work differently.

To summarize, they were *cheating*.

"I know!" The girl raised her voice like she was about to go wild. "I know, but! If I don't do this, I'm off the team! I'm the only newbie on this team and... I know I'm dead weight! You're the president's favorite, Shiraseki-senpai! We're different in every way!"

"...Who made you do this?" he asked, pushing for an answer.

She gave no answer. However, there was only one person who would benefit from such an order: it must have been Ginjou, *Rondo's* team director.

Kai knew that Ginjou was the type of guy to prioritize results—and the social status that came with it—over any kind of passion for the game, but Kai never imagined he'd go this far. Ginjou was obsessed with surpassing Tsukigase's number one title, *LW*. They were projected to have done so last month, but their real earnings fell short. He must have cooked up this ploy in order to guarantee his victory in the first anniversary gacha.

"We're going to be Tsukigase's number one this anniversary!" That was all Ginjou would say, as of late.

It was true that the gacha was appealing, what with it being the first anniversary and all. It was a safe bet to assume more people would roll than usual, and there were probably a decent number of users who planned on rolling until they got what they wanted. If they implemented the cheating algorithm the girl mentioned earlier... their earnings would indeed rise.

"Have you already finished your implementation?" Kai questioned.

"...Yes." As soon as Itou nodded, she instantly dropped to her hands and

knees, and Kai could hear the sound of her head banging against the floor as she groveled.

“Please...!” she begged. “I know this is wrong! I know it’s wrong, but please, please look the other way just this once! Senpai, if you bring this out into the open, no matter how it pans out, I’m going to lose my place in the club! I... I still want to make games here...!” She was halfway to hysteria as she cried and shouted.

Kai took a moment to find the words to reply, knowing that her estimation was most likely to be correct. Ginjou was the type of person to hedge his bets and likely had a way of deleting all the evidence of the program she’d written. Afterwards, he simply wouldn’t give her any work and would quietly eliminate any place she’d once had. He’d bury it all up in the dark and—in the worst-case scenario—someone else would meet the same fate down the line.

“If you finished your implementation, then does that mean you’re done with your work?” Kai asked, taking the wind out of her sails with a simple anticlimactic question.

“...Huh? Um, yes.”

“Then go ahead and go home,” he ordered.

“But, senpai—”

“Itou-san, you did what you needed to do... I didn’t see anything. That’s what you wanted, right?” Kai heartlessly spat out the words to signify that he had no intention of continuing their conversation.

He couldn’t tell what kind of internal anguish she was facing, but she grimaced and gave him a small nod. After turning off her computer and collecting her things, Itou hurried out of the room without turning back.

Kai gave a heavy sigh that rang out into the now-empty room. The clock on the wall read a little past 9 P.M., and the rigged gacha system was set to release the next morning. He had to do something before then.

That being said, Kai was not a programmer. He didn’t have any way of changing the code. If there was something that he *could* do—there was only one idea that came to mind.

Ginjou had a burning sense of rivalry with Akane and hated Kai for being her protege. The reason Kai had to work this late at night to begin with was because Ginjou had given him a ludicrous amount of work to do on his own. The other club members knew that all too well. So... a problem arising from their feud would fall well within expectations.

He took a deep breath.

Shiraseki Kai would become the villain, and Itou Haruka would get off safely—she did her part, but a third party came and ruined it; to make that scenario a reality, he turned on his computer.

Kai leaked all the information pertaining to the rigged rates to the public. His dream ended there, and he woke up to the morning of the routine competition.

Chapter 14 - Post-Victory

“Alright, let’s update!”

The day of the competition, *Miracle Stage* was updated to version 1.1.0 on Nanaka’s cue.

For management competitions, each party was required to upload the necessary update data to the BOX by a set date and then enact the update on the day of the competition. Then the judges would look over the two teams’ work for a week, and the team which improved their game most from before the update would be declared the winner.

Their opponent’s social game was a standard fantasy RPG at its core. They, too, were a team that had resigned themselves to the bottom of the ranking board, so it was unlikely for them to have managed their game all that much. Kai was well aware of this, and had confirmed his suspicions when playing through the game. The main story came to a close very quickly, and there wasn’t any other content to continue playing after that, either. They *did* have co-op quests that were intended to be endgame content, but the small user base meant that the matchmaking functionality didn’t work properly. It was a capital example of the sad fate of an unpopular social game.

That being said, management competitions weren’t based on how fun a game was; they were based on how much work went into improving the game, and how successful that effort was. That was what decided the match.

A simplified list of improvements implemented was turned in alongside the update data, and this list was also visible to the opposing team. Compared to the seventy improvements they’d added, their opponents had a meager three. Furthermore, those three points were all insignificant changes that were clearly only done because they figured they might as well update their game for the competition.

When Kai saw their improvement list, frankly, he felt an intense sense of relief. He had been feeling restless recently because he kept thinking back on

Nanaka's uncertain face as she asked whether their seventy improvements were enough. As in baseball or soccer, social game competitions didn't have a guaranteed process that ensured victory. Even at Tsukigase, Kai had encountered evaluations from the judges that he'd felt to be unfair. But every time that happened, Akane would tell him, "That is what it means to create a game," and her words would soak into his heart.

After all, it was the same when he *played* social games. Sometimes he'd deem a game or event as boring and pass judgment without any real reason. With no regard for the hard work that who-knows-how-many people put in to make it, he'd give it the one-star rating of 'boring.' Boring things were boring, and fun things were fun. That was the way of the world. So long as that criterion was in the hands of humans, there would never be a social game that everyone would enjoy; and inversely, there was no social game that no one would find boring.

So, until the very last moment, Kai couldn't bring himself to say that they'd certainly win. It was almost guaranteed that they'd win, but it wasn't for *sure*. Not all the wisdom on the earth could assure that.

However, fortunately enough, the evaluation form that arrived at Meikun High School the following week clearly marked the winner of the competition as being *Miracle Stage*.

For the moment, that meant the continued existence of the social game club. And in contrast to Nanaka's gleeful celebration, Kai was so relieved that his legs nearly gave out.



"Nana-seen, can I start eating yet?" Aya wheedled.

"Ahh! Bad, Ah-chan!" Nanaka said, scolding her in response. "Bad! Eru's not here yet!"

"I bet she's not even coming."

"Don't worry! I let her know ahead of time!"

"Hmph, fine, I'll wait five more minutes," Aya grumbled. "Ah, thanks, senpai."

Kai handed Aya a paper cup full of orange juice, and then she snuck a bite of

the snacks on the table while no one was looking.

The table in the club room was lined up with a handful of different snacks, and Nanaka's handmade banner read "First Ever ☆ Competition Victory" as it draped across the wall. It was quite modest for a victory celebration, but Kai thought it was more than lively enough for their tiny clubroom.

"Aoi-san," Kai asked, "did the talks of disbandment turn out okay?"

"Yup," Nanaka said brightly. "They said they'd reexamine things."

"...Reexamine?" he asked, feeling that there was an ominous ring to that word.

"Um, what was it... 'Congratulations on your victory in the routine competition. The immediate dissolution of the social game club has been annulled. What's that? Your status going forward? That is something that I am unable to decide alone. We shall let you know once we have conducted a reexamination at the student council. Farewell,' is what she told me," said Nanaka.

"Was that supposed to be the VP?" Aya wondered. "Nana-sen, you suck at impressions."

"But, for now, we're safe from being disbanded!" said Nanaka. "I'm so glad..."

"Hmm... Senpai, what do you think?" Aya asked Kai.

"What do you mean?" Kai replied.

"I just kinda get a bad vibe. It's like if someone hired me as their new lead programmer but when I ask them about their concrete plans, they hit me with the, 'It's a normal RPG,' treatment," Aya suggested. "The response is so vague that it has zilch for substance and zero details."

"...Well, I see where you're coming from," Kai admitted. The verdict was too suspicious for them to rest easy. Thinking back on how the student council president had acted, it wouldn't be out of place for him to say they needed to win the next competition to avoid disbandment again.

"I get it, our school's packed with useless clubs since everyone's forced to join one," Aya said, picking the conversation back up. "For the people managing the

school, they're trying to weed out the bad apples. All these clubs we have cost money, and since our student body's spread so thin, apparently we don't have that many clubs that put up good results by going to national tournaments and stuff. Social games are shitty, too, if they're full of useless parts that nobody wants to play."

"You're not wrong, but..." Kai understood what she was trying to say, yet he felt uncomfortable putting school and social games on the same level.

"By the way, senpai..." said Aya, who suddenly scooted closer to him.

"W-What is it?" he asked, noting that Aya was so short that he had to look down on her even when they were sitting together. Her collarbone was as white as an unused eraser, and was visible from the neck area of her sloppily worn blouse as she forced her way into Kai's field of view.

"Can you stop with the 'Oushima-san'?" she requested. "It's way too stiff for me."

"Huh? Why is that?"

"Oh, and that 'polite business partner' tone can go, too," she added.

"Ah, I was thinking that too," Nanaka chimed in from the doorway, where she was waiting for Eru.

Aya continued, "You can call me Aya, no honorifics. I figure Ah-chan's too hard for you."

"You can call me Nanaka, too!"

"W-Why so suddenly?" Kai asked.

"Mmm, I mean, there's kinda some distance between us, y'know?" Aya pointed out. "Trust is important when you're developing social games, you feel me?"

"That may be true," Kai protested, "but—"

Aya cut him off. "Man, I'm telling you I don't need that 'That may be true' kinda thing."

"Kai-kun, do you not want to?" asked Nanaka.

“It’s not that I—” His consciousness finally caught up to the fact that she had called him by his first name. KAI KUN. Kaikun. Kai-kun. The way it sounded when she said it continued to roll around his head like the beautiful marble in a ramune bottle. As soon as he’d noticed, Kai became unable to pull his eyes away from Nanaka.

“B-Being on a first name basis is... it’s something that’s reserved for good friends,” he tried again. “Like best friends, or someone really special, or—”

“...Pfft!” Aya cut off Kai’s excuses with a loud, sputtering laugh. Nanaka had the same pained expression of desperately holding in a laugh.

“C’moon, aren’t we good friends?”

“Don’t you think we’re good friends?”

The two of them asked him at the exact same time.

“...Is this really okay with you?” Kai asked cautiously, and got an immediate response.

“Kai-kun,” Nanaka coaxed him, “try saying my name.”

“Ao—” Nanaka shook her head, so Kai prepared himself. “Nanaka..... -san.”

“...-san?” Nanaka questioned.

“Um... This is my limit,” Kai confessed. “Please let me keep the -san... I’ll attempt to—er, I’ll try to talk as casually as I can, so...”

Nanaka grinned and happily teased him, “I guess that’s good enough.” Her smile was physically painful for Kai’s heart, and he desperately tried to keep a straight face.

“Senpai,” Aya said, “me next!”

“Aya,” he said simply.

“Hey, what the heck!” she objected. “How come you had to conquer some internal struggle just to add a -san to Nana-sen’s name but you say mine so casually?! If this were a galge, my affection rating woulda dropped!”

Kai began to laugh at Aya’s fiery protest, to which she responded by becoming even more over-the-top with her anger, and the situation spiraled out of

control. Nanaka started to laugh out loud. Aya, despite her anger, got swept up and joined in. The tiny club room was filled to the brim with the sound of their bright laughter.

It felt as though Kai was sitting in a patch of warm sunlight. He had never felt this way at Tsukigase, and he wondered for a moment if it was alright for this same social game club to be so different.

“Oh dear, it seems you’re all getting along swimmingly.” A tense voice arrived like a clap of thunder in a blue sky. Eru looked at them as she stood by the doorway, one step outside of the room.



“E-Eru, you’re late.” Nanaka approached her friend despite the prickly atmosphere between them.

“It’s not as if I came to celebrate,” Eru said coldly. “I didn’t exactly contribute to the competition, after all. You ought to enjoy yourselves as you wish.”

“Eru, don’t say that. You’re a member of the club too,” Nanaka protested.

“...Nanaka, dear, I came here to ask you a question.”

“To me?” asked Nanaka, clearly surprised.

“You were the planner for this competition, were you not?” Eru asked pointedly.

“Yup... but that was only thanks to Kai-kun.”

“I couldn’t care less who it was thanks to. And? Are you going to continue onwards as a planner?”

Nanaka dragged her feet in answering, but after hesitating for a moment she quietly muttered, “Yeah.”

“...I see.” Eru’s face was robotic, like a man-made wall, and she let out a sigh. “Then this is farewell.” She pulled out a piece of paper from her bag and handed it to Nanaka. The lettering at the top of the paper was bigger than that of the rest, and Kai was able to read, ‘Club Withdrawal Form.’

For an instant, she turned to Kai and flashed a glare so full of fury that he could hardly believe how expressionless she had been just a moment ago. Before Nanaka could say anything, Eru forcefully turned on her heel to express with her body that she was finished talking.

“Dear,” said Eru, “I didn’t join this club for you to be like *this*.”

Nanaka slowly crumpled to the ground, as if the weight of Eru’s words had crushed her.

Eru shut herself off by putting on the headphones that were dangling from her neck and walked away without looking back.

Chapter 15 - The Before and After of a Dream

Nanaka was frozen in a state of shock until Kai tried to talk to her, at which point she took off in pursuit of Eru.

Kai attempted to follow her, but stopped when Aya said, "Senpai, you shouldn't go with them." She spoke in a casual tone, but it was obvious that she wasn't saying that half-heartedly. She had some sort of personal conviction behind her words.

"Why's that?" he asked.

"Mm..." Aya tilted her head back and forth and mulled over her thoughts. "It's 'cause that's their problem. You and I aren't a part of it, senpai. I guess you could say that you were kind of a catalyst to what happened, though." Since Kai wasn't exactly *uninvolved*, Aya explained, she had a hard time deciding whether or not to tell him what was going on.

"If I'm part of the reason that things turned out like this," Kai insisted in reply, "then I want to know." There was no need for hesitation. The sight of Nanaka crumpled on the floor, like a flower ready to snap, lingered in his mind. There was no way he could stand by and do nothing.

"I guess I don't have a choice," Aya said. She seemed troubled, but there was a tinge of happiness to her voice. "If I'm gonna tell you," she went on, "then you have to promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Senpai, I want you to resolve all this."

"...I got it," Kai said with a nod, despite the uncertainty of whether or not there was anything he could do.

"Woah, quick answer," said Aya. "Welp, at this rate we'd have less than four people again and our club would get disbanded, so I guess that makes sense."

It was just as Aya said; it didn't matter what Kai could or couldn't do. Eru had

brought a club withdrawal form. If that got turned in, the social game club wouldn't have enough members and would be at risk of disbandment all over again. Unless there was another transfer student like Kai, they'd need to drag someone out of another club. That was not a realistic solution. All promises aside, he had to do something.

"Senpai, c'mere for a sec," said Aya, booting up the computer she always used. Then she opened up a shared folder that contained art assets pertaining to *MiSt*. *MiSt* had ten characters, with each character having a base sprite. The folder she opened contained those illustrations.

"This is the issue," she told him as the cursor selected a second, nested folder within the current one. It was titled 'Old_Sprites.' This folder was home to the drawings of five characters. They seemed to be characters that existed in *MiSt*, but... frankly, the quality was far below that of Eru's work in the final product. Kai speculated from the title of the folder that these were the original designs that Eru redrew into the characters that were in the game now. Once she was finished, these drawings had been shelved.

"...What are these?" he asked.

"I feel like you don't need to ask," Aya replied. "Nana-sen was the one who drew these."

Kai had a feeling when he saw the illustrations, but hearing that his guess was correct left him at a loss for words.

"Initially, those two were both illustrators in this club," Aya continued. "I heard that they wanted to make a game with both of their drawings in it since they were little, and they joined the social game club in high school to realize that dream. Out of the ten characters in the game, half were drawn by Kuroba and the other half by Nana-sen. But, well..." Aya paused for a moment and sighed. "When Kuroba's drawings were lined up side by side with Nana-sen's... I'm sure you can imagine what kind of reaction the users had."

"...She got trashed?" Kai guessed.

"I think she would've managed if she only got trashed and told that she sucked," Aya said. "But we got questions like, 'Did you upload the wrong illustrations?' or 'Why do half of the characters have unfinished artwork?'"

People treated her work like a bug that needed to be fixed. I'm sure you could guess, but it really got to Nana-sen to see her art being written off as a mistake."

It wasn't on a scale of good or bad; Nanaka's artwork had become a defective product. Just imagining it was enough to put a vise onto Kai's heart and grind it into dust. He subconsciously gripped the breast of his dress shirt, and the sensation of scrunching fabric in his hand only served to worsen his mood.

In social games—and especially in games like *MiSt*—the quality of the illustrations was of the utmost importance. In particular, *MiSt* didn't have any character rarities. All ten characters were present from the beginning, and the gameplay loop revolved around collecting equipment for them to wear on stage.

So Eru's drawings and Nanaka's drawings were forced to line up beside one another. Earlier, despite having only looked at them for an instant, Kai felt that Nanaka's drawings were bad. That was his blunt observation from comparing the two's work. In terms of rarity, it'd be the difference between an SSR and R.

From the user's perspective, it didn't matter how hard the illustrator worked. If they were lined up together, they'd be judged together; trash would be discarded as trash. That wasn't something to blame the users for. Rather, the management should have never let that situation occur.

"In the end, Nana-sen's heart broke and she backed down from drawing," concluded Aya. "Kuroba redrew these, and we re-released those characters."

"...And Nanaka became a planner," Kai said slowly.

"That's right," Aya agreed, "We tried to stop her, though. Nana-sen decided that on her own, saying, 'I'll cause problems for everyone again if I keep trying to draw.' But there was no way Kuroba'd agree to that when they promised to draw together and... that led to what you saw earlier."

Aya paused for a moment, reaching over to grab her cup. She put her lips to the rim and tilted it back, but then realized it was empty and placed it back on the table with a disgruntled expression. "That's all that I can tell you," she finished.

While listening to Aya talk, Kai thought back to the day that Nanaka cried. He'd praised her drawings, saying it was more than enough to be a planner's weapon.

He had meant to praise her. Kai never imagined that those words would become a needle deep, deep inside of her heart, piercing her from the inside.



After a while, Nanaka returned to the club room.

In her hand was Eru's club withdrawal form. Kai could tell from her sullen expression that she'd failed to convince her.

Nanaka's gaze wandered in the space between Kai and Aya as she put on a weak smile.

"...I'm sorry, you two. We managed to win the competition and all, but now..."

"I don't mind, though." Aya gave an exaggerated shrug of her shoulders to stress how little of a problem it was to her. "If you hold onto that form, she'll just be a ghost member. No one outside of our club would know that we only have three real members."

"That wouldn't mean anything!" Nanaka gripped the edges of her skirt and wrung out the words. Kai had never seen her so openly emotional before. "...It won't mean anything unless everyone is here. Please, don't say that."

"'Everyone'?" One corner of Aya's mouth rose up into a sneer, and she picked her words to match. To Kai, it was almost as if she was trying to rile Nanaka up on purpose. "When you say 'everyone,' do you mean you and Kuroba, Nanase?"

"That's not what I mean!" Nanaka retorted.

"But if Kuroba was gone, you could stretch your wings and be our illustrator again, you know?" Aya suggested. "The difference in your skill wouldn't matter, since you'd be the only illustrator we'd have. Are you *sure* you wanna let a chance like this—"

Smack. It was a dry, explosive sound—much like that of popping open a bag

of chips—that reverberated throughout the room as the palm of Nanaka’s right hand cleanly connected with Aya’s left cheek. Aya’s face turned to the side due to the force of impact, and her cheek began to grow red.

Aya sighed. “Resorting to violence just because I hit the nail on the head? I can’t believe you, Nana-sen.”

“You didn’t hit anything on the head!” Nanaka yelled.

“H-Hey, both of you!” Kai attempted to break up the fight to no avail.

“While the three of us worked on the competition, you let Kuroba do whatever she wanted then, too,” Aya pointed out. “That’s what you call ‘favoritism,’ isn’t it?”

“That’s... This time we managed with the three of us, so it was fine,” Nanaka argued back. “Plus, Eru’s a bit—she has her own way of doing things.”

“Ohhh, I see? So you’re saying there was nothing you could do. If she helped out the entire time, Nana-sen, you wouldn’t have been making all those UI materials on your own,” Aya pointed out. “Don’t you think we coulda made more improvements? I guess it’s all peaches if you can say ‘everyone’ is here after all that.” Behind Aya’s statement was a thinly veiled, *You can’t say it, can you?*

“Nana-sen,” she asked next, “what do you want to do?”

“What do I... want to do?”

“Do you wanna make social games?” Aya persisted. “That’s not it, is it? At first, all you wanted was to draw pictures for a game, right? *With Kuroba*. You don’t *want* to be a planner. You still want to be an illustrator now, don’t you?”

“...I, just, I wanted everyone—” Nanaka started to say, before Aya cut her off again.

“Everyone, everyone, everyone,” Aya said mockingly. “If everyone is here, then does it matter what you do?”

Nanaka was at a loss for words, but Aya sighed in disgust and shook her head. “Nana-sen,” she said, “I like you... but I hate people who lie to themselves.” Having said that, Aya got up from her seat, picked up her bag, and headed

towards the door.

Right as she was about to leave, she turned back and said, “I’m honest with myself, so I’d rather work and roll my gachas than sit around here playing at high school drama. Aight, senpai, I leave the rest to you.” Then she casually waved her hand and disappeared from the club room.

Nanaka collapsed into a chair. It had been so lively until a moment ago, but now the merriness of the snacks on the table and the silence of the room were at such odds that it seemed they only served to emphasize the fact that only Kai and Nanaka remained.

“...I’m sorry,” he said at last.

“Why are you apologizing, Kai-kun?” Nanaka asked.

“If I had asked why you cried that day... I’m sure this...” he trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“‘Wouldn’t have happened’?” Nanaka finished for him. “...I don’t need your sympathy,” she said, with her face down. Then, she slapped her cheek with much more force than when she hit Aya. “...I’m sorry. What I just said—I’m the worst.

“I really am the worst,” she repeated, as if to beat herself up.

“...I heard that you were originally an illustrator,” said Kai.

“From Ah-chan?” When she saw him nod, Nanaka looked up at the ceiling in resignation. “It’s not like I was trying to trick you, you know? I really... I really wanted to do my best as a planner. But, I guess from your perspective, it’s basically the same as being tricked. Honestly...” Nanaka took a deep bow toward the table. “I’m sorry.”

“Nanaka-san, I am well aware that you were serious about trying to work as a planner... Er, I mean, I know that you were serious,” Kai told her. “I don’t feel like you tricked me. So please, don’t say that.”

Before the competition began, Kai couldn’t see the faintest glimmer of hope. The first moment he felt like they had a chance was when Nanaka brought him her specification document: it was rough around the edges, unorganized, and

hard to read, but the passion that went into it was certain. No one would deny that her efforts were sincere.

But her sincerity was not the same as her *truth*.

If you were to sincerely give your best for something that didn't align with the truth you saw in the world, one day your soul would wear away.

"Nanaka-san," Kai said next, "what do you want to do?"

"...Kai-kun, you're going to ask that, too? About... what I want to do. I... can't bring myself to say I want to draw," Nanaka admitted in a small voice. "Eru, and Ah-chan, and you, Kai-kun—you're all amazing. If I hold you all back again with my drawings... I think I really will hate myself."

That was her truth.

However, Kai felt intensely uncomfortable hearing Nanaka say it out loud. It wasn't as if she was lying, or that her words seemed insincere. Still, he knew there was definitely something *wrong* about what she said.

"...I'm sorry," Nanaka sighed. "It's Friday, so I'll go home and cool off over the weekend."

As she said her farewell and left the room, Kai could do nothing but watch her go.



"Ho ho ho!" chortled Misako. "Know me as the god who accomplished the great feat of turning in her manuscript a week before her deadline! Wait, huh? Kai? What's all this? Are you going to eat all of those snacks?"

"...Oh, nee-san," Kai replied.

Click. The sound of the lightbulb turning on was followed by light that filled the whole room. Where he had previously sat bathed in the dim glow of his laptop, the sudden bright light now caused Kai to subconsciously rub at his eyes.

On the other side of his laptop laid a mountain of snacks that he couldn't leave behind in the club room. He'd left everything that was sealed properly or looked to have a long shelf life, but figured the ones that'd go bad would

otherwise have been wasted.

“We had a victory celebration at my club today, and we had some leftover snacks,” he explained. “You can have some if you want, nee-san.”

“Ooh, don’t mind if I do.” Misako sat across from Kai as per usual, and then proceeded to eat some of the potato chips that were out on the table. She continued eating without a word until she got thirsty, and then she made and brought back two cups of tea. Afterwards, she resumed eating potato chips. The entire time she was doing all of this, Misako observed him as well.

Kai knew that he couldn’t ignore her gaze any longer; it would have been a pain if she began crying again. “What?” he finally asked her.

“Do you need me to spell it out for you?” Misako asked dryly.

“You like seaweed-salt chips more than ones with just salt?”

“That’s correct,” she agreed. “But also wrong. You had a victory celebration, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“That’s it,” said Misako, whipping her pointer finger towards him. “That face. Would you like to explain why the face you’re making is so unfitting of a ‘victory celebration’?”

“That’s not true,” he protested.

“It’s pretty much a given that something happened at your club again,” Misako speculated.

All Kai had to do to avoid the conversation was give his sister a half-baked response, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“So easy to read,” Misako said to herself. As she chomped on some potato chips, Misako began with magnanimity, “The completion of my writings has left me most gay; I am verily in the highest of spirits. Do allow me to repay your hospitality by listening to your tale.”

Kai wondered what sort of character she was portraying. He felt that it may have been a noble from the Heian Period. *Perhaps*, he thought, *she was writing some sort of historical novel*. “...It’s nothing important,” was what he said out

loud.

“Do allow me,” Misako insisted.

“I’m telling you—”

“Do you forget, good sir, that upon last discussing with this handsome, picturesque sister of yours, your troubles were found to be neatly resolved?”

“I think ‘picturesque’ is usually meant to describe scenery,” Kai said.

“Are you to claim that your sister’s smoking hot body is not the most charming of all scenery?!” Misako objected indignantly.

“No—you know what? Sure, that’s fine... yeah.” *Should you really be saying that about yourself?* Kai thought to himself as he took a closer look at his sister. Upon doing so, he noticed her eyes were a tad droopier than usual. She talked about finishing her manuscript and being in a good mood, so Kai realized that she must have drank a decent amount of alcohol before coming over. Misako already acted like she was under the influence when she was sober, but Kai knew all too well that he was no match for drunkards—after all, she was the one who’d taught him that lesson.

So, he gave in and explained everything that had happened today. As he spoke, he couldn’t shake the intense discomfort he felt when hearing Nanaka talk.

Not wanting to hold your friends back was a simple emotion, and one that Kai understood well. In fact, he felt that the entire time he’d spent at Tsukigase had been structured around the thought of ‘I don’t want to drag Akane’s name through the mud.’ He felt like he should have been able to empathize with the urge to not be a burden, but... what was it? The more Kai thought about it, the more uncomfortable he grew.

“...I see how it is.” Misako nodded along with a gentle expression. “You’ve progressed to the point where you call each other by your first names... Could it be, boy? Did you confess?”

“...Nee-san.” Kai intended on chasing her out right away if she began goofing around.

His intention must have gotten through to her, because Misako shrugged her shoulders and continued, “Come on, I can’t help but mess around a little. This story is so chock-full of immaturity and adolescence that the flavor is too strong for your older sister to listen to without some humor.”

“‘Immature’... We’re in high school,” Kai pointed out.

“No, Kai, that’s not what I mean,” Misako strongly rejected his protest, but her voice had a kind nostalgia mixed into it. “I’m not talking about your age, I’m talking about your immaturity as a creator.”

“...What do you mean?” he asked slowly.

“You should understand what I mean, too. Well, I guess it might be one of those things where if you’re too close it gets harder to see, but it’s a simple story,” said Misako, who then paused to snack on another chip before continuing. “It’s been five years since I started working as a novelist, but between now and then, there’s always been one constant that’s never changed. Now, what would that be?”

“...Deadlines are scary,” suggested Kai.

“That’s correct, but also wrong. You see, whenever you put forth your creation out into the world, it will be praised, and it will also be mocked,” Misako said solemnly. “This is an absolute given. Well, in my case as an author, it’s not often that I can say I held someone back. But if you broaden the definition a little, you could say I can hold back the artists who draw illustrations for me, my editor, or the employees at bookstores who stock my works. I think this is the same for any creator out there. If she wants to be an illustrator—and especially if she’s just starting out—it’s only natural that she’d get bashed, right?”

“...Right,” he agreed. The source of discomfort Kai felt had been tangled up into a ball of yarn, and now it finally slipped back into thread.

“—Boring, exceedingly. Start over from the very first line.”

“—Unchanged, practically. The differences between this and your first document are meager. Start over from scratch.”

“—Distracted, unfocused. Every location marked with a tab has an issue in the

level design. Start over."

When Kai thought back, there was no end to the times upon which Akane had berated his work. Even when his work got past her review, there were both users who praised it and users who completely trashed it. Every time that happened, it meant Kai dragged down the many people who worked alongside him in the club.

And drag them down he most certainly had. However, there wasn't anyone out there who could avoid walking that path if they wanted to press forward as a creator.

"But!" Misako had one finger raised as she gave him a warning. "The fact that criticism is a matter of course is a slightly different issue from not wanting to hold someone back. You don't like things that you don't like, and that's completely fine; no one wants to hold their friends back. I think it's wonderful that Nanaka-chan is responsible enough to feel that way. But for you guys, there's no need to worry that much, is there?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Kai, you said it yourself the other day," Misako reminded him.

...The other day? What did I say? Kai racked his brain for a conversation with Misako that would fit here, but he had no idea what she meant.

"Kai, you guys are a club, right? You can't forget that. If you were professionals, holding someone back could lead to debt and the company going under. You might not be able to put food on the table. But that has nothing to do with you guys," Misako told him. "I'm not telling you to half-ass it, you hear? All I'm saying is that you should give it everything you've got. Hold your friends back, get held back, receive praise, and receive hate as you grow up together.

"See? I told you it'd be a story of adolescence." Misako put on a dry smile as she intentionally began groaning, "I want more alcohol! My chest burns!"

Chapter 16 - Flowers Bloom in One's Footsteps

However, finding out the root cause of his discomfort didn't magically solve the issue.

The next day was a Saturday, and Kai left his house with a certain destination in mind. There was a park next to a large river, and it seemed a good number of families were spending their weekends there. He walked straight past the park and toward a multipurpose convention center that the city had built to promote industrial development. Many different events took place there, and according to the social media account Kai found during his research, there was a large doujin market being hosted today.

Unlike the park, the large hall that Kai entered was filled with a quiet enthusiasm. A number of long tables were laid out with doujinshi lined up at each booth. He figured that he'd be a nuisance if he came too early, so he arrived about two hours before the end of the event, and as a result he didn't need to wade through a crowd of people to move around.

He had marked out a particular booth before coming, and when he walked over to it, a girl was in the middle of talking to a group of entrants. Kai waited at a short distance until they finished up their purchase, and then made his approach.

The girl wore a long, black skirt and had a jacket draped over her shoulders; the sleeves would have made it just past the elbow of her blouse, had she worn it properly. Perhaps owing to the fact that the fabric was thinner than her usual uniform's blazer, her large breasts were especially accentuated, and the familiar white headphones seemed to rest atop them.

Noticing Kai's presence, she made the sourest face she possibly could to show her extremely bad mood. "And why are *you* here?"

"Kuroba-san," he greeted her politely. "I checked the account on your art blog, and it said you were participating in today's event... I have something I would like to talk about."

“Well, *I* simply don’t,” she retorted.

“But I *do*.” The situation had devolved into a staring match, but Kai couldn’t afford to back down now.

“You do know you’re a bother when you stand here?” she asked him pointedly.

“Then I’ll wait outside until you’re finished.”

“...Oh dear, do as you like.”

Indeed, Eru’s booth was quite popular, and during the midst of their conversation, someone had come up to look through her samples. Kai reasoned that it was only natural considering the quality of her drawings. It seemed like she still hadn’t begun taking on professional work, but Eru’s skill was already of that level. At any rate, it was a fact that he would be in the way here.

“Ah,” he said.

“What?” said Eru. “You *still* have business with me?”

“One copy of everything, please.” Kai bought one of all the books Eru had on sale as she leered at him, and then left the building. To kill the last two hours until the event ended, he went back to the park he’d come across on his way there. He spent his time flipping through her books on a bench and walking around the park for one hour, and then headed for the convention center again.

However, instead of approaching the front entrance, he made his way over to the backdoor. After about fifteen minutes, sure enough, Eru came through the door; she had obviously planned on sneaking home.

Her eyes narrowed in aggravation as she said, “Oh dear, are you a stalker?”

“I have something I would like to talk about,” Kai reminded her.

“I’m certain I told you that there is nothing for us to discuss!” Eru ignored him and began to walk away, but Kai stuck to her side and matched her pace. From a third party’s perspective, he might have truly looked like a stalker (just as Eru said), but Kai had no leeway to care about how others viewed him.

A bus stopped right in front of them and Kai followed her as she got on. Eru sat in a two-person seat and placed down her things beside her so that Kai

wouldn't be able to sit down. He didn't have time to be taken aback by her actions. He picked up her belongings and placed them on her lap as he shamelessly took his seat beside her.

"It's about Nanaka-san," Kai told her.

As soon as he mentioned her name, Eru's gaze turned quiet. Make no mistake, it was not a calm sight; her eyes were like a blue-white flame, lit ablaze with silent rage.

"It's all your fault," she said accusingly.

"That... may be true," Kai admitted.

"I believe I told you that you'd make my dear Nanaka cry again with the way you went about things." In order to show how unwilling she was to hear him out, Eru flicked her gaze outside the window and put on the headphones that rested on her neck.

If sound didn't work, Kai thought, then he had to try sight. He thrust a memo pad with the message, 'I want to talk,' written on it into her field of view and kept it there as she vehemently ignored him.

The bus passed through a handful of traffic lights. A short while before they arrived at the final stop, Eru finally caved and took off her headphones with a heavy sigh.

She pulled out a single business card from her wallet. On it was the name of a publishing company so large that there wouldn't be anyone who couldn't recognize it.

"I've been receiving requests to draw for light novels for quite a long time," she said. "Up until now, I had rejected their offers, saying that I had club activities to prioritize... but now, I've decided to accept. So, I am done with the club. This no longer has anything to do with me."

"And... are you really okay with being 'done with it'?" Kai asked.

Eru glared at him, and Kai expected to be punched at any moment. But instead, the bus arrived at Niigata Station and Eru erupted out of her seat with enough force to knock Kai over. She quickly paced away through the station,

ignoring Kai the whole time.

“Kuroba-san, I have something I want to ask of you!” They were practically running by the time Kai lined up beside her once more. “Please, teach Nanaka-san how to draw!”

“.....Huh?” Eru stopped in her tracks.

Kai walked slightly past her and turned on his heel in order to speak face-to-face. “I want to ask you to tutor her as she draws so she can become a better illustrator,” he explained.

Since talking it out with Misako yesterday, this was the only solution that Kai could come up with. No planner would ever be thrown into a position of responsibility on their own; usually a senior planner would shadow and teach them until they were skilled enough to work by themselves. Akane’s teachings had been what shaped Kai into a proper planner.

Programmers worked under the same principle. A junior programmer would conduct a series of code reviews with their senior until they were a full-fledged part of the team, he knew. There shouldn’t have been any problem with an illustrator following the same path.

“Nanaka... is a planner now,” Eru said bitterly.

“We have another planner now,” Kai said. “I’m right here.”

“Did she tell you that she wanted to become an illustrator? She didn’t, did she?”

“Well, maybe not right now, but...”

“...Why must I cooperate for someone who doesn’t even want to do it?” Eru wanted to know.

“That’s... that’s wrong.” *There’s no way that’s true.* “She just can’t say it! What reason other than ‘I want to draw’ could possibly explain why she cried?!” Kai demanded.

“...” Eru looked like she wanted to snap back at him, but in the next moment, she turned heel and ran.

Kai hurried after her. They ran past a stoplight and a pedestrian bridge, and

turned at the corner of a large post office; yet Eru continued to run, and Kai chased her with all he had.

“My word, how long do you plan on following me?!” she screamed back at him.

“Until I get a response!” Kai bellowed back.

“I’m almost home!”

“Then I’ll wait outside!”

“Listen here!”

After running through a neighborhood for a few minutes, Eru suddenly stopped. Kai thought she’d reached her own residence, but it was immediately apparent that that was not the case. The setting sun was directly in front of them and nothing was in view to block it from burning Kai’s eyes. In this fiery, backlit world, a single human shadow stretched out toward them.

In the middle of the street, in front of a home with a plaque reading, ‘Aoi,’ Nanaka stood befuddled with a plastic bag in her hand.

“...What are you two talking about?” she asked, clearly confused.



“Excuse... me,” Kai said uncertainly.

“I had to clean everything up in a hurry, so sorry if it’s a bit messy,” Nanaka told them.

Despite that, Kai thought the room was nice and tidy. There was a single twin-size bed, two bookshelves, and a desk with a laptop on it.

“.....Nanaka, where’s your tablet?” Eru asked.

“Oh... Um, I put it away when I cleaned up just now,” Nanaka admitted sheepishly.

Eru gave an irritated grunt as she glared toward the closet Nanaka pointed to. Eru sat on the bed like she owned the place, and Kai awkwardly froze when he took his seat on the blue carpet.

Kai didn’t need to double-check to know this was the first time he’d ever been

in a girl's room before. He noticed a small aromatic candle when he glanced at Nanaka's desk, and confirmed that the pleasant smell wasn't just him imagining things; this was completely different from his sister's room.

Nanaka pulled the chair out from her desk and sat down. The atmosphere was tense as Kai wondered who would break the silence first, until, "This goon had the audacity to tell me that I ought to teach you how to draw," Eru started.

"What... what does she mean?" Nanaka asked.

Kai explained his thought process, step-by-step. The conversation he'd had with Misako yesterday, and the things he realized—or rather, remembered—during it. How being bad, failing, and being criticized were only natural. That, if what Nanaka truly wanted to do was to draw, he'd like for her to work as an illustrator alongside Eru. And finally, how that led him to ask Eru for her cooperation.

After silently listening to his explanation, Nanaka put her hand to her chest and shook her head. "Thank you..." she said sadly. "But, I'm done with that now."

"Done?"

"I think... I'm going to give up on being an illustrator," Nanaka admitted.

The hush of a pebble being thrown into still water filled the room in the wake of her announcement. But of course, such stillness only persists as long as the pebble remains in the air. Upon breaking through the surface, a harsh sound is sure to ring out, and the silent water is sure to collapse into a series of waves.

"Is that your final conclusion?" Eru asked, immediately rising to her feet. In contrast to her calm tone of voice, she was trembling with her hands balled up into fists.

Nanaka averted her eyes and gave a small nod.

"You don't mind if I quit the club?" Eru asked.

"...Eru, you have work requests from big publishers, don't you? A little while ago, I saw a message in the *MiSt* user support email," said Nanaka. "There was a reply saying you couldn't because of your club activities, but maybe you could

ask them again.”

“I-I’m not asking for myself, dear!” Eru told her.

“Plus I... I’m, well, in my second year already. I need to start taking my studies seriously soon for my entrance exams,” Nanaka admitted. “Eru, unlike you and Ah-chan... and Kai-kun, I don’t have any chance of making it as a pro. I thought, maybe this is the perfect timing for me... Maybe it’s time to stop dreaming.”

Nanaka looked down the entire time, connecting the words one after another as if to reassure herself. “So... I’m done. I’m sorry, everyone. Ah-chan, too... I need to apologize to her properly. Once Eru’s gone, the club won’t be here anymore.”

“Dear, are you serious?”

“.....Yeah.”

“Seriously serious?” Eru asked insistently. “Is that *truly* how you feel?”

“I’m sorry... I couldn’t keep our promise,” Nanaka said abashedly.

“Sorry, sorry, *sorry!* Do you *truly* think that?!” Eru yelled.

“Gh! Kuroba-san!” Kai grunted. Eru’s face was a deep red as she lunged for Nanaka’s collar, and he only just managed to hold her back.

He understood why she was angry; it was obvious from her facial expression that Nanaka wasn’t being true to herself. But pointing it out as a lie at this point wouldn’t get her to admit to it. Even if it was a lie, even if it wasn’t the *truth*, Nanaka wanted to push past it all and end things here.

“I’m sick of looking down on you like this,” Eru said, coldly insulting her friend.

“...That’s... fine,” Nanaka said haltingly.

“Oh, my dear word! Fine, I won’t let you hold onto even the slightest fragment of attachment for any of this!” The momentum behind Eru’s outburst carried her to the closet. “You don’t need your tablet anymore! I’ll destroy it, here and now, so that you won’t ever think about drawing again!”

“Ah, no! Don’t open—”

The instant Eru opened the closet... an avalanche occurred.

A mountain of drawing paper that had been stuffed away in the closet suddenly flooded out from its sealed chambers and into the room. Hundreds, thousands—no, tens of thousands of slips of drawing paper were the root of the avalanche. The only difference they had from snow was the fact that the papers were not pure white.

“...What is...”

Each and every single one had a date written on it.

Kai picked up a piece that had slid out and landed at his feet. It was dated back to the days he'd spent writing the specification document with Nanaka. The drawing had been made on the day that Nanaka pulled an all-nighter, reading textbooks in order to write up her own document.

He picked up another piece of paper. It was a drawing of a character from *MiSt*, along with today's date. Nanaka was still drawing, even today.

“You were still drawing today...” he said. “Why... Why would you say you want to quit?” he asked.

There was no response. Nanaka seemed out of her own mind as she wobbled over and sat atop the pile of spilled papers. She picked up one sheet at a time, only to toss it away on the ground again. “Ahaha,” she chuckled in a dry, emotionless tone and buried her face in her hands.



“Because... no good,” she mumbled.

“...Nanaka-san?”

“I’m... no good. No matter how much I draw, no matter how much I practice, I don’t get better. I used to be better than Eru, but I can’t draw well at all now... I can’t draw,” Nanaka told them miserably. “I draw and draw and draw and draw and draw... but I don’t get any better! What else am I supposed to do?! Will I get better if someone teaches me, even though I already practice this much?! I don’t need to hear from someone else how bad I am! I know that better than anyone! You can tell me to practice more, but there’s no more time in my day I can use! What do you want me to do to get better?! The answer is nothing! I won’t get better...! I’m... I’m no good anymore!”

Nanaka raised her head to face them, and her eyes pierced straight through Kai. The tears flowing out from them fell upon the layers of paper and turned into a series of round stains.

“All of these, I deliberately draw all of these on paper. I have a drawing tablet, but... if I don’t leave some kind of proof to myself that I *tried*... I get so insecure that I can’t take a single step forward,” she said. “But that... is all in the past now... I’m sorry... I’m sorry... Forgive me. I can’t be like Eru, I can’t be like Ah-chan, I can’t be like Kai-kun—I can’t be anything... Forgive me.”

There were no longer tears in Nanaka’s eyes, but seeing the hollow look on her face was more painful than seeing her cry. Eru was at a loss for words and froze where she stood.

That being said, Kai caught the words that Nanaka threw out and shook his head. “...You’re wrong,” he said.

You’re wrong, Kai thought to himself. *You’re absolutely wrong. I didn’t come here to make you say, ‘Forgive me.’*

“I might not be able to say that it’s wrong to give up,” he admitted. “I’m not in a position to say something like that.” It was precisely because he’d given up and ran away that he was here in the first place. “When I was at Tsukigase, it was so much harsher than it is here, and there were so many people... There were so many people with incredible talent. But with all the internal conflict

and outside criticism... there were just as many who cracked under the pressure and left. Some went on to different kinds of clubs, others decided to continue game development by themselves... There were also some who stopped doing things like that entirely.”

“...I see. That makes sense,” Nanaka muttered to herself. “I guess... I’m like that too.”

“But!” Kai exclaimed. Right now, he was here again, back at the social game club. If he’d been on his own, he wouldn’t be here: he knew that for a fact. He’d be the same as he was when he transferred, living out his melancholic days alone. He wouldn’t trouble anyone, wouldn’t be hurt, wouldn’t be betrayed, wouldn’t be exhausted—he wouldn’t have anything.

But even then, Nanaka brought him here that day. So, if she trapped herself in her own room and felt like she couldn’t walk anymore... this time, it was his turn to pull her up and take her away.

“I want to make games with you, Nanaka-san!” Kai didn’t wait for an answer before he began rifling through the papers spread across the ground. He confirmed the dates on the sheets and picked up a handful of drawings. “Kuroba-san! Look at this drawing!”

“Huh?” Eru said defensively. “W-What do you want?”

“Hurry! Look!” Kai insisted. “What’s wrong with this drawing?! Tell me!”

“What part of this could be important right now?!” Eru wondered.

“I’m asking you *because* it’s important! Hurry!”

Eru was a bit overwhelmed as she took the paper into her hands. “...To put it simply, she doesn’t understand human anatomy,” she said. “There are parts that absolutely would not bend this way if you were to keep the structure of joints and muscles in mind, so the entire piece looks unnatural.”

“Okay, and this one next!” said Kai, thrusting another drawing at Eru.

“This one is... The figure is fine, but the perspective is strange. This composition relies heavily on depth, so a sloppy perspective leads to the entire illustration feeling flat and unappealing.”

“Next!”

“...This one isn’t terrible when it comes to anatomy and perspective, but the fundamental composition of the drawing doesn’t suit the piece. This shouldn’t be drawn in an O shape, but rather an S shape to highlight a sense of flow.”

“Then, next—”

“Stop!” Nanaka cried out, gripping Kai’s hand tightly as he reached for another paper.

“I won’t stop! I won’t let you stop...!” Kai fanned out the three drawings so Nanaka could see them properly. She looked away in pain, as if she no longer cared to look at her own artwork. “Nanaka-san,” he told her, “these drawings are in order of oldest to newest.”

“...So, what about it?”

“Kuroba-san, when you saw these—wouldn’t you say the newer ones have improved?”

Nanaka raised her head at his words. At the end of her timid gaze, Eru silently—but certainly—gave a nod. “...They’ve gotten better,” she told Nanaka. “After drawing this much... My dear, there’s no way you wouldn’t get better.”

Kai peered at the long, layered trail at Nanaka’s feet. Even if she was still bad at drawing, it didn’t mean she wasn’t moving forward; even with his untrained eye, he could see it. He knew for sure that Eru would see it, too.

It was a fact that Nanaka’s drawings weren’t amazingly spectacular. It was clear to anyone who looked that her work paled in comparison to Eru’s; there wasn’t anything they could do about that. Like in a race between a turtle and a hare, there were those who could only take small steps, and those who could soar the great skies above them like birds. Surely that was what people called ‘talent.’ Still, Kai wouldn’t let the small steps of hard work be reduced to meaninglessness.

“I... I...” Nanaka couldn’t bring the words out any more than that. She turned right, and then left, as she surveyed the room: every corner was overflowing with her illustrations. Some sheets had a single drawing completed with colors, and others were a collage of many characters. Each and every one was proof of

the many steps she'd taken to reach this point.

As if to blot out Nanaka's resurgent stream of tears, Eru pulled her close, and her friend's muffled sobs were the only noise that filled the silent room.

Chapter 17 - Even If I Can't Run Away

"I'm gonna give it one more shot." When Kai saw Nanaka smile through her puffy red eyes, he felt like everything was going to fall into place from now onwards.

They decided to hold another victory celebration on the following Monday. Nanaka looked worried about the fact that she'd slapped her friend's cheek, but Aya's response to that was a simple, "Hm? I was making you mad on purpose. We'll call it even since you came back to us and all."

They all went out to buy snacks together and returned to their room—this time, with Eru in tow. Kai noticed that this was the first time all of their members had gathered together in the club room since the first day he arrived. The space around him felt smaller than usual, but he found it comforting for some strange reason.

"I apologize for interrupting your fun," said the Student Council Vice President, Rei Shizaki, making her way into the room. "I have come to report the outcome of our reexamination on the continued existence of the social game club."

She stopped for a moment to survey the room as Kai and company froze with their cups still raised in a toast. Then, she continued dispassionately, "We asked that you attain victory in a routine competition, and you have done well to accomplish the task we set out. The Student Council has no intention of forcing the disbandment of any club that operates properly; that is to say, any club which we can expect to act in good faith and morality. Therefore, the conclusion we reached was to allow the social game club's continued existence—or at least, that *was* the case." She stressed the word 'was' to turn the entire story on its head, and then looked over to Kai.

A loud voice suddenly rose up from behind the vice president. "Shiraseki Kai! You look like you couldn't hurt a fly, but to think—to *think!* That you were a troublemaker who drove Tsukigase into chaos!"

“... President,” said Vice President Rei, “I thought I mentioned that I would be explaining this.”

The Student Council President’s wickedly smug grin poked out from behind the vice president. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head,” he told her. “I thought this sort of work might be harsh on a woman of integrity like yourself. How about it, Rei-kun? Can’t you feel my overwhelming manliness?”

“Thank you for your concern, but I merely wanted you to stay back because your words are as shallow as an inflatable pool, and your presence would cause undue trouble,” Shizaki told him coldly. “Furthermore, if you are still concerned about my pointing out that all of your decisions reflect on how sore of a loser you are, then know that the only overwhelming sensation I feel from your little maneuver is irritation.”

“You really ought to learn the meaning of the word ‘mercy’!” the Student Council President complained.

“I pride myself on the fact that I tolerate you more than anyone else, President..”

“*This* attitude is you being tolerant? ...Fine, enough of that. Let me through,” he said, lunging forward as the Vice President stepped back. “There was a slanderous insider leak at Tsukigase High School with regard to the popular social game, *Girls’ Symphonic Rondo*,” he announced next. “The culprit was one ‘Shiraseki Kai,’ wasn’t it?”

“That’s...” Kai was at a loss for words. In the end, there was only one thing he could say. “...It’s true that I leaked internal data.”

“I see.” The president was grinning from ear to ear as he continued, “When I made fun at the expense of the social game club the last time we met, you were quite angry with me. Indeed, your anger was well placed, so I offer my apologies for that. After researching the matter, I found that Japan’s gaming applications market exceeds one trillion yen and seems to still be growing; our national government considers it worth creating policies to push the growth of the field. Though our school may be one of long tradition, we would be more than happy to expand our reach to include activities like this within our club roster in order to connect with the changing future.”

“What on *earth* are you trying to say?” Eru asked sharply.

“I’m not seeing the punchline,” Aya added.

The Student Council President ignored them and pointed his finger at Kai. “That is exactly why your history is such a pressing issue, Shiraseki Kai: should this club attain similar levels of popularity, your very presence will cause unrest in our users. You serve to harm the reputation of this club. And of course, I’m sure you’re aware of all this. After all, isn’t that why you left Tsukigase?”

Just as those who create masterpieces are praised, those who create failures also have their names remembered by the users. Even a seemingly enjoyable game can have its reputation tarnished if ‘that one guy who worked on that other shitty game’ is found to be involved. There was nothing anyone could do about it.

After the incident, *Rondo* had been slammed all across the internet. One of the club members must have made their own post about it, because it was now public information that Kai was the culprit. On top of that, his name, school year, address, and personal email account were all exposed, and Kai received countless abusive messages from *Rondo* users and random netizens. There were complaints about gacha rates, complaints about event design, and more; every issue in *Rondo*’s management up until that point became the personal responsibility of Shiraseki Kai. His name became a dumpster. Any horrible statement was fair game as long as it was paired with the words, ‘Shiraseki Kai.’

If Kai ever got involved with social games again, his name alone would become a burden. He knew that better than anyone else, which was the entire reason he’d planned on never touching the field again.

“Our decision is simple,” the president continued. “We will acknowledge the continued existence of the social game club. However, Shiraseki Kai, *your* continued presence will *not* be acknowledged. I order you to withdraw from the club at once. And if you withdraw, this club will be back to having less than four members. But I’m no demon; I’ll look the other way on this matter until summer break comes to a close and the second semester begins. If you manage to find a new member to join you by then, we will recognize the social game club’s status as an official club... Of course, all the students who *have* to be in a

club already *are*. Mwahaha!” He laughed in the spitting image of a supervillain and turned to leave.

“Please wait!” Nanaka called out to the Student Council President as he was turning his back.

“What is it? You might not realize this, but I’m quite busy,” he noted dismissively.

“We won in our competition because Kai-kun was with us! He worked so hard for us!”

“So, we should forgive his misconduct because he worked hard?”

“Th-That’s not what I—” Nanaka stammered.

“An athlete who behaves violently is banned from entering tournaments,” the Student Council President pointed out. “This has nothing to do with how much effort someone puts in; a student who causes problems is removed from their club, and this scenario is no different. He did something that he shouldn’t have done, that’s all it is.”

“President, I believe that’s enough,” Vice President Rei stated.

“Hm? I suppose so,” agreed the President, who looked across their silent faces before cheerfully leaving the room. The vice president gave a deep bow and then followed after him.

Kai couldn’t bring himself to say anything as he stood with a meaningless paper cup in his hands. He had felt so hopeful just a moment ago—like everything was going to go well—and now, because of him, all of it was washed away without a trace. Because of *Shiraseki Kai*. His only thought was that he wished he could go bury himself in a deep underground hole and never come back to the surface. ‘I’m sorry,’ he wanted to apologize. But as he was about to open his mouth...

“Aight, let’s get back to the toast,” Aya’s bright voice made its way to his ears.

“Yup, let’s!” Nanaka followed up.

“Dear, that isn’t something *you* ought to say,” Eru said, chastising Aya.

“Yeah, yeah, my bad,” grumbled Aya. “Aight, Nana-sen, it’s all you.”

“R-Right. Um... Kai-kun, raise your cup with us,” Nanaka invited.

Kai raised his head and made eye contact with a smiling Nanaka. Aya had a smug grin on her face and Eru looked sick of waiting, but both of them had their cups raised. It was as if nothing had happened.

“B-But!” he stammered. “Because of me—”

“It’s okay,” Nanaka told him. Her voice was soft yet powerful, and made its way directly into Kai’s heart. “Kai-kun, we know you wouldn’t do something so awful.”

“That’s how it is,” Aya agreed.

“...Would you hurry up and toast?” said Eru, beckoning to him.

Urged on by the three of them, Kai was swept up in the atmosphere and held up his cup. After the toast, he took a moment to look at all three of the faces before him. Nobody seemed to be putting on a mask; they all truly believed in him. Nanaka’s, ‘It’s okay,’ echoed in his ears and he felt like he’d start crying if he didn’t focus.

“Now then...” After a short while, Aya spoke up to reset the flow of conversation. “I dunno if you were framed, or what... Senpai, what really happened?”

Everyone’s eyes were on Kai. When Nanaka asked him before, he hadn’t been able to answer... But now, he wasn’t in a situation where that strategy would fly. So, Kai tightened his resolve and began telling the girls about what occurred that day.



“I see.” Aya’s statement was a simple confirmation, but was also chock-full of the nuance of someone hearing an unbelievably stupid tale. “So by leaking the rigging to the public, you managed to prevent it from actually taking place.”

“That’s... correct,” Kai affirmed.

“My dear, are you *stupid*?” Eru was just as—no, even more disbelieving than Aya was. “Before you committed to a leak, you should have snitched to your club president or advisor—someone in charge.”

“Mmmmm, I dunno,” Aya countered. “I’d bet that Senpai didn’t exactly have a place in his club.”

“Oh dear, I can imagine that,” Eru agreed. “Which means the root cause of his demise was the fact that this moron had no one to discuss the issue with.”

“Yeah, senpai, you seem like the type that super duper sucks at asking someone for help,” Aya pointed out.

“I mean, yeah, you’re not wrong...” Kai grumbled. He’d thought they were going to react in a nicer way. It wasn’t as if he expected the girls to console him, but he didn’t think they’d rail him so hard right after he opened up with such a personal story.

Of course, he could understand their incredulity. *I wonder if I can cry now?* he thought to himself.

“There’s something wrong with this, I think!” Nanaka broke the mold and raised her voice for him as the other two shook their heads in resignation. “Why is Kai-kun being treated like the bad guy here?!”

“Duh, that’s ‘cause senpai set it up that way himself,” Aya explained.

“What a masochist,” Eru observed.

“No, I’m not a masochist,” Kai tried to retort.

“I don’t care whether he’s a masochist or not!” Nanaka exclaimed, slamming her hands on the table and leaning forward. “This is wrong!” Turning to him next, she asked, “Kai-kun, are you okay with how this turned out?!”

At the time, Kai had thought it was the right decision. Re-evaluating it now, whether or not his choice back then had been correct, it was all that he could have managed in what little time had been available to him. But now, this was no longer a problem of the past. Like the twisted roots of a plant, his lingering issues from Tsukigase had curled around his leg and now threatened to drag him back into the darkness.

There was no changing what had already happened, and thinking about whether or not he did the right thing wouldn’t accomplish anything. Still, the situation had changed: at this rate, Kai would have to leave this club behind,

too. That... was not something he could stand.

“I’ve decided!” declared Nanaka, reaching the end of her patience and balling her hands up into fists. “I’m going to Tokyo!”

“What the heck would you do in Tokyo?” Aya asked.

“I’m gonna go to Tsukigase High School and talk it out with their club’s president! I mean, I haven’t done anything to make me seem like it..... but I’m the president of *our* club!”

“Please wait.” Kai stopped her and pulled out the tattered letter from his bag. He stared at the contact information written on it.

Nanaka had decided to walk forward yet again. As the one who pushed her to that point, he couldn’t keep running forever.

“I’ll be the one to go,” he said.

Chapter 18 - The Chosen Path of Thorns

When Kai messaged Akane, she replied immediately. It seemed that, as always, the flow of time was hot on the club president's heels. However, "—Concern, unnecessary. I will free up my schedule in three days," was her response.

On Saturday, four days after having sent that message, Akane arrived in Niigata.

Kai made his way to the train station shortly after noon and walked up the connecting staircase to the bullet train platform. Then he waited in front of the ticket gate for a moment. When he heard a train arriving from Tokyo, the burning sensation of his anxiety lit up like a fuse, creeping upwards from the bottom of his feet. His heartbeat quickened. Businessmen, some younger adults that seemed like college students, and families with children rode the escalator down from the elevated train platform. Kai strained his eyes to make certain that he wouldn't miss her, but there was no need for him to do so.

At the very tail end, Akane gently strolled out onto the now-vacant walkway. Her footsteps were light and dry as they slowly drew closer. Despite it being the weekend, she was still wearing the same old Tsukigase High uniform. Her long, straight black hair was the same as he remembered it, and hardly curved as it slipped down her shoulders and fell to her waist.

Kai had worried that the nausea might return when he saw Akane, but thankfully this wasn't the case. He greeted her, "Long time no see... President."

She seemed uncharacteristically surprised at his greeting, and her eyes widened the slightest bit. "—Honorifics, unnecessary. You say the strangest things."

"Strange?" he questioned.

"I am no longer your president, am I?"

"...That's correct."

“There’s no need to feel disheartened,” she told him. “I didn’t mean to reprimand you. In fact... Hm. I have been looking forward to this day, where I can speak to you simply as Kurenai Akane.”

Kai couldn’t sense a hint of falsehood in her words. When the two first began speaking to one another, Kai had just been some random user of *LW*. He sent messages on support tickets detailing his thoughts, analyses, and requests on every little thing until one day, Akane reached out to him. That was how he joined the social game club.

The two left the station and headed to a cafe that Misako recommended to Kai upon his request, where they ordered two coffee blends and sat down. Each table was set up like a private room, with walls blocking off the view of the tables next to them. It seemed like the perfect place to discuss complicated matters, and Kai realized that Misako might have had this in mind when suggesting the place. He hadn’t divulged any details to her, but Misako was mysteriously perceptive in these sorts of situations. It was likely that she’d seen right through him.

Their coffees arrived after a few minutes of waiting, and they took one sip each.

“...Quite good.” Akane exhaled deeply, as if to savor the taste before continuing. “Today, you have come to discuss your own matters,” she said. “I am well aware. However, I, too, have matters I would like to discuss with you. Forgive me, but I would like for you to listen to me first.”

“I... understand,” Kai said slowly. He’d prepared himself for this before coming: after all, the one who’d sent out a letter displaying her intent to talk had been Akane. He knew that, and he knew whatever she was about to say was beyond his control. But nevertheless, his heart was still uneasy.

Surprisingly, Akane gave him a sad smile. “Don’t make such a stiff face,” she said ruefully. “I am the one who is nervous here.” Then her smile disappeared and changed into a calm, serious expression that reminded him of earthen pottery. The unexpected scenario left Kai dumbfounded.

“I am sincerely sorry,” said Akane, her long black hair swaying forward as she bowed her head deeply toward him. Ignoring Kai’s shock, she carried on, “I

know the whole of what occurred. I take no issue should you choose to blame me, as the responsibility of your exit from our school was that of the club... of myself.”

“P-Please stop!” he begged. “That wasn’t... I chose to do that myself. I didn’t want for you to come out and apologize like this!”

“My apology does not change what has happened,” she went on. “You may not wish for it, and if that is the case, then this is merely for my own satisfaction. However, I... I do not wish to become the sort of human being that can carelessly live out her days without regret—without apology— knowing that I failed to save an important colleague and friend.”

“President...”

“I told you,” she reminded him, “I am no longer your president.”

Kai found himself scrambling for an appropriate response to her apology. *Thank you*, he tried out mentally, before realizing that to thank her here would probably be wrong. *I’m sorry*, he considered next, but to apologize to her would be just as incorrect.

Speaking to Akane about the situation at the time would have caused an uproar, and Itou Haruka would have lost her place in the club. Convinced that this was the case, Kai had chosen not to confide in her that day.

However, there was the possibility that upon having discussed the situation with Akane, she would have found a way to neatly clean up the situation. For her, both the incident and Kai’s course of action were in the past-tense; she’d only heard the story after it was over.

Kai had come prepared to be blamed for his choices... He never would have guessed that she would apologize. And... she’d called him a colleague. She *acknowledged* him. Akane’s words brought him a simple, yet profound feeling of joy.

“However, the reason I contacted you was not merely to apologize,” she said next.

“...It wasn’t?”

“Let me be brief. Won’t you return to us?”

“...What?” Kai asked in surprise.

“Talks with the school have been sorted out,” Akane explained further. “All financial issues and expenses of that sort have been settled for the purposes of this proposal.”

“Does that mean...” As he attempted to sort out the rush of information she was hurling his way, Kai’s brain went into overdrive. Somehow, he managed to move his mouth into words, saying, “I would be able to go back to Tsukigase?”

“Correct,” Akane nodded. “We cannot publicize the truth of matters without your consent; if you do not wish for it, then a public announcement would only do more harm. However, if you do wish for such a thing, then we plan to disclose the whole truth publicly and repair your damaged reputation. Should you have any further conditions, I shall bring them to fruition.”

Can you really do that? was Kai’s first thought, but he then remembered that the girl sitting in front of him was none other than the one in command of the Tsukigase High Social Game Club, Kurenai Akane herself. The fact that she’d made the offer meant that the work behind the scenes was already completed. To readmit a student who’d already quit once must have taken a serious amount of discussion with the people in charge of the school, but it seemed that she had finished that work, too.

The only thing left was Kai’s response. “Earlier...” he said slowly.

“Yes?”

“...You said I was still your colleague—your friend. That made me very happy,” he admitted, while thinking, *And that’s why I won’t hesitate*. Three faces. Bright, noisy, and curt: their usual expressions floated into his mind. “I, too, have friends that I want to be there for. So... I can’t go back.”

“...I see,” said Akane.

“You don’t... seem that surprised.”

“When I received your message, I sensed that there was not much hope in bringing you back.” Akane’s smile seemed ever so slightly lonely.

Kai's initial message to Akane contained one favor. That favor was both the largest and only means that he had to strike back against his fate.

"Let me say this now," Akane said, reaching into her uniform's breast pocket. Her slender fingers pulled out a single USB memory stick, which made a quiet clacking noise as she laid it onto the table. "I plan to assist you in every way I can." Before Kai could reach out and grab the USB, her hand cut him off and she added, "But, are you sure about this?"

Her gaze was testing him, and he looked directly back at her. "...A name sullied through game development can only be cleansed by game development," he said slowly. "That's why... I'm going to build *Rondo* back up."

Earlier, Akane had stated that she would repair Kai's broken reputation, which was easier said than done. Of course, Kai needed it to happen, but the terrible impression his name now left wouldn't be wiped clean with just an announcement. No matter how loudly he screamed that he was clean, a dirty name passed around on the internet would stick around like a stain unaffected by the laundry machine.

There was no way to erase the past—no way to make it so that this had never happened. In that case, there was only one thing to do. *Rondo* had dropped through the rankings after the incident, and Kai would build it back up. Instead of deleting the negative press, he'd overwrite it with overwhelmingly positive buzz. He'd flip the whole thing on its head. The student council wouldn't be able to say anything about the Shiraseki Kai's misdeeds then. He was sure that this was the path he had to take.

"Should you fail, your wounds will only grow deeper," Akane warned him. "Do you understand that?"

Kai nodded deeply. His response acted as a key to the gate, and Akane moved her hands away. She beckoned him to take the USB, and Kai picked it up.

"All the necessary data has been included," she told him. "If there is anything else you find yourself in need of, contact me. This is obviously confidential data, so make sure to dispose of it properly."

"Yes... Thank you very much."

“One more thing,” Akane continued. “Your time limit is two weeks.”

“...Two weeks,” Kai echoed.

“To begin with, we planned on using our weekly meeting to discuss the future direction of *Rondo* in two weeks’ time. This is a serious issue for all of us at Tsukigase. I cannot shift the schedule for you... I hope you understand.”

“I do,” he said simply.

“—Will, immovable. A good response, Shiraseki. I look forward to your proposal.” With those words, Akane left him and returned to Tokyo.



“K-Kai-kun, are you sure this is okay...?” Kai nodded his affirmation as Nanaka looked him over. She took a big gulp and said, “Here I go...!”

Nanaka had a hammer in her right hand, and exuded a sense of nervousness. Her full attention was on the clubroom’s table, which was covered in newspapers and had a plastic bag in the middle that contained a single USB memory stick.

“Hyahhhh!” she cried. The *thud* of her strike and the dry shattering of plastic and metal accompanied Nanaka’s shout and reverberated throughout the room. The dull vibration made its way to Kai’s fingertips, as he sat with his laptop at the very same table.

“Oh,” he reminded her, “make sure to break the part with the black chip.”

“I got it!” she declared.

“A lowly non-officer member of the club has no right to be ordering Nanaka around like this,” Eru sneered.

“Eru, it’s fine!” said Nanaka reassuringly. “Don’t worry about her, Kai-kun!”

Kai thought he heard Eru click her tongue *just* quietly enough so that Nanaka wouldn’t hear it, but he would. He decided not to hear it, either, and returned his attention to the laptop in front of him.

He was looking at the data extracted from the USB that Nanaka was now destroying; insider information on the state of *Girls’ Symphonic Rondo*. These

files contained all the data on *Rondo*'s current state of affairs: the KPI values spanned both the time after he left and the time before it, and there were documents that had been written up by Tsukigase's data analysis team.

Considering that it was confidential information of the highest degree, Kai needed to be extremely cautious of its spread. He couldn't bear the thought of carrying it around with him and having something go wrong, so he'd decided to move all the data to his computer and quickly destroy the USB. There were methods to restore data even after wiping the stick, so the fastest way of taking care of accomplishing this task was to physically break the USB. Kai was pretty sure that was what Akane meant by, 'Make sure to dispose of it properly.'

Thud, thud, thump, thump, crunch, crunch. Kai listened to the sound of Nanaka's diligent efforts as he ran through the documents and let out a subconscious sigh.

"Wheeeew. That's a deep sigh," Aya pointed out.

"...My bad."

"It's not something you gotta say sorry for, but I didn't expect you to go for broke without a plan like this."

"Oh dear, you truly are a giga-masochist," Eru observed again.

"That's worse than before..." Kai noted.

"...And? Senpai? You still don't have anything you wanna discuss with us?" Aya suggested pointedly.

"There's..." *so much I want to discuss*, he thought, but the data he was currently confronting had paralyzed his brain.

Ever since the information leak, *Rondo* had tumbled through the rankings day by day. It was finally at a point where its ranking stabilized—which sounded great, until you realized that it had reached the bottom of the rankings.

Looking at the KPI, the issue stemmed from a massive drop in sales, which had dropped instantly on the day of the incident. There wasn't any trace of earnings to look at now. They didn't have *zero* sales, but it seemed that their only income was from users who were new to the game spending money, and

that the long-standing core users had long since stopped making purchases.

The users stopped spending, and their earnings went down: anyone could understand that much. The problem was what came next. Usually, the underlying reason for that would be something like: ‘Users stopped playing the game and thus our active user count is lower,’ or ‘We haven’t put out attractive events, thus our purchase rate per user is dragging behind.’ Then, from there, they’d be able to break down and analyze why people stopped playing, or why people didn’t enjoy an event.

Kai couldn’t do that for *Rondo*. Despite a lack of earnings, *Rondo’s* user base had not gone down. In fact, the user count had *increased*, perhaps due to the massive storm of media coverage that came with the leak. Retention wasn’t an issue, as many users continued to play even after the incident. And yet, the gacha alone simply had not been touched.

Even when a character who was popular with their core users was released, there wasn’t the slightest sliver of movement in *Rondo’s* sales. Before the scandal, they could’ve expected a huge uptick in earnings from such an event.

Kai would have understood it if maybe the user base didn’t find the gacha appealing, but that clearly wasn’t the case: the users were still there, playing *Rondo*. But due to mistrust in regards to the gacha—or rather, the game’s management—they had simply stopped spending money.

That was *Rondo’s* current state of affairs.

“Hmm... this really is a toughie to figure out,” Aya muttered.

“...What fools. If they don’t like the game, they should uninstall,” Eru said, mocking *Rondo’s* fickle player base.

“Don’t say that,” Kai told her. “If they delete the app, that’s our death blow...” he had to be glad that there were any users left at all.

“Is that whole attitude of mistrust directed at the gacha?” Nanaka asked curiously as she continued to hammer away at the USB stick.

“I think it’s fair to assume so,” Kai said in agreement.

“Well, *Rondo’s* gacha was hella infamous for how brutal it was to begin with,”

Aya added.

“Right... yeah.” Viewed through a cynical lens, that infamy could be considered Ginjou’s crowning achievement as *Rondo*’s lead director. He had implemented one new money-making system after the next in order to take Tsukigase’s number one spot as his own. Kai had been stuck in a grueling work cycle of attempting to implement events and campaigns in order to balance out Ginjou’s user-unfriendly management philosophy.

Aya tapped her fist into her palm. “How ’bout that one thing? ‘Guaranteed Gacha,’” she suggested. “They’re pretty common, right? The ones where you have to pay real money, but a ten-pull guarantees one of the rarest units. If it’s guaranteed, then trust has nothing to do with it, y’know? It’s not really my style, though.”

“That can be one of our ideas, but... I think it’d be tough to make it work.” Kai explained. “It wouldn’t mean anything if the rare unit you got was still random. Plus, that’s more of a band-aid fix. It would only boost sales for the event period in which we release it... And we can’t have them that often.”

“Welp, that’s fair. It’s not what we need right now,” Aya admitted.

“Gachas are simple, my dear,” Eru said, putting in her two cents. “If the characters are cute, then people will pull. I say, the perfect plan would be to commission a new illustration that’s so cute, it knocks people out cold. Then throw that into the game.”

“Pffft,” said Aya, pretending to snicker. “If they’re out cold, then they can’t roll the gacha. Geez, this is why gacha noobs are a pain in the ass!”

“I didn’t ask for the opinion of someone whose skull is home to empty space,” Eru snapped back.

“That’s true,” Kai mused, pretending not to hear the two of them fight. “Appealing to our users with a beautiful drawing isn’t a mistake... but apparently, they tried that and failed already.”

It wasn’t as if the current management team behind *Rondo* was goofing off. In their desperate attempt to overcome their current situation, they’d had a period where they commissioned an excessive number of artists to draw

characters for the gacha. Still, the sales hadn't picked up.

"Then I am out of ideas," Eru proclaimed. "If you're going to sit here and nitpick at our suggestions, then I'm sure you have one of your own?"

"Eru, don't say that," Nanaka warned.

"No..." *She's right*, Kai thought. To be honest, his initial estimates had been naive, much too naive. He didn't expect to have to rack his brain over this sort of undecipherable KPI. But had he thought about it deeply, then he should've anticipated this. The talent of Tsukigase's development team had thought through the issue thoroughly and were still at a dead end. He should have expected to face off against a massive wall like this one.

A lesson Kai once learned from Akane rose up in his mind. —*Misconduct, prohibited. Under no circumstance should you betray the users' trust, Shiraseki. What you built up can crumble to dust with horrifying ease, and will never return to what it once was. A social game that has lost its users' trust is no more than a gilded husk.*

Up until this very moment, he had never truly considered how difficult it would be to manage a social game that users had lost faith in. Social games didn't have physical form; literally speaking—and this was often a term used to make light of the items that users obtained in social games—they were purely digital data. There wasn't anything that you could hold in your hands, and one day, the service would come to an end and it would all disappear without a trace of the ones and zeros which had once built it up. The reason users played social games in spite of this was because—perhaps unconsciously—on some level, they trusted the management. To get people to believe in the worth of something they can't see could be said to be the fundamental principle behind social games.

Now, for *Rondo*, that foundation was wavering.

"I did it!" said Nanaka, and her voice brought Kai back from his deep thoughts. She brought over the plastic bag, inside of which was the obliterated remains of a USB memory stick. There was no mistaking it—no one could extract data out of this.

"Can I have a look at that, too?" Nanaka asked.

“Oh, sure.” Kai slid the laptop toward Nanaka, who had taken the seat next to him.

“Nana-sen, can you understand some of the KPI now?” Aya questioned.

“J-Just a bit!”

“No,” Kai disagreed. “Nanaka-san knows more than enough when it comes to the basics now.” At the very least, the girl who saw DAU (Daily Active Users) and read it as DAU (Dragon and Uncle) was no more. Besides, Kai would accept help from anyone at this point so long as they helped him with a breakthrough.

Click, click. The sounds of Nanaka browsing through the laptop rang out. After taking her time to loosely check through the documents, her eyes were... shining, for whatever reason.

“This is amazing!” she exclaimed. “There’s so many people playing!”

“Y-Yeah,” Kai agreed. Her response was so straightforward that he simply couldn’t find anything else to say.

“If they’re playing, they have to be having fun, right?” she questioned. “But there still aren’t any sales...”

“I think that... would be the natural conclusion,” Kai agreed once more. If the game weren’t fun, then the user count would be just as devastating as the sales. That was the whole reason their situation was such a mess, though.

“Hmm...” Nanaka tilted her head back and forth as she looked at the screen. “...Do you think everyone would pay if it were ten yen at a time?”

“Nanaka...”

“Nana-sen...”

Eru and Aya’s eyes sank perfectly in sync. The two of them often clashed with each other, but in these situations their reactions were the same.

“B-But hear me out,” Nanaka said defensively. “Didn’t you have this thought when you were a kid: ‘If everyone in Japan gave me ten yen each, then I’d be a multimillionaire!’ Right?”

“Nanaka...”

“Nana-sen...”

“Geez! You two are so mean!” Nanaka puffed up her cheeks in a fit and suddenly turned to Kai. “Kai-kun, you’ve thought that before, right?!”

“...Umm.....”

“Ah man, that’s looking like a no,” Aya said.

“That’s the face of someone who was too pessimistic to think anyone would ever give him money,” Eru accused.

What kind of face would that be? Kai wondered. That being said, Eru’s observation was otherwise spot on, so he couldn’t exactly say anything in his own defense.

“Millionaire aside, as Nanaka-san said, the fact that we have a lot of active users is amazing, and in fact, that’s...” *not... wrong... at all.* That was correct, he realized. It *was* amazing.

Before he could put it into words, Kai felt something burst and flash throughout his mind. *That’s it,* he thought. *They already had a ton of active users.* A lot of people were playing their game. In and of itself, that was something worth praising without reserve. On top of that, the users weren’t quitting right away; most of them had stuck around.

...Maybe he had thought too hard and tunneled his vision again.

“...Kai-kun? W-Was my suggestion that bad...?”

He shook his head to disagree with Nanaka’s worrying. “Nanaka-san, because of you... I think I’ve got it,” he said. “It’s a really big scale idea, so I’m sure it’ll be a huge pain, and it’ll take a lot of time... but if you all don’t mind—”

“Kai-kun.” Nanaka puffed up her cheeks on purpose as she cut him off. “This is the Meikun High School Social Game Club.”

“R-Right,” he agreed.

“We are friends,” she said firmly.

“...We are.”

“So, don’t hesitate to ask when you need our help. Right?” She turned back to

reaffirm her statement with the others, and the two tired girls had, 'Oh dear/Ah man, your personality is a pain in the ass,' written all over their faces.

"...Sorry," he said. They had until next Friday: whether or not he could convert his breakthrough idea into a convincing plan was only a matter of time.

"I've only just thought of this," he began to explain next, "but hear me out..."

Chapter 19 - To Touch a Dream

This was the first time Kai would be taking a bullet train to Tokyo. After setting off from Niigata, he would arrive in about two hours. He had reserved an afternoon ticket to make it just in time for the meeting at Tsukigase. Apparently no one had reserved the seat beside him, since the train gently set off without anybody sitting there.

He was accompanied by businessmen, who were seated sparsely around him. The three girls, however, were not there; Nanaka said she would go with him, but Kai had refused her offer. It was a regular weekday, so they had class, and the bullet train fare wasn't exactly cheap.

More than anything, this was Kai's problem: if he'd said, "I don't want to tangle you up in this any more than I have," Nanaka would probably have been upset with him. But regardless, he knew that he needed to put an end to this on his own. He couldn't let himself suffer and be depressed to the point of physically freezing up *every single time* he was reminded of what happened... The time for groveling was over.

The train gracefully slipped into a tunnel, as though it was submerging into water. The view outside the window morphed into a pitch black wall, letting Kai get a look at his own nervous face in the reflection of the glass. He pulled out his smartphone to distract himself, but didn't have any signal. Instead, he pulled his laptop out from his bag.

He opened the PowerPoint file containing all the material he would go over today. With the help of his three clubmates, Kai had managed to form a proposal on *Rondo's* revival plan. In a few hours, he would be in that conference room at Tsukigase, presenting these documents to everyone in attendance.

Kai looked away from the monitor and closed his eyes for a moment. He could feel the beating in his chest growing faster and heavier. As if he were a third-person observer, he noted internally that, despite his anxiety, he hadn't been

tormented by guilt to the point of nausea since opening up to Nanaka and the others. Therefore, this was merely nervousness, which meant there was no reason to run.

Once more, once more, once more... As Kai ran through his presentation again and again, the time went by in the blink of an eye, and he arrived in Tokyo. *I had forgotten the bustle of the city's crowds*, he reflected while pushing his way through the platform. Switching trains to the Yamanote Line, he made his way to the station closest to Tsukigase. One stop after another went by as he pressed closer and closer to his former school. By the time he got off at his final stop, Kai felt like he had teleported.

It was late enough now to head to Tsukigase High School without any issue. Mentally preparing himself, Kai paused for a moment before walking through the ticket gate. And, after weaving through a wave of people, he set his sights toward the exit.

“—Shiraseki.” Before Kai could take a single step forward, a voice called out to him. He didn’t need to turn around to know who it was. Akane had her arms crossed and her calm, regal gaze was fixated straight onto Kai. “—Surprise, unnecessary,” she lectured him. “Do not let it show on your face so, Shiraseki.”

“Oh, uh, sorry...” he replied awkwardly.

“Apologies are similarly unnecessary. Is my picking you up here so out of the ordinary?” Akane inquired. “Previously, you came to escort me: this is me returning the favor. This marks my second time today taking on the role of a guide. It is a nice change of pace.” Her soft expression suddenly tightened and she sharply asked, “Final confirmation... Are you prepared?”

“Yes,” he said.

Akane smiled slightly at his reply. “Then let us go.”



Akane’s hair swayed with all the luster of a raven’s dewy wing as Kai followed behind her. The path to school hadn’t changed since the time he’d left. Tsukigase was less than a five-minute walk away from the closest station, and they arrived at the school gate without saying a word.

There was no nostalgia—no anything—here. This went without saying, but what stood before him was a regular high school, and the immense pressure he'd experienced in his nightmares was not present.

Kai took a deep breath as he entered the premises. From both the school building and the fields behind it, he could hear the sound of clubs echoing throughout the school after-hours like a ripple in a pond.

On their way to the front entrance, they crossed paths with several students who were headed home. Kai's foreign uniform drew a decent number of glances. Akane was about to prepare a set of guest slippers for Kai when he said, "Oh, that's alright," and pulled out a pair of indoor shoes that he had kept in his bag.

"—Thoroughly prepared," she said with admiration. "As expected of you."

"You taught me that familiar dress is another means of retaining composure, after all," Kai pointed out.

"...Indeed. I did, didn't I?"

Quiet footsteps arose from the glossy linoleum flooring on their way to the social game club's conference room. Akane stopped in front of the door. From inside, Kai could hear the murmuring of the club members who had already gathered there. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he checked the time: it was 5:57 pm. In three minutes the curtains would rise, and Akane no longer spoke to him. Instead, she shot him a glance, which he responded to in kind.

Click. The instant the door opened, the chatter between club members that filled the conference room died down into silence... and the instant Kai entered, an intense clamoring snapped back into the air.

"—Noise, unnecessary," Akane said briskly. "It is time. Let us begin our weekly meeting."

The team directors were seated around the round table, just as always. Naturally, that included Ginjou, who didn't hold back as he glared at Kai with confusion and contempt.

Though Akane's command had silenced their voices, the shaken members of the club continued to focus their eyes on Kai as she began to speak. "Today's

discussion is, as previously mentioned, on the topic of Team 10's *Girls' Symphonic Rondo* and its direction going forward... Ginjou."

"Y-Yes?" Perhaps he was surprised with how suddenly she turned to him. Perhaps he was only pretending as much. Nevertheless, Ginjou's voice had a rare uncertainty to it.

"To begin," Akane asked, "do you have anything you would like to say?"

"...Nothing. I have... nothing to say. President Kurenai, I expect you to detail the termina... No, the future direction of *Rondo* today." Ginjou's voice was faintly hoarse as he concluded, "I have come fully prepared."

From Akane's seat, Kai had a good view of all the members of the club. It felt exactly like standing at the teacher's podium, as everyone was in his line of sight. He could clearly see the effect Ginjou's words had on the rest of the club members.

When Ginjou misspoke, there was a distinct group of people who'd reacted to his slip-up. Looking at the people who were affected, it was easy to guess why, because these were the unfortunate members of Team 10. Some had downcast eyes, while others painfully averted their entire gaze.

It seemed that all of Team 10 came as prepared as Ginjou was. There was only ever one final stop for a failed social game: termination of services. That was it. It seemed that Ginjou and the other members of his team were here at this conference only to await that announcement.

Akane sighed dramatically—more so than anyone would expect from her usual behavior. "I see," she said. "How disappointing."

"Disappointing...?" This time, Ginjou's surprise seemed sincere.

"You did not value the correct things, Ginjou," said Akane, with a light shake of her head. Then, "...Shiraseki."

"Yes?"

"It is your turn."

The instant Akane handed Kai the reins, Ginjou sent him a venomous glare, and it wasn't just him. Once again, the stares of everyone in the room turned to

follow Kai. The murmuring of the club members, asking each other what was going on sounded like the waves of the sea that he'd visited with Nanaka. He placed his laptop on the table and connected the cable that would let him project his screen onto the whiteboard.

However, Kai didn't turn on the projector immediately, knowing that the first statement was crucial. He envisioned the ocean and Nanaka beside him as he summoned his voice from the bottom of his stomach, exclaiming, "Long time no see! I'm Shiraseki Kai!" The murmuring stopped, and the atmosphere dropped into silence. "Today..." He slammed the enter key on his keyboard and continued, "I come today *not* in order to suggest a means of improving *Rondo*... But rather, with a project proposal that will resurrect it from scratch."

"...This—" Ginjou burst out, shooting out of his chair. "This is all too late! Do you comprehend what you've—"

"Ginjou-san," Kai said, cutting him off in a calm, yet emotionally charged tone of voice. "Earlier, when President Kurenai asked you for your case, you said that you had nothing. In that case..." he paused, putting all his strength into his voice. "First, I'd like you to shut up and listen. I will address your concerns afterward."

Ginjou looked at Akane as if to protest, but she paid him no attention. His face twisted so harshly that Kai could almost hear his teeth grate as he violently sat back down.

Ahem. Kai cleared his throat deliberately, bringing the restless crowd's attention back to himself. For them to give him a chance to say his piece was the first hurdle, and Ginjou's performance had been an appreciated boost that would allow Kai to clear it safely. All the pieces were in place. From this point forward, the only question remaining was whether or not Kai could deliver a convincing presentation.

"I believe we are all aware that *Rondo* is currently facing a crisis," he began. "It has plummeted through the rankings, and none of our attempted improvements have hit home with our users. From this data, it's clear that everyone on the management team has gone through great pains as of late."

Kai advanced the presentation by one slide, in order to display a page with all

the analyzed data neatly summarized. Neither the DAU, nor the retention rate, nor even the generally all-important KPI had any issues, and yet their sales would not go up. To be precise, the gacha wasn't rolling.

Kai went out of his way to drive that point home. "The root cause of this issue can be thought of as an unshakable mistrust in *Rondo's* management that stems from my information leak. Especially on the gacha end, nothing we've done in the time since then has resonated with our users."

He advanced to yet another slide. This one had a compilation of all the gacha banners implemented since the incident, alongside the userbase's reactions to those banners. The sales graph was practically a straight line as it crawled horizontally near the zero mark.

They already knew that. Within the club, this was information even a moron would understand. Did Kai come to rub it in their faces? Exhaustion and rage began to seethe out of the club members present.

"—With that said, let's throw it all out," Kai suggested, as he purposefully hurled the statement out at them with absolute disregard for their comprehension.

A silence that stemmed less from surprise and more from confusion spread throughout the room.

"Do you not understand?" This time, Kai chose words to provoke them as he advanced through the slideshow. "Let's throw out the gacha," he persisted. "The main component of my proposal is the discontinuation of the gacha." The whiteboard was empty save for the words, 'Gacha Discontinuation,' which had been starkly printed in the middle of the screen.

Once they understood what he meant, the crowd began to stir. As if to champion them, Ginjou sprung to his feet again and shouted, "That's plain ridiculous! *Rondo's* monetization revolves around the gacha! Dropping that would just lead to our income being completely gone!"

"Obviously, we will need a new method for monetization—we'll need to establish some method to get players to pay us," Kai clarified. "Furthermore, it can't be a small-scale solution: we'll need to review our gameplay loop from the ground up and offer our users new content and a new way to play. Of course,

we'll be careful to keep the best parts about the game intact, but it's already clear that this won't be enough... which is why I said that this was a proposal to resurrect *Rondo* and have it be reborn anew."

Kai clicked forward on the PowerPoint again. The new slide compiled a list of the new functions and content that he deemed to be necessary in conjunction with the discontinuation of the gacha. If you totaled all of the required changes—from the main content that comprised the core gameplay loop to the tiny details—it wasn't far off from being the amount of work it'd take to make an entirely new game.

"Are you an idiot?! This...!" Ginjou clamored, "This isn't any different from creating a new game! This isn't realistic!"

"...It's true that a plan of this scale would be an armchair proposal at best if you only had my word," Kai agreed. "With that in mind, I prepared a prototype for the main gameplay and a handful of different features. Needless to say, I also ran simulations on the projected KPI improvements."

Kai fired up Alchemia on his computer and opened up the prototype. In essence, prototypes were samples for gameplay that were used to test new features and suss out usability issues. You could think of it as being a tool to assess the reliability or fun factor of a given function.

The revelation Kai had two weeks ago when Nanaka said, 'If everyone in Japan gave me ten yen each, then I'd be a multimillionaire!' was a very simple one:

No matter how hard they tried, the gacha was not going to be trusted. They could publicly state that they'd amended all the issues, but people would still feel like they were being cheated in a part of the program that they couldn't see. It was a pointless game of cat and mouse.

In that case... they needed to quit chasing. If the task is impossible, then it was time to give up. In exchange—though it wasn't everyone in Japan—they could reorganize *Rondo* so that the huge number of people still playing would pay them without participating in the gacha.

Ten people could spend ten-thousand yen each to make one-hundred-thousand. A thousand people could spend one-hundred yen each to make the

same amount. The final outcome they arrived at wouldn't be any different.

At first, Kai had thought a prototype would be pushing it. But, as he now recalled past events, the scene had gone something like this...

"Welp, at this point, I feel like we should make a mockup, or like, maybe a full prototype?" Aya offered.

"In that case, do allow me to draw the characters," Eru had responded.

"Then I'll draw up the UI! A-And some characters!" Nanaka had exclaimed. "I wanna draw them with you...!"

"Of course, dear," Eru had agreed pleasantly. "But I'll veto them if they're low quality."

"E-Eru," he remembered Nanaka objecting, "that's harsh!"

As they'd compiled the details, they stumbled into that conversation and, before they knew it, the prototype had been finished. Thanks to that exchange, Kai now had something far more persuasive than a simple PowerPoint slideshow.

To what extent would *Rondo's* sales recover if they implemented this? What was the projected cost effectiveness? How about the spending rate? Kai could take each element and run simulations to create documents for his presentation on his own, but there was no way he could have exhibited the real thing without the girls' help.

There was no issue with the code, and Eru's depiction of the *Rondo* characters was bound to be cute. Nanaka's UI blended in well, without any oddities. The club members' reaction to the prototype on screen wasn't bad at all, and Kai could hear a positive, 'Woah,' wash over the room.

This was his chance to press the advantage. "What Ginjou said is completely true," he told them. "This might be ridiculous. Obviously, there's still a chance that our users won't respond to our efforts even if we enact this plan.

"But didn't you all come here today thinking that *Rondo* would be

terminated?” he asked them. “Are you really okay with that? Before that happens, we should do everything within our power to try so long as the odds of success are more than zero. That’s what I think.”

Don’t you think so too? The hidden message was not lost on the audience as they began looking at one another.

“My proposal is to completely abandon *Rondo*’s strategy of aiming for large profits off of a select subset of users and, instead, focus on the many players who have stuck with us even now—yes, even now—and to shift our management policy to a wide but shallow net, so that our users can enjoy the game more than ever.”

Kai wanted his message to get through to them. He took a single step forward and continued, “In order to do so, superficial fixes aren’t going to cut it. They won’t reach our users! ‘We want to regain your trust, and we’re giving it our all to do so.’ For that message to reach them, we *need* a function like this...!”

Ginjou couldn’t find the words to refute him, and stood in silence. The rest of the club, too, swallowed their breath and patiently waited to see what the outcome would be.

A newfound silence gave birth to a moment without end. *One second, two seconds, three seconds*, Kai counted silently, as time continued to pass without any sort of reaction at all from Tsukigase’s club members. *If I can’t get a response here, then I’ve failed*. And then, at the very moment in which Kai had that thought, he heard a sound.

Clap, clap.

For a second, he didn’t know what he was listening to, but Kai realized what it was when he turned toward the source of the noise. Amidst the seated members of the club, a single person stood to applaud. She had been there, on that day, coding a bogus program in a pitch black room: it was Itou Haruka.

The gazes of the room shifted away from Kai and centered on Haruka. Still, she continued without flinching and, slowly, the clapping gained traction and rippled out across the room. By the time Kai realized it, he was standing in the middle of a large sea of applause.

“Hold it...!!!” Ginjou was now too flustered to keep his nice-guy persona in place, and he desperately shouted, “A-Are you all going to accept this ludicrous proposal?! He’s basically telling you to start over from scratch! Do you understand?!”

“...Ginjou, sit.” The applause stopped on a dime when Akane rose up from her seat. “—Explanation, and gratitude. For a moment, let me speak to this proposal, as well.”

With Akane’s motion, Kai stepped back and handed her the cable that had been plugged into his laptop, which Akane took from him and plugged in her own computer. A simple title that read, “*Rondo’s* Future Plans” appeared on the whiteboard.

“Originally, this meeting was meant to be composed of my own proposal, along with a recruitment drive for planners to see that plan through,” Akane explained, advancing through the slideshow.

Something new projected onto the screen. The words ‘Gacha Discontinuation’ were written on the next slide, pointing to the same answer that Kai had arrived at.

“Ginjou, do you remember? When you were deciding the members of your team, you asked me for, ‘A planner well-versed in both operation and improvement,’” Akane reminded him.

“Specifically, you asked for ‘Kurenai Akane’ to be included among *Rondo’s* development team. I presume you came to the conclusion that I was the most talented planner in the club. I acknowledged the value in your drive, and willingness to take the most effective path by any means necessary. However, I never did accept your request.” She glanced back at Kai. “In my stead, I offered you one man. He was still inexperienced, but given time and polish, he could one day shine even brighter than myself. I told you as much, did I not?”

“...What does that matter now?” Ginjou spluttered.

“—Impudence, extreme. Do you not understand? You were unable to properly assess his talents,” Akane said accusingly. “Instead, you prioritized your own stunted ego. Let me say this again: Ginjou, you did not value the correct things.”

Ginjou did not speak back. Whether due to regret or rage, he trembled as he sat back down with a bitter expression on his face.

“Shiraseki,” said Akane, turning to Kai.

“...Yes?”

“Today, I wanted to propose the same ‘Gacha Discontinuation’ idea as you, but I intended to decide on the accompanying plans at a later date. This was because the volume of this issue was truly that great. However, you created your proposal with suitable data analysis in mind, and what’s more, you completed a prototype design alongside it. Truly, well done... You’ve well surpassed my expectations, Shiraseki. *You did well.*” As she said so, Akane sported a gentle smile which Kai had never seen before.

“...Yes,” Kai agreed. “Thank you... very much...” His emotions would overflow if he gave them the slightest opportunity. *I always, always... I had always chased the back of this dreamlike figure,* he thought. *But I never thought I would reach her.* Now, for the first time, he felt as though he’d touched that dream.

“However, allow me to ask about one point of concern.” Akane’s new statement dragged Kai back to the present, and her demeanor had returned to its usual coolness. “I understand that you have your own circumstances. When do you plan to complete the project by?”

“Well...” Kai hesitated for a moment before solidifying his resolve. If he backed down now, then his original purpose would be completely lost. “...At the latest, by mid-August.”

It would be too late to release the revised version of *Rondo* at the end of August, which would be at the end of summer break. Kai needed it to come out before the second semester began, or his plan to wash away the dishonor coiled around his name wouldn’t make it in time. In order to stay on as a member of the Meikun High School Social Game Club, he needed to do something before then.

“Sorry to say, Shiraseki,” the large, bearlike director of Team 3 spoke after listening to their conversation. “But that’s gonna be a tough one. That’s the same time frame as our update. I hate to say it, but we’re already borrowing manpower from other projects, especially in the graphics teams.”

“*LW* also...” Team 1’s director chimed in as well. “In order to implement a new set of content, we’re currently borrowing a good deal of programmers from other projects. Unfortunately, I think it would be difficult to complete your plans by that deadline with our current internal resources. The *Rondo* team alone would not be enough to finish the work by that point.”

“Y-Yes, but...!” Kai objected in shock. “At this rate, *Rondo*—”

“Surely you don’t mean to say that we should neglect the users of our other projects solely for *Rondo*, do you?” Team 1’s director cut in. “I believe there wouldn’t be any issue if you simply shift the schedule back.”

“Yep, that’s about right,” Team 3’s director concurred.

“Yes... but...” *Then it won’t mean anything*, was what Kai wanted to scream. However, that was his own personal issue. Just as they’d said, there were users that were waiting on other teams’ management efforts, too. As frustrating as it was... Kai couldn’t find any reason to put all of them on the back foot for his own problems.

Something. Anything. I have to say something. The more desperate his thoughts grew, the more the words got stuck in his throat. That was why... he thought the stress of the situation was causing him to hallucinate.

“Kai-kun, it’s okay!” Nanaka cried out.

“Geez,” snickered Aya, “why the hell are you freaking out with that hilarious look on your face?”

“Oh dear, what happened to all that vigor you had earlier?” asked Eru, with an elegant sigh.

In the very back of the conference room, behind all the club members, were three familiar faces. Kai rubbed his eyes and pinched his cheeks, but they wouldn’t disappear.



“W-Why...?” he asked.

““Why...?”” Nanaka mimicked back.

The three girls looked at one another and shook their heads with a sigh.

“We were worried, so we came to help you. Duh!” Nanaka smiled as she spoke up for the three of them.

“Anyhoo, back to what you were saying earlier,” Aya reminded him. “You’ve got a programmer right here. This is easy for me—I mean, I’ve got no intentions of taking until August or summer break or whatever for something like *this*.”

“And I can handle the graphics... Dear me, this ‘prestigious’ school isn’t much to see if they’re going to kick up a fuss about something on this level,” observed Eru.

“E-Eru! Would you stop that, for now, at least?!” Nanaka said, chastising her friend. “Oh, I-I’ll help out wherever I can!” Then, glancing over at Kai, she said, “Kai-kun!”

“Y-Yes?!” he panicked and responded in a loud voice.

For a reason that he didn’t quite understand, Nanaka happily smiled at him. Then she said, “If we’re with you, it’ll be okay, won’t it?”



“It...” Kai himself knew their abilities more than anyone else, so there was only one answer, and he turned to face Akane head on. “Kurenai-san,” he called out to her, but did not call her ‘President Kurenai.’ Surely, he never would again. “With these three with us,” he went on, “it *will* be okay.”

“I see,” Akane said simply, nodding as if she knew this was how it would turn out all along.

Chapter 20 - Because You Were Here

Kai's proposal began development as a joint venture between the Meikun High School Social Game Club and Tsukigase's *Rondo* team.

Kai was a planner, Aya was a programmer, and Eru was a graphic designer. Nanaka was also entrusted with graphics, but since it was undeniable that she was lacking in some aspects, she also held a secondary role as the project sub-manager to support Akane, who was participating as the project manager.

The project manager oversaw the entirety of development. If the director was responsible for the quality and fun factor of the game, then the project manager could be said to be responsible for the environment in which it was made. They supervised the budget, scheduling, member allocation, and more in order to keep things running smoothly and achieve the best results; all of that was the project manager's duty. As a sub-manager, Nanaka shouldered a part of that burden. She was in sole charge of communications between Meikun and Tsukigase.

Basically, the two teams made their own progress in Niigata and Tokyo respectively, and then they would use phone calls and messaging apps to stay in touch. Aya and Eru's skill was a cut above even the talent at Tsukigase. Thanks to their help, development progressed at a brisk pace (similarly to when they had overhauled their own UI).

"Oh, summer break is starting tomorrow," Aya pointed out.

"...Shut up," Eru hissed.

"Geez, what's with the attitude? Are you overheating because your chest is retaining too much heat?"

"...It's too hot for this. Be a dear and stop pestering me." Eru really did seem like she was suffering as she slouched over the table. Her long, black hair fanned out like kelp floating in the ocean. Kai thought that maybe she felt hot due to her lengthy hair, rather than her figure.

Niigata was heading into summer, and the day after they finished their semester exams was terribly humid. Their club room, unfortunately, did not have any air conditioning. The four of them had lugged in a bunch of electric fans and placed them in each corner of the room. They made a nice *vwoooooosh* sound as they turned from side-to-side, but the moment the breeze faced a different direction, the people relying on them returned to being boiled alive.

“Nana-sen, when are we getting our AC unit...? My PC’s gonna fry... God, I’m so glad we finished everything already...” Aya groaned.

“I sent a request to the student council, and they said they’d get us one... early summer break...” Nanaka replied faintly.

“...So all I need to do is slap the daylights out of that Student Council President?” Eru asked.

“No... Violence is out of the question,” Kai couldn’t help but interject, when there was a *click* and the door opened.

“—Heat, oppressive. I had thought this place would offer shelter from the intense heat outside... but it appears it is just as terribly hot here.”

“Akane-san?!” Both Nanaka and Kai shouted out in surprise, but all Aya and Eru did was lazily look her way.

“Wassup, Akanecchi?” Aya greeted her.

“...What are *you* here for?” asked Eru, who was less hospitable.

“E-Eru...! Don’t say it like that!” Nanaka scolded her.

“I don’t mind. I was the one who appeared without forewarning. Here,” Akane lifted a convenience store bag onto the table with a light rustling sound. “I bought you ice cream as a gift.”

“Nice one, Akanecchi!”

“Oh my, not bad.”

The pair’s attitudes did a quick 180 as they shot up, both of them reaching to get to the ice cream first. Kai and Nanaka looked at each other before joining them and picking up some ice cream for themselves.

After cooling off with their frozen treat, Akane pulled out a laptop and opened up a web page. This was the School Social Game Link, which was a site dedicated to accumulating information on all the social game clubs in the country. Just like the BOX, it was run by the government, and you could use your account to comment on news posts.

Akane opened up one of the most recent articles, which appeared to be a page detailing the news of Tsukigase's *Rondo*, and it featured the game's return to the top of the rankings that had followed the update they pushed out a few days ago.

Akane must have announced part of the situation in advance, because the article mentioned all of the Meikun High School members by name. Kai was listed as having spearheaded the project in place of Ginjou, who had stepped down from his position and been removed from the *Rondo* development team. Scrolling to the bottom of the article, the user comments were full of people in shock at having seen the name 'Shiraseki Kai.' There were so many comments from people who flip-flopped, and now were heralding their work as "God-tier management," that all the abuse he received before seemed like it had never happened at all.

"I made sure to discuss this matter with your student council beforehand," Akane admitted, "but now there is no need to worry about your reputation."

"...Thank you very much," Kai replied.

"No, we are the ones who ought to show our gratitude. You really saved us this time," Akane told him. "As the representative of the Tsukigase High School Social Game Club, allow me to formally thank you once again. In fact, that was the reason I came here today."

"You came out all this way, just for that...?" Nanaka seemed shocked.

"Of course," Akane said with a nod. "Nanaka, I am indebted to you, as well. Without your communication skills, there would certainly have been more difficulties in our correspondence."

Akane was completely right. Aya and Eru were, as you could tell from looking at them, oftentimes unwilling to compromise with someone else's point of view. That part of them did have its merits, but it also meant that butting heads

was a regular occurrence for them. Nanaka had effectively been traffic control, constantly mediating between Tsukigase and Meikun's branches to make sure that communication wasn't delayed and relations wouldn't become strained.

"You managed to keep these three obstinate fools in line," Akane said. "You should hold your head high as the president of this club."

"That's righ—" *Hm?* Kai stopped midway through his nod. "Three? You mean, me too?"

"—Awareness, lacking. That has long since been your greatest flaw." Akane's words were accompanied by an affirmative laugh that burst out from all of his clubmates.

Kai objected to being lined up with Aya and Eru on a number of different levels, but it seemed that the common consensus disagreed with him.

After chatting for a while longer, Akane's day trip came to a close. The four Meikun students followed her to Niigata Station in order to see her off on her bullet train to Tokyo.

At the very end, Akane told Kai she needed to speak to him, so the two split off from the rest and faced one another right in front of the ticket gate. "I said I needed to speak to you," she admitted, "but this is about myself."

"About you... Akane-san?" Even as he asked for confirmation, Kai felt slightly uncomfortable with the way her name sat on his tongue. When Akane found out that he referred to Nanaka and Aya by their names, she had requested that he do the same for her, as well. He felt something was out of place when he called her that while they were developing the new patch, and, frankly, that feeling had not gone away.

"After I graduate, I'm going to work at Tricolore's development team," she told him.

"Wha—Really?!" Kai exclaimed.

Tricolore Games was a powerhouse studio that had several titles within the top 50 sales rankings. It was a meritocratic company that only took the best of the best, so this would mark the first time a student would be hired straight out of a social game club.

“Do you plan on going to university?” she asked next.

“I... probably won’t receive any offers from the industry,” Kai admitted. “So I’ll probably go to college.”

“...We’ll see about that.”

“W-What?”

“Once I begin working,” she said, “I’ll talk to the HR scouts about you.”

“You mean...”

Teasing him now, Akane squinted her eyes ever so slightly and said, “I look forward to the day when we make a game together again.” With that, she gave a small nod to Nanaka and company and passed through the ticket gate. She didn’t look back a single time, and Kai saw her off until her long, swaying, black hair was no longer in sight.

When he returned to the other three, Nanaka was filled with indignation. “Kai-kun!” she exclaimed.

“Y-Yes?! W-What’s wrong...?” Kai was worried that *he* had done something, but that didn’t appear to be the case.

Nanaka thrust her phone in his face. On it was the comments page from the article they were viewing earlier. “‘The news got me curious about Meikun’s social game, but it wasn’t anything special...’ Can you believe that?!” she demanded.

“I mean, well...” There were parts that definitely didn’t match up against Tsukigase’s *Rondo*, in his opinion.

“I think we’re miles better just because we have a gacha,” Aya argued. “Senpai, the fact that you stopped me from sneaking in a gacha system is the greatest defeat of my life.”

During the development of *Rondo*’s revamp, Aya had attempted to quietly slip in a gacha system. By enacting a specific sequence of hidden inputs, you could make a gacha screen pop up. Thankfully, Kai stumbled across it, but she’d almost managed to lay a fatal landmine.

“Leave this idiot to her own delusions,” Eru suggested. Then, turning to

Nanaka, she said, “However, *you* should start by getting good enough at drawing to stand your ground before you go around picking fights.”

“Th-That’s true, but...!” Nanaka groaned as if she couldn’t quite accept that truth. Then, without warning, she looked up in epiphany and grabbed Kai by the hand. “Let’s go!” she exclaimed.

“Huh? Wh-Where?!” he asked.

“Duh!” said Nanaka, who had a brilliant smile on her face. “To our club! Let’s go!”

Kai was dragged into a run, but he nodded in agreement. *That’s right. That’s all we can do.* If people said their work was boring, then the only thing left to do was create something fun.

“Nanaka, hold on a moment,” Eru said.

“There’s no point in going back to school now. School hours are almost done, so it’d be a waste to head there just to get forced out,” Aya added.

“Whaaaat?!” Nanaka nearly tumbled over with how hard she ground to a halt. She whipped back to the two of them and asked, “Are you telling me you’re okay with how things are now?!”

“Of course not, dear,” Eru protested.

“Of course not, Nana-sen,” Aya echoed. Then, she pointed behind her with an outstretched thumb. “Let’s just go to that cafe over there. We all have our laptops, right?”

“...If all four of us are here, then it won’t matter where we go,” Eru concluded.

With that, the two of them began walking toward the cafe. Their confident strides seemed to beckon them, saying, ‘Hurry up and join us.’

Under her breath, Nanaka whispered their names. Then, she turned to Kai and said, “Us too! Let’s go!” and promptly took off.

Running behind her, Kai had something he wanted to say. He didn’t need her to hear him as he muttered, “...Thank you.”

I'm glad I met you.

This hand... was everything.

When I announced I would step down from the club...

When I quit Tsukigase and left Tokyo...

I never thought a day like this would come.

You were so different—I thought you were in a faraway land of sunlight. You brought me with you.

Nanaka happened to hear him and asked, “Huh? What for?” Kai thought about how he should reply for a second, but then overtook her with a burst of speed, tugging at her hand as he did so. He ran in front of her so she wouldn’t see the happiness and embarrassment plastered all across his face.

Kai was sure that they could go anywhere together, just the way they were.

Afterword

—*I told you so.*

One day, when I win a rookie novelist award, I'm sure that'll be the thought that explodes within me. That's what I had believed, but when I was notified that I was awarded the prize, I was only happy and surprised, to the point where that '*I told you so*' feeling was nowhere to be found... Okay, that was a lie. I'm sorry. I felt that way a little bit. I've been told, "You have no talent," straight to my face before, so I'd be thankful if you could forgive the odd disgraceful thought.

But, well, my response to such a statement now would be simply, "I will write anyway." I know my own incompetence more than anyone else. However, that isn't an excuse for me to not write. That's all it is. So that I can continue to write until I one day inevitably reach my end, all I can do is to humbly concentrate my efforts and push onward.

I apologize, my introduction is rather late.

I am Shiki Oriori, recipient of the Sixth Overlap Bunko Awards Gold Medal.

To all of the readers who completed this novel and are here reading the afterword: thank you very much. I would be overjoyed if there was anything at all that stuck with you from this story.

To those of you who have yet to buy this book, flipping through to the afterword because your heart was captured by Hyuuga-san's illustration: I will not disappoint you. Please, if you would be so kind as to purchase this book, nothing would make me happier.

Now, then. I wonder, what do you imagine when you hear the words, 'social game?' I believe most of you would think of an application for your smartphone that you can download off of the app store. However, the truth is that a 'social game' is meant to be a more concrete term to describe online games that can be played via social media. That being said, it is now common usage to refer to

a great deal of things under the umbrella term, ‘social game,’ so I beg your pardon for the stretching of the term in both the title and text of this book.

It seems I’ve run out of space due to my rambling, so let me conclude with an address of thanks.

Hyuuga Azuri-san, you understood the characters on a deep level and drew such wonderful illustrations for them. Thank you so much. My editor, Y-san. I believe it was during our first meeting when I realized that you happened to know of the novels I had previously uploaded online. I was happy from the bottom of my heart. I hope to continue writing novels and to continue to be in your care.

Other than them, I’d like to offer my heartfelt thanks to all the people involved in producing and selling books, my friends who celebrated my award more than I did, and—most of all—to everyone who is reading this novel now.

I pray that we may meet again.

Shiki Oriori



AUTHOR
Oriori Siki
ILLUSTRATOR
Azuri Hyuga

1



Satoru Ginzyo

Kurenai Akane

Shiraseki Misako

Kuroba Eru

Oushima Aya

Shiraseki Kai

Aoi Nanaka

Character

She must have just gotten out of the bath.
Her hair was soft and damp, sensually
dying her neck a light beige.
Her shoulders, back, stomach, arms, legs...
The color of flesh burst out past the
cloth and burned into his eyes, grinding
his thoughts to a halt.



Bonus Short Stories

Apostle of Solitude

“—Anxiety, soften. What’s wrong, Itou?”

Despite the fact that Akane’s tone of voice was kinder than usual, Itou Haruka could not bring herself to raise her head. The two of them had been sitting across from one another in a small, secluded conference room for over ten minutes now. Haruka already knew that Akane was busier than anyone else in the club when she’d asked to meet her, but now that they were face-to-face, her words were sticking in the back of her throat.

“Clear, concise,” Akane continued in her standard, matter-of-fact tone. “Even as a programmer, there will inevitably come a time when you must explain your ideas to others—for example, when discussing means of implementation. When that time comes, the most important thing is to explain yourself clearly and concisely... But I understand that you are uneasy. I don’t mind if your thoughts are fragmented. To start, try and put them into words.”

Don’t think about it too hard. Start by talking about what you can—about what you want to. Is that what she’s telling me? Haruka wondered. Akane’s statement nudged her forward enough to recall the long forgotten art of speaking, and her voice began to leak out. “.....Is...”

“Yes?” Akane prompted.

“...Is it... okay for me to be here?” Haruka asked, finishing the thought.

“Surroundings, overlook. The only one who can determine where you ought to be is you.”

“That may be true, but...” *This whole time.*

This whole time, Haruka had thought that it was all her own fault: that *Rondo* was in the mess that it was; that she had *stolen* Shiraseki Kai’s place, when he was far more of an asset to the project. That all of it—all of it, *all of it*—had

been due to the thoughtless actions of the single person known as Itou Haruka.

He hadn't done anything wrong, and yet Shiraseki Kai's name had been paraded around the internet as being that of the perpetrator, with baseless slander flying left and right. Even when she had tried to explain the truth online, she was completely ignored for being "obvious damage control." At this rate, his sullied name would follow him for the rest of his life. When Haruka had finally come to understand the position that she had offloaded onto Shiraseki Kai, she hated herself, and could no longer forgive her own stupidity.

Akane set her sights on Haruka's bag. "Is there a club withdrawal form in there?" she wanted to know.

"...Yes," Haruka admitted.

"If that is what you desire, then I won't stop you. I will accept your resignation," Akane said, but stalled before offering her hand to Haruka. Akane's voice rang out, as if she meant to block her open palm with her words, even as she continued to speak.

"There isn't any use in crying over spilt milk," she told Haruka. "The depths of despair are dark and fathomless; I have no idea how much you have tormented yourself with guilt. So, what I say next is not an order... but if you have the will to hold on, then wait. Wait for two more weeks."

"...Two weeks?" Haruka echoed.

"That's right." Akane nodded quietly. "Once upon a time, there lived a king who believed that black cats were the messenger of the devil, and did not wish to allow a single one to live in his kingdom."

"What?" Haruka asked.

"Black cats were slaughtered without exception," Akane continued, pressing forward with her dizzyingly abrupt story. "That was the common sense of this world. The people all followed the king's order to kill black cats, and they were proud to do it.

"However, a man appeared who questioned such actions. The man rose up to protect the black cats, and began to speak out against the practice all on his own. Others mocked him for his lunacy, but the man insisted upon his point

with conviction. Although it took a long time, the man's message slowly but surely began to reach the people's ears. And black cats were once again safe to roam the lands, happily ever after."

"...R-Right," Haruka agreed uncertainly.

"Itou," Akane asked, "in this story, who do you think is a good person?"

"That would be... the man, wouldn't it?"

"Of course. However, there is a second person who isn't mentioned in the story."

"Second person?"

"Within this world, the man's ideas were abnormal," Akane pointed out. "No normal person would have agreed with him. There isn't so much as a single reason to have heard him out. However, at some point, a second person must have appeared to follow him... Do you think you could believe in a man who perpetually speaks against the common rhetoric? A man from whom everyone else averts their eyes?"

"...I think that would be quite a task," Haruka admitted.

"I'm sure it would be. I, too, lack the confidence to say I would. That is why we should praise this second person's courage just the same as we praise the man."

Haruka was nearly swallowed whole by Akane's unwavering gaze.

"Creation is always a lonely endeavor, not limited to game development. No matter how many people are placed together in a team, any serious attempt will always include time spent alone," said Akane. "Even if you overcome that solitude, in the end, there is a moment where all you can do is believe that your message will reach someone."

"...Um, President, I don't... I'm sorry. What are you talking about?" asked Haruka, feeling bewildered.

"One day—no, in two weeks' time, you'll understand. I believe you'll understand, because I have faith in the man in whom I believe. If you find yourself following the lonely light in which he preaches... when that time

comes, do something,” Akane advised her. “Applaud, or anything. This time, find the courage to display your true will.”

After having said all that, Akane silently smiled.

Lonely Misako *Bygone Youth Steeped in Specialty Tare Katsudon*

It was the night before Kai had to head to Tokyo and present his plan to Akane and company.

“Kai! Let’s go!” said Misako, practically kicking down the door to drag Kai out of the house before he could ask where it was they were going. There was a single minicar parked in front of his home, and his sister promptly pushed him into the passenger seat.

“Huh?” he said. “A car? Where are we going?”

“The hell?! Mister, ain’tcha got a battle ahead of ya’ t’morrow? There’s only one spot we can go!” Misako answered confidently, after locking his front door and returning to take the driver’s seat.

“I won’t ask why you’re speaking with an Edo accent, but—wait. Nee-san, can you drive?” Kai demanded to know. “You don’t have a license, do you?”

“Aha ha,” said Misako, smiling at him from the bottom of her heart. “I’m glad you asked! I went and got it a little while ago, just in case you ever begged me to take you out on a nighttime drive because you were having trouble sleeping!”

“So you’re a total beginner...” Kai observed. *Also*, he thought to himself, *that day will never come*.

“Don’t worry, young man. Even a ship made of mud will sail so long as you row.”

“Well my heart has already sunk...”

“Hard-a-port!” Misako sang out.

Kai no longer had the energy to point out that they were in a car, not a boat.

Still, he found Misako's driving to be far more competent than he'd expected as the car left his home and merged into a large road, before heading onto a bypass that appeared to have originally been a river. As soon as Kai began to expect that they'd continue along that road for a while longer, Misako pulled into a parking lot next to what seemed to be a set of private homes along the street. Beside them was another, shockingly large structure, whose sign Kai read to figure out it was a pachinko parlor.

"Over here," Misako beckoned.

The building she waved him over to had "Tonkatsu Masa-chan" written on its sign, and Kai was fairly certain it was some kind of restaurant. The building's architecture was a subdued Japanese style, and the interior was packed with customers, since it was dinnertime.

"Heya, boss!" Misako called out. As the siblings sat down at the counter, she raised her hand toward a man who met their eyes from the kitchen. He didn't say anything back, but gestured towards them in a small greeting.

Misako continued, "I'll have the usual. Give him the specialty!" to which the man gave another short, silent nod of acknowledgment.

"Nee-san," said Kai, "do you come here often?"

"Yup."

"Did you... bring me here for the good luck superstition?"

"Of course! *Katsu* means to win! Eat katsu and win, it's plain and simple!" Misako cheered. Then, she suddenly straightened up and looked at him solemnly. "...Kai. At times, our battles are merciless," she told him seriously. "No matter how much time you spend, how much thought you put into it, how guaranteed your victory is... there are times when you may offend the Goddess of Fortune. But don't forget this, Kai: I'll be here waiting. Whether you're smiling or crying, I'll be waiting for you to come home."

"...It's not that big of a deal," he mumbled.

"Have you looked at yourself in the mirror these past few days?"

"No... But I know what you mean." Kai was aware that he looked awful.

Nanaka had been terribly worried as well, and offered to accompany him to Tokyo nearly every time they met.

“Plus,” Misako added, “Kai, you haven’t eaten tare katsu yet, have you?”

“Tare katsu?” he echoed.

The mystery behind these unknown words was revealed to him as soon as their food was served. Kai’s dish was unmistakably a katsudon—it was a bowl of rice with tonkatsu on top—but otherwise, it was completely different from what he was familiar with. A katsudon was generally placed on top of an egg, but there wasn’t any egg at all in front of him. There weren’t any onions, either. There were just three cuts of katsu, fried to a golden brown and stacked on top of the rice. As the name implied, there was a tare sauce drizzled onto the katsu, which had also soaked into the rice underneath. Misako was silently egging him on, so he started off by taking a bite of the katsu.

“...Whoa,” said Kai. He wondered, *What is this?* Rather than being crispy, the tare had soaked into the cutlets and made them moist. Though the meat still had some chew to it, the quality of the pork was good enough for Kai’s teeth to slice through it without issue. Every single bite diffused the sweet taste of the soy-based tare sauce throughout his entire mouth. The juicy meat’s classic, savory flavor blended together with the sauce to give birth to a delicious flavor he had never before experienced.

Then Kai put the katsu aside and tried the tare-soaked rice to find out that it, too, was amazing. *Incredibly* amazing. It fell under the same principle as rice covered in yakiniku sauce: there was no way it *wouldn’t* be good.

The dish came with pickles on the side, perhaps because the tare itself was of a sweeter flavor. After eating a refreshing pickle, Kai’s mouth reset—no. In fact, the next bite of tare katsu he ate was *even more* tasty than the first bite he had taken. He simply couldn’t put down his food; it was the perfect infinite loop.

“Isn’t it good?” Misako asked.

“...It’s super good,” Kai replied.

“*Right?*” Misako nodded triumphantly, as if she had made the dish herself. “By the way,” she added, “That specialty set is no longer something that I am

allowed to eat... Keep that in mind as you enjoy it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll understand if you keep eating.”

Just as she’d said, Kai came to understand as he continued to eat. At first glance, his katsudon wasn’t all that different from the one his sister had ordered, so he was somewhat confused as to what made it a specialty item. The answer was at the bottom of the rice. Or rather, in the middle of the rice. As he ate the katsu on top and the rice underneath, Kai struck... katsu.

Kai literally dug up more katsu. The ‘specialty’ part of this tare katsudon was the fact that there was yet another layer of katsu buried inside the rice. What was more, the katsu was covered in sauce that had soaked through the rice and had a slightly different—but still delicious—taste to it, as compared to the others.

It was delicious... but Kai realized it was definitely too much for Misako, who had, just a while ago, drunkenly cried about how she was cutting back on oily foods. As a matter of fact, Kai wasn’t exactly a big eater himself, so he, too, struggled to finish.

But after eating this much, Kai knew it’d be enough. They say an army marches on its stomach, and now that he had eaten his fill, there was nothing to fear. He even received his share of good luck.

All that remained was to resolve himself and do what he needed to do.

When in Rome

“Senpai, Senpai!”

“...? What’s up?” he asked.

Aya was using one of the computers in the clubroom and had suddenly turned around, sporting a mischievous grin. Nanaka was sitting right in between her and Kai, so she looked up as well. Eru was holed up in her own world, as usual, and drawing with her headphones on.

“I’m gonna say a word. Can you guess what it means?” Aya asked.

“A word?” Kai seemed puzzled.

“Aight, here we go... Senpai, there’s a *kōko* in the fridge,” she said.

“...*K-Kōko*?” he repeated.

“*Kōko*,” Aya affirmed.

Kai looked at the monitor behind Aya, and he could read the large lettering that said “Niigata Dialect.” Apparently, *kōko* was some sort of word from that regional dialect. He figured she was curious as to whether or not a Tokyoite like Kai could understand it.

“Ah-chan, isn’t that one a bit hard?” Nanaka caught the gist of Aya’s plan and made a comment while waiting for Kai’s response.

A bit? Kai thought incredulously. *This is super difficult right off the bat. I can’t think of anything. She probably said ‘fridge’ as a hint. At the very least, it has to be something that fits in a refrigerator. I’m pretty sure it’s safe to assume it’s some kind of food. So it’s some kind of food that goes in the fridge and is called a kōko... kōko... koko? Kokokoko... Cockadoodle doo?*

“Ch...” Kai began.

““Ch?”” Aya goaded.

“...Chicken?”

“Just ‘cause Niigata is in the sticks doesn’t mean we’ve got slaughtered chickens chilling in our fridges,” Aya denied.

“...Pft. Chick—pfft, chicken...” Kai’s response seemed to strike a chord with Nanaka, who was now covering her mouth as she held back a laugh. “Your answer reminded me of when you heard what I thought KPI was, and... I guess there are things even you don’t know, huh Kai-kun?”

“Nana-sen, was your answer super ridiculous?” Aya questioned.

“Th-That’s a secret! I know what it means *now*!” Nanaka sidestepped the topic by turning to Kai and saying, “A *kōko* is just a takuan. We don’t use that word much, but I think my grandma still says it a lot.”

“...Takuan?” Kai echoed. “Like the pickled yellow radishes?”

“Yup, that’s right,” Nanaka replied.

“So why is it a *kōko*?” he asked.

“How would we know? It’s just the dialect,” Aya retorted.

“R-Right.” Kai supposed that maybe that was just how the dialect worked.

“By the way,” Aya resumed, “There’s more where that came from. Wanna bet one gacha pull that you’ll get it wrong?”

“Yeah, no thanks.”

“What?! Don’t be a killjoy! How about I’ll roll the gacha whether you win or lose?”

“Then you should just roll on your own...” Kai mumbled.

“You know how sometimes you can’t decide if you wanna roll or not?” Aya asked, by way of explanation.

“I think I’ll pass on being used to decide something like that.”

“Hey, hey!” Nanaka interjected, “If you’re gonna make bets on them, then future dialect quizzes are banned!” Then, she glanced up at the clock on the wall. She naturally followed up with, “Whoa, it’s already this late? Let’s hush up and head home for the day.”

Leaving aside Eru, who couldn’t hear anything, Aya acted completely normal, saying only, “Sounds good.” It seemed that Kai was the only one who found Nanaka’s word choice strange.

“Um... Nanaka-san?” he called out to her.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” she replied.

“...Uh, well, is there a particular reason we need to go home stealthily today?”

“Stealthily?” Nanaka tilted her head.

“What are you on about?” Aya was practically rolling her eyes as she asked.

“I mean, we need to ‘hush up’ as we go home, right...?”

“Huh? What I said was—wait... Kai-kun, could it be... do you know what ‘hush

up' means?" Nanaka asked.

"...To be quiet and sneaky?" he ventured.

Nanaka covered her face in shame as she realized what had happened.

"...Nana-sen," Aya pointed out, "I can't believe you gave Senpai a dialect quiz immediately after banning them. That's unfair!"

"But Ah-chan, it's not like you realized what I said, either!"

"That's not true, though? Oh, Senpai," Aya explained, "'hush up' basically means to clean up."

I see, thought Kai. That made Nanaka's previous statement fall into place. She'd looked at the clock and realized it was almost time to leave, so they all needed to hush up and go home. *Clean up, of course*. Now that Kai knew, it made complete sense.

"...Okay then," the words flowed naturally from Kai's mouth. "Nanaka-san, let's hush up and go home."

In response, Nanaka playfully cried, "Kai-kun's bullying me!" and Eru (who happened to overhear her) erupted with a far less playful, "What the hell did you do to my dear Nanaka?!" all while Aya laughed the situation off with an, "Ah geez." But of course, Kai hadn't meant to bully her at all.

It was just because he was here, and had wanted to use the new phrase that he'd only managed to learn because he was with them. Amidst the chaos of the clubroom, he thought to himself...

I hope that, as we continue forward, you all will teach me even more words like these.

A Day in the Social Game Club *The Swimsuit Debate*

Kai and Nanaka were running a little late because their homeroom had dragged on longer than usual. When they reached the clubroom, Aya and Eru were arguing with frightening menace.

"Like! I! Said!" Aya shouted. "This girl needs a bikini! Imagine, this meek girl

musters up all her courage so she can enjoy the adventurous summer of a lifetime, but she doesn't know how far she should take it, so she floors the gas so hard that she ends up buying a bikini that's a touch risqué—*that's* what's cute!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Eru snapped back. "My dear girl wouldn't be able to buy a bikini! She'd be far too embarrassed! But she *definitely* wouldn't want to be caught wearing a school swimsuit with a name tag, so she'd look for one that has similar body coverage... and then, she finds a competitive swimsuit! But she wouldn't know that competitive swimsuits are designed to reduce drag by sticking tightly to the body, so in the end she has her own, slightly weird little adventure, and *that's* what's cute!"

"I've never heard of your internal canon, and I don't give a crap about your fetishes!" Aya hollered.

"Well, bikinis are your fetish, then!" Eru said accusingly.

"Fine! Then, look at it this way: do you think people would roll for a swimsuit like that?!"

"I'm not drawing this for the sake of the gacha!" Eru declared scornfully. "Perhaps you ought to spend a little less on the gacha and more on the building blocks of a brain!"

As the argument raged on, it was less "sparks flying" and more "bombs rocketing across the room." Their intensity had frozen Kai in place by the doorway, but Nanaka had begun to approach them. She picked Eru's printed illustration up from off of the table.

"Nanaka, what do you think?!"

"Nana-sen, what do you think?!"

The two of them whipped toward Nanaka with bloodshot eyes. She looked over the image for a moment, and then raised a concern. "Racing swimsuits... are wide open in the back, right? Say we were to go with a competitive swimsuit; do you think a front-facing angle or a back-facing angle would be better? Which would the users like more?"

Nanaka-san, I don't think you should say— Kai didn't so much as have time to

finish his thought, let alone say it aloud.

“She’d show her back, dear,” said Eru.

“It’s gotta be from the front,” Aya disagreed.

The two of them offered their opposing opinions at precisely the same time, and things began to heat up once again. Of course, this time, Nanaka was pulled into the mix and she called for Kai’s help, so all the members of the club ended up debating about swimsuits together.

...To conclude, the four of them argued for an unreasonably long time and decided that the girl went shopping with her friends, and partially due to their suggestion, she stepped out of her comfort zone to buy a bikini. However, she ultimately couldn’t bear the embarrassment, and so the final illustration depicted her hiding under the shade with an oversized hoodie to cover herself.

Because I Want to See Your Smile

Nanaka carefully put the finishing touches on her drawing and raised her face from the cartridge paper laid out before her. She took a moment to close her eyes. They opened back up slowly, to look over the character she’d drawn, and she held the paper out at a short distance with both hands so she could get a good look.

There... weren’t any problems. At least, Nanaka didn’t notice any. In particular, she felt like the eyes she’d drawn were especially cute, and the motion of the hair had a sense of momentum that matched the jumping pose she’d set out to create.

At least... that’s what Nanaka thought.

Nanaka slowly lowered the sheet of paper taking up her line of sight. Hidden beyond it, Eru slowly came into view. She was sitting across the coffee table from Nanaka, wholly absorbed in scratching away with her pen, but she shifted her piercing gaze toward Nanaka once the drawing had been lowered.

Are you ready? she asked with her stare.

Nanaka gave her work one last look...*Yes. It’s fine.* If nothing else, Nanaka

could puff up her chest and say she'd made something good. She nodded, before flipping the paper upside down and slowly thrusting it forward.

Eru removed her headphones and accepted the drawing with both hands as she immediately began to check it over. Nanaka didn't even have a moment to wait with bated breath.

"This is no good, dear." Eru had only looked at it for an instant before shaking her head. She placed the sheet on the table and pulled out a red pen from her pen case before drawing a series of red lines with zero hesitation.

And then, the marked up drawing returned to Nanaka.

"It may have been because the jumping pose was difficult, but the body structure is entirely out of balance," Eru explained.

"I... see," Nanaka said. The red markings all over the paper clearly displayed what would have been the proper form for the pose. Just a few seconds ago, she'd thought she had created a good drawing, but now that all came crumbling down in an instant.

".....I see," she said again, laying out backwards with her illustration still in her hands.

"...Nanaka?"

"I'm fine." Nanaka repeated to herself, "...I'm fine. Thanks, Eru."

"Are you... truly okay?" Eru inquired.

Don't worry, I really am. Nanaka forced herself up so she could look her friend in the eye as she said so, but when she sat back up, Eru was digging through her bag. Nanaka could tell right away what it was that she was searching for. The item that Eru pulled out was quickly placed on the table in front of her.

It was a sasa dango.

"Taking breaks is important, too, dear," Eru explained.

"That's true... Yup, thanks—hey, wait? Do you only have one?" Nanaka asked.

"We had one at home, so I simply brought that."

"Eru," Nanaka persisted, "do you not want any?"

“I don’t really need—” Depending on perspective, the timing was either perfect or awful. Alongside the word ‘need,’ a cute little growl came from the inside of Eru’s stomach. She didn’t act ashamed, and stoically looked down at it.

“...Pft.” Nanaka let out a small laugh as she began to untie the juncus string wound around the package. Sasa dango was a Japanese sweet in which a yomogi mochi filled with anko was wrapped in a few layers of bamboo leaves and then finally tied up with string made from juncus grass. Once she finished untying the string, Nanaka began to carefully peel off the bamboo leaves. A mistake could either leave parts of a leaf on the mochi, or break the mochi open and let the anko spill everywhere. This part required the utmost caution.

After successfully extracting the dango, Nanaka held it from two sides and split it down the middle. The appetizing red bean poked out from the cross section and let a faintly sweet smell drift from it.

“Here, Eru.”

“Nanaka, dear, you can just eat it yourself.”

“...No. Let’s eat together.”

Eru peered at the sasa dango in hesitation, but then quietly accepted. The two girls exchanged looks and took their first bites at the same time. The refreshing yomogi mochi paired with the sweetness of the granulated anko, intertwining in their mouths as they continued to chew. *Yummy*, they thought.

“...Hey Eru, do you remember?” Nanaka asked.

“Remember what?”

“Back when we were kids, we used to draw together like this a lot, right?”

“...That’s right,” Eru agreed.

“There was one time where I couldn’t get a drawing right, and I started pouting—only a bit, though. And then, Eru, you gave me the sasa dango that you had brought over as a snack. Like you did just now. I dunno if you remember this.”

When I eat sasa dango, Nanaka thought, sometimes I think back and wonder... Why did the ones I ate that day taste so sweet... so good? Thinking

about it now, I feel like Eru started bringing sasa dango every once in a while after that. I must have made them look really tasty when I ate those first ones.

“The truth is,” she continued, “That was when I started liking sasa dango. So... I remember it super clearly.” After finishing what she’d wanted to say, Nanaka quickly gulped down the rest of the mochi. She’d eaten something good and her spirits were high; all that was left was to give it her all. “Alright!” she declared. “I’m gonna try drawing that pose one more time!”

Nanaka pulled out a fresh sheet of cartridge paper with maxed out morale. Then she looked up at Eru to see what she was doing, and noticed that she was staring back at her.

“...That story...” Eru began.

“Huh?”

“I remember that story, too.” Eru seemed embarrassed and averted her gaze, but not before adding, “There’s no way I’d forget, dear.”

Yet Again, Rain Falls Next to You

“Ah.”

Their voices rang out together. The droplet of rain that had landed on Kai’s head made its way down the side of his ear and wet his skin until it was absorbed by the collar of his shirt. Nanaka had been hit on the bridge of her nose, and she bent her right index finger to wipe it off. However, even as she was doing so, the rain began to worsen.

It was only a matter of time before it turned into a full-fledged storm, Kai realized. Niigata’s weather truly was unruly. “Let’s hurry before it starts pouring and—” *run*, he was going to say, but his mouth stayed shut.

Nanaka had a smug, look-what-I’ve-got expression on her face as she turned to him and asked, “What might this be?”

“...A foldable umbrella?” he guessed.

“Correct!” The umbrella opened up alongside Nanaka’s enthusiastic reply. Kai thought she’d pulled a black umbrella from her bag, but the inside had a stylish

design of clear skies. Nanaka's bright smile went so well with the umbrella's blue sky that Kai found himself enchanted.

"...Kai-kun?"

"Ah, s-sorry! I was kinda out of it."

"That's fine, here."

"What?"

"Geez, look," said Nanaka, as she stretched out the hand with the umbrella. "Here."

"O-Okay." The shower around them continued to make a *drip drip* sound against the umbrella as it grew stronger. The noise served to hurry the already-confused Kai, and he grabbed hold of the umbrella's handle. The action itself was mostly reflex. Nanaka looked like she was offering it, so he accepted. He didn't think any more or less of it than that.

As a result, Kai found himself very surprised.

"Oh, you're going to hold it for me?" Nanaka asked. "I guess that'd work out better since you're taller than me, Kai-kun."

"Huh? Um..." Before he could get the words out, Nanaka moved into place, slipping from his left to under the umbrella with the grace of a cat. Beneath, of course, the umbrella which Kai was holding.

The foldable umbrella was small—extremely small. If Nanaka tried to join him beneath it, they'd be extremely close by necessity. And as Kai began to comprehend their situation, his heart started beating extremely loud, to the point where it was getting to be ridiculous. To be honest, he was worried that Nanaka might be able to hear his heartbeat. *Shut up shut up shut up*, he prayed, but the beating of his heart wasn't something he could will into changing.

"Kai-kun." Kai looked down, only to face a head-on collision with Nanaka's eyes as she looked up at him. "Aren't we going home?"

"Um... Nanaka... san?" he managed to say.

"What's wrong?"

“Um... well...”

“Well?”

“This is, well... we’re sharing an umbrella... right?”

“I... guess you could say that,” she agreed cautiously. “No, actually, I think you have to say that. Ahaha.” Nanaka timidly scratched at her cheek. She looked up at him again and asked, “...Do you mind?”

“Th-That’s not it!” Kai denied vehemently. That was absolutely, positively untrue. “It’s just, well, I’m fine with it... But Nanaka-san, don’t you... well, mind?”

“I...” Nanaka trailed off and averted her eyes for a moment before energetically turning back to face Kai. She had her smartphone in her hand, and it made a camera shutter sound as it flashed brightly at him. When she flipped her phone around to show him the screen, Kai saw the face of an introvert, visibly red with embarrassment in the face of an unknown situation.

“Geez! Kai-kun, you’re getting way too embarrassed! I-I figured it’d be weird to think too hard about it, so I tried my best to act normal! If you make a face like that, then even I...” Nanaka’s eyes were swimming and, like Kai, her cheeks were also gingerly red.

The sound of rain hitting the umbrella filled the silence between them.

“...L-Let’s just go home,” Nanaka suggested.

“...Y-Yeah,” he agreed.

They began to walk awkwardly through the echoing sound of rain with the gait of a three-legged race. If this were to continue forever, Kai’s heart would either explode or come to a stop. But for a little longer... For just a little longer, he wished the rain would continue. He couldn’t help but think these two paradoxical thoughts...

At least, he decided, let us walk like this all the way home.

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Our Crappy Social Game Club is Gonna Make the Most Epic Game: Volume 1
by Oriori Siki

Translated by Mikey N.

Edited by Dana Allen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by OVERLAP, Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2021

Premium Ebook