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Amagi  
Brilliant  
Park  
#03







Macaron

Moffle

Tiramii



Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!



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# Prologue

*Pa-pop!* With a bang, confetti and streamers went flying everywhere.

A cheerful melody began to play. Dancers in extravagant costumes threw themselves onto the stage, their long tails tracing lovely arcs as they whirled.

*Welcome, welcome, welcome all! To wonderland! A fantasy! Worlds of dreams that span dimensions! Adventures and miracles! It's Amagi Brilliant Park! It's Amagi Brilliant Park! Let's all sing and dance together! Let's all smile and laugh and play! Call to them and they will come! Who'll be first? It's Macaron! Let's all call to Macaron! Fairy of Music, Macaron!*

“Rooon!” One of the park’s headliner mascots, Macaron, the Fairy of Music, appeared, as if launched upwards from underneath the stage. He landed neatly, then immediately launched into a bagpipe solo. As his thrilling performance ended, more dancers took to the stage.

*Who'll be next? It's Tiramii! Let's all call to Tiramii! Fairy of Flowers, Tiramii!*

“Miiii!” Tiramii, the Fairy of Flowers, appeared. Like Macaron, he flew up from beneath the stage, spun end-over-end, and landed neatly. He twirled his silk hat and performed some magic tricks, producing one beautiful bouquet after another. Then, as he swung his cape with a flourish, a flurry of fireworks burst in the background. Even more dancers took the stage.

*Sorcerer's Hill is full of fun! Come and smile with everyone! Everybody join the gang! Rabbida! Nyathan! Wanipii! Bargen! They've all come here just for you!*

More and more mascots appeared and joined the line of dancers. The cheerful music reached its apex.

*Oh? Oh? Aren't we missing something? That's right! There's no sweets at all! Let's all call to Moffle, now! Fairy of Sweets... Moffle!*

“Moffu!” Moffle appeared on a tall pedestal at the back of the stage. He was silhouetted by a massive firework that burst into glints of shining light, which fizzed off in all directions. The dancers gasped in wonder. It was an entrance

befitting the park's headliner mascot.

That was all well and good, except... one of the sparks had set Moffle's chef's whites ablaze.

"Moffu, moffu!" Had he even noticed?

Moffle took a running leap off the platform, bounded off a hidden trampoline and did a sharp flip in midair. It was all according to plan, but the rapid motion had only caused the fire on his costume to spread.

"Mooooffu!" Ah, yes. He had noticed. He crashed to the stage, now trailing flames. The park's headliner mascot had become a rampaging ball of fire, and all the while, the cheerful music continued to blare. The dancers stopped dancing and ran away in terror.

Moffle knocked over giant "talking flower" props, then plowed into a speaker, which released a screech of feedback. The confetti and streamers scattered around the stage just added fuel to the growing inferno.

"H-Hey, it's hot! It's hot!" Moffle squealed. "Someone! Someone!"

"Don't move!" someone in the ensemble shouted. "Hold still! Bring a blanket!"

"Fire team! Fire team!" Wanipii yelled. "Where are you, pii?! Fire team!"

The whimsical display of wonder was now a crucible of tragedy; the panicked staff rushed the stage with fire extinguishers, which they unleashed in force. Soon, the area was awash in foul-smelling white smoke.

Five minutes after things were settled—

"—which is why I told you, no fireworks!" Kanie Seiya yelled to the dejected-looking cast. He had joined in the fire-fighting efforts, so his acting manager's uniform was bleached white with flame retardant. "At least it was only a rehearsal, but... what if it had been a real performance?! I've invited the media, you know! We'd have rubbernecker reports all over the Internet! Then they'd be deleted from YouTube, and we'd have the world laughing at us over LiveLeak instead!"

“Hmm... that might be good advertising in its own way, ron...” Macaron, dressed in his own wrecked stage attire, whispered.

“I’ve heard of videos catching fire on the Internet, but nothing like this, mii!” Tiramii, also dressed in a tattered stage costume, snickered.

“This isn’t funny!” Seiya fumed. “The show is coming up, you know! If we screw this up, it’s going to have a huge impact on our visitor count for Golden Week and after. This is April’s do-or-die moment! Don’t you get that?!”

The show—A (AmaBri) Fight Begins! The Moffle that Fell to Earth!—was to be Golden Week’s hottest event, conducted on the park’s large central stage. It was the centerpiece of their renovations for the new fiscal year.

Amagi Brilliant Park (the AmaBri in question) had never held a show on a scale like this before. They had done routine song-and-dance numbers on the stage, but those were unambitious; they never lasted longer than ten minutes.

This show would be a huge upscale from their prior performances. It would be a whole 50 minutes long, with almost all of the cast in attendance.

They’d written a new script and new music, and prepared new costumes and props. Even before advertising expenses, the budget had been enormous, but Seiya hadn’t hesitated; he knew how important this live show was. It was the best way to get word out about the new AmaBri. “Look at us,” it would say. “This year’s park is like never before. Amagi Brilliant Park has been reborn!”

But if that was going to happen, they had to genuinely wow the viewers. He couldn’t let them go home feeling ambivalent; guests had to get home from the park and immediately tell their friends and family: “It was awesome!” As in any age, word of mouth was crucial.

So if that was the purpose of the live show, then—“We can’t have our headliner mascot setting the stage on fire!”

“Look, I know... why you’re nervous, Seiya,” Moffle said. He seemed to have made it back from the infirmary. His patissier’s outfit was blackened and charred, while his fur was stained white from the (frankly alarming) amount of flame retardant that had been sprayed on him. He seemed to have trouble keeping his footing, perhaps due to the psychological trauma of the event. “But

we need the fireworks, fumo. They're a must-have for delighting an audience; always have been. They're the portal from a humdrum daily life to a world of the wondrous and spectacular. You need them if you want to grab the guests' attention and hold it."

"You said that at the meeting, too. But you saw what it's led to."

"C-Come on, now..." Moffle protested. "I've been through bloodbaths worse than that before."

*What kind of bloodbaths, exactly? Seiya wondered. You're an amusement park mascot...*

"Besides, this was a learning experience," the mascot continued. "Now we know that we need to make my costume and the surrounding props fireproof, fumo. That ought to be enough to prevent a repeat."

"Hmmm..." He couldn't deny that Moffle had a point. But at the same time, Seiya was the acting manager. He was one making the decisions, and if forced to choose between artistry and safety, safety was going to win out every time. But... even so...

"I agree with Moffle, ron. We need to go all-out on this," Macaron added.

"So do I, mii. Catching the problem in rehearsal was a lucky break, if you ask mii," Tiramii added.

"I agree too, mog. Don't worry, we'll work out all the dangerous parts in time for the big opening."

"Yeah, and you just can't beat flashiness, nell."

"If the guests'll enjoy it, we oughta try to make it happen, don'cha think?"

Taramo, Dornell, and Wrenchy-kun—representatives of various backstage departments—weighed in respectively.

"Hmm..." Seiya pondered. If they were that insistent about it, then maybe he should just trust them and take the risk? "...In that case, I want you to work out every possible risk and your proposed countermeasure. I expect a report from each department on my desk by 9:00 tomorrow morning. If I still have cold feet after that, we cut the dangerous elements. Can you do that?"

“Of course,” they chorused. Before, Seiya thought, they all would have tried to avoid responsibility. But now the eyes of these strange, super-deformed creatures shone with determination.

“Good,” he decided. “Then let’s tidy up and get back to rehearsal.”

Seiya watched the resumed rehearsal from the audience seats. The cheerful music washed over him. There were no fireworks this time, so Moffle remained non-combusted, and he gave a hard-hitting performance befitting the star he was.

“Kanie-kun.” Carrying a file case at her side, Sento Isuzu took a seat next to Seiya. “Wrenchy-kun told me what happened. It must have been awful.”

“It very nearly ended in tragedy,” he admitted. “But I’m glad they’re enthusiastic, at least.”

He had meant to sound nonchalant about it, but Isuzu stared into his face and responded: “Are you all right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well... You haven’t told anyone about the new attendance number yet, have you?” She was referring to something that had happened during the sale of the second park. By selling the southern plot of land on the other side of the highway, the park had gained the funding it needed to keep running. But in the process of putting the contract together, the park’s “enemy,” Amagi Development, had forced them to swallow an even more difficult condition: the minimum number of people they had to bring to the park each year had skyrocketed to three million people. If they couldn’t get the three million they needed this year, the park would close.

It was a truly absurd number. A first-rate park, like Urayasu, could get 20 million in a year, but that was an exception rather than a rule. Three million was a number that only a handful of Japan’s many theme parks could ever hope to reach. In other words, a park that usually barely broke the top 50 would now have to burst into the top five.

Even so, he had to accept it. The alternative was going without paying their employees for a month.

"It's not time to tell them yet," Seiya said. "First, we need to get things on track. Then... then I'll tell them. Let's build up their confidence first."

"...Do you think that they will?" Isuzu questioned. "Build up confidence, that is."

"If they don't," he told her grimly, "we're finished."

# Chujo Shiina Wants to Run Away

## 1

I know I'm not exactly attractive.

I'm 1.4 meters tall and 35 kilograms (and not the kind of silly girl who says "my weight is a se~cret"). That's average for a 5th grader... which means people usually assume I'm a kid.

But! I, Chujo Shiina, am an honest-to-goodness high school girl: a "JK," as we're sometimes known.

True, most of my clothes are things my mom buys me at Shimamura and Uniqlo, and I've been going to the same neighborhood barber all my life... Well, actually, there was one time I got up all my courage and took my New Year's money to Shibuya to buy some more stylish clothes (C-C-Cecil McBee and stuff!) But not only did nothing there fit me, I also got lost on the way back and a police officer ended up escorting me home. So humiliating!

Still, it's just not in me to go around pretending to be a kid, acting all clingy and naive. No matter how I might look, inside, I'm still a high schooler—a JK, if I may (let me say it again). I have basic decency, for one thing, and I feel like going around invading other people's personal space is really rude.

But the most important factor, I guess, is that I'm really awkward around people.

How long have I been this way? I don't know! I just get so worried about what other people think of me that I end up freezing up, even for the most basic stuff. I just end up stuttering: "Um, um, um," and "sorry, sorry, sorry." Because of the way I look, most people end up looking down on me (both literally and figuratively) and acting a little too familiar. Then I don't know what to say to that, and I end up panicking, and they eventually get bored and walk away.

I spend most of my time on the verge of tears, saying I'm sorry and feeling

pathetic. Well... not even the “verge of tears”; any time you see me, there’s a good chance that I’ll be crying.

So when I got into Amagi High School, I decided I’d give myself a big makeover —what some people call a “high school debut.” *I can’t do anything about my height, I thought, but I can change my behavior. Then I’ll make lots of friends and have a great school life.*

I changed my hair, learned all about accessories and jewelry, and rented comedy DVDs to learn how to banter. I even got my mother to teach me some basic makeup tips.

But... on my very first day, it was already hopeless. I flubbed my way through my self-introduction. I had nothing in common with the girls sitting near me in terms of interests, conversation topics, or outlook on life. A girl who had taken the role of class leader did talk to me (probably out of pity), but everything I learned from those comedy DVDs just flew out of my mind, and after three days she stopped even saying hello to me. So humiliating!

Actually, I did manage to make friends with another practically invisible girl in the same class, but she was in the biology club, and she ended up spending all her time there during lunch and after class, and before long our friendship regressed to just bare-bones acknowledgment. The next thing I knew, a week had passed.

It was so bad. Time to panic.

*Well, if my comfort zone isn’t in class, I thought, maybe I’ll find refuge in extracurricular activities, like that girl in the biology club.* I’d heard the biology club was a very comfortable place. Still, I knew I couldn’t spend every day in a room full of specimens in formaldehyde jars.

Amagi High had night school, anyway, so it was very strict about when clubs let out. As a result, club activities weren’t very intense.

*If only there was a cozy, snuggly culture club like the kind you see in late night anime,* I thought to myself many times. But you can’t just will those kinds of things into existence. “Just make your own!” you’re probably thinking, but... come on, there’s no way I’m assertive enough to go out recruiting people. And while I dilly-dallied over that, a second week had passed.

It was so bad. Time to panic.

*At this rate, I thought, I'm going to end up completely alone.* (Though actually, I was already completely alone.) I decided that at the very least, I could stop pecking at my lunch all alone in the classroom every afternoon.

It was biologically impossible for me to eat lunch in a toilet stall, so I marched myself to a stairwell on the far end of the east building. The door to the roof above the fourth floor was sealed off, and the landing was used as a storage room. I had decided to eat my lunch there.

But oh, what was this? Someone had gotten there before me!

It was a second-year boy. He was munching on curry bread while he played with his smartphone, grumbling to himself. He seemed to be in a bad mood. I couldn't fully make out what he was saying, but it sounded like "not enough funding..." and "have to sell the second park..."

He was a very attractive man, with sleek black hair and facial lines that seemed to be drawn with a very fine pen. His elegant carriage told me at a glance that he was a man of great intelligence and powerful convictions. Why was someone so attractive sitting in a place like this, eating curry bread and muttering to himself? That's like the least attractive thing you can do!

"Hmm?" The handsome senpai noticed me and froze up. My presence must have shaken him; he probably didn't like being seen eating all by himself. (It is pretty pathetic; I would have felt the same way.)

"Um... Um..." 'I'm terribly sorry to startle you,' I tried to say, but as usual, all that came out of my mouth was stammering.

*But wait a minute, I thought. Is this a "meet cute?"*

Let's take a moment to imagine it: a girl and boy, experiencing the same(?) solitude, meet by chance in a corner of an empty school building. We end up eating lunch together every afternoon, exchanging the most trivial of conversations...

Oh no, oh no. I'm not ready for this! Soon, the emotional distance between us would close, and ah... I'd start bringing him homemade lunches! I'd burn the tamagoyaki a little, but he'd say, "It's delicious, because you made it." Then one

thing would lead to another, and soon we'd... we'd...

Just then, the senpai spoke. "This is my spot. Get lost."

.....Er?

"Didn't you hear me?" he demanded. "Get lost. ...Oh, I get it. You were struck by my breathtaking good looks, and now you're daydreaming about us being friends."

How could he have gotten it so right? Was he an Esper? A Newtype?

"I get that a lot, you see," he explained. "But I'll never be interested in someone like you, and also, I'm thinking about work right now. I have a mountain of PDFs I have to read through, so get lost."

"U-Um... but..." I stammered.

"Do I need to say it a fourth time? Get! Lost! Right! Now!"

"S-S-Seally rorry!!" I shouted, even managing to flub my apology. So humiliating! Unable to even argue my case, I turned around and sped away.

I spent the rest of the day feeling depressed. At times like these, I needed some solo karaoke—that's what I always do when I'm sad. On the way home from school, I belted out about 20 anime songs, and got myself feeling a little bit better.

The employee at the karaoke shop, when he came around with the bill, looked at me and said earnestly, "You're really good at singing." It was all lip service, of course, but in reply I managed to stammer, "Ah, um... tha... (nk you very much)."

All that aside, it was time to just admit it: my school situation was hopeless. Even the seat usually reserved for the loneliest of outcasts, the top of the stairs leading to the roof, had been claimed by a scary, aloof older boy. In that case, I realized, could I not pursue some fun escapism outside of school? Of course! A job! A fun workplace! Amiable colleagues! Cute uniforms!

If I could carve myself an extracurricular niche, that would propel me through the bitter hardships of school life. And I'd get paid! Two birds with one stone!

With that decided, I thought, let's get searching for a job. First, to the classifieds!

The classifieds site I visited was filled with job offers. Fast food! Family restaurants! Oh, what about a fashionable cafe?! I searched all around and applied for jobs at some nice-sounding places in the city. *I've never worked a job before, but I'm sure I'll work it out!* I thought. *Let's do this, Shiina!*

.....It was a disaster.

Well, of course it was! Getting a job means going through an interview, and it was unreasonable to expect that someone who flubbed her class introduction could suddenly manage a job interview. Those prying eyes of the owners and the managers scared me, too. None of the places with appropriate conditions would hire me. So humiliating!

Another round of solo karaoke soothed my injured heart.

It had been a disaster, but I had to get back into the search. There was only one left that was appropriate; my final candidate was an amusement park.

It was a theme park in Amagi City, the city where I lived, known as Amagi Brilliant Park. When I was little (chronologically speaking), my parents took me there a lot. I loved their cute mascot, the Fairy of Sweets, Moffle. I still do, in fact... I always have to have my Moffle plushie with me at bedtime.

*This must be destiny!* I thought. Surely the reason none of the other jobs worked out was because fate was guiding me here!

Anyway, I applied immediately. I'd been through the interview → rejected pattern enough times by now that I'd worked up a pretty thick skin—the first time I applied to one of these, it had taken me about three hours of hesitation before I finally pressed "send."

I received a response from the manager that same day and we decided on the date for the interview.

The day of destiny arrived. So as not to be late, I headed for Amagi Brilliant Park first thing in the morning!

Then I got on the wrong bus!

I got thrown out in some unfamiliar spot in the Tama Hills. I ended up arriving at the park on the verge of tears, two hours late. So, so late!

It was clear that I wouldn't be hired now, but I thought I should at least apologize in person. All the other applicants seemed to have gone home, so I hesitantly poked my face into the interview room.

"Hey, where should I wash with the mop?"

"Give it to me. I'll handle the washing."

The two employees(?) inside were cleaning up the venue. I didn't recognize the woman, but the man's voice was familiar.

Amazing! He was that same handsome senpai who had claimed my lonely lunch spot! Was he working here at this park too? He was handsome, but scary. It made me nervous. On top of that, I was so, so late!

But, I screwed up my courage and spoke up: "U-Um... Is this where the interviews are being held?"

"Who are you?" the senpai asked. He looked exhausted. The interviews he'd been conducting must have been really taxing.

"Chujo Shiina. I applied for the part-time job... but I was late to my interview..." I did my best, and miraculously managed to get through my apology without flubbing one word. Although I wished I could have been this assertive in the real interview...

"We had an incident; interviews are delayed until tomorrow," he told me. "We can't hire you, though."

"Wh-What?!" I spluttered, "Why not?"

"Child labor laws. You're too young."

"B-But I..." I was so shocked, I reverted to my middle school pronoun, "atashi," even though I should really be using the adult "watakushi." So humiliating!

"The exit is that way," he sighed. "Thanks for stopping by,"

I was dumbfounded. Part of it was being mistaken for a small child, but there was also the fact that he didn't seem to remember me at all. Even a hint of recognition would do. "Hey, aren't you the one who..." or "Hm? Haven't we met before?" or something like that. Anything would have been better than nothing!

Usually when a man and woman meet each other at school under awful circumstances, their next meeting will come in a more heart-pounding situation. That's how it always goes in manga, anyways. But there was no such sense of connection between that senpai and me.

He was treating me like someone he was meeting for the first time. Someone he couldn't care less about. Like I was "Extra #3." How humiliating!

I wanted to run out of the room wailing at the top of my lungs... but I'm in high school, not elementary school. I'm a JK (that makes three), so I gritted my teeth and walked away. It was very mature of me. Well done, Shiina!

On the way home, I once again engaged in some solo karaoke. I sang 10 Vocaloid songs. Then, when that didn't soothe my wounded heart, I belted out twenty passionate enka songs. I could see the Tsugaru Strait in winter!

The karaoke parlor employee once again said, "You really are good. I mean it," but I wished he would stop. I never know how to react to people patronizing me.

That night, in tears, I explained everything to my mother, and she let me sleep in bed with her for the first time in a while.

The next day, I overheard some girls talking during lunch break; it seemed that that rude second-year was named Kanie Seiya. The first years talked about him a lot, I guess, because of how handsome he was.

They talked about how he had excellent grades and incredible athletic ability, but that he also had an awful personality (to which I could attest), so he didn't have any friends.

At the very least, it proved that I wasn't alone in the way Kanie Seiya-senpai treated me. I wasn't sure how to feel about that... if he was especially cold to

me, that was at least better than being treated like an extra.

I also overheard them saying that Kanie-senpai tended to spend time with another girl in his grade, Sento Isuzu-senpai. There had been rumors that the two were dating a while back, but it seemed they weren't true (although that was also just rumors, so I couldn't be sure).

At lunch, that very same Sento Isuzu-senpai came to my class to ask to see me. I knew it was Sento-senpai immediately, because the girls in the seats around me whispered, "That's Sento-senpai, the second year! Isn't she so pretty?"

Everyone was staring at me, shocked that I was the one she was there to see. How embarrassing!

Anyway, it turned out Sento Isuzu-senpai was the person who had been cleaning up the interview venue with Kanie-senpai last night—she really was beautiful and had a great figure. It was hard to believe we were from the same country! I don't typically swing that way, but I couldn't help staring at her.

"Are you Chujo Shiina-san?" Sento-senpai asked, without even a greeting to break the ice. My mouth flapped uselessly. All I could do was nod. "I emailed you last night," she said. "You haven't seen it yet?"

"Ah... u-um..." That was right. I'd been so busy soothing my wounded heart that I hadn't checked my emails at all last night. Anyway, about the only emails I ever got were promotions from my usual karaoke parlor and spam about making money by dating women past their prime. LINE, you say? What's that? Is it tasty?

"You didn't see it, then?" she asked.

"Um... um, no," I answered.

"I apologize for our acting manager's behavior at last night's interview," she said. "There were a number of incidents that left us all rather on edge."

"R-Right..."

"I know this might be a little confusing after all that's happened," she sighed, "but..."

What could she be about to ask? I was so confused. Was it just an apology? Was it a declaration of rivalry, telling me to stay away from “my Kanie-kun”?

“Would you consent to a re-interview?” she asked. “If you still want the job, of course.”

“Huh? U-Um...” It was so strange. I had been late, after all. I could hardly complain if they rejected me.

“Of course, I call it an interview, but it’s just a formality,” she explained. “We won’t take up much of your time. Are you free at the moment?”

“Um... um... yes.” How frustrating. Why was it that “Um” and “Yes” were all I could say? At a time like this, I should work hard and try to say something else. Like “darshe zanna,” which means “thank you” in Farbanian. Well, better not to say that, actually. Sorry.

“All right. Come with me, then.” Sento-senpai started walking swiftly, and I ran to catch up with her. When we arrived in a deserted hallway in a corner of the east building, Kanie-senpai was there, waiting for us.

“Here she is,” Isuzu told him.

“Right,” he affirmed. “I still can’t believe you’re really in high school...”

Senpai looked me up and down closely as he spoke. It wasn’t the way a man looked at a woman; more the skeptical eye of someone trying to decide whether or not to buy a slightly questionable city bike in a hardware store. It was an awful way to treat someone, but he really was handsome. So annoying!

“Sorry about yesterday,” he told me. “Mistakes were made. If you still want the job, we can get the interview out of the way here.”

“Y-Yes?” I said.

“The trial period will last two weeks. During that time, you’ll get 750 yen per hour. You requested merchandise and food services, but we’d like to have you as an actor assistant. Saturdays will be full time,” he went on, “and weekdays, you’ll work the closing shift at least three days a week. If you accept those conditions, we’ll hire you. What do you think?”

“Um... ah, well...” I was so confused. Just what titles did Kanie-senpai and

Sento-senpai hold? Wasn't it a little bit bizarre that I had to decide whether to take the job or not right on the spot, in a place like this?

"Well?" he demanded. "Will you do it or not?"

"Um... ah... W-Wuh..."

"You won't?"

"No. Yes. Ah, um..."

"Which one? Out with it." Kanie-senpai was clearly getting annoyed. It was cruel of him to push me like this, when I was already struggling to answer. So annoying!

"Ah... Ah... Alboot!!" I shouted at the top of my voice. I'd flubbed it again. So humiliating!

Incidentally, I had meant to shout, "I'll do it!" This felt like my last chance to change myself. If I turned it down now, I would be consigning myself to a miserable, ashen high school life. A repeat of middle school... that was one thing I wanted no more part of. Kanie-senpai was very unpleasant, and Sento-senpai was inscrutable and kind of scary, but I couldn't run away. I mustn't run away.

They both stood there dumbfounded for a moment, maybe because I had shouted so loud.

"Alboot?" he asked. "What does that mean?"

"I wonder if it's some kind of dialect?" Sento-senpai whispered.

"Sounds a little like Arabic," Kanie-senpai whispered back.

I realized I would have to try again.

"...I-I'll doobit! No, I'll boodit! I... I'll boo my dest!" I was trying to say, 'I'll do it, I'll do my best,' but for some reason it came out as 'I'll boo my dest.' My language center was utterly hopeless!

Sento-senpai at last seemed to catch on, and threw me a lifeline. "Are you trying to say that you'll do it?"

"Y-Yes..." I said, relieved.

“All right then, we’ll start you up this weekend.” With that, Kanie-senpai seemed about to leave, but he stopped and spoke just once more. “That reminds me... Have we met somewhere before?”

“Y-Yes...” I told him. “Um, on the sta—”

“Ah, never mind. Don’t be late again.” He turned around and left without even listening to my answer.

*Why did you even ask me, then?! I wondered. So, so annoying!*

After watching him walk away, Sento-senpai spoke to me again. “I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

I don’t know why, but in that moment, I felt like she and I could really get along. Anyway, that’s how I got a job at Amagi Brilliant Park.

## 2

I started my job at the park that weekend.

I arrived at work at 9:00 a.m. The staff (referred to as “cast,” apparently) had to pick up their ID cards from the security center next to the employee gate. The head of security, Mr. Okuro, was a little bit of an oddball, and I felt a sort of affinity with him.

Then, just as Sento-senpai had told me to do in her email, I headed right for the conference room, where the new employee orientation was supposed to take place. Inside were about twenty brand new hires, just like me. The majority were in college and/or in their 20s, with me being the only high school student there as far as I could see.

They all seemed very nervous. I was petrified, too—understandable, I hope, since it was my first job—but there was one person there who seemed strangely relaxed.

She was a pretty older woman who gave off real calming vibes. She talked to me a little (probably because I happened to be sitting next to her) and

explained that her name was Adachi Eiko and she used to work in AVs.

*Wait, I thought. Wait a minute here. Did she say AVs? AVs, as in... AVs? That's not short for Armored Valkyries, right?*

"Everyone always seems so surprised when I tell them about it. I wish I knew why..." Eiko-san sighed, ignoring my own stunned reaction.

It was incredible. Was this what it meant to be out in the world? Just sitting next to someone in her profession, I felt like I had grown up a lot. Like I'd reached a place no one else in my school had ever been. So grateful to her!

Several minutes later, after everyone had arrived, another girl came in late and sat down next to me. She looked about my age, and I guessed she was the only other high school student there.

She had short hair and a real bubbly energy to her. She introduced herself as Bando Biino, said "looking forward to working with you!" and offered me a handshake. I just sat there, stammering. I wasn't nervous because we had only just met—it was because she was dressed in pajamas, and the hand she was offering me was stained with fresh blood.

"Orientation is so important!" she explained. "That's why I snuck out of the hospital! I guess it caused my wound to open up again... Hehehe..."

*Don't "hehehe" about that! I silently cried. Your whole side is sopping red! Someone, please call an ambulance! This girl is crazy! Her face was growing paler and paler by the minute.*

"I-I'm fine! This is... nothing. Just want to... work... blurgh..."

Before I could think of what to do, Biino-san toppled over. Some members of the cast came running and carried her off on a stretcher.

While the rest of us sat there, trembling in fear, the chief of security made an announcement: "Sorry, sorry about that. Um, we'll start the orientation soon, but please rest easy in the meantime." Then he wandered off. There was no way we could rest easy, of course. (Eiko-san was quite relaxed. She really did have nerves of steel.) Several of the newcomers even stood up, pale-faced, and left the room. I totally got how they felt; I would have done the same, if I could.

Before long, our trainers arrived. Trainers were experienced cast members in charge of getting new employees settled in. They would teach us the bare minimum of what we needed to know to work at the park.

“Atten-SHUN!” a sharp voice cried, as three mascot characters entered.

One was a mouse-like mascot with a rotund body like a wombat. This was the Fairy of Sweets, Moffle!

One was a sheep-like mascot covered in pillow-y white wool. This was the Fairy of Music, Macaron!

One was a dog-like mascot covered in fluffy down, carrying an adorable little pouch. This was the Fairy of Flowers, Tiramii!

Their feet squeaked cutely as they ran to form a neat row in front of us.

“Wow!” Me and the other newbies launched into a round of applause. What else could we do? These were Amagi Brilliant Park’s headliners, after all! Even if it was just a minor amusement park, you couldn’t ignore that kind of star power!

*They must have sent them here to welcome and soothe the nervous newcomers on our first day,* I thought. How considerate! I was so grateful! Were they going to dance for us? Offer souvenir photos? We were all on the edges of our seats as we waited to find out!

But while we applauded them—

The Fairy of Sweets, Moffle, threw the whiteboard against the wall. It hit it and fell with a bang and a clatter. “Quiet! Shut your traps, fumo!” His voice dripped malice. It lacked even a trace of warmth.

A hush did indeed fall over the room—although it was less that he had told us to be quiet, and more that we couldn’t quite square the “Fairy of Sweets” image with the words coming out of his mouth.

“...Something amusing you, fumo? You must be amused, because I see you all smiling! You still think you’re customers, is that it?”

Nobody knew what to say.

Moffle continued: “Listen up, maggots. The minute you set foot in this land of

hopes and dreams, you cease being human, fumo! You're the lowest forms of life on Earth, fumo! You are nothing but unorganized grab-assitic pieces of amphibian shit, and I am gonna ride you day and night until you learn how to interact with the guests! You will not laugh! You will not cry, fumo!"

It was a surprise to see Moffle talking at all, but the foulness that spewed from his mouth just took it over the top.

"We are gonna break you, we are gonna wash you out, and we are gonna take pleasure in seeing that happen, fumo! If you puke on our park's legacy, you will earn our contempt! You are gonna wish you never came here, fumo! Understand? ...Now, time to start training, fumo."

"Everyone, line up! Stand at attention, ron!" The Fairy of Music, Macaron, shouted. Everyone rushed to line up—I just barely made it in time, myself—except for one man, who seemed about college age. He looked like the superficial, slacker-y type.

"Hey, you! Slack-jawed bleach boy! Get your measly ass up here, fumo!" Moffle shouted, singling out the slacker. With an annoyed roll of his eyes, the man did as he was told, but he kept his posture slumped 45 degrees in an aggressive act of defiance.

"Looks like we're dealing with a real shitheel, fumo. Where were you born, fumo?"

"...Hokkaido."

"Hokkaido? Only cows and crabs come from Hokkaido. Which are you, fumo?"

It was a bizarre question, I thought. Naturally, the slacker also scowled in confusion. "Huh? What're you talkin' about?"

"Are you a cow? Or a crab?" Moffle demanded. "Answer me! Right now!"

"Uh, I mean... what? What are you talking a—blugh!"

A body blow from Moffle sent the slacker doubling over in pain. "I'm asking the questions here, fumo! Are you a cow! Are you a crab! Answer! This! Instant!"

“Uh... guh, I... I...”

“You want another one, fumo?!”

“I’m... c-crab... no, c-cow? I’m a cow!” the man moaned.

“If you’re a cow, then act like it, fumo! Let’s hear you moo! Moo, moo!”

“M-Moo...”

“That’s one hell of a limp-dick cow! I’ve seen five-year-olds that could do better! Try again, and put your whole ass into it, fumo! Moo, moo!”

“Moo! Moo! Moooooo!”

“Still lacking conviction. Practice it, fumo.”

The slacker man was relieved. Tiramii walked him to a corner of the room, where he stood looking on the verge of tears. I was on the verge of tears, too.

“Listen up, nuggets! I’m not taking any shit from you, fumo. From now on, the first and last words out of your filthy sewers will be ‘Sir!’ You got that, fumo?!”

“S-Sir, okay, sir...” the group answered, out of sync.



“That’s ‘Sir, yes, sir!’ ron! Again!”

“S-Sir... yes, sir...”

“Can’t hear you, mii! One more time!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” we all shouted out desperately.

Still, Moffle didn’t seem pleased. “I still can’t hear you, fumo! Is this how you plan to act around our guests?! I can hear them already! ‘Amagi Brilliant Park is a park of gutless crybabies!’ Now our reputation’s in the toilet, and it’s all your fault, fumo!”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Was being gutless really so bad? Were the customers terrorists? Were they Communists?

From there, Moffle and the others went on and on about how we were know-nothing weaklings, how they were going to turn us into emotionless killing machines, and how we’d start with a twenty kilometer run carrying twenty kilograms on our backs.

I wanted to run away. Everyone else seemed to be looking for a way out, too.

It was just then that Kanie Seiya-senpai and Sento Isuzu-senpai arrived.

“What the hell are you doing, you rat?!” Kanie-senpai bellowed.

“Fumo?!”

Kanie-senpai kicked Moffle in the butt.

“This is no way to treat an educator, fumo!”

“Shut up! Educator, my ass!”

They both looked furious. They didn’t seem to get along at all.

“Moffu... well, I’m glad you’re here, fumo. I have to build something out of all this human refuse, and watching me beat you to death might just scare ‘em rigid!”

A paw whipped through the air. Senpai dodged. A thrilling back-and-forth commenced: folding chairs went flying, tables toppled, and the new hires ran everywhere in panic.

*Ah, I wondered, dazed. What is happening here? I was just trying to get a part-time job at an amusement park. Why am I forced to cower into a corner while mascots fight to the death nearby? I want to go home.*

“That’s enough of that,” Sento-senpai declared. Then, she pulled out a musket and fired shots into Kanie-senpai, Muffle, and the others. Her gun must have had some kind of special bullets, because they didn’t seem to die. They just writhed around on the ground, clearly in a lot of pain. At this point, though, I had already lost my ability to be surprised by anything.

At last, the commotion died down.

“...Is everybody calmed down now?” she asked. “Then, please continue.”

Kanie-senpai and the others spent some time doubled over, but at Sento-senpai’s urging, they finally stood up on unsteady legs. Their shoulders were heaving. Muffle caught my attention in particular: a costume character, heaving for breath? That was *very* strange.

Kanie-senpai spoke. “Hahh... hahh... You told me to trust you with the newcomer training, so I did... but what’s with this boot camp crap?!”

“Whew... whew... ...It’s cutting edge, fumo,” Muffle insisted. “Look... you see a lot of part-timers screwing around on Twitter these days, fumo. They walk into fridges, sleep on top of merchandise... It’s a huge risk for the company, fumo. I wanted to head all that off by instilling strict discipline and accountability from the start, fumo.”

“You’ll chase them away before any of that sticks!” Kanie-senpai insisted. “We’re already short on employees, and you already want to drive out the handful of people actually *willing* to apply to this crap amusement park?!”

Just then, Macaron and Tiramii chimed in.

“The main reason is actually that we watched *Full Metal Jacket* the other day, ron.”

“We’ve been practicing Sgt. Hartman’s boot camp speech, mii!”

“Yeah, I figured it was something like that... Anyway, you three are out! Get back to your posts. Shoo, shoo!” Kanie-senpai sent them away like they were

stray cats or something.

“Aw, we’re off the job, fumo?”

“No way! I worked hard on those running cadences, ron!”

“Yeah, mii! Like ‘I don’t know but I’ve been told! Isuzu-chan’s c\*nt is mighty cold!’... bguh!”

Sento-senpai shot Tiramii again, killing him. I was starting to realize that the musket was more like one of those fans people use to whack each other in comical situations. That made perfect sense to me.

Moffle and Macaron left, dragging off Tiramii’s corpse. Kanie-senpai and Sento-senpai remained behind and cleared their throats.

“Ah, excuse us. We made a slight miscalculation... Just forget all that nonsense. No, wait, wait! Don’t leave... Ah, they left. Damn.” Kanie-senpai clicked his tongue ruefully as he watched two or three more new hires flee the room. “Sento, would you please?”

“Certainly.” Sento-senpai stepped out in front of him, holding a sheaf of documents under one arm. “I will now explain the basics of what it means to work here. Please pass these printouts around.”

Everything after that went smoothly.

Kanie-senpai seemed to have other work to attend to, because he disappeared immediately.

Sento-senpai explained the park rules and terminology, as well as the basics of how to dress and greet customers, in a very businesslike manner. Businesslike is such a wonderful word, don’t you think? Businesslike forever!

I started to realize, as she was speaking, that Kanie-senpai and Sento-senpai weren’t just leaders for the part-time crew, but occupied much more important positions in the park. I didn’t know more than that, but they wore park uniforms, and Sento-senpai led the orientation so efficiently that it made her seem even more impressive than she was at school. *Maybe I’ll be a capable woman like her some day!* I thought.

But as wonderful as she was, I was still curious about her relationship with Kanie-senpai; I couldn't help but pick up on some sexual tension between them. *They might be up to some pretty risqué stuff when no one was watching*, I thought. *Like... holding hands and stuff!* But then, she had also shown no mercy in putting a bullet into him, so maybe their relationship was platonic after all?

Hmm, I was just so curious! *If I get another chance*, I thought, *I should try to observe them more closely!*

The orientation ended just before noon, and then we were shown around the park. Sento-senpai read out our names and informed us where we'd all be stationed:

The AV performer(?), Adachi Eiko-san, was assigned to Macaron's Music Theater. She waved to me as she went on her way. *What a nice person!* I thought. *Let me call you "big sister!"* Actually, I won't do that. Sorry.

"Chujo Shiina-san?" Sento-senpai called.

"Y-Yes?!" I squeaked.

"Your assignment is Muffle's House of Sweets. You'll be an actor's assistant. Good luck."

"Dokay! Al boodai mest!" You can probably guess these things by now, but I was trying to say, "Okay! I'll do my best!"

But... wait a minute. Did she just say Muffle's House of Sweets? Wasn't that the attraction where that awful Muffle worked? Was I going to be his assistant? I was definitely going to end this day by peeing myself. (I had already been on the verge before.)

"Any questions?" she asked.

"Ah... u-um, no, ma'am..."

I was seriously thinking about running away.

There was still time. I could tell Sento-senpai I quit, apologize, run home and bury myself in my covers. If I did that, I would never have to meet that scary Muffle again! Then again, maybe not...

Like I said before, I was a fan of Moffle's when I was little. So round and plushy, those big button eyes... A sweets-loving friend to all! The way he'd tilt his head and whuffle, "Fumo? Moffu!" He was super-duper cute. You just wanted to hug him and stroke his fur! And when I was feeling lonely, my Moffle plushie was always there for me.

And yet...

*That* Moffle was just too much. He was violent and aggressive, had a potty mouth, and he had a nasty look in his eyes (which seems strange to say about a mascot costume, but I was insistent that that was still the case).

My pure image of him had been thoroughly shattered—as devastated as Hue, the old capital of Vietnam, during the Tet Offensive. So enraging!

*In that case, I thought, maybe I should stay and fight?*

I could go to that House of Sweets and give the person in that Moffle suit a piece of my mind. I could get him to take off the costume and have a good look at the ugly jerk underneath. That way, I could draw a line between him and the Moffle in my bed at home. That way, I could have good dreams again. I worked up my nerve and headed for the House of Sweets.

I would give that costume actor a piece of my mind! I would take back my peaceful nights!

"Thirty minutes late? Hey, rookie... What do you think this job is, fumo?"

"Ah... ah... um, um... rorrssy, rorrssy..." I was on the verge of tears already. I had intended to arrive with plenty of time to spare, you see... But it was my first time backstage, and I didn't know where I was going... The next thing I knew, I was in a totally different area, and I ended up somewhere that looked like outer space, and the cast person I ran into (a man in a robot suit?) started yelling at me... Naturally, I asked for directions, but they were so complicated, I just ended up getting confused again... So frustrating! My sense of direction was utterly hopeless!

"I c-couldn't... find... I'm yorrssy," I stammered. "Um, s-sorrby..."

"Ahh, whatever, fumo. Just follow me." Moffle started to walk out of the

room, grumbling.

I felt so awful about being late that I couldn't say what I meant to say. So galling! So humiliating!

"Already busy with preparations for Golden Week, now I need to look after a rookie..." he muttered. "And a child at that, fumo. Why do I always get stuck working with kids, fumo?"

*Dealing with kids is your job, isn't it?!* I wanted to scream. But of course, I was nowhere near brave enough to do so.

Moffle swiftly led me to the House of Sweets's backstage area. We were using a passage reserved for employees only, and I could hear the giggling of the naughty mice from onstage nearby.

Despite everything else, I couldn't help but feel a little thrill about walking backstage at an amusement park.

He brought me to a corner of the corridor that had been converted into a supply room—and a messy one, at that. The smell of paint thinner hung faintly in the air. Spare animatronics and audio devices lay all around. There was a work table for repairing the mechanics and the critters; needles, thread, and a sewing machine; piles of tools and tubes of paint... There was also a coloring table. It had an airbrush attachment, but what really caught my attention was the size of the filter mask lying nearby. It was clearly sized for Moffle's face.

"...It would be a lot better to have one central department to do all our maintenance, fumo. But because we don't have any budget, each attraction handles its own, fumo. This is my work space, so no poking around, all right?"

"Y-Yes sir..."

"First, let's get you a costume, fumo. The question is whether I have one that'll fit..."

Moffle searched through the lockers in the back of the supply space, then returned with a pale pink costume that looked like a cook's outfit. It was a cute, but simple, design.

"I reckon this is the smallest one I have... Now, hold still, fumo."

“O-Okay...”

He held the costume up to my shoulders and narrowed his eyes. He took out a measuring tape and measured me here and there. He even measured my bust!

“Ah, um, s-sexual h-harassment...”

“What? I’m an adult, fumo. A kid like you isn’t even on my radar, fumo. Now, arms up. Arms.”

Moffle wasn’t angry. He just seemed baffled. Such thoughtless treatment. So humiliating!

“Ugh...”

“Yeah, that’ll be baggy on you, fumo. Might as well not even bother with the pants... Hmm.”

After thinking for a bit, Moffle tossed the pants aside and began messing with the cook’s top. He didn’t use scissors, but just folded the excess cloth away and then fastened it with safety pins.

He was actually doing needlework with those round paws of his... Incomprehensible. How did he do it?

“There we are. That’s a temporary fix, but try it on, fumo. Go on.”

“Huh? R-Right here?”

“There’s an employee bathroom over there. Go on, fumo.” Moffle urged me on, clearly annoyed. I quickly ran into the bathroom and got changed, just like he told me to.

As I’ve explained several times, I’m quite petite, so the costume top fit me like a dress, with the hem stopping ten centimeters above my knees. That felt really short to me, but when I looked in the mirror, it was actually really cute! I put on the cook’s hat, and that completed the ensemble. Wow! Now I was a real member of the cast!

I was still nervous about a lot of things, but putting on this uniform(?) really put me in the spirit. I did a twirl in front of the mirror. It was pretty... no, really good! I had to take a picture and send it to my mom! She’d be so happy for me!

I wasn't used to using my smartphone, though, so while I was messing with it, the door banged open.

"What's taking so long? Hurry up, fumo!"

"Oh, oh... sorry, sorry!" I flew out of the bathroom, deciding I could take the picture another time.

Moffle stared at my costume with a careful, scrutinizing gaze.



“...Well, not bad, if I do say so myself. When you’re done working for the day, just leave those clothes on the bench from before, fumo. I’ll do the final stitching tonight. In the meantime, you can stash your things in those lockers there... pick any locker that’s available, fumo.”

“O-Okay!” I threw my uniform and belongings into the locker.

Moffle was as strict as ever, but I was surprised to hear him say that he’d sew up my outfit. Maybe he really was a nice guy?

“What’s with that warm-and-gooey expression? Are you thinking ‘maybe he’s really a nice guy,’ fumo?”

“Ah, um... well...”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I just know that leaving a costume with a little girl like you is a recipe for a ruined costume, fumo. Pain in my ass, heaven’s sake...”

Okay, so he wasn’t a nice guy. He was surprisingly sharp, though. So annoying!

“Your first job today will be assisting me in Entrance Square, fumo. Follow me.”

Moffle-san and I walked down the underground tunnel to Entrance Square.

Oh, just so you know! From now on, I’ll be referring to Moffle as Moffle-san. There was something about the gravitas he put out that made me feel uncomfortable addressing him without an honorific. Besides, using “-san” would help me to distinguish this Moffle from the one on my bed! Thus, Moffle-san.

Entrance Square was the big plaza just beyond the park entrance; it was the first place the guests saw after they came through the gate.

“We’re going onstage now, fumo. We’ll be in front of the guests, so stay alert, fumo.”

“Y-Yes sir!”

“I’ll be entertaining the guests, and you’ll be helping me. Keep an eye on the

time, too; every thirty minutes I get a break, so you'll guide me backstage then, fumo. If a guest wants a picture, you'll take it for them, fumo. I'll also do some juggling, so you'll hold onto my things for that, fumo. Also, if one of those guests takes too much of my time, it's your job to gently steer them away and let the next guest through, fumo. There's a lot of other things, too, so you'll need to play it by ear. Anything you don't get?"

I didn't even know what to say. He had run through the explanation so quickly, it was all a muddle in my mind. But Moffle-san was glaring at me. I knew if I said the wrong thing, he would lay into me.

"I-I'm fine... I think."

"Good. Then let's go, fumo."

Moffle-san made a few minor adjustments to his outfit, then left the room. Petrified, I followed him. I never knew people actually stepped with the same arm and leg before, but here I was, doing it. What an educational experience!

The moment we arrived in Entrance Square, though, I felt transported. I'd spent all morning in the dark, gloomy backstage area, so this was my first time onstage for real. "Ah..."

A cheerful melody played. Fountains danced in whimsical rhythms. Sculptures and buildings, in all different colors, sparkled in the sun. Macaron, Tiramii, and minor characters like Wanipii were out and about, greeting the guests. Some gave out balloons, some played the flute, some did pantomime—all kinds of things. They were such amazing performers, it was hard to believe they were really people in costumes.

Amagi Brilliant Park was infamous around western Tokyo as a crummy amusement park, but... That just wasn't true. This place was a wonderland!

"This plaza was in an awful state until last month, fumo," Moffle-san whispered to me. "We all worked hard to fix it up, fumo. Even with no budget, we all chipped in... It was a lot of hard, late nights, but I'd say we got it looking presentable, fumo."

After everything that had happened that morning, I had honestly grown disillusioned with this park. But now, I was starting to feel like I wanted to see a

little more of this place—this place where I worked. That was the mysterious magic that this view had worked on me.

“Now, let’s start the fun, fumo.” Muffle-san headed for the center of the plaza. As he walked away from me, he put out an aura that was difficult to describe.

I felt like I had seen it somewhere before. It reminded me of... my father, I think. My father had been a firefighter. Sometimes, he had had to leave home on an urgent call, and when he walked out of the house, he looked a bit like that. Even though they were very different men, in very different professions... I wondered why I felt that way. It was hard to say.

“Oh, Yuna-chan! Look! It’s Muffle!” A family with a little girl walked right up to Muffle-san.

Muffle-san tilted his head cutely and waved. The girl hesitated a little at first, then ran right up to him and grabbed his sleeve. Muffle patted the girl’s head with his plush hand. The girl finally smiled; her parents were beaming.

The Muffle-san before me now wasn’t that nasty cast member who had berated the new employees. He was the sweet, kind Muffle that I hugged every night. It was like some kind of spell had been cast.

Of course, I couldn’t just stand here admiring him. I was failing in my job as an assistant!

The guest family wanted to take a picture with Muffle, but I was just standing there! The next thing I knew, they were asking another guest to take their picture! Muffle-san glared at me. So scary!

After interacting with the guests for a while, Muffle-san held out his hand to me. He was asking me for his juggling balls, but I didn’t realize that. I just stuck my own right hand out, like I was asking for a dog’s paw. Muffle-san glared at me. So scary!

An elderly guest asked me for directions. He seemed to be looking for an attraction called Aquario, but I had no idea where it was. While I panicked and stammered, he eventually took out his pamphlet map and wandered off on his own. Muffle-san’s eyes stared daggers into me. So scary!

The next thing I knew, we had spent an hour in that plaza. I felt like I was forgetting something important. That's right! He was supposed to take a break every thirty minutes! I was supposed to beckon to Muffle-san and take him backstage... wasn't I?

Perhaps tired of waiting, Muffle-san turned and ran off backstage, his feet squeaking as he went. What else could I do but follow after him?

"You... You incompetent!" Muffle-san screamed at me as we made it backstage again. "Your job is to assist me, fumo! You did nothing! What are we even paying you for?! Do you even want to be here?!"

"Um... Um, sorry..."

"Here we go again! Is "um" and "sorry" all you ever say, fumo? Do you speak Japanese, fumo? Were you born in the Ukraine, fumo? I'd be better off by myself at this rate, fumo!"

"I'm s-so—"

"Don't you dare say you're sorry, fumo!"

"Ah... wahhhh..." Lacking any idea of what to say, I burst out crying. I knew that crying at work was bad, but that's just the way women are, you know? I couldn't help it!

We were entering the usual pattern. My classmates were patient, doing everything they could to look after me, yet I always betrayed their expectations. Eventually they'd get annoyed, get disappointed, and then throw a few words of consolation at me before walking away.

Muffle-san was going to do the same thing. It was inevitable. After all, I was worthless.

"Ahh... sor—ahh... um..." While I choked and sniffled, Muffle-san let out a deep sigh.

An awkward silence reigned. Next, he was going to say, "Fine, you can go," because those were the simplest words anyone could use to get my worthless self out of their sight. I wished he'd just say them already. Then I could just go home and bury myself in my bed. I could go back to being my usual pathetic

self.

But here's what Muffle-san said instead: "You'll do a better job next time, fumo. Is there anything you don't get?"

Muffle-san had no intention of letting me run away. He dragged me out in front of the guests and forced me to interact with them again.

Obviously, I wasn't going to get the hang of things any time soon. It was pathetic. The guests sighed at me, scoffed at me, yelled at me... and each time, I started to panic. I think Muffle-san and the rest of the cast must have covered for me then, but I was in such a panic that I don't actually know what they did.

I was so afraid, so self-pitying, so embarrassed... I was on the verge of tears again and again! Each time I started to lose my composure, Muffle-san would take me backstage and ask, "Is there anything you don't get?"

At first, I couldn't say anything. But the third or fourth time, I timidly asked him: "U-Um... If I want to take someone's picture... how do I ask them for it?"

Then, instead of yelling, Muffle-san just said calmly: "Moffu. When that happens, you can say 'Sir (or Ma'am), would you like a photo with Muffle?' Say it to me for practice, fumo."

"...Yes. Um..."

"Go on."

"...S-Sir... Would you like a photo with Muffle-san?"

"Not 'Muffle-san.' Say 'Muffle,' fumo. One more time."

"S-Sir... Would you like a photo with Muffle?"

"Don't stutter. One more time."

"Sir, would you... like a photo with Muffle?"

Muffle-san looked at me carefully for a moment, then gave a small nod.  
"...Good enough. You see how it works now, fumo?"

"Y-Yes."

"Then is there anything else you don't get?"

My miserable day came to an end. Exhausted, I cleaned out the House of Sweets as Muffle-san ordered, and then changed back into street clothes in the cast bathroom. I was under a ton of stress, and I felt completely numb, but I still had to go put my uniform on Muffle-san's work bench.

The uniform was covered in my gross sweat, and I didn't really want to hand it over to someone else... but I couldn't actually say that. I folded up the uniform and was heading to the work bench when I heard some people talking around the corner.

It sounded like Muffle-san and Kanie-senpai.

"...So, how'd it go?" Kanie-senpai asked.

"It was a disaster, fumo. She can't even talk to the guests. She actually started crying at one point. If anyone was going to cry, it should have been me, fumo!"

They were talking about me. They were talking about my day at work. My arms and legs, limp from exhaustion, suddenly tensed up again.

"Any hope for her?" Kanie-senpai wanted to know. "If she's not cut out for the service industry, we could move her to backstage work..."

"I'm not sure. It might not be about that, fumo."

"Really?"

"Moffu. Seiya, you were a performer once, right?"

"...Yes, and?" There was a stiffness in Kanie-senpai's voice.

"How'd you feel the first time you went on stage, fumo? You were nervous, weren't you?"

"Hmm... I suppose I was."

"You've got more guts than most people, fumo, but I bet even you got nervous out there. So you can probably imagine what it was like for a little introvert like her, fumo."

"Hmm..."

"Whether it's an audience of hundreds or just two or three, putting yourself

out there is scary, fumo. It's really, really scary. So, ah... you know. It's hard to tell from just the first day, fumo."

It was a surprisingly evasive statement. Kanie-senpai seemed to pick up on that, too.

"What's this, hmm? You're covering for a part-timer?"

"I wouldn't say..."

"That's what it sounds like."

"Moffu. Anyway, I was especially hard on her today. If she runs away because of that, it'll be a sign that she's got nothing to offer us, fumo. She wouldn't last long even if I was kind to her."

"That's fine, just drop the *agoge*, okay?"

"Roger that, fumo."

I heard Kanie-senpai's footsteps moving away, which suggested that their talk was over. Having listened in the whole time and not knowing what to do, I just stood there, frozen. I was surprised to hear them having such a laid-back conversation after they'd been at each other's throats that morning. Maybe they were actually friends? And... Kanie-senpai used to be a performer? What did that mean? He seemed to have no friends other than Sento-senpai(?) at school, and I'd been convinced that he had no social skills at all.

"Hey, rookie. Did you catch all that, fumo?"

"Eeek?!" I let out a screech. It seemed Muffle-san knew that I was listening in! Before I could come up with a good excuse though, he was in front of me.

"Um, um, sorry, sorry. I... I..."

"Ahh, it's fine, fumo." Muffle-san waved it away dismissively with his paw. "I was going to explain all of that to you, anyway. This just saves me time, fumo."

Muffle-san snatched the uniform from my hands, then squeaked back to his work space. Unsure of what to do, I followed after him.

"...I know you had a hard time today, fumo. Seiya told me you're a first year in high school, right? 'I don't fit in at my new school, so I'll get a job and have fun

there.' Is that what you've deluded yourself into believing, fumo?"

"Ah..." He was right on the money. Could everyone here read minds? "H-  
How... did you know?"

"It was obvious from watching you today, fumo. That's what it means to be an adult, fumo." Moffle-san's words were really insightful, but I felt a little uncomfortable having a plush rodent dissecting my psyche... "...Anyway, what I told Seiya earlier was the truth. I was especially hard on you today, fumo."

"Um, but then..."

"Now, I'll also be hard on you tomorrow. And the next day, and the next. I'm going to keep grinding away at you forever, fumo. Don't underestimate the service industry."

"Nngh..."

"Better quit now if you don't like it, fumo. I won't have you wasting both of our time."

"....."

"Got it? Then we're done here. Dismissed, fumo."

The next day was Sunday morning, and I didn't want to go to work at all. I didn't have an appetite, and my stomach hurt, but I thought I should at least drink some milk. When I peeked into the fridge, I also saw some apple pie left over from last night; Mom had made it to celebrate my first day at work.

She'd cut back on the sugar so it wasn't *incredibly* delicious, but it was still a really good pie. She had left a piece in front of Dad on the family altar, and prayed fervently.

It was morning now. Mom was off at her job at a family restaurant, so I was alone in the house. I could have just pulled the covers over my head and pretended like none of it had ever happened.

But. But... I had eaten that apple pie for breakfast, and the sweet-sourness had brought tears to my eyes.

Just one more day. I would work one more day at that awful place. If I could

manage that, then surely the apple pie would forgive me.

"You're late! Get us ready to open right away, fumo!" Muffle-san yelled. Such an awful way to treat someone! Even though I'd made it to work, fighting the urge to throw up the whole way!

I ran to my locker. He'd finished the final sewing on my uniform, and put it up neatly on a hanger. I tried it on, and it fit perfectly. He'd done an amazing job.

The minute I finished changing, Muffle-san took me all around, telling me "do this, do that." I was rushing around everywhere and so busy that I barely had time to think, let alone worry.

There were a few other part-time workers in Muffle's House of Sweets, and compared to the industrious Muffle-san, they were all pretty laid-back. They didn't get yelled at, though. They seemed to know what they were doing, so they just kept working at their own leisurely pace without needing Muffle-san to tell them anything.

"He's really biting your head off, huh?" one of my senpai workers said to me in the brief time before the park opened and the guests arrived. "The old man's really thrown himself back into things since they dodged the bullet of the park closing last month. He'd been really slacking before." This senpai part-timer had been working at the House of Sweets for about a year. He was in college, he said, so he was going to be quitting soon to look for a real job.

But, despite screaming at me as much as he did, Muffle-san wasn't as hard on my senpais. Why was that? I asked.

"Oh, well... Probably just because you screw up all the time."

It was such a reasonable answer that I couldn't even object. So depressing!

While we finished up the last of our odd jobs, opening time arrived and the guests started trickling in. Muffle-san and I were waiting at the end of the attraction route to take photos with the guests when they finished the course. It wasn't all that different from the work I'd done at Entrance Square yesterday, so I managed to get through it this time without getting too many glares thrown my way.

The real trouble came about an hour later. After seeing off a group from a senior organization, Muffle-san spoke to me. “Okay, we’ve done enough here, fumo. I have a meeting I need to attend, so I’ll need you to sub for me, fumo.”

“Er?” I asked nervously.

“This way, this way. C’mon, fumo.”

Muffle-san led me to the backstage storeroom and offered me a Muffle-san suit, complete with patissier’s costume and cook’s hat, plush fur, and cute round fluffy head.

“Um, um... what is this?” I asked.

“It’s my double, fumo. I need you to put this on and take commemorative photos at the House of Sweets while I do some work backstage.”

“Ah, right... But, um...”

What did he mean, “my double”? I mean, I knew that amusement parks usually had spare suits for their costume characters. But while the spare was well-made, it was clearly a costume, and looked all the shabbier compared to Muffle-san’s. It had none of that realism and life-like aura.

I was a little hesitant to wear the costume of someone whose real face I’d never even seen, but if I had to wear one, I’d prefer it to be the better quality one. So I worked hard to assert myself.

“Um, i-if I could... I’d like to wear that one instead...”

Muffle-san knitted his brow dubiously (it really was a well-made costume) and turned to look behind him. There was just an old wall there.

“Fumo?” Muffle-san pointed at himself with his paw, as if to say “What, you mean me?”

“Yes... Could I have your costume?”

“Ahh. Moffu.” Muffle-san nodded in understanding. “I can’t take it off, fumo.”

“...?” I was confused.

“I said, I can’t take it off, fumo. There’s no one inside.”

I didn’t understand what he was saying. I’d heard that theme parks put up a

front about their mascot characters, claiming “there’s no one inside,” but...

“You don’t get it, fumo? Ah, what a pain in the...” Muffle-san muttered to himself, then opened his mouth wide and chomped down on my hand. Rather than feeling cloth, as I was expecting, my fingers were greeted by the wetness of a living thing. There was... a tongue?! And teeth?!

“Eek?!”

It wasn’t especially slimy or unpleasant. Having my hand in Muffle-san’s moffly mouth felt more like it did when I was little and let my pet hamster nom on my finger.

“Wha? Huh? Wa...?!” I withdrew my hand and backed into a corner at full speed.

Muffle-san didn’t pursue me. He just snorted and folded his arms, smacking his ω lips as if he’d just tasted something unpleasant.

“You get it, fumo? I’m just me.”

“S-Sexual harassment...”

“Oh, pipe down. I just wanted to get my point across in the quickest way possible, fumo. ...The point is, I come from the magical realm, Maple Land. I’m the real deal. It’s not a top secret thing, so it’ll save us time if I just tell you now, fumo. Get it? Now put that costume on and double for me, fumo.” Muffle-san shoved the costume head into my hands.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of confusion. Muffle-san had said there was nobody ‘inside the suit’; that he was a real fairy from a magical land. Which meant that Muffle-san was “the real Muffle.”

It was awful. It was cruel. It was too much.

The kind, sweet Muffle; the Fairy of Sweets, Muffle... he just *couldn’t* be that rotten, nasty, high-and-mighty bully, Muffle-san!

Making matters worse was a conversation we had that evening. He was eating some donuts brought in as refreshments, and let out a sigh: “Donuts again? I’m not fond of sweet things, fumo...”

“B-But aren’t you the Fairy of Sweets?” I objected. “You’re supposed to love donuts...”

“Ah, that’s all ad copy,” he scoffed. “We did this collaboration with Señor Donut... you know, that famous chain.”

“Yes, I love them!”

“For the campaign, they decided—without my input—to say that I like donuts, so now I have to eat donuts every day during my breaks. What am I, some American cop? It’s just annoying, fumo.”

“Um, then... what sweets do you like?”

“Well... if pressed, I’d say salami, I reckon.”

*Isn’t that a drinking snack, not a sweet?* I thought.

“Ah, just talking about this makes me want a beer, fumo. I’m so sick of Hoppy all the time. Maybe I’ll have a beer, just for tonight...”

“Y-You drink alcohol?”

“Of course I do. I only work so I can drink, fumo.” Then he pulled out a cigarette from somewhere or other and lit it with a 100 yen lighter.

The brand was “Hope”— Short Hope, also known as Shoppo. Very austere.

*But then, I thought, he’s just an old man!*

“What’s with that expression? You’re thinking ‘he’s just an old man,’ is that it, fumo?”

“Gack!”

“Right on the money, eh? But I’ve never actually seen someone say ‘gack’ out loud before, fumo.”

“But, but... aren’t you a fairy?! Aren’t you a mascot who gives hope to children?! If you drink and you smoke, it’s... it’s...”

Moffle-san glared at me. So scary! “It’s what?”

“Well... it’s... Sorry.”

While I lowered my eyes, Moffle-san breathed out a plume of smoke, though

his expression was sour as he did. “I refrain while I’m working. And you should hold off on the lectures until you’re actually decent at your job, fumo. ...By the way.” Moffle-san peered seriously into my face.

“Yes?”

“You’ve grown rather talkative, fumo.”

“Ah...”

He was right. Now that he mentioned it, I had had quite a lot of back-and-forth with Moffle-san today. Even though we’d barely talked the day before... How surprising! How mysterious!

“Anyway, I still think you’re too soft. With the time left in the day, I’m going to put you through your paces even more.”

Immediately, the world around me went black.

After a few more hours of scolding and verbal abuse, my second day at the park came to an end.

Tomorrow was Monday. I was supposed to head to work the minute school was over, but I wasn’t actually planning on going back. My life as a part-time worker would come to an end after a mere two days.

I’d forced myself to work despite hating it. I’d done enough, in my opinion. I’d really pushed myself.

When I got home, Mom asked me “How did it go?” but I just said I was tired and went to bed, so that I didn’t have to tell her anything. The thought of telling her that I planned to quit was depressing, and I just didn’t have the mental energy for it.

Um, yes. I really *did* intend to quit. But then the next morning, when I showed up at school, something strange happened.

“Ah... morning, Chujo-san.” It was that girl from before who, as it happened, had been unanimously elected class rep a few days ago. She’d stopped even saying ‘hello’ to me most of the time, but since we were in front of the shoe

cabinets, I guess the timing and all made her feel obligated to talk to me.

“Ah, good morning,” I replied casually. For some reason, her jaw dropped in response.

Then, during second period gym class, this happened:

My gym teacher was... some might say earnest, some might say callous, but either way she liked singling out students who didn't show enough enthusiasm for her liking. She'd shout “I can't hear you!” and after watching the student cringe in response, she would cheerfully tell them “You must be anemic! Eat more meat!” and such. Yes, she was the worst kind of person for me to deal with, and had already singled me out once last week.

“Great, everyone's here! Let's time your sprints! Oh, heck, I forgot my stopwatch! Um... hey, you! The little one!” She pointed me out.

“Yes?” I said.

“You'll fetch it from the staff office, right?” she demanded.

“Yes ma'am,” I responded politely. “Where is the staff office?”

“Hm? Ah... oh, er... Just find a teacher and ask them,” she instructed.

“Yes, ma'am.”

All I had done was answer her and then head for the office. But for some reason, the other girls were all squinting at me. Had I said something strange?

The same thing happened a few more times that day. Someone would address me, I would respond, and the person would react with surprise.

“Of course that's what they're doing. You've been able to respond like a normal person,” Sento Isuzu-senpai told me at lunch.

I had planned on running off and eating by myself as usual, but she had come to my classroom and personally invited me to join her. Now we were sitting next to a flowerbed in the courtyard, eating our lunches together.

She asked me how I was doing. I said that everyone was acting really weird, and that had been her response. She also mentioned that Kanie-senpai was

absent from school today. Apparently he was running all around, trying to find ways to raise money for the park (though why a leader of the part-time staff needed to do that, I had no idea).

Isuzu-senpai's words caught me off-guard. "Huh?" I asked.

"Normally you would cringe and end up in a loop of 'um' and 'sorry,'" she told me. "But when I invited you to join me here, you simply said 'Okay, let's go' like any normal person would. Even I was a bit surprised."

"....." She was right, I realized. Isuzu-senpai wasn't normally an expressive person, so I hadn't noticed any surprise on her face, but... Ah, by the way, from now on I'll be calling her Isuzu-senpai instead of Sento-senpai. It sounds cuter!

"I heard about the way Muffle has been treating you, and I thought you might be thinking of quitting," she explained. "So I thought I might invite you out here to see how you were feeling..."

"I see," I told her. "Well... I'm sorry to make you take time out of your day..."

"You see? You wouldn't have been able to say that last week either," she pointed out.

"Ah..." I had even surprised myself, that time. The things she said were definitely true. But what was going on here? What had happened to me?

"M-Muffle-san told me that... that the people who work at AmaBri are real fairies from real magical lands," I blurted out.

Isuzu-senpai's brow wrinkled a little bit. "He told you that already? Well... it's not as if it's highly classified information, but..."

"I was wondering if Muffle-san might have cast some kind of spell on me..."

"I doubt it. Muffle-kyo does not have that kind of power, though he is a brilliant combatant..."

"C-Combatant?" I was surprised to hear him described in such a way. And what did she mean by 'kyo'? Kyo, like lord? 'Lord Muffle?'

"Don't worry about it," she advised me. "My point is that he can't use magic, at least based on what I know."

“But, but... Then why is it I can talk normally... normally to people?!”

“I don’t know...” Isuzu-senpai tilted her head and popped a tamagoyaki roll into her mouth. It was a discreet (but very cute) mannerism. So amazing! “Perhaps it’s a result of his training,” she guessed. “It may have been like shock therapy for you...”

“Hmm...” Of course, that made a lot of sense. Muffle-san had given me such a kick in the pants that now, compared to the torture of having to interact with guests, talking to my schoolmates seemed like the easiest thing in the world. And compared to Muffle-san, the gym teacher who so used to scare me was like a plate of takoyaki next to a venomous blue-ringed octopus. I know that’s a weird metaphor, but that’s what it felt like!

So, now I was feeling a little conflicted; it was really great that I could interact with people normally now. It would be amazing if I could keep it up forever!

But I didn’t want to admit that it was thanks to Muffle-san.

I’m not the kind of simpleton who would just go running up to Muffle-san in tears, thanking him and shouting “I’m going to work at AmaBri forever!” My self-esteem isn’t so rotten that I’d join a cult or LGAT seminars based on a little minor self-improvement! Remember: though I might be little, I’m not a child!

“You seem rather unhappy,” Isuzu said, gazing at me from the side.

“Huh? O-Oh... um... sorry.”

“Ah, you’re back.”

“Ah...”

Isuzu-senpai let out a small snort—it was hard to tell if it was a chuckle or an expression of disgust—and finished off the last of the side dishes in her lunch. She had chicken kara-age. It looked really good.

“So, do you think you’ll stay with the job?” she asked.

“Ah... um... well...” I wasn’t sure. Actually, I had planned to send her an email or something, saying that I wanted to quit. But while I had worked up enough courage to do that, I wasn’t ready to say it to her face.

“Um... um... I’m sorry,” I stuttered. “I’m so—”

Oh no! I'd regressed, just like that! I felt totally hopeless, and that feeling just made me feel even more hesitant. It was a deadly spiral.

"U-Um, I'm taking... today off..." I couldn't tell her I was quitting, but I at least managed to get that much out.

"I see. I'll let them know." Isuzu-senpai said nothing more than that, and went back to eating her lunch in silence.

Whenever my anxiety reached its peak, that's when it was time for solo karaoke. I decided I'd sing and sing, not paying attention to the time.

First, I warmed up with some Vocaloid songs: "Matroyshka" and "Senbonzakura," then "Setsuna Trip."

After five or six songs, my vocal cords felt nice and loose.

Then, on to the anisong. I started with a passionate rendition of a recent favorite, "Yasashisa no Riyuu." Then I went on to "SWINGING" and "Minamikaze." All such great songs! Then I sang "The Real Folk Blues"— that's the *Cowboy Bebop* ending, and while they call it blues, it's really more like enka. (Though that's what makes it so great, in my opinion.)

From there, it was a natural step to more enka. I'm not sure why, but singing "Kitasakaba" and "Michinoku Hitoritabi" put me in an English mood.

It was time to try some Western songs! The lyrics were in English, but if I knew a song well, I could sing it. It wasn't some die-hard geek thing; I had learned the songs from listening to my father's CDs, and as a result I could get pretty good grades on English songs.

First, I went with the Nirvana classic, "Smells Like Teen Spirit." That's a great song for when you're feeling down. The desperation, the feeling of going deeper and darker, yet still riding high! So now that I was riding high, I sang a few more songs in that vein. This was going great!

Then, I moved to the Godfather of Soul, James Brown. But I was feeling sad today (well, and every day), so I went with "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" as sort of a cooldown. Nothing, nothing, nothiiiiing! It felt good to hold that note so long!

JB (my nickname for James Brown) had picked me back up again, so I followed up with more JB: “Living in America.” Such a cheery, silly, bubbly song. ...Why did songs like these help to fire up someone as timid as me? I couldn’t say.

But right now, I was all about America: “Super highways! Coast to coast! Just easy to get anywhere... Atlanta... Chicago! L.A.! Wow! Living-inna-merica!”

“.....?!” Just then, I froze up. I was, of course, in a private parlor, but through the smoked glass of the soundproof door I could see three plush creatures peering in at me.

It was Muffle-san, Macaron-san, and Tiramii-san. They were pressed against the glass, watching me with the strangest expressions... all screwed-up faces and wide eyes.

The English lyrics continued to scroll across the old-fashioned CRT. They hastily waved their paws and hoofs, as if to say “keep singing,” but I was so shocked that I’d locked up, so while the music kept playing, I just stood there stock still.

On the other side of the glass, the group let out a sigh. Then they opened the door and came in.

“Aww, I guess we really did interrupt, mii. Sorry, okay?” Tiramii-san said.

“We come to this karaoke place a lot, ron. And this one employee, see... he’s been telling us all about this really awesome customer who comes in, even though she never talks to him...” Macaron-san added.

“We couldn’t have been more surprised to learn that it was you, fumo,” Muffle-san chimed in.

According to Macaron-san, the employee (the one who was always patronizing to me when I paid) had encouraged them all to listen to me.

The doors were only nominally soundproof, which meant voices could leak out into the halls. So if you stood right next to the door, you could probably hear me singing.

I suddenly realized that the room clock read 9:00 p.m.

AmaBri closed at 7:00 today, so it wasn’t that unusual to think they might

stop by a karaoke parlor near the station on the way back from work. (Though “usual” was also not a word I’d use for amusement park mascots doing after-work karaoke...)

“Um, um, um!” My eyes began to fill with tears of panic, but Muffle-san stopped me with a “moffu.”

“Isuzu told me you were taking off work today. Well, we all feel that way sometimes. No need to cry, fumo.”

“Um, but...”

“That’s not to say I’m not angry, of course.”

“Yeek?!”

I was so obviously afraid that Macaron-san gently patted my shoulder. “Don’t you worry, ron. He might say some things, but he’d never strike a girl. He’s old-fashioned that way, ron.”

“Macaron...” Muffle-san growled.

“Oh, calm down. It’s the least we can do for the nice performance she gave us, ron.”

“P-Performance?” I squeaked.

“Your singing. You were as great as that employee said, mii. You even blew *mii* away! Let’s sing together at the Alamo some time!”

“A-Alamo?” What was an ‘Alamo?’ I felt like I’d heard the name before...

“...It’s a love hotel near AmaBri, fumo. I’ll give you a word of warning: never go anywhere with this mongrel.”

“Th-That’s miin! I was just trying to get to know this cute li’l loli...”

“Shut up,” Muffle and Macaron hissed simultaneously.

“Mii...” Tiramii wheezed, deflated.

“...Anyway, it was a great performance, ron. You sure do find talent in the most unexpected places... I wish I could ask you to change postings to my Music Theater, ron.”

“A-Ah...” I had no idea what Macaron-san was talking about. Great performance? Talent? What? Was he talking about those songs I was singing just to satisfy myself? I mean, I was flattered, but he was still exaggerating, right?

I flashed back to a memory of when I was younger. We were in middle school, and going on a field trip. One of the popular girls in the class was singing an idol group song on the bus. Everyone loved it.

Right after her, my name was drawn as the next singer. Fighting back my desire to cry, I sang, and everyone went silent. Nobody said anything. I’m still pretty sure I must have sounded awful.

The girl who sang before me never talked to me again. I still don’t know how to take what happened there.

“Well, anyron... We came in late, so it’s obligatory catch-up time! Hmm, what to pick... let’s see...” Macaron-san suddenly picked up the remote and started messing with it. What on earth was he doing?

“Move it or lose it, mii!”

“Ah! Hey!” Tiramii banged a few buttons on the other remote and then mercilessly pressed the “send” button. Immediately, a cheerful intro began to play. It was the opening song for a superhero(?) anime that had recently been a hit.

“Um, um...” I tried to object.

“Gokigen you doukashitan da mii? Kao o mireba isshun de wakaru miiii! Hooligan, hooligaaan! Sesso nai deeesu!” He’d just started singing. I couldn’t stop him.

At some point, the nominally soundproof door had ended up closed, and we’d shifted to a four-person karaoke arrangement. Macaron-san had put in his song order, and was now playing a tambourine for accompaniment. Moffle-san chose his own song with a cautious scowl.

Tiramii-san had thrown himself into it so hard that he was shrieking.  
“...uchitoritaaai kachikoshitaaai! Tsumari Hanshin fan ga acchi-kocchi!”

Then we moved on to a karaoke competition.

Macaron-san led off with “Ai Senshi” from *Gundam*, and the others booed; they seemed to think that was an exclusively end-of-the-night song.

Moffle-san sang a fiery Western song I’d never heard before: “Body Count,” by a person called Ice T. It was an invigorating song that felt like a blend of rap and heavy metal.

“Tell us what to do?” he called.

“Puff you!” they shouted back.

“Tell us what to do?”

“Puff you!”

I could tell he was singing something angry and vulgar, but I just clapped along anyway.

For over two hours, Moffle-san and the others drank and sang. Each time I tried to bow out, they just shouted “Don’t run, sing!” and I would have to play along.

I was getting desperate. I sang George Michael’s “I Want Your Sex.” It was a sexy song from the 1980s, and I sang it with all the eroticism I could muster.

“Hey! Hey, now! Act your age, fumo!”

“What a song!” Macaron-san chided. “Your dad’s not gonna like that!”

“Oh, boy. Lyrics like those from such a young-sounding voice... I’m reporting you to Agnes-san, mii!”

Everyone was so fired up, it was feeling like a real party. Although, this just proved even more that they were nothing but a bunch of old men...

The more they sang, the more they drank. By the end, all three were stumbling drunk.

As we sang “Ginga Senpu Braiger” and “Akuu Daisakusen Srungle” together, the energy was through the roof. To top it off, we sang “Ah, Sankan’ou” from *Gyakuten Ippatsuman*.



“Ugh... Yamamoto Masayuki is the best, ron. A treasure of humanity, ron.”

“I feel gross, mii. I drank way too much of that cheap-ass shochu...”

“C’mon, let’s go, fumo. They tack on extra for everything here, fumo.”

I was afraid they were expecting me to treat them, but thankfully, they handled the bill themselves.

As we left the karaoke building, I spoke up timidly: “Um, um... I’d better get going...”

“You’re kidding, ron! We were gonna take you somewhere even better, ron!”

“The night is still young, mii! ...Urp. Blurrrrrgh...” Tiramii-san puked behind a telephone pole. He was the *worst*. Macaron-san put an arm around my shoulders, as if getting ready to lead me somewhere.

“But, but... ah, Muffle-san?” I looked to Muffle-san for help. He might have been scary, but he also seemed like the most sensible member of the group. As my direct superior at work, he’d probably let me escape.

“Moffu... Burp.” His eyes were glazed over, and he was drinking right from a bottle of Japanese sake that he held in his right hand.

“M-Muffle-san?” I tried again.

“Ah, c’mon,” he finally answered.

“Huh?”

“I said c’mon, fumo. C’mon. *Come on.*”

“Ah... um, um...” I fumbled, trying to come up with an excuse.

“Just come on. Don’t worry so much. It’ll be educational, fumo!”

“No!!!” And so I was dragged out into the city at night.

Two hours later...

“I’m so, so, so sorry,” Muffle-san, Tiramii-san, and Macaron-san chorused together. We were standing in the parking lot of a girlie bar. I was on the verge of tears, while Muffle-san and the others prostrated themselves before me.

I'd sent an SOS to Isuzu-senpai via email, and she'd come running right away. The three mascots had been flirting excitedly with the girls in the club when she arrived, put a bullet into each of them, and then dragged us all outside. Once there, she pointed the gun at them again and commanded them to get down on their hands and knees and apologize.

Three mascots on all fours in a grimy parking lot at night... It was a nightmare. It was a sight I hoped no child ever had to see. I didn't want to see it either!

"I know we live in an age where power harassment is commonplace..." Isuzu scolded them. "But how could you bring an underage girl into a place like that?" There was quiet malice in Isuzu-senpai's voice. She really was terrifying.

"But... but we weren't going to let her drink, mii!"

"Yeah, yeah. We were being really careful about that, ron."

Macaron-san and Tiramii-san both defended themselves. In fact, I'd gotten a lot of "Want some, ron? C'mon, try it!" peer pressure, but I decided not to mention that.

"...That's not the problem and you know it. Now, Muffle-kyo, how could you let this happen? This is hardly standard behavior from you.

"Moffu... Hmm, I'm sorry, fumo. I had a little too much to drink, I think..." Muffle-san looked uncomfortable, too. He was talking like he had something stuck in his back teeth (even though I don't actually know if he had back teeth).

"Well, we're sorry about this, newbie. You can go on home... Er... has the last train run?"

"Of course it has," Isuzu-senpai said. "It's 1:00 in the morning."

"...Ah, true, fumo. Then get yourself a taxi, all right? Will this be enough to cover it, fumo?" He produced a wallet from somewhere or other and pressed a few 1,000 yen bills into my hand.

"Ah, um, I've never been in a taxi before..." While I panicked, Isuzu-senpai returned the bills to him.

"It's close enough to walk," she said. "I'll get her home."

"I... I see, fumo. Well, then... erm, take care, fumo." Muffle-san must have still

been pretty drunk, because he limped away on unsteady legs. Tiramii-san, who seemed equally unsteady, lent him his shoulder, and they started heading out of the parking lot.

“We have practice for the live show tomorrow,” Isuzu-senpai reminded them. “Will you be able to make it?”

“Yeah, yeah... I’m fine... I’m fine, fumo.”

“Mii... I want some ramen, mii... Something with really rich pork broth...”

“Better not, ron. I’d just barf it up... urp.”

And so the three of them left. For some reason, I wasn’t mad. As I watched them walk away, I just felt pity, for reasons I couldn’t describe.

“I’m sorry about that,” Isuzu-senpai said. “Were you frightened?”

“No. Well...” Since I had emailed her asking for help, I couldn’t really say anything else. I had been scared and bothered, for sure. But looking back now—

No, I shouldn’t go there.

At any rate, I decided to keep up with my job a little longer. One thing had changed, though: Isuzu-senpai had arranged a transfer for me. I was moved from Moffle-san’s House of Sweets to Macaron-san’s Music Theater; Adachi Eiko-san went to the House of Sweets in my place.

“You and Moffle don’t seem very compatible,” was Isuzu-senpai’s reasoning.

I knew she was making a fuss over me, but I couldn’t tell her not to. And it was true that I was relieved to be away from Moffle-san...

My new superior, Macaron-san, was a pretty laid-back guy, and working for him wasn’t as grueling as working for Moffle-san was. He seemed to have realized that I got stage fright, so he just decided not to put me onstage. If it was just a lot of backstage work, I could keep up, more or less.

I ran into Moffle-san backstage fairly often while I was working. He’d ask, “How are you doing, fumo?”

I’d say, “Oh, um, I’m learning, I think.”

Moffle-san would mutter an indifferent “I see,” and then go about his business. It seemed like there was something lonely in the way he walked away... Or was it just my imagination?

Incidentally, Kanie-senpai still didn’t seem to care about me at all. We occasionally passed each other backstage, but even if I said hello, he’d just say “hey,” and no more. Well... that was understandable. He seemed to be in a constant state of busyness, pretty much. He was taking a lot of time off from school, too.

At work, they were doing renovations on the attractions. I don’t know where they’d come from, but all of a sudden we had a whole bunch of mole-like mascots (apparently called the Mogute Clan), who finished the remodels in just a few days. So surprising! Could this be magic? (Well actually, I’d heard they’d had to pay for it...)

With all that going on, a week ended up passing; after all that stressing I’d done over quitting, I couldn’t believe I’d made it this long.

But things at school were back to the way they’d been before. I still couldn’t say hello to people, and I still mumbled when my gym teacher singled me out. My other conversations went more or less the same way—I guess it goes to show that it’s not that easy for a person to change.

My passion, or I guess the novelty of the job, was fading, too. Why had I chosen to work at this park in the first place? It was supposed to be about changing myself, but I hadn’t changed at all.

At school, Isuzu-senpai sometimes said hi to me, but other than that I barely talked to anyone. After school, I went straight to the park and did nothing but clean stuff, carry stuff, and run checks on the warehouses of merchandise.

Onstage, everything was business as usual, but backstage we were running all over the place with preparations for Golden Week. The cast was exhausted from all the renovations and daily rehearsals. Even after closing time, they stayed until after midnight hauling in equipment, doing stage tests, and all those sorts of things.

Isuzu-senpai must have been very busy too, because she was also absent from school a lot. On the off-chance that I did happen to see her in school, most of

the time, she was napping.

Since I was in a department not connected to the parade or the show though, most of what I did every day was drudge work. I was starting to think those first two days I spent suffering in front of the guests were more fulfilling.

May was almost here. On the last Saturday of April, I commuted to work in the morning. I decided I would finally tell them I was quitting, but only after a good, full day of work. I had emailed Isuzu-senpai, too: “I need to talk to you after work today.”

The first day of Golden Week came near the end of April. Everyone was super busy starting from that morning. ...Actually, they'd been running all over the place since the night before, preparing for the Golden Week event. A lot of attractions would be holding grand re-openings too, and apparently, they'd built a huge ad campaign around that. TV stations would be coming to report on the shows in the afternoon.

But even though things were so busy, right before the park opened, there was an announcement calling for all the cast to meet in front of Maple Castle. Maple Castle was a large building that stood across from the gate, past Entrance Square. It wasn't a charming, pretty castle; it was an honest-to-goodness fortress that looked like it would give pause to even Napoleon's Grande Armée.

A crowd of cast members was gathered in front of it; there were hundreds of them. Some were part-time workers like me, while others wore fancy costumes, and still others were mascots.

There was a brief squeal of feedback before a voice came out over the speakers. “Okay, is everybody here?! We're short on time, so I'll keep it brief!”

And who did I see there, speaking on the stage with microphone in hand, but Kanie-senpai? He was wearing a striking, tailored uniform with gold trim. Even from where I was standing, I could see his red arm band that read “Acting Manager.” Acting manager? Kanie-senpai? He wasn't just the leader of the part-time staff?!

“Ahem!” he began. “Today is the first day of Golden Week, and I don't think I need to explain to you how important it is! It's no exaggeration to say that the

job we do in the week to come will determine our park's fate a year from now! We've made a lot of preparations! We've put advertisements in newspapers! We've run renovations! But in the end, it all still comes down to our cast's hard work! Got it?! This whole thing is riding on you!"

Some were only half-listening, but the majority of the cast had their eyes fixed on Kanie-senpai. The mascots in particular—as residents of “magical realms,” I guess—seemed to take in his words with great seriousness.

“I want to see what all those rehearsals have gotten us!” he barked, sounding like the general of an army. “Don’t make mistakes! Perform with sincerity! If you’re pros, you can do this! Anyone who can’t, can get out of here now! This park doesn’t need you!” He was such a slender, pretty man, but for some reason he had a strangely commanding aura; it was awe-inspiring. Even I found myself unconsciously standing at attention.

“But there’s one more factor that’s even more important! This, above all, you must not forget! You hear me? It’s—” While everyone waited with bated breath, he threw a small pause into his speech. Then with a composed expression, he said this: “Above all, have fun.”

The moment he said that, a strange mood fell over the crowd. It was a mood of disarmament, of comprehension, of warmth. They all seemed to be thinking, “Yes, of course.” Someone close to me let out a giggle.

“That’s right,” Kanie-senpai concluded. “...Now, let’s have a fun day at work! Everyone, to your stations!!”

The crowd let out a cheer and dispersed, clapping and whistling. They all seemed raring to go.

“...He’s a damned fine performer, ron,” Macaron-san said from close by. “Kanie-kun is probably the most panicked of us all, but he gives us one little speech and suddenly we’re cock-eyed optimists, ron.”

“Um, um... just who is Kanie-senpai?” I asked.

“He’s the park’s savior, ron.”

Macaron-san explained everything on the way to the Music Theater. He explained how the park was really supposed to have closed in March; about

how they had called Kanie-senpai here based on “the revelation” and given him management of the park; about how he’d made a miracle happen that had let the park stay in business.

“We all tease him and treat him like a nuisance,” Macaron-san concluded. “But the fact is, we trust him, ron. The kid’s got something special.”

It was all so hard to accept. That Kanie-senpai, the same person who ate lunch by himself in a corner of the school building every day, could be doing such amazing things here at this park.

Compared to him, I... No, it was silly to compare myself to him. He might be a nasty person, but he was born with things I wasn’t. He could probably do anything he put his mind to. Meanwhile, I had nothing.

While everyone else was raring to go, I was feeling small and pathetic.

It was partly because the weather was good, I guess, but tons of people were coming to the park. I was back to my work backstage. After the park opened its doors, I worked for a while at Macaron-san’s Music Theater (well, underneath it), but then I was ordered to go to the big stage and help out there.

“Um, um... the big... the big stage?” I questioned.

“The one where Kanie-san gave his speech this morning,” the female cast member who’d told me said; she was a Fairy of Water, known as Muse. She wore a revealing outfit, but she was a very nice lady. “They just don’t have enough hands on deck. The girls need help changing, they need people carrying equipment, helping with the wiring and, um... anyway, just head over! I need to get ready for the show!” She must have been running around backstage, looking for any cast members who could be spared. Once she passed on the request, she ran right off.

I told the one cast member left at the Music Theater (a member of the Mogute Clan) that I was leaving my station, and he just responded, “Sure thing, mog,” so I hurried to the big stage.

I remembered now. The big stage was where the special live show “A (AmaBri) Fight Begins! The Moffle that Fell to Earth!” was going to take place.

This show was to be the biggest spectacle of the Golden Week opening. This was how it was described in the pamphlet:

“The first phase of our major renovations!

“A black cloud has fallen on the peaceful Sorcerer’s Hill. Oh no! We’re losing dream energy! Will the magical fairies be able to save the children’s dreams?! Muffle, Macaron, Tiramii, and all their park friends are going to fight to set things right! Come watch this singing, dancing picture book brought to you with the latest special effects!

“(May be canceled in case of inclement weather. We appreciate your understanding.)”

...I won’t comment on the idea of that trio of lushes “saving children’s dreams,” of course. It’s just fiction, after all.

As I arrived under the big stage, which was bustling with preparations, I happened to run into Macaron-san coming out of one of the greenrooms. For some reason, he was wearing a plaid miniskirt underneath a dark blue jacket. Was he playing a high school girl in the musical? Even if he was a sheep, that was still kind of weird.

My thoughts must have been showing on my face, because Macaron-san got indignant. “Why are you looking at me that way? This is my Scotland costume! It’s not women’s clothing, ron!”

Ah, of course. Now that he mentioned it, he was carrying bagpipes, too. It was easy to forget that he was the Fairy of Music.

“Anyway, what are you doing here, ron?” Macaron-san asked. “I thought you were stationed at the Music Theater.”

“Oh, um... Muse-san asked me to come help...” I told him.

“Ah, okay! Go see Dornell, then,” he ordered.

“Dornell?” I asked. It sounded like the name of a massive mobile weapon, the kind that fired big fat beams.

“He’s the show’s director. You’ll find him in the master control room. Hurry,

hurry! Less than thirty minutes to showtime, ron!"

I did as I was told and headed to the master control room. It was crammed and cluttered with monitors, consoles, PCs and audio equipment. A weasel-like fairy and a few members of the Mogute Clan were shouting at each other:

"How are those speaker tests in the southern area coming?! You need to hurry, mog!"

"There's a problem in the fifth elevator! Send a repair crew, stat!"

"Main cannon, mega-particle cannon! Target that Musai on the left wing!"

Okay, I might have mixed in a comment unrelated to the musical there... but the point is, they were busy.

"Um, um, I came to help..." As I spoke up, the weasel fairy turned around. He was wearing an armband that read DIRECTOR. He must be Dornell-san, then.

"Okay, well, carry that cardboard box to the special greenroom, nell. You'll find it on... um, here," he told me, "take a map!"

"U-Um..."

I was just standing there, fidgeting, when someone entered the room behind me; it was Kanie-senpai. He completely ignored me to address the director, Dornell. "How are things going?"

"Oh, hey Boss. Time's gonna be tight, but I think we'll make it, nell. Wanna watch from here?"

"Sure," Kanie-senpai responded. "I can watch from the spectator seats if I'm in the way, of course..."

"No sweat off my brow, nell. You choreographed the whole thing, after all. ...Hey, you! Why are you just standing there? Hurry up!" Dornell-san said, laying into me for sticking around to listen to their conversation.

"S-Sorry!" I grabbed the large cardboard box and a copy of the map, and flew out of the room.

Kanie-senpai just said "oh?" as if he'd only now realized I was there.

I raced around, using the crummy map to help me find my way. It seemed the

area's underground passages had been renovated and expanded recently, and they didn't have official maps made yet. What could this "special greenroom" be, I wondered. It seemed to be rather far down, but...

Fortunately, I found a helpful sign on the walls (it read "Special greenroom this way, mog →") and I arrived at my destination soon enough. I opened the metal door that read "Special Greenroom" and walked inside to find a large hall.

At the center of the hall was a dragon.

Yes, a dragon. A *real* dragon, with amazing fangs and terrible claws. *It could probably slice a truck in two with those*, I thought.

There were four or five cast members hard at work around the dragon: polishing his scales, using large brushes to apply some kind of fluorescent material, *etc.* It was makeup. They were putting makeup on the dragon.

『Yeah, right there. Put extra care into the nape of the neck,』 the dragon said. 『That's my best feature. That neck charmed all the young females in the old days, and today, it's going to knock a few guests off their feet!』

『We get it, now shut up. It's hard to keep steady when you're moving,』 a woman with long ears, who looked a bit like a dark elf, muttered as she polished the dragon's neck (looking more closely, she was using a car buffer).

『Now now, Ashe-san. You clearly don't believe me, but I really was a ladies' man! Do you know a dragon called Eliza Gonda? She was a popular idol a while back, and she and I—』

『Just shut up,』 she interrupted him. 『You're playing the villain, anyway. I can't believe even an accountant like me has to—』

『By the way, who's that girl?』 At the dragon's words, all eyes turned towards me.

『What? What do you want?』 the woman he'd called Ashe asked.

『Um, um... excuse me. The director person... um, Dornell-san? He told me to bring this here...』

『Ohh, finally!』

“I was worried it wouldn’t make it in time,” she said. “Since we had to have it made-to-order...”

《We need this to coordinate our performance. Last night’s rehearsal was a mess without it.》

She opened the package and pulled out a watermelon-sized earphone. She pushed it into the dragon’s left ear and then switched it on.

“Testing, testing. Can you hear me?”

《I hear you. I hear y—wahh?!》

“What is it? Too soft?”

《No, the opposite! Too loud! Shut u— turn it off, turn it off!》

“Stop writhing!” she ordered, “you’ll hurt someone!”

But the dragon just started thrashing even more, as if picking up his own voice. The people around him started running in panic. I shrank out of the room.

“Y-You have it now, so... I gotta go!!” I sprinted away, leaving the commotion behind.

Since coming to this park, I’d stopped being surprised by most things. But who wouldn’t be flabbergasted by the sight of a dragon?! A dragon! An honest-to-goodness dragon! And they were, apparently, going to put him in front of the guests at the show! This was a really bold stroke, and it worried me.

When I got back to the master control room, Kanie-senpai happened to be saying that exact same thing: “We have to put every card we have on the table. I’d been thinking about how best to use that dragon, Rubrum, but I really think we just need to put him out there.”

“It’s a really bold stroke, Boss,” Dornell-san agreed, “but writing Rubu-yan off as a special effect is gonna be tricky.”

“Eh, we just say it’s a trade secret,” Kanie-senpai scoffed. “That’ll make people speculate, which will get people talking. Guests will even start filming it and uploading video!” His mouth curled up in a smile. It was the smile of a

villain, but it was also attractive in a way that sent a chill up my spine. So frustrating!

The monitors nearby showed security camera footage of the audience. There was a huge crowd of guests out there—absolutely massive. It wasn’t just one or two hundred, either; there were probably more than a thousand people there, and that number was growing all the time.

“Um... I delivered it,” I announced.

“Oh, you’re back, nell? Good. Take that coil of cables to the 15th warehouse,” Dornell-san said bluntly, then went back to messing with his console.

Kanie-senpai looked at me and, once again, just said “Oh.” So humiliating!

I carried the cables to the 15th warehouse, just as I was told. It felt like I was just getting some stuff out of their way, and it felt like total busywork. Did they *really* need me here helping out? But I wasn’t going to complain.

It was about five minutes until showtime. On my way to the warehouse, I saw members of the cast all around me, getting ready for the show. Most of the chaos had died down by now, and it was now all the tension and silence that precedes a big performance.

A group of women in beautiful costumes stood around the elevators that led up to the stage; they were all stiff with nerves. I saw Muse-san there too, compulsively adjusting her bra.

Near another elevator further in, I saw Macaron-san speaking to a photo he was holding. A photo of his family, maybe? Next to him, a Tiramii-san covered in flowers was leaning against a pillar, taking a nap. He looked like Corporal Hicks during the drop mission. He was braver than I gave him credit for.

I didn’t see Moffle-san. He was the star of the show, so he was probably waiting somewhere else.

“Three minutes until showtime. All departments, make your final reports to the master control room,” intoned a backstage announcement. It was Isuzu-senpai’s voice. I saw cast members saying “All clear” into their headsets, one after another.

The onstage BGM and the guests' whispers of excitement could be heard in the distance, somehow feeling louder than they really were. Even I was getting nervous. My heart was pounding like a drum.

I threw the mass of cables into the warehouse and headed back towards the master control room, thinking that the show would have started, and I'd see everybody hyped with excitement on my way back. But instead... it was weird.

As I walked back from the warehouse, the cast was all still on standby. They were fidgeting and glancing at clocks on the walls. It was five minutes past the scheduled showtime.

There was another announcement from Isuzu-senpai. Her voice had a slight edge to it. "We're having trouble with the sound system, but we're working to fix it. Please remain on standby."

As I returned to the master control room, I found Dornell-san shouting commands at people all around him. He was pale and covered in sweat, unable to find the source of the issue, and adjusted things on his console repeatedly while he talked to someone on the other line.

From what I could tell, the problem was that the stage's main speakers weren't working. That meant they wouldn't play music, sound effects, or the cast's lines. Without that, the show would lack impact, and more importantly, nothing would make any sense.

"What the nell is going on here?!" he fumed. "It was working during the tests this morning!"

"I don't know, pii. It was such a rush job, it could be anything..."

"We're sending our full force to test the connections, mog."

"How long will it take?"

"Ten minutes... no, about twenty minutes, mog."

"Oh, for the... The guests won't wait ten minutes, nell! They'll get fed up and leave!"

The situation was apparently more desperate than I'd imagined. I was back in the control room, but I couldn't exactly ask for another assignment.

Kanie-senpai was sitting silently in the back of the room. He wasn't chastising Dornell-san and the others; he just stewed there in silence, his expression severe. I'm sure he'd like to be stomping back and forth around the room, screaming his head off. But he was biting back his feelings and remaining perfectly still.

I realized I'd seen that expression before. It was a long time ago, when I'd visited my dad at work with an onigiri pick-me-up. There had been an awful flood, and my mother and I decided to stop in to visit him and his comrades, who'd been on standby for a long time. I'd walked in to see him sitting in front of the radio, waiting for the call, and his face had looked something like that. Of course, when he noticed me there, his expression had immediately gone back to its usual gentle one.

But when Kanie-senpai noticed me, there was nothing gentle about his expression. "Oh, are you here?" was all he said, before returning to his sullen silence. With no other choice, I just stood in the corner of the room and watched things unfold. There was nothing I could do, but... They didn't seem to be able to identify the source of the problem.

Time ticked by, minute after minute. I could see the guests on the monitor growing cranky. They must have been bored. They must have been irritated. I saw parents doing everything they could to soothe crying children.

Isuzu-senpai said repeatedly over the announcement system, "We're still getting the show ready. Please wait." But it still didn't start. This wasn't good. Already, some guests were leaving.

"How are things going, fumo?" Moffle, wearing a red scarf over the top of his cook's whites complete with hat, entered the master control room. I thought he might have lost his temper and come to demand to know more, but his voice remained even. He seemed actively trying to remain relaxed and to stay out of the way of Dornell-san's work.

"Looks like it's going to take more time," Dornell-san told him. "The issue seems to be with the new amps, but..."

"Should I go out first? I could buy us a little time, fumo." Of course. So that was why Moffle-san had come here. It made sense that he wouldn't just leave

his post for no reason.

But Kanie-senpai shook his head. "...No, don't. Macaron and the others need to warm up the crowd before you come out for your main character spot. If you're the opening act, it all falls apart."

"I know that, fumo. But it's... getting pretty dicey out there, fumo."

"Yeah. Why don't we get Sento to tell some humorous anecdotes? The announcement system is working, at least..." Kanie-senpai was joking, but his voice was dry.

"That's not even funny, fumo."

"I guess not," Kanie-senpai sighed. "She wouldn't get any laughs. She'd be better off singing, if anything."

Silence reigned after that. Those two, who always seemed so competent, had no choice now but to fall silent. They were out of options, after all.

After a while, Muffle-san let out a sigh. "Singing, eh? Well... moffu."

His large eyes flicked in my direction. He must have known I was there from the start, but now he watched me with a scrutinizing yet careful gaze. After a little while, he finally spoke. "Hey, newbie."

"Y-Yes?" I stammered.

"Go to the announcement booth and sing a little, fumo."

Naturally, I was speechless. So were Kanie-senpai and Dornell-san.

"Huh? Um... um?" I managed to squeeze out at last.

Muffle-san responded with total calm. "The customers are bored, fumo. I'd like you to go out and sing to buy time."

What was he talking about? I didn't understand. Me? In front of that huge crowd? Huh?

"I'm not telling you to sing on stage, fumo," Muffle continued. "Isuzu's doing announcements from the room next door. You'll go in there and do a few songs

over the loudspeaker, fumo. They'll love it, don't worry."

Words—a whole lot of words—began running through my brain. *This is a joke what is he talking about it's like this bizarre rodent is telling me to kill myself yes that's right I see now I'll die if I have to sing in front of all those people and he wants me to die or else he's joking yes that's right I hope he's joking if he's not I'm going to pee myself it's over I'm out of here it's okay for me to run isn't it that's my legal right he's being unreasonable there's no way the crowd will like my singing they'll be shocked they'll be offended I mean this isn't some talent show on public TV it's not like going to end with a bell ringing if the audience boos me off who will pay for my therapy bills they won't they don't care why should I do something like this for 850 yen an hour it's horrible you people aren't fairies you're demons you're devils this is devil's advocacy you're shadow warriors I refuse unequivocally um I'm really sorry but I have no obligation to you none of this is my fault it has nothing to do with me so please let me go let me go let me go let me go let me go—*

"Moffle. What are you talking about?" Kanie-senpai asked, ignorant of my mile-a-minute thought process. "You want a part-timer to sing? The fate of the park depends on this show; surely we can find a better opening act. If someone has to sing, even *Sento* would be a better candidate... And while I really wouldn't be happy about it, I can also sing. My voice is professional grade, of course. ...Anyway, the point is—"

"You're amateur hour next to Chujo Shiina, fumo," Moffle-san stated plainly.

I was shocked! (Mostly because he remembered my full name.)

Naturally, Kanie-senpai was furious. "What was that? How dare you—!"

"Ah, that's nothing against you, Seiya. What I'm saying is that she's incredible, fumo. I've been in this business a long time, and talent like hers is a once-in-a-blue-moon thing. The stability and emotion when she's singing full blast—that's something you can't acquire with hard work. She might be timid, she might get bad stage fright, but I tell you she's the real thing, fumo."

"You're talking about *her*?" Kanie-senpai sputtered incredulously. In theory, it was an awful thing to say, but his doubts were justified. I said nothing.

"Moffu. I heard her at karaoke the other day, and I mean every word I said.

But you're the acting manager, Seiya. The decision's yours, fumo." Muffle-san fell silent.

Seconds continued to tick by on the clock. Kanie-senpai looked at me with greater scrutiny than he ever had before. I wanted to turn tail and run.

At last, Kanie-senpai spoke. "No, I don't think so."

"Seiya!" Muffle interjected.

"Even if you're right, it's not going to work," Kanie-senpai insisted. "We can't trust this to someone who's running away. The ability to keep it together at a critical moment—I don't feel any of that strength from her. She's terrified!"

"Mmgh..."

"You said you've been in this business a long time, right?" Kanie-senpai continued. "Then you should know the element that all successful entertainers have in common isn't skill; it's strength. You get flustered, but you still read the next line in the script. The crowd turns on you, but you keep going anyway. Can she do that? No, she can't. So, my answer is no."

"Moffu..." Muffle-san seemed to have a hard time arguing with Kanie-senpai's reasoning.

And what was going through my mind? It was a blazing anger like nothing I'd ever felt before. A moment ago, I had been trembling, wanting to run away. But now that had changed.

This person who ate lunch alone in that isolated area at school. This person who treated me like I didn't even exist. This person who had everything, who could do anything. This person I found so attractive. Kanie-senpai... he had no right to talk about me! He didn't even know me! How could anyone be so arrogant, so dismissive? Not even I could abide this kind of treatment.

*What would you know about me? I thought fiercely. You never really talked to me! This is the first time you've even really looked at me! How dare you reduce the complicated human being that I am to some kind of eternally hopeless loser?*

It was outrageous. It was unforgivable. Yes, it was so... so humiliating!

But then, what should I do? If I wanted to really show up this arrogant senpai... “—I’ll sing,” I found myself saying.

“What?” Kanie-senpai asked in disbelief.

“I’ll sing,” I told him defiantly. “I’m not scared, and I never gave you the right to question my character like this. I’m going to sing and I’m going to knock your socks off. In other words, I’m saying yes. And by the way, I’m serious!”

“Um, but you...”

“We don’t have time, right? I’m doing it and you can’t stop me. So just sit here and watch!” I hissed, then strode away.

Looking back on it now, I don’t think I was in my right mind. The depression of my awful new school year; the parade of surprises from all the people I’d met at the park; the strange atmosphere of this place where reality and magic jumbled together... It had all combined together inside me to explode into a form I never could have expected.

“Are you serious?” Isuzu-senpai asked me in the announcer’s booth, her eyes wide.

Moffle-san had come with me and explained the situation. “Oh, she’s serious. Way serious, fumo. Isn’t that right, newbie?”

“Yes, I’m very serious,” I replied immediately. I think my eyes had glazed over. “Let me do it.”

Isuzu-senpai didn’t offer any more objections. She just stared at Moffle-san intently. Then, once she determined that he wasn’t playing around, she nodded. “All right. But what will you sing? This isn’t a karaoke parlor; our selection is far from impressive.”

“Whatever you happen to have is fine. This Park... yes, ‘This Brilliant Park,’ please.”

“...That song?” she questioned doubtfully.

I was talking about Amagi Brilliant Park’s theme song, which played frequently over the speaker system. It was written in the 1980s, and it went like this:

*O wonderful, wonderful, wonderful park.*

*Get bigger and stronger, wonderful park.*

*We all love to work here.*

*We love to meet guests.*

*So strong, so gentle, this wonderful park.*

*O Amagi Brilliant Park.*

*We're happy to be here, wonderful park.*

That was more or less how it went (and I hoped the lyric writer lost his job over it).

Also, for some reason, the melody was this grandiose thing, like the Russian national anthem. That, combined with the lyrics, made it feel a lot like totalitarian propaganda. But to be honest, the song didn't matter. I just had to sing. I was feeling kind of desperate, to be honest!

*Don't blame me, I thought, if my stupid song makes the crowd mad and they riot! Yes, that's right! I hope you all die!* ...was more or less how I felt. But feeling that way was the only chance I had of going through with this.

"I'm starting the song now." Isuzu-senpai manipulated the controls. Immediately, the speakers in the park creaked to life, playing a fanfare-like introduction. It was a very long intro. While it played, Isuzu-senpai spoke into the mike.

"We apologize again for the wait. The special live show will soon begin. In the meantime, please enjoy this rendition of our park's theme song, 'This Brilliant Park.'"

"No flair as an announcer, eh, fumo?"

"Be quiet," Isuzu ordered. "...It's coming, Shiina-san."

Okay, I thought. While the intro was playing, I cleared my throat.

The PA booth sat halfway up Maple Castle, looking down on the stage. The

front window was one-way glass, so I could look out over the guests gathered in front of the stage. They were looking pretty rowdy. Some had left their seats in boredom, but there were still a huge number of people there.

So many people—a thousand, at least. I saw a few people with large video cameras, too. They had probably come from TV stations. Now, I had to sing? In front of all these people? It was a bit late to turn back now, but I found myself trembling in terror over what I'd agreed to do.

I wanted to cry. My legs were shaking. I wondered if maybe I could just apologize and run away.

...But just then, Muffle-san spoke up from his place by my side. "Sing, fumo. Pretend your father is listening."

In that moment, my mind cleared. I didn't know how Muffle-san knew about my father, but his words made my chest feel hot, and my urge to run away vanished. Muffle-san's voice became the voice of my father, which I'd never hear again, encouraging me on. The feelings I had sealed away inside for so long began to strain at the seams, looking for release.

"....." For a moment, I hesitated. But then the words poured from my throat —like a retch, like a scream.

*O wonderful, wonderful, wonderful park.*

Ridiculous! This park wasn't wonderful at all! Why was everyone running themselves ragged over it? It was so stupid, I thought.

But I kept on singing. My lips moved smoothly. My throat felt clear. I could even feel the vibration of air molecules around me. It felt better than my best night at solo karaoke. I kept singing.

Sento-senpai sat there, dumbstruck. Muffle-san stood perfectly still, his brow furrowed. The crowd in the venue had fallen silent. Eyes shut tight, fists clenched, I drew out every note I sang.

*O Amagi Brilliant Park. We're happy to be here, wonderful park.*

The song's ending was greeted with sporadic applause, which gradually grew louder. At first, I couldn't even process it, but within seconds, it had become the wildest applause I'd ever heard. I even heard whistles and cheers. What were the guests so happy about? Well, common sense would dictate...

"You're... kidding," Isuzu-senpai whispered.

"Moffu. You got me beat this time, fumo," Muffle-san said. He sounded satisfied. "That'll be a hard performance to follow."

After that, they had me sing a few more songs. It was all so touch-and-go, I don't even remember what they were... But it made the guests happy, and the repairs to the sound system finished before I was done. Muffle-san had patted me on the shoulder a few minutes before, then returned to his station.

"We apologize again for the extended wait. We will now commence our special live show, 'A (AmaBri) Fight Begins! The Muffle that Fell to Earth!'" Isuzu-senpai announced.

Immediately, a BGM started playing on the main stage, and confetti began to fly. Macaron-san, Tiramii-san, and other major members of the cast appeared one after another. They flew, jumped, danced, and sang.

*Sorcerer's Hill is all about dreams! Songs and smiles and so many things! Always so many fun things to do! Oh? Oh? Aren't we missing something? That's right! There's no sweets at all! Let's all call to Muffle now! Fairy of Sweets... Muffle!*

...And that's when Muffle-san appeared. A flashy fireworks show erupted behind the stage as he jumped down onto a waiting trampoline. He did a somersault, landed, then joined in with the dancers. Naturally—I suppose, since he was a professional—his moves were sharp and on point. It was beyond what any normal mascot in a costume could handle.

At points during the song, he'd stagger back as if exhausted, and someone would put a towel around his shoulders. Then seconds later, he'd bounce back and go on singing and dancing. It was kind of a JB knockoff and I don't know

what he was going for, but the show was certainly invigorating.

I continued to watch it, feeling numb.

“Shiina-san.”

“Yes?”

Isuzu-senpai stood up and embraced me tightly.

“U-Um?!”

“Thank you. You saved us. I can’t thank you enough.” My face was pressed against her considerable chest, so I couldn’t see her expression, but I could hear deep emotion in her voice. “We worked so hard for this, and it all nearly went down the drain. We’re in your debt today.”

I didn’t know what to say.



The evil dragon was so intimidating that some children started to cry. But otherwise, the show ended just fine. The evening show also went on with no trouble, with double the spectators from before.

After the park closed, they had a cast party at AM. Dornell-san, the director, gave a toast, with nothing but praise for everybody.

Macaron-san and Tiramii-san spoke to me, their large eyes shimmering.

“Whew... you got me beat today, ron. Starting today, you’re the Fairy of Music.”

*No, thank you, I thought.*

“You really shocked mii! Let’s go to Alamo and sing there after all!”

*No, thank you, I thought.*

A number of other people came up to me, offered thanks, shook my hand, or hugged me. It was a pretty overwhelming experience, overall.

I didn’t know what to do. I knew I wasn’t a very special person, and I didn’t do anything all that amazing. I just sang a few songs to buy us time. It was really more embarrassment than I could bear.

My colleagues, Adachi Eiko-san and Bando Biino-san, came up and congratulated me, too. I was genuinely happy about that one—I was hoping we could be friends.

Kanie Seiya arrived in the dining hall “fashionably late.” It was my first time seeing him since the master control room. He looked pretty awkward as he approached me. His expression couldn’t settle on one single emotion, but it mostly looked like frustration and embarrassment.

I loved it!

“Um... hello,” I said to him.

“What’s that expression?” he asked stiffly. “You think you’re pretty hot stuff after showing me up like that, hmm?”

“Gack...”

“Bullseye, eh? Also, who actually says the word ‘gack’?”

“S-Sorry...”

Kanie-senpai let out a sigh. “Well, it’s fine. Anyway... you know. I’m sorry. You did a good thing. I was surprised, I was moved, I’m grateful, et cetera.”

“...That didn’t sound very sincere,” I said accusingly.

“Sh-Shut up. I’m not good at this kind of thing. Anyway, let the others make a fuss over you for today!” With that, Kanie-senpai turned to leave. But he stopped and said one more thing to me. “Oh, and Chujo.”

“Y-Yes?” It was his first time saying my name out loud. So surprising!

“I’ve decided to make a CD of your songs. It’s to sell in the shops. So start practicing!”

“What?! Huh... wh-what the...”

He didn’t even ask for my approval; he just told me his intentions and then walked away. He moved on to speak to Isuzu-senpai, who was sitting in a corner of the cafeteria and offered him a few words of reply. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but it seemed to me that Isuzu-senpai was happy to see him... I could sense that, somehow, even though she never smiled. Was there some kind of intimacy between them after all? I really was curious.

Ah, but it was rude to stare at people, so I headed for the soda fountain to refill my orange juice.

“Moffu?” Muffle-san happened to be there too. I hadn’t talked to him since the show, either.

“Um, hello,” I said.

“Ahh. Good job out there, fumo.” He said nothing more as he dispensed oolong tea into his mug. They’d be doing daily performances starting tomorrow, so there was to be no alcohol at the cast party tonight.

I dug down deep and found my voice. “Um, Muffle-san. Thank you for today.”

“Moffu? For what?”

“Um... for what you said about my father...”

“Ahh, that.” Moffle nodded. “Join me on the terrace, fumo.”

Moffle-san headed for the terrace outside. Actually, it was so small and old, it was probably more like a veranda—and in practice, it was really just a place people went to smoke. Once we were outside, Moffle-san pulled a cigarette from somewhere or other. It was his usual brand, ‘Hope.’

“There’s something I need to apologize for, fumo,” Moffle-san said. He lit the cigarette, took a long drag, then blew a plume of dark smoke into the night air. “The truth is, I knew your dad, fumo.”

“.....” I had thought that he might. It was the only way he would have known to mention it, then. But why?

“Has it been five years since he passed away now? ...That’s not to say we had much of a relationship, fumo. We were just drinking buddies at a bar I like.”

“You were... drinking buddies?” I asked.

“Yeah. There’s a little place on the outskirts of the shopping street near Amagi Station. We met there, fumo. Of course, we only saw each other about once a month... but we got along, for some reason, so we usually ended up talking, fumo.”

This was the first I had heard about it, of course. My father didn’t drink very often, and as far as I knew, he hardly ever went out to bars. But now that Moffle-san mentioned it, I remembered how, once a month, he’d come home from work a little late, and when he did he’d be a little tipsy. I was usually in bed by then, though, so I almost never talked to him when he was drunk.

“Well... he told me about you too, fumo. He was worried about his daughter’s social anxiety. What’d he say again... ‘she’d gotten nervous during a school play, locked up and couldn’t say her lines.’ And then he...”

“...I remember. He shouted out to encourage me.”

It was a school play in fourth grade. My father had called out to me in a big shout that resounded throughout the gymnasium: “Go, Shiina!” Everyone was so surprised. Of course, I was just playing “Forest Rabbit C,” a side character with only one line...

“Thanks to him... I managed to say my line.”

“Yeah, that’s what he told me, fumo. He was a tight-lipped man, even when drinking, but that was one story he told with pride. I still remember it, fumo.”

“I... I see...” It was a strange thing, imagining the pudgy little Fairy of Sweets and my father, side by side in a bar, swapping stories. Although everyone in AmaBri wore an item called the Lalapatch Charm, which let them appear to be ordinary people to the outside world... so my father probably thought he was talking to any ordinary guy.

“He showed me a picture of you too, fumo. ...You were in elementary school at the time, but you don’t seem to have changed much since.”

*Hey, butt out! I thought.*

“...A few months passed after that, and I didn’t see him again. I had just started to wonder about it when the bartender told me, fumo. One of his colleagues had come in to say he’d passed in the line of duty.”

“...Yes.” The world around me suddenly looked a little blurry. I thought I’d gotten used to thinking about it, but...

“I’d missed the funeral, and I didn’t know him well enough to pay my respects to his family. I’m sorry to say that all I’ve ever done was pay one visit to his grave.”

“I see...”

“Now, it might just be a coincidence, but when you came here, it felt to me like destiny in motion, fumo. Or, well, maybe it was the goddess Libra who brought you here...” Moffle-san planted his cigarette in one of the nearby ash trays. “That’s all I have to say. See you around.”

“U-Um... wait a minute, please,” I said as Moffle-san turned to go back into the cafeteria.

“What is it, fumo?”

“Moffle-san, were you...” I debated with myself for a minute over whether or not to ask him. But I decided I had to do it. “Um... were you hard on me because you knew my father?”

Moffle-san looked at me for a while in silence, but eventually turned his back on me and responded, “That’s ridiculous. I’ve got better things to do than that, fumo. I got mad because you’re a klutz.”

“I... I see...” Maybe I shouldn’t have asked. So embarrassing...

“But... watching you today was a real relief, fumo.”

“Huh?”

Moffle-san didn’t answer. He just walked away. He was such a sourpuss, it was hard to know what he was ever thinking, but that one statement seemed to take a burden off my shoulders. Moffle-san was probably just a very modest person.

I returned to the cafeteria, where Isuzu-senpai approached me.

“Shiina-san.”

“Ah... yes?”

“Your email this morning said that you had something to talk about. I think I can imagine what it is, of course...”

“Ah...” I had completely forgotten that I had been planning to quit at the end of the day. That was what I was going to tell Isuzu-senpai, but...

“I know you’ve never felt at home here in the park,” she said. “Kanie-kun and Moffle clearly have plans for you... but we can’t force you to stay if you don’t want to.”

“Yes...”

“Even if you do stay, not every day will be a good one. It might all be bad days, in fact. But...” Isuzu-senpai said.

Did she have a feeling about what was to come? I hesitated. I wondered.

“No, I won’t say it,” she finally said. “It might not even be my place to say.”

“.....” I had no answer to that.

“Anyway, tell me. What do you intend to do?”

It was true that it felt nice to sing and be praised for it, but that wasn’t the

most important thing. Over the past few weeks, I had met all kinds of adults that I never could have met at school. They weren't impressive, they weren't noble, they had all kinds of problems... yet they were all scrambling desperately for a singular goal. I wanted to scramble with them for a little while longer.

"I'm sorry for being so selfish all the time," I said. "But if you don't mind, I think I'd like to..."

After she heard the next words out of my mouth, Isuzu-senpai smiled just a bit, told me when to report in tomorrow, and just before leaving, said this: "All right. I'm glad to be working with you."

*Yes. I'm glad to be working with you, too.*

# The Magic App

It was evening on a normal business day. Izusu was walking down one of the underground employee corridors when she heard the Fairy of Water, Muse, addressing her from behind.

“Isuzu-san! Isuzu-san! I found the most interesting app!”

“App?”

“Look at this! It’s called Magic☆Photo V1, Snap the Truth! It’s a camera app!” Muse held out her smartphone.

“That’s a rather dubious title...” Isuzu observed.

“Of course it is! It’s made by a small developer in Maple Land. They need the name to stand out as much as possible.”

“Is that how these things work?”

“Yes,” Muse affirmed. “Anyway, this app uses a magical camera that shows you the ‘human form’ of whoever you take a picture of! For instance... oh, perfect timing!”

Wanipii had come around the corner and was just passing by. As his name suggested, Wanipii was a two-heads-tall crocodile mascot. Naturally, it wasn’t a costume—there was no one inside.

“I’ll take a picture of Wanipii-san with the app.” Muse took a snapshot of a yawning Wanipii. He just walked on, not even noticing the attention.

There were a few minutes of processing time, and then the picture appeared. It showed a gangly, ordinary-faced man yawning. For some reason, he had a pompadour hairstyle, and wore an 80s-era varsity jacket over distressed jeans. He was also wearing alligator skin shoes.

“Is this Wanipii?” Isuzu questioned.

“I guess it must be!” Muse gushed. “At least, according to this app...”

“It seems difficult to accept.” Just because an app was magical didn’t mean it was trustworthy. Such programs were frequently fraudulent.

“Incidentally, it doesn’t seem to work if you’re already in a human form. If you take a picture of me with the app...” Muse took a picture of herself, and the subsequent picture looked exactly like her. “...It looks like this. Most of the people in my family look like humans... Oh, but my little brother is a fairy, you know?”

There were generally two kinds of people living in the magical realms: those like Isuzu and Muse, who looked almost exactly like mortals, and the obvious “fairies,” like Wanipii. These appearances weren’t set in stone; many people swapped between one or the other as children, with most choosing their preferred form by the end of puberty. Their decision would be made based on family, environment, and personal preference—in general, men tended to choose fairy forms, while women chose human forms.

Changing forms was a fairly simple process even far into adulthood, so there was no systematic prejudice against either form. It was more like changing your hairstyle to make a personal statement. But to change your form did cost quite a lot of money, and in many cases, it left you under the weather for about a week. It was also believed to have adverse effects on your health and appearance, so few people did it frequently.

“...It’s just human forms, then,” Isuzu observed.

“Looks like it! Isuzu-san, will you come take pictures of all the cast with me?!”

“Why would you want me along?”

“Oh, no real reason! It’s just more fun to see things with someone else,” Muse answered nonchalantly.

Isuzu wasn’t especially busy at that moment, so she decided to go along with her to clear her head. “..... Well, all right. Let’s go.”

With that, the two began wandering the underground halls with no particular aim in mind. Wrenchy-kun from general affairs passed. He was pushing a cart full of paint and lumber, and seemed to be heading for the Wild Valley area.

“Wrenchy-san. Can we get a picture?” Muse asked.

“Hm?”

She snapped the photo. Wrenchy-kun wandered off, muttering to himself about “silly girls.”

“It’s certainly difficult to imagine what Wrenchy-kun would look like as a human...” Isuzu said.

“Really?” Muse answered. “Ah, it’s here, it’s here!”

It was a picture of a tradesman with a crew cut, wearing a twisted headband. He looked to be in his forties or fifties, short, with a toned physique. He wore a tank top that showed off his burly, tanned arms, and baggy knickerbockers bound into tabi socks.

“I see... that does seem just about right,” Isuzu commented.

“He’s serious! Wrenchy-san is so serious!” Muse gushed. “Okay, let’s do someone else.”

They were heading towards the general affairs building when they ran into the weasel-like mascot, Dornell, carrying a small tablet at his side. He was on the way back from a conference and he looked absolutely exhausted.

“Dornell-san,” Muse greeted him. “Could I get a picture?”

“Ahh? Ah, what the nell... But isn’t photography forbidden backstage?”

“Oh, just play along!” She took the photo.

“Sure, whatever. Ahh, I’m hungry, nell...” Dornell left without even looking at the picture.

“I wonder what he’ll look like! Hmm... urk.” Muse fell silent as the picture appeared before her. Isuzu also found herself letting out a groan.

He was a pale, overweight man of about thirty. He had scraggly hair, wore chino pants, and had a checked shirt. There was stubble peppering his considerable double-chins, and he looked exhausted. It was an unflattering appearance overall.

“Well...” Isuzu began, “after all, he was an underground shut-in for ten years...”

“He’s like a poster child for a general health campaign...” Muse observed.

“Should we show this to him?” Isuzu wondered. “It might convince him to lay off the snacks and sweets...”

“I-I’d rather not!” Muse said. “It would probably just depress him!”

“But...”

“Anyway, let’s move on to the next one!”

As they entered the general affairs building, they immediately ran into Tricen, the head of PR. He seemed to be heading home after a day on the job.

“Are you going home?” Isuzu asked.

“Ohh, Isuzu-san, Muse-san! ...No, I have a few business calls to make first. I have two potential sponsors to visit.”

“Tricen-san,” Muse asked, “could I take a picture of you?”

“Oh, I hunch over with delight! Shall we take one together? Perhaps one where you’re hugging me from behind?”

“No, just one of you,” she clarified hastily.

“Oh, I see...”

Muse took the photo. While it processed, she asked if he wanted to see it, but Tricen cast a glance at the clock and panicked. “Ah, my bus is almost here! I’ll look at it later. See you around!” The photo finished processing just as Tricen ran off.

“Let’s have a look...” said Muse.

It was a picture of the quintessential businessman: middling weight, middling height, glasses... He wore a cheap suit, but he was well coiffed, and he smiled a mild smile. For some reason, he was gesturing as if he was shaping pottery on a wheel—a pose often seen in business magazines.

“This is rather dubious in its own way...” Isuzu commented.

“But it *is* about how I imagined him,” Muse insisted. “Okay... where should we go next?”

“There won’t be many people in the general affairs building now. Kanie-kun is a mortal...” Isuzu pondered. “Sorcerer’s Hill, perhaps?”

“Okay!”

With that, the two moved on to Sorcerer’s Hill. The first person they met was Tiramii, who had just returned backstage after a few rounds with the guests.

“Mii! Mii! Isuzu-chan, Muse-chan! Listen, listen! I saw this real hot mama in the park, mii! She was with this old man and they were the worst couple ever! I bet it was a hostess and her sugar daddy, mii!” They ignored Tiramii’s rambling and took a picture of him.

“What, what? You making a pinup of mii? Hee hee, I’m flattered...”

“Er, not exactly...”

“That’s all we needed. On your way, now.”

They coldly shooed him away.

“Aw, what’s with that? So miin... If you’ve got something fun planned—”

“Tiramii-san!” Just then, Tiramii’s assistant, Bando Biino, called to him from the door. “Sorry to bug you, but a premium pass guest still hasn’t gotten their picture taken! We need you back onstage right now!”

“Ahh. Ain’t that always the way, mii? Duty calls, mii!” Tiramii sighed, then ran back onstage.

“...He’s such a total jerk,” Muse muttered. “I bet he looks hideous.”

“He surely has the face of an absolute lech,” Isuzu agreed. “If he looks like Dornell on top of that, I’ll have nightmares.”

“Ugh, let’s skip it. I don’t even want to thi—”

The processing was complete. The picture appeared. Pictured there was—“Uh... no way!” Muse objected.

“Huh?” Isuzu was bewildered, too. “Ah... but...”

Pictured there was a blond-haired hottie. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, with mischievous green eyes. A simple but stylish black shirt and cargo pants clung flatteringly to his slender model’s frame (there was something very erotic

about the clavicles peeking out from the collar of the V-neck). The handsome man in the picture seemed to be speaking to the viewer with an amiable smile.

Both girls clamped hands over their noses and mouths.

"Er, what? Is it broken? Surely it's broken..." Isuzu said.

"Oh gosh! He looks like Zac Efron! I love it..." Muse trailed off. "Um... er... I don't know what to do about this..."

*Just what is her problem, exactly?* Isuzu wondered. "Get a hold of yourself," she commanded her friend. "It must... simply be a mistake. Let's move on to the next one."

"R-Right..." Muse agreed, "it has to be broken, of course..."

The two recovered from their shock and moved on. They headed to the Music Theater's backstage area where they ran into Macaron. It seemed that he'd just finished a minor stage show. He'd been performing blues today, so he had a harmonica in one hoof and he looked a bit dejected.

"Ohh... Isuzu and Muse. I really threw myself into today's performance. I'm exhausted. Go buy me a beer?"

"You're still on the job, aren't you?" Isuzu retorted. "Wait until you're off-duty."

"Ron... Don't be that way. One beer doesn't even count as drinking! Please!"

"I told you, no!"

"Tsk, so stingy, ron..." As he spoke, he stuck a Marlboro in his mouth and lit it. Macaron was in charge of this area, so it was within his rights to allow smoking here. "Whew! Refreshing, ron."

They took a picture of the reclining Macaron.

"He must be an old man..." Isuzu said under her breath.

"Yeah, definitely an old man!" Muse agreed lowly. "Brimming with old man smell, I bet!"

As they whispered to each other, Macaron cast a glance in their direction. "What is it? What's wrong?"

“Oh, nothing...” Muse said innocently.

The image processing completed. The picture was of a moody yet handsome older man. “No way!” she goggled.

“Huh?!” Isuzu was also surprised.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties, tempered by the trials of life, but in a way that just added to his character. He was slender, with long arms and legs, and black hair that fell in thick locks over his eyes. He had a bad boy aura about him, wore a crisp white button-up shirt and simple (but high-end) slacks. His gold necklace and harmonica glinted in the darkness. He had the languid air of a man bathing in the afterglow of a performance, and the smooth plume of smoke from his mouth was unspeakably sexy...

“What’s all the fuss about, ron? Tell me what you want or leave me alone.”

Seen with the naked eye, Macaron was his usual woolly sheep self. There was no resemblance at all to the bad boy in the picture.

“Ah, er?” Muse squawked. “Th-That’s right! Excuse us!”

“P-Please, enjoy your break,” Isuzu stammered. “Goodbye...”

Back in the underground passageway, they stared at the smartphone with renewed disbelief.

“What is with this... ‘popular-among-professionals’ stance?” Isuzu wondered.

“This is bad. I love it, but...” Muse was shaken. “Umm. ...It really is a problem...”

*What problem is she having, exactly?* Isuzu felt like her friend had been saying ‘I love it’ an awful lot today.

“Th-This confirms... it’s broken, unquestionably,” Muse decided.

“M-Most likely,” Isuzu agreed, “but... hmm...”

They were both standing there, scowling, when they heard a voice behind them.

“Isuzu, Muse. What are you doing here, fumo?”

“Eek?!”

They turned around in shock and saw Moffle standing there. He was holding a croquette from Maple Kitchen and a bottle of black oolong tea.

“M-Moffle-san...” they greeted him.

“You two aren’t looking well, fumo. Did you catch a disturbing image on your phone?”

In a way, that was what had happened... How could he be so insightful?

“Ah... no. It’s just a little girl talk,” Muse told him. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Ahh... fine, then. Do either of you know where Seiya is, fumo?”

“I believe... he’s in the general affairs building,” Isuzu answered. “In his usual office.”

“Got it, fumo. See you.”

“Um, Moffle-san!” Muse called to Moffle as he started walking away.

“Fumo? What is it?”

“Um... ah, well... We’re taking pictures of everyone. We were wondering if we could get one of you, too...”

“We’re backstage, remember? No photography permitted, fumo.”

“But it’s for the year-end appreciation party!” Muse protested. “We won’t abuse it! We promise!”

Isuzu was impressed by her ability to come up with excuses on the fly (though she felt she deserved a bit of credit for not contradicting her immediately).

“Moffu... well, all right. Just standing here, fumo?”

“Yes! In that case...” Muse took the picture.

“All done, fumo? I’ll be going, then.”

Moffle squeaked away down the hall. The two watched breathlessly as the app processed the image.

“...Why did you take another picture?” Isuzu asked. “We’d concluded it was broken, hadn’t we?”

“B-But we’ve come so far, we might as well keep taking them, right?!”

“Well, I suppose...”

“What will we do?” Muse wondered anxiously. “What if Muffle-san turns out to be handsome, too?”

“I believe he needs to be ugly to restore the balance,” Isuzu suggested.

“He doesn’t need to be ugly, but I’d feel better if he was more around Wrenchy-kun’s level...”

“Indeed. Just as long as it’s not as bad as Dornell...”

Once the image processing finished, the photo appeared.

“Waaaaaaaaagh!”

“Aaaaaaaaaah!”

They were both taken aback.

He looked exactly like *ragorn* from *Lrd of the R\*ngs*: tall, brawny, longish black hair with streaks of brown. He had the barest hint of five o’clock shadow, and deep-set features, with almond eyes that communicated a sharp mind and strong will. He was dressed in outdoorsy clothing appropriate to his age. The middle-aged hunk scowled at them, a bottle of oolong tea in one hand and a croquette in the other.

“This is... but... seriously...” Isuzu was taken aback.



“Um... this is really... I love it, I mean, it’s kind of a strike down the plate... it’s trouble. Big trouble. It’s a joke, right? It must be a joke... mgh.” Muse swooned, holding back a nosebleed. Drops of blood spattered on the floor.

“It’s broken,” Isuzu said flatly. “It simply has to be broken.”

“B-But you don’t know that, do you?!” Muse squealed. “Ahh... if this is true... i-it’s big trouble, okay?!”

“I... I agree,” Isuzu told her. “It could undermine relationships in the workplace...”

Especially with the women. That would be extremely bad.

“L-Let’s confirm it.” Isuzu said, steadying her shaking legs. “We should take another round of pictures of Moffle and the others. If they present a different result, we’ll know for certain that the app is fraudulent.”

“I... I see... that’s a good point,” Muse agreed.

Moffle was already gone, but they decided to head to the backstage area nearby and take another of Macaron. They retraced their steps and found Macaron sagged in a folding chair.

“Ron? What is it?”

Muse ignored him and readied her smartphone. “Okay, let’s do it.”

“Okay!”

Muse froze up. There was no “click” this time. Her eyes were locked on the screen.

“What’s wrong?” Isuzu asked.

“I-Isuzu-san... Look...” Muse showed her the screen, looking like she was holding back tears.

《Magic☆Photo Tips! Thank you for using Magic☆Photo (Trial Version) The app you are using is a trial version, which limits the pictures you can take to eight (8). To unlock the full features of the app, please purchase Magic☆Photo Pro.》

They had to buy the pay version? That was... fiendish!

Gritting her teeth, Muse went to the paid version's download site. "What..." The price was an incredible 4800 yen. "4800 yen?!" she screamed. "That's way too high!"

"This is preposterous," Isuzu agreed. "Utterly preposterous..."

They were seized with a seething anger.

"Y-You're freaking me out, ron... What's up with you two?" Macaron waved at them for a while, but he was so intimidated by the girls standing there, gritting their teeth, that he ended up skedaddling.

The two remained there, glaring silently at the "4800 yen" on the smartphone.

Around closing time, it occurred to them that they could just download the trial version to Isuzu's phone, take one picture, and be done with it.

"...Should we do it?" Isuzu wondered.

"Yes. No," Muse wavered. "...Hm. I'm not sure..."

Cooler heads prevailed. They realized that if they took another picture that way... they had no guarantee they could stay sane in the face of the truth. They were gripped by a fear of losing something indescribable, yet important. And so, after even more thinking— ".....Let's not," Isuzu decided.

"...Good idea," Muse said with relief.

There was no point in opening Pandora's box. Better to leave things ambiguous. After a long discussion in great detail, they agreed to forget about the pictures.

Although, the link to the trial version remained on Isuzu's smartphone...

# Not Enough Attendance Days!

"I really am worried about you, Kanie-kun," Seiya's homeroom teacher, Ms. Konoike, said to him in the south building's guidance office. "You've only been at school for ten days in April. That's about half absences, you know? I know you've been sick and you've had family problems, but enough is enough. You don't seem to be fitting in with the rest of the class, and on top of that, your grades are sliding. Will you please tell me the real reason for your absences?"

Internally, Kanie Seiya was annoyed. He'd been struggling with the lousy amusement park he'd been put in charge of, trying to find ways to boost attendance. He had things to do, dammit, and he resented having to waste his time sitting here, dealing with some mediocre teacher's self-satisfying show of concern.

Normally he would have loved to tell her off. *What the hell do you care?* he'd say. *The things I'm dealing with would make a pathetic public servant like you piss her pants and cry. The fates of hundreds are riding on my decisions! If you want to play 'concerned mommy,' do it on your own time! Idiot!*

*Ah, I want to say it. I really, really want to say it.* But for all of his faults, Seiya had more sense than to talk to his teachers that way.

"...I'm sorry, Sensei," Seiya said, swallowing his annoyance. "But it's not like I've been lying. I *have* been going through a difficult time, mentally and physically..." He let out a long sigh.

*Ah, well done. A perfect performance, he told himself. Not too strong, not too soft; just the right balance. Now instead of jabbering on, this stupid woman will feel pity for my amazing, handsome self and say, "I see... I'm sorry."*

This, in fact, was what Ms. Konoike said. "I see... I'm sorry, Kanie-kun."

"It's all right..." he trailed off, while thinking: *Great. That's right, you backwater desk jockey. Now get your nose out of my business.*

But she wasn't quite done yet. "...But you need to do something about your attendance, at least. You'll get held back if you don't, okay?"

"Please..." he implored, "isn't there something you can do?"

"I'm afraid not," Ms. Konoike said firmly.

"....." He didn't know what to say.

"You need to come to class," she continued. "Understand?"

"Welcome back, Kanie-kun." As he left the guidance room, Seiya was greeted by his secretary and fellow student Sento Isuzu, who had been waiting for him in the hallway. "I have your evening's schedule for you. You have an advertising meeting starting at 5:00. At 6:00, you'll watch rehearsals. You also need to reply to your emails before 6:00, so you'll need to find time for that somewhere between now and then. You have a meeting with the show director at 6:30, and then, starting at 7:00..."

"Enough. I'm already this close to killing myself," Seiya said, waving his hand in annoyance.

"I'm afraid there's no room in the schedule for that," Isuzu said, businesslike to the end. He wished she could indulge him just once, but ah, well... That was just the kind of person she was.

"Anyway, we should head to the park. I'll explain the details in the car." Isuzu took Seiya's hand and began striding towards the entrance. Seiya shook off her hand roughly. He knew the other students would start annoying rumors about them if they saw them like this.

While keeping up his jog, he cast a glance at Isuzu. She didn't look particularly hurt. "I just don't get it..." he grumbled.

"Don't get what?" she asked.

"Never mind," he told her shortly. "Let's go."

They ran out the front door, then back behind the school where the park's company car was waiting. Isuzu had arranged it in advance to save them a little

bit of time. Lately, in addition to his usual bike commute, Seiya had been taking the company car to work more often.

The company car: if it were an expensive sedan like a Benz, it might have been a welcome sight. Unfortunately, it was a Daihatsu K-car, driven by their head of PR and all-around odd-jobber, Tricen. He was a terrible driver, heavy-handed with the brakes and the gas in a way that made Seiya carsick.

Back when he was a child actor, Seiya frequently traveled around the city in a Benz or a Lexus... But ah, well. If it meant that he didn't have to sit next to his mother, it was an improvement.

"So? What did the teacher have to say?" Isuzu asked once the car was in motion, and after she'd finished explaining his schedule.

"Just what I thought," he told her. "She got on my case about my attendance."

"...It's true that if you continue to take absences at your current rate, you may be locked in to repeating the year before the first term is over," Isuzu said, as she checked the schedule table on her smartphone.

"She mentioned that, too," he admitted.

"If such a result is already assured, it might be preferable for you to take a proper furlough," she advised. "You could devote yourself to office work as early as tomorrow."

"That's a pretty heartless thing to say..." Seiya mused. But at the same time, he quickly realized he wasn't actually angry about it. Maybe Isuzu was right.

He didn't especially enjoy going to school. He had no friends there; breaks between classes were excruciating; his classes weren't interesting at all.

"But," he concluded, "I don't want to take a furlough."

"Why not?"

"Because it means I'd have to go back eventually."

"I see," said Isuzu.

If he took a furlough, he'd end up never wanting to come back. Most people

would rebel at the idea of having to take classes with people a year younger than them at a school they had no real attachment to.

“What if I just quit entirely? Then, once things at the park are straightened out, I could take the high school equivalency test. I’m certainly smart enough to pass it.”

“A common path for those who find high school life unsatisfying,” Isuzu commented. “But isn’t the equivalency test rather difficult?”

“Easier than drawing three million people to a crappy amusement park.”

“.....” Isuzu fell silent. Seiya had meant it as a joke, but it may have sounded to her like a recrimination—like he was accusing them of ruining his life.

“Ah... this humble Tricen finds that idea a bit extreme...” the driver Tricen said, speaking up for the first time. “Quitting school, that is. We could never ask you to take so drastic an action.”

*Oh-ho? Seiya thought. Is this a way of covering for my misstep? Not bad at all, Tricen.*

“We know very well that we cannot afford to rely on you indefinitely. We are working as hard as we can. Ah, yes. I, the humble Tricen, shall work my own fingers to the bone to ensure that you can enjoy a comfortable school life, if you will only be patient for now...”

*Ah, never mind.*

At first, Seiya thought about not saying anything—maybe this was just the mascot’s way of expressing friendship. But then, this wasn’t really acceptable behavior from his head of PR, so he decided to speak up after all. “Um... look, this isn’t really a problem that can be solved with ‘I’ll do my best’ kind of talk, Tricen. Did you really think I was going to light up and say, ‘Gosh, thanks, I’m counting on you!’? Do you think your fantasy of ‘working my fingers to the bone’ is going to accomplish anything?”

“Oh, well, I—”

“It won’t, idiot!” Seiya fumed. “You’ll ‘work your fingers to the bone’ in stupid ways that will literally grind the park down! There’s nothing worse than a

diligent fool. If you want to break your fingers that badly, go put them in a vise!"

"Hmm. What a cruel thing to say. I, the humble Tricen, am in no way diligent... I am simply a fool, so there is no need for concern."

"That just makes it worse! ...Ah, forget it. Just keep your eyes on the road, you weird reptile!"

"Hmm. Weird reptile, you say? I'll have you know that I am a dinosaur, which, according to recent studies, are more closely related to birds."

"I get it, just dri—Did you just cross on a red?!"

The company car plowed through a rather large intersection, ignoring the signal. Tricen had nearly caused a major accident. "Hmm? Oh, forgive me... I hunch over in shame for my inattention..."

Seiya was starting to think seriously about getting his motorcycle license. Stashing a motorcycle near the school and commuting that way would be safer than being driven around like this.

"But if you truly are thinking about quitting school," Tricen said, after an all-too-brief window of focusing on his driving, "I would advise you to consult with Latifah-sama first. After all, she is the park's chief executive. Surely you would not make future plans without consulting your employer first."

"Why are you telling me things that are obvious?" But he understood what he was getting at.

"I agree," Isuzu chimed in. "I'm sorry that we've forced you into such a difficult decision, but you really should speak with the princess first."

"I will not allow it!" Latifah, chief executive of AmaBri, shouted defiantly from the rooftop of Maple Castle.

Her usually kind, reassuring air was nowhere to be found. Her voice was blunt and harsh. If she hadn't been blind, she almost surely would have had her eyes locked furiously on Seiya.

It was around midnight. It had been an eventful day, and he had visited her

just before she retired. Still, her response had been swift and unflinching.

Incidentally, Seiya was alone with Latifah here; Isuzu had demurred. Latifah had no need to call on her full gravitas as the princess of Maple Land here, but still, her bearing was formidable. It appeared that this was a matter she would not compromise on.

“Although I do not remember choosing you with my revelation, the moment I learned that I had, I swore that I would never ask you for any unreasonable sacrifices—that I would rather see the park die than to destroy your way of life. Why do you think that is?”

“Oh... well... I don’t really know...” Seiya stammered out. For some reason, he could never be his usual cocksure self in front of her.

“Because if we were to destroy a life through our own incompetence, then we would lose all right to gather up dreams. Our happiness must not be built on the unhappiness of another. That... that is one principle on which I shall not waver. Therefore... if staying with us means that you must quit school, then I would sooner remove you from your position here.” Her voice broke. “Of course, that is not what I want. I depend upon you greatly. But, but...” She was on the verge of tears. “Such things are not worth... ruining your life...”

“Okay, I get it. Calm down already,” Seiya patted her shoulders soothingly. He’d normally just use a gesture, but unfortunately, she couldn’t see his body language—This inevitably put them physically closer together. “I wouldn’t exactly call this ‘ruining my life.’ It’s just high school. It’s not the end of the world.”

“But Kanie-sama, I... I...”

“Things aren’t at that point yet. I just wanted to get your advice.”

“But... but...”

“So don’t get too worked up,” he advised her. “It was an option I was considering, and I wanted to know what you think. That’s all.”

Latifah put a soft hand on his chest and whispered, as downcast as could be: “...You will not quit?”

“No. I won’t quit.”

“Really?” she pressed. “You truly will not?”

“I said I wouldn’t. Quit worrying.” He felt a sudden urge to squeeze her hands. Her fingers were smooth and delicate. If someone with fingers like these was truly wishing for his happiness, then that was something he needed to respect. His happiness was in no way connected to high school, of course... but still, he didn’t want to give her any reason to worry about him.

“...Very well,” Latifah said, finally seeming reassured. “Forgive me. It seems that even my concern is a burden to you.”

“Hmph. The burden is within tolerable levels.”

“Thank you very much.” She smiled a bit sadly. “It is because of moments like these that I find you so wonderful, Kanie-sama.”

“...Oh, come on. Don’t tease me.”

“I am not teasing you. I am merely stating what I feel. Kanie-sama, you are wonderful.”

“Stop it.” He had tried to sound irritated, but his performance had probably failed, because Latifah giggled and showed no sign of being hurt. “I should be going,” he sighed. “I have lots of things to do tomorrow.”

“Very well,” Latifah agreed.

Suddenly feeling restless, Seiya beat a swift retreat from the rooftop garden.

The next day—

“Kanie-kun! Rejoice! We’ve solved your attendance problem, ron!” He was in his office staring at his laptop when Macaron burst in unannounced. Macaron was a woolly sheep-like mascot, a once-divorced Fairy of Music. For some reason, he was carrying a Tsugaru-shamisen.

“Knock, would you?” Seiya asked. “...And where’s my secretary? Why’d she let you through?”

“Isuzu-chan is helping with the morning garbage run, ron.”

*That's not a secretary's job. What the hell is she thinking?* Out loud, Seiya asked: "So, what do you want?"

"I'm telling you, we've solved your problem, ron! You need more attendance days, right?"

"Well, yes..." The truth was, Seiya was taking off from school again, the very day after Ms. Konoike scolded him for it. She was probably feeling very disappointed in him right about now.

"Hence the good news! Watch this, ron!"

Isuzu entered the room behind Macaron. She was dressed in her usual park uniform, but there was something strange about her expression. She was smiling brightly.

"...I thought you went to the garbage dump," Seiya said suspiciously.

"I just returned," Isuzu responded.

".....Ah-hah."

"What do you think, Kanie-kun?" she asked. "Don't I look wonderful?"

"...What are you talking about?"

"Now, don't you worry your little head about it. Well, Kanie-kun? I'm Isuzu-sa~~n in every way, aren't I? I'm your secretary, we go to the same school, and you'd know me anywhere, right?"

"...?" Well, it *was* spring; he'd heard a lot of people went loopy in spring. Even so, that didn't explain the extent of Isuzu's bizarre behavior.

"He's freaking out, ron."

"He really is."

Isuzu and Macaron snickered to each other.

"Now, Kanie-kun..." She wiggled her hips as she walked up to Seiya. She unbuttoned her suit jacket and pressed her ample chest against him.

"H-Hey... Mmgh..."

"I can't *bear* being only your secretary anymore," she simpered. "If things get

too hard, you'll let me know, won't you? I'll just do *anything* to help... Because I... I..." Isuzu leaned closer, cheeks flushed. Her breath was hot. Her eyes were dewy. What the hell was going on?!



“W-Wait,” Seiya said, drawing back. “Sento. You know I’m busy now, right? I don’t understand why you’re helping Macaron tease me... you’re not usually this frivolous...”

“Don’t worry about Macaron,” she told him. “Focus on me right now, Kanie-kun.”

“Get a grip, Sento!”

“I’m just as embarrassed as you are, you know. Don’t run anymore, Kanie-kun...” Isuzu’s lips drew nearer.

“H-Hey...”

“Did you think I was Isuzu-chan? Too bad! It was mii!” Isuzu shouted suddenly as she threw off her clothes. Actually, it wasn’t her clothes—she threw off her entire self. There was a strange “zwiiiip” sound, and in a flash, the one standing in front of him had become Tiramii.

“What?!”

“Gwa... Gwahahahahaha!” Tiramii and Macaron both burst out laughing. They held their stomachs and pounded on the desk, waving around the “empty shell” of Isuzu.

“What? Wh-What the...” Seiya was dumbfounded.

Tiramii snickered, then offered him the shriveled shell. “It’s a Golley Suit, mii!”

“...What the heck is that?”

“What do you think?” the mascot cackled. “It’s a magic item that lets you look like someone else, ron. You saw them at my attraction earlier, remember? The Mogute Clan wore them to become those burly street dudes.”

“Ahh...” That was right. He had seen it in the upgrade to Macaron’s Music Theater. Those tiny Mogutes had been wearing body suits that turned them into macho men.

“It’s a type of costume, mii. They let you disguise as anything, unbound by the physique of the person inside!”

“It used to be that you couldn’t mimic specific individuals, ron. But the

Mogute Clan altered the technology to integrate 3D model data. Now you can look exactly like someone else!"

The Mogutes again, eh? They were quite a skilled bunch. Seiya's choice to hire them was paying off even more than expected.

"But it takes a lot of pricey rare earths, so they can't mass produce them, mii."

"This Isuzu-chan suit was a prototype. We used Tiramii's massive photo gallery to make it, ron. Unfortunately, it only mirrors the parts seen in the photos, so we didn't have a model for her bare boobs..."

"I just used my imagination to fill in the blanks, mii. I made them just the size I like, too. See?"

"They're too big, ron. And they're weirdly shiny, too. Who do you think you are, Shirow Masamune?"

"But the color..."

"Yeah. We're agreed on the color, ron."

Restraining a headache—and more or less having caught up to speed—Seiya spoke up. "Um, so... what does this magical suit have to do with getting my attendance up?"

"We have enough material to make about one more prototype, ron. And if we use it to make a Kanie-kun costume...!"

"Ahh..."

"It'll be the perfect standin! Then we just need to get cast members with nothing better to do to attend class disguised as you, mii!"

"Hmm..." Yes, Seiya thought, *I get the drift of what they're saying.* But at the moment, the greater issue was the real Sento Isuzu, who was standing behind them with her musket drawn. *Ah, she's mad. Her expression is blank, but I can see the aura of rage around her. Don't blame me. I'm a victim in all of this.*

Finally realizing where Seiya was looking, Macaron and Tiramii turned around. When they saw Isuzu there, they whispered "Oh..." in perfect unison.

“I-Isuzu-chan... how long have you been there, mii?”

“From the part where you used those disgraceful lines to attempt to seduce Kanie-kun.”

“Th-That was pretty far back, mii...”

“Th-That’s a long time to be eavesdropping. Not polite, ron...”

Isuzu snatched away the deflated costume. She then glanced at the chest area, and in a barely audible whisper said, “They’re not that big...”

“H-How’s the color?” Tiramii asked. It was a bold question.

“Shut up,” she snarled. “Anyway, it’s time that I killed you. Ready?”

“...B-Bring it on!” The two mascots faced their deaths resolutely—probably because they knew that running away tended to result in far more tragic outcomes.

Isuzu left the two dead mascots in the infirmary, shut away the costume of herself somewhere or other, then returned to Seiya’s office. Muffle, having overheard the commotion, had come with her.

“...Well, it’s not the worst plan I’ve ever heard, fumo,” said Muffle, folding his arms after hearing the circumstances. “Loath as I am to admit it, the park needs Seiya, but at the same time, he does have to go to school, fumo. And seeing as he doesn’t have any friends, it’d probably be easy for a substitute to get through the day if they kept their head down.”

“Hey!” Seiya objected. “I... I have friends...”

“No, you don’t. Not one,” Isuzu intoned, mercilessly.

“Ugh...”

“Then that’s fine, fumo. I think Macaron and Tiramii’s plan is worth a try, myself. What do you think, fumo?”

“I agree,” Isuzu said, grudgingly. “It’s the best idea we have at the moment. Even if it’s not possible to get a standin for all of your days, if we can just get you as many as possible... I think it would work.”

“Hmm...” Well, It was logical enough. It was true that, lately, he’d been talking to people even less frequently than before. If all they had to do was keep their head down and show up for classes, a standin could probably work. Pop quizzes might be a problem, but that was a risk worth taking—it wasn’t as if he was trying to get a college referral, so all he needed was enough credits to graduate.

*And either way, I’m incredibly smart. It’s trivial for me to keep up with school lessons.* .....Although in reality, his grades in a number of his subjects had been slipping lately. It wasn’t unusual to see such “ex-prodigies”—students who were untouchable in middle school that abruptly started to struggle in high school classes. This was because high school material tended to require effort that basic intelligence couldn’t compensate for. Even so, he told himself, he could probably still handle it.

“So, here’s the plan, fumo,” Moffle said. “If Seiya gives his permission, I’ll make up a shift chart with the available cast. That’s going to change our May schedule, so I’ll need your answer soon, fumo.”

“Right,” Seiya decided. “Let’s give it a try, then.”

For the first day, Seiya’s standin was Isuzu. After all, she was already a student at Amagi High School, and she knew Seiya there. That made her a safe choice to test out the concept.

*Even so, Isuzu thought as she passed through the school gate that morning, It is a strange feeling... To go to school looking like Kanie-kun, whom I see every day... She stared at herself in the glass door of the entryway. Her reflection was clearly that of Kanie Seiya.*

The Gulley Suit that the Mogute clan had made the night before really was a perfect replica. It was a magic item, so it didn’t even matter that her height and physique were different from his; her sight line had even increased to match Seiya’s greater height.

*Ah, this isn’t good. I’m standing pigeon-toed.* She tried standing with feet shoulder-width apart and parallel, but that wasn’t right, either. That wasn’t the kind of man he was; he was elegant, simultaneously manly and graceful...

*It’s difficult...* Perhaps she had to fix her posture. Shoulders front, back

straight. Always look down at others, like you're better than they are...

But that was only part of being Kanie Seiya; in truth, he could often be seen brooding over difficult questions, as well. Eyes downward, brows knitted, like you're perpetually annoyed about something... *Yes, that should do it...*

Even so, it seemed a bit off. This wasn't quite how he appeared when she looked at him. He was a bit kinder, more gentle—no, perhaps she was overthinking it. *Although I do think he acts a bit different when he's talking to me...*

"Kanie-senpai?" A sudden voice from behind caused Isuzu to start. It was Chujo Shiina, the girl who had performed at the live show on the first day of Golden Week. She had done them a great service on that day, but since she was just a part-time worker, nobody had told her about the standin plan.

"Oh... m-morning, Chujo-san." Ah, she'd already messed up.

"Wh-What?"

"I mean, Chujo. Nice weather we're having, isn't it?" She tried to recover, but Shiina remained confused.

"Um... it's pretty cloudy, actually..." In fact, it was starting to drizzle. The weather was gross and overcast.

"Well, never mind that," Isuzu said. "What did you want?"

"I saw you fidgeting around," said Shiina, "so I got worried, that's all. Are you okay?"

"Of course I am. There is nothing at all—er, that is to say, I'm fine."

"Ahh."

Isuzu took a deep breath, then righted her posture in front of Shiina. "At any rate, look at me. What do you think?"

"Huh? I don't know what to say," Shiina said. "You look like you, Kanie-senpai."

"I see. Good to hear it." Satisfied, she cleared her throat. To be honest, speaking like Seiya made her feel a bit like a Takurazuka performer. It was

unsettling, but she assured herself that it was the right thing to do.

“I guess if anything, you seem to be in a pretty good mood,” Shiina was saying.

“...Do I?”

“Yes. Normally, you just ignore me.”

“D-Do I?”

“...You do. But, so, um... I-I’m happy that you... didn’t today.” Shiina stopped talking then, and ran quickly to her shoe cupboard. Was it just Isuzu’s imagination that her cheeks seemed a bit red?

*Kanie-kun. How do you usually interact with this girl?* Shaking herself out of her stupor, Isuzu headed for her own class’s shoe cupboards. ...Rather, for Seiya’s class’s shoe cupboards. She opened the door marked “Kanie,” and... inside were Seiya’s slippers and an envelope.

“.....” Actually, to just call it an envelope wouldn’t be quite accurate; it was a pale pink and sealed with a blue heart-shaped sticker.

Oh dear. She couldn’t let anyone else see this—it was like finding a bomb. Isuzu stuffed the letter into her bag, then headed for the classroom as if nothing had happened. She was trying so hard to act casual that she didn’t even think twice about putting on Seiya’s slippers.

It was a rather old-fashioned love letter:

*I’ve loved you since first year.*

*I don’t care what anyone says. I know you’re a good person. Even though we’re in different classes, I’m always watching you from afar.*

*I can see the loneliness in your eyes sometimes.*

*When I see it, I can’t help but stare.*

*I feel like you’re always looking at something just over the horizon.*

*You probably think this is stupid, but I’m actually very serious.*

*I want to stand by your side and help you to achieve your goals.*

*I'm sorry. I know this is strange.*

*But if it's all right with you, I want to tell you how I feel.*

*I'll be waiting for you behind the gym after class.*

As she read through the letter secretly in class, Isuzu thought: *Behind the gym, in this day and age? Is this a trap by some 70s delinquent gang?*

Just what did this person hope to achieve by writing an anonymous letter? How did she expect it not to be ignored out of hand? The love letter was handwritten, clearly by a woman. Isuzu would have preferred it if it had been a prank, but the writing seemed unfortunately sincere.

Still, this letter... She found it strangely annoying. The way the writer was acting as if she understood Kanie Seiya... The arrogance of it. The presumption. The sense of "I'm the only one who understands your true worth."

Of course, you had to have a certain amount of gall to ask a worthless man like Kanie-kun out on a date. The feeling of stumbling upon a rare and valuable curio in an old pawn shop was one Isuzu could understand... but it was the writer's certainty that stuck in her craw.

Liking him because he was "a good person?" This woman's ideas about romance were far too simplistic. Not that this was a problem for teenagers, usually... but it nagged at her. Because it was all superficial, wasn't it? He was a handsome man, and therefore, this girl had convinced herself that he was something he wasn't.

*Well, you've missed the mark, Isuzu thought. That smug handsome face of Kanie-kun's is the most hateful part of him. It isn't where his true appeal lies. Of course, you couldn't possibly understand—She caught herself, then. Ah, no, no. Why am I feeling such animosity towards this woman? I need to approach this with a neutral mindset. Now... what should I do?*

It would be simple enough to take a picture of the love letter, send it to Kanie Seiya, and wait for instruction. After all, she was his secretary, and that would fall under her duties to report, contact, and advise. Even so...

Maybe she should wait to report to him *after* meeting the girl and ascertaining her intentions? Would bothering him with unnecessary trouble not be the *true* failure in her duty as secretary? Yes, she told herself, it absolutely would. *At any rate, she decided, I won't report it just yet.*

After class, she was met behind the gym by a very attractive girl. She was in second year, like Isuzu, with alluring eyes and hair that hung just past her shoulders, beautifully slender legs, and attractive curves. Isuzu didn't know her name, but she had seen her in the halls several times before.

"Ah... Kanie-kun," the girl said hesitantly. "I'm Tsuchida Kanae from class one. I'm sorry for giving you that letter out of the blue like that. I've been worrying myself sick about it all day..."

"Ah, it's no issue," Isuzu, dressed in her Seiya costume, responded noncommittally. She felt a bit guilty, but she reassured herself that she was just doing her job.

"...I thought that maybe I should just forget the whole thing and run away," Kanae confessed. "B-But I realized I couldn't do that. It would be too irresponsible."

"I see..." Maybe she should pretend to be a bit more nervous? But she couldn't do it. She felt utterly indifferent. It was taking everything she had to keep from saying "Oh, whatever."

Isuzu had once seen a segment on a variety show called *Grilling Cheating Husbands! The Wives and the Mistresses Have it Out!* The mistresses would try to turn the blame on the wives by saying things like "He's lonely!" and the thing the wife always said in response was, "Oh, whatever."

Isuzu wanted to employ that same "Oh, whatever" right now. She was also feeling annoyed at Seiya, even though he had done nothing wrong.

*Attracting a woman like this... Kanie-kun, perhaps you should watch yourself more carefully? Isuzu thought critically. No, stop that, stop it... I am his secretary. I need to be cool, composed, and impartial.*

"And?" she asked the girl neutrally.

“I’m sorry!” The girl, Tsuchida Kanae, bowed at a 90 degree angle. “I meant to put it into Kimura-kun’s cupboard in class five, but I accidentally slipped it into yours in class four... I really am sorry!”



“Eh?”

“So, um... that letter, it... it wasn’t meant for you. I really am... um... very sorry...”

Isuzu just stood there for a moment, stunned, then finally straightened up. “Er... you mean to say that you didn’t come here to ask me out?”

“That’s right. I’m v-very sorry...” Tsuchida Kanae looked up again, her eyes filled with tears. She was rather charming, Isuzu had to admit. She began to feel sorry for her. “Y-You’re mad, right? I figured you would be. I really... I really wanted to apologize...”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” All of Isuzu’s anxieties washed away. She felt utterly cleansed.

“Eh?” Tsuchida Kanae was bewildered.

“Mistakes happen,” Isuzu clarified. “You sent the letter anonymously, so you could have just run away. It’s admirable that you came to apologize instead. I’m impressed.” She found herself speaking ‘Kanie Seiya’ with strange fluency, even though imitating him had felt strangely unsettling, previously.

“Y-You forgive me?”

“Of course I do,” Isuzu affirmed. “Tsuchida Kanae, you are an honest person.”

“Ah...” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Thank you so much! I... I... I was so afraid that you would yell at me... I’m... I’m glad I put the letter in the wrong box.”

“...? Ahh. Well... it’s fine. Anyway... I hope things go well with the other man. I’ll be cheering for you, all right?”

“Yes. No. Yes,” the girl fretted. “No. ...Oh, what should I do...?”

“...?” Isuzu didn’t know what to say. Tsuchida Kanae’s behavior had taken an odd turn, and her choice of words was strange.

The girl’s fear was gone, but now she seemed flushed—was it Isuzu’s imagination that her body language was a bit coquettish? “Are you all right?”

“Ah, yes! I’m fine!” Kanae gushed. “Well... g-goodbye! See you later!”

“Ah, sure.”

Tsuchida Kanae bowed deeply and then ran off. Isuzu muttered to herself as she watched her run away. “...‘Later’?”

That night, Isuzu stopped by the park’s rooftop garden, where she found Latifah and Seiya talking with teacups in hand. The mood between them was a tranquil one.

Seiya had emailed her earlier to tell her that thanks to her filling in, he’d been able to sleep until late morning for the first time in a long time. Normally he was busy even on weekends and holidays because of the park, so he hadn’t gotten a proper night’s sleep in a while.

Perhaps because of that, there was none of the usual annoyance in his face. Or maybe he was always this way in front of Princess Latifah?

“Oh, Isuzu-san.” Latifah had been giggling, but spoke up when she noticed Isuzu’s presence. She could tell people apart just from the sound of their feet on the flagstones.

“Your Highness,” Isuzu greeted her.

“Kanie-sama is such a very funny person. Listen to this... When he eats shortcake, he tries to keep the strawberry balanced on top for as long as he can!”

She looked and saw Seiya shaving away at his shortcake, taking great pains to keep the large strawberry on top from falling. It looked like a boulder balanced precariously on top of a spire.

“Hmm...” he pondered. “Is it that strange?”

“Oh, it is!” Latifah laughed.

“Maybe it is.” His manner was rather playful; it was a side of him that Isuzu rarely saw.

Isuzu spoke, trying to keep from sounding too depressed. “I am glad to hear it, Your Highness. ...Kanie-kun, a moment?”

“If it’s about school, you can talk about it here,” he told her. “Have a cup of

tea with us.”

“Yes. I made some for you too, Isuzu-san.” Latifah smiled brightly as she poured the tea.

“Right. In that case...”

She sat down, took the cup of tea from Latifah, and then summarized the day’s events: the people she had talked to, the contents of her conversations, and various minor events she had made sure to commit to memory. She didn’t tell him about the love letter, though. It didn’t seem worth talking about... and besides, it was already dealt with.

“Hmm. It sounds like things went smoothly,” Seiya said, sounding satisfied. “I have to say, since it was a Macaron/Tiramii idea, I’d been keeping expectations low... But it sounds like this might really work.”

“Yes,” Isuzu affirmed. “Your complete lack of friends will be our saving grace.”

“Grr...”

Latifah quickly interrupted. “I-It does sound as though it might work! Of course, it would be preferable if you could attend school yourself, but...”

“There’s no need to worry, Your Highness,” Isuzu said reassuringly. “His presence at school could not be more insignificant.”

“Quit sniping at me!” Seiya snapped.

“Indeed, Isuzu-san, you should be more careful with your words,” Latifah rebuked her gently. “You should perhaps rephrase it as ‘Nobody will care if Kanie-sama is not in school.’”

“That’s not actually any better...” His objection to Latifah was much more gentle.

Isuzu found it a bit unfair, but she changed the subject without showing her resentment. “...Macaron will be your standin tomorrow, so I’ll make my report to him now. Excuse me.”

"High school, eh? That takes me back, ron," Macaron whispered, gazing into the distance. Isuzu had just given him her report about serving as Seiya's standin. "I got up to so much dumb stuff back then, ron. You know Lubba-Dubba Melody High School in Maple Land? That low-class school for losers?"

"I believe I've heard of it," she responded politely. "It has frequent problems with violence, doesn't it?" Isuzu knew Lubba-Dubba Melody High because it had been the next district over from her own school, the Royal Guard Cadet Corps. She'd heard things had calmed down there recently (relatively speaking) but back in the day it had, apparently, been quite a hellscape.

LubDub High, a school full of roughnecks all waiting for their next brawl... It was infamous enough that there was a delinquent manga based off of it—it was called *Roar, LubDub High!* and it was popular all throughout Maple Land.

"I went there, ron. Well, got expelled from it, actually..."

"...I see."

"I sort of picked a fight with another school," he explained. "Look, I'd tried to keep things from getting to that point, but they kept going after my underclassmen... even sent one to the hospital. As the head of the crew, they didn't leave me much choice. I found me a steel pipe and went off to dish out some punishment. But I was by myself, so things got pretty hairy, ron."

"Ahh..."

"By the end, a few of my pals showed up and had my back, so we managed to do what we needed to... but the school found out and I got expelled. On my last day, all the guys came out to see me off, in tears. They were stupid as hell, but they were good guys at heart, ron. I wonder what they're up to now..."

An old man's stories about "my wild past." There was no more annoying subject for a young woman to listen to. While Isuzu's eyes glazed over, Macaron told a few more war stories.

"Anyway, I think it's good to let a little of the wicked out during your youth, ron. Though I guess you wouldn't understand that, eh, Isuzu-chan?"

"I am incapable of caring less," she responded.

"I see." Macaron shrugged, not looking particularly hurt. "After my expulsion, I didn't have much choice but to join the army, ron. Now, boot camp came with its own set of experiences. There was this one time when..."

"Enough. Just try not to cause any problems tomorrow," Isuzu cut him off, then began preparing to head home.

The next morning, Macaron put on the Gulley Body Suit (Upgraded) to take Kanie's appearance, then headed for Amagi High school. It was a weekday and, as it happened, there weren't any large groups coming in that week. That meant business at Macaron's attraction would be slow enough that another cast member could put on a costume and fill in for him.

*It's just an ordinary high school in the mortal world, he told himself. No delinquent eat-or-be-eaten here.* He could probably just keep his head down and relax the day away.

Macaron arrived at school a little early. Then after ditching his bag in the classroom, he went out into the halls, hoping to get a smoke in before class started. He pulled a Marlboro from his pocket and wandered around, looking for a smoking area. The students he passed shot him icy glances.

He tried addressing a random boy. "Hey. Where's the smoking area?"

"Um, we're in school... and you're too young to smoke... Look, just leave me out of it, okay?" the boy said, before rushing away.

"Ah, right. Damn, ron..." He pocketed the cigarette and scratched the back of his head. That's right, this was high school. Of course there were no smoking areas.

*We could smoke in the classroom when I was in high school, of course. Everyone smoked, and the wage slave teachers looked the other way, he recalled nostalgically. Ah, I remember the windows, sticky with tar...*

Still, this was a serious problem. Would he have to go a whole day without smoking? That wasn't going to be easy.

While he weighed his options, class ended up starting. First period was math. It was a subject he had no interest in, so he spent half of the class flipping

through a book of pachinko strategies, and the other half napping. The teacher caught him, warned him, then told him to solve a problem on the blackboard. In response, he just said, “Can’t” and went back to sleep. The teacher and the students all seemed stunned by his behavior, but as far as Macaron knew, he wasn’t doing anything strange. He was keeping his head down, just like he promised. So with a passing thought about how strange they all were, he just let it go.

They reached the short break period between classes. By this point, he was really craving a smoke, but there was nothing he could do. He endured it and spent the next few periods the same way as before.

*So tired, ron...* This was boring. So boring. Had classes always been this boring? How could people spend every day in a place like this?

In the middle of fourth period English—he was finding ways to kill time with this and that, when his smartphone suddenly rang. He’d forgotten to put it into airplane mode, which meant the class was suddenly interrupted by some angry 50 Cent rap—a song with lots of “fucks” and “bitches.” The English teacher stared at him, eyes wide, and though he seemed to recognize the words, he chose not to comment.

Macaron checked and saw that it was an email from his ex-wife, urging him to pay his child support and discussing his request to meet his daughter. “Puff,” he cursed under his breath. Why did she have to get on his case, just because the deposit was a little late? He’d been working so hard to get it paid these last two months, too... Darn it.

“Um, Kanie-kun?” the English teacher ventured tentatively. “Please don’t check email during class...”

“Piss off.” Macaron was so annoyed about the email from his ex, on top of already not getting to smoke, that he spoke without thinking.

“Er... what? Kanie-kun, you can’t talk that way to a teacher...”

“Just piss off, ron. I’ve got things to do. So get back to your drone work and stop bugging me.” *Crap. I added a copula... slipping into the accent of my*

*homeland, Macaronia. Well, that's okay. Just roll with it.*

The teacher was flabbergasted. He was acting like he couldn't believe what he had heard.

*That's the kindest response I could give him, and it's freaking him out? Does this guy ever deal with anything but honor students? Even so, this was high school, Macaron thought. He should probably interact with the teacher a little more like a student himself. So he stood up, hands crammed into his pockets, and walked up to the lectern.*

"Wh-What is it?" the teacher stammered. "Are you going to hit me?!"

"Yeah, sorry about that, Teach," Macaron apologized. "Look, I feel like crap. Mind if I see the nurse?"

Why? He was just acting like a high school student. How had he ended up in the student guidance room, getting a lecture from a crabby gym teacher? It made no sense.

He had been leaving the classroom to find a place where he could smoke while composing his reply to the email, when the gym teacher had dashed out and grabbed him. He knew it would trash Seiya's reputation if he started a fight, so he went along peacefully. Once in the guidance room, he just said "Yeah..." and "No..." and "Not really..." and other things a real high school student would say.

Once it was over, the gym teacher said: "...Well, you don't usually cause any trouble. Just be careful in the future, okay?"

"Yo." After offering another high school-appropriate reply, Macaron was released from the guidance room. It was then that he realized it was probably less important to act "like a high school student," and more important to act like Kanie Seiya. That's right. Seiya wasn't the kind of person who said "Yo." *Hmm. I'll need to rethink all of this, ron.*

It was the middle of fourth period when he'd been accosted, so they were about halfway through lunch break by now. *I'm hungry, but I really need that cigarette first. I'm hitting a wall*, Macaron thought. *I'll die if I don't get my fix.*

He made it to the fire stairs behind the school, where luckily nobody was around. He squatted behind them and lit a Marlboro, then took in a long breath of that succulent smoke.

At last, he could think clearly again.

It was just then that a girl with a packed lunch walked by. It was Chujo Shiina, a part-time worker at the park. She had worked at Macaron's attraction for a time, though right now she was Moffle's assistant, as well as a singer.

When she saw Macaron (Seiya) squatting on the ground smoking a cigarette, her jaw dropped. "Uh... Um, S-Senpai?"

"sup, Shiina-chan?" Macaron said.

"Huh? Shiina-cha... huh? Wha?"

"I forgot you went here too, ron. I tell you, there's not a single damn place to get my nicotine fix..." He smiled at her, wryly, but Shiina didn't return the gesture. She just took one step back, then another, looking like she'd seen some Lovecraftian horror. Macaron (still disguised as Seiya) offered her a cigarette. "Want one? I doubt the wage slaves'll catch us here."

"N-No thank you! Excuse me!" Shiina ran away.

It wasn't exactly top secret as far as the cast were concerned, so he'd planned to reveal his identity to her over a smoke, but she didn't even give him time to call her back.

*...I hope I won't regret that. Ah well, ron. He smoked another cigarette, then stood up. Maybe I'll skip fifth period, head down to the shopping district, eat some ramen and play some pachinko.*

He was just on his way to the bicycle lot when he heard voices from around the corner. ".....?"

It was a boy and a girl, and they sounded serious. They seemed to be fighting about something. Since he wasn't in any particular hurry, Macaron decided to stop and listen in.

"...What do you mean, a mistake?" the boy demanded to know. "You like me, right, Tsuchida-san?"

"Well... I did," the girl hedged, "but... now I don't know anymore..."

It sounded like the boy was angry at the girl. "You don't know? This is crazy! You tried to give me a love letter yesterday, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but... how do you know that, Kimura-kun?" she asked pointedly.

"Huh? Well..."

"Terano-san is the only person I told about that... I knew it was strange that you called me out here!" the girl fumed. "All I did yesterday was put a letter in the wrong shoe cupboard. I haven't done anything to show that I liked you!"

"Well... we were talking, and Terano asked me 'How'd things go with Tsuchida-san?'" the boy explained defensively. "I didn't understand, so I asked..."

"Oh, for... Terano-san, you blabbermouth!" The girl let out a long sigh.

"Anyway, I feel the same way," the boy insisted. "So that's that, right? Let's date."

"Well, it's just... after my mistake," the girl said, "I'm not sure if I want to anymore..."

"That's nuts!" he exploded. "Did you change your mind or something?!"

As he listened, Macaron tried to work out the situation in his mind. *What a mess, ron. Let's see...*

The girl, Tsuchida-san, had tried to give the boy, Kimura-kun, a love letter (how old-fashioned!) yesterday, but she'd accidentally given it to the wrong person. Then today, a mutual friend of theirs, Terano (he didn't know their gender, but it sounded like a girl) asked Kimura-kun about the love letter, which Kimura-kun hadn't actually gotten. Kimura-kun had probably liked Tsuchida-san for a long time, so he ended up getting ahead of himself and calling Tsuchida-san out to talk to him. But a woman's heart was a fickle thing; Tsuchida-san had already lost interest, and now Kimura-kun was giving her the third degree.

*Does that about cover it, ron? Yeah, that should cover it. Mmm, good old teen angst. I'm jealous, ron.*

There had been hardly any girls at Lubba-Dubba Melody High (referred to

locally as “LubDub Melo”), the school Macaron had attended, and “behind the school building” was a place delinquents hung out. So for him, stumbling upon something like this was a rare and precious find.

“I’m sorry,” Tsuchida-san was saying. “It’s just, I started having second thoughts after yesterday...”

“What the hell?!” Kimura-kun replied. “I’d go out with you in a heartbeat!”

“But I can’t do that when I don’t really know how I feel...” Tsuchida-san trailed off.

“Just because you gave the letter to the wrong person? That’s insane!”

Kimura-kun’s voice was cracking. Macaron pitied him his misfortune of circumstance. He couldn’t stand watching the man spiral deeper into disgrace; as his senpai in life, he should offer him a helping hand.

“Now, now. Let’s all take a deep breath and relax, ron.” Macaron spoke up, interrupting the seemingly circular argument.

“What?!” Kimura-kun shouted.

“K-Kanie-kun?!” Tsuchida-san shouted.

They both seemed shocked.

*Oh, do they know me? Macaron (still dressed as Seiya) wondered. ...Also, my accent slipped out again. Well, that’s okay. Just roll with it.* “Hey there, you two,” he said, “I overheard everything. It sounds like a real sad course of events.”

He paced back and forth leisurely before the distraught pair. Yes, “distraught” was the word—they looked conflicted by his appearance in a way that “a third party interrupting our lovers’ quarrel” wouldn’t explain. Why? He had no idea.

“You... You were eavesdropping? That’s horrible!” Kimura-kun said.

“Oh, chill out. I just happened to be passing by, ron.”

“R-Ron?”

“Forget it. Let’s talk about you. You need to man up, kid,” Macaron advised. “In times like these, the more you push her, the more she’ll pull away. That’s

lesson one.”

“S-Stay out of this!” Kimura-kun told him. “How dare you come here and lecture me!”

“It’s no lecture. It’s just advice, ron.”

“Seriously, what’s with the ‘ron’?!” Kimura-kun demanded.

“Just listen already!” Macaron seized Kimura-kun’s shoulder and drew him in conspiratorially. It was a rather coarse move. Up until then, Kimura-kun had been glaring at him like he might try to hit him. But he was acting cowed now, perhaps intimidated by Macaron’s delinquent body language. “All right, boy... let me tell you about girls. The more you chase them, the more they run, ron. You hear me? What you need is confidence. ‘Plenty of fish in the sea. If I can’t reel you in, I’ll go cast my line elsewhere.’ You know? That’s what you need to make her think, ron.”

“Th-That does sound convincing, but... I don’t wanna hear it from you!” Kimura-kun told him.

“Oh, don’t take it so personally. Everybody’s that way in the beginning. You just can’t *stay* that way, is all.” Turning now to Tsuchida-san, he continued, “Women who fall for desperate men are an invention of TV dramas. Isn’t that right, ron? My dear.”

“Huh? Ah... yes. No. Um...” Tsuchida-san, who had been watching their discussion, sputtered hysterically in surprise.

“Right? You see?” Macaron addressed Kimura-kun again. “...So anyway, you’re best off walking away until she calms down a little bit, ron.”

“But... but...”

“I know you’re nervous,” Macaron said in a kind tone. “You’re worried that while you’re gone, she’ll start making eyes at some other man, eh? But you’ll never get anywhere thinking that way, ron. You need to be firm. Now if you don’t have that confidence, there’s a way to get it, ron. Do you know what it is?”

“N-No, I don’t!” Kimura-kun said angrily. “I’m not a damned model like you

are!"

Macaron squeezed Kimura-kun's shoulders and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Hit up a whorehouse."

"Huh?"

"Hit up a whorehouse. It'll solve everything. The more expensive, the better," Macaron specified. "Get yourself some experience with gorgeous babes who know the sour from the sweet. Then a little brat like her will stop feeling so special, and you can give it another go."

"What is this," Kimura spluttered, "life advice from Kitakata Kenzo?!"

"It's just the facts, ron."

"I know... it makes sense, but... but I... I...!"

"Don't worry. I have a friend who knows all about that stuff," Macaron said soothingly. "He'll tell you where to go, ron. They have girls a lot like Tsuchida-san, too, you know? Give me your email address and I'll send you the info later." *Of course, I've never actually been to a place like that myself*, he thought. *Well, Tricen will probably know something. He's usually the person to ask in situations like these.*

"Huh, for real? I mean... but..." Kimura-kun trailed off.

"Just do it already. So annoying, ron."

"Ah, right..." While they whispered, Kimura-kun had started typing his email address to Macaron—but then suddenly he realized what he was doing, and let out a shriek. "Wait, no!!!"

"What's the problem now, ron?!"

"Enough! Why do I have to get a lecture from you?! You're the one she accidentally gave the love letter to, right? You—Kanie Seiya! And now you want to advise *us* about the problem?! She's always liked you, too! And you... your gentlemanly response to her has made this all really complicated!"

His sudden, angry rant struck Macaron dumb for a second. "Er... Seiya... I mean, I did that?"

“Yes,” Kimura-kun affirmed.

“With her?” Macaron asked.

“That’s right.”

“Hrm... That wasn’t in the report, ron. Is this true?” he asked Tsuchida-san. She nodded firmly, her cheeks slightly pink.

“I’m sorry... It’s not like I was trying to pit you two against each other,” she clarified, “but... you were so nice to me yesterday... I started wondering if maybe I really wanted something else...”

“Wow,” Macaron observed. “We’ve got a real phore in our midst, ron.”

“Er?”

“Nothing,” Macaron said innocently. Incidentally, ‘phore’ was Maplese for a certain kind of woman. It certainly wasn’t a polite word—if you wanted to cuss someone out, you might say ‘Your mother’s a phore!’ It was a terrible insult.

Anyway.

Kimura-kun, his jealousy now inflamed, glared at Macaron.

Tsuchida-san was staring at the ground, perhaps waiting for him to play the white knight.

Having joined the conversation halfway through, it seemed that Macaron had missed some crucial information. At any rate, he could see now that his meddling had made the situation more complicated. “...Yeah. Well, you know. Despite how I might look, I, Kanie Seiya, am not much of a man. I’m always getting henpecked by a woman at work. I’m full of myself, strutting around like I own the place. I’m no good for dating, ron. So, like... I can’t recommend it, you know?”

“What are you talking about?” Kimura-kun demanded to know. “This is all your fault!”

“Hmm,” Macaron pondered. “All’ might be going a little far...”

“Shut up! You knew that and you’re taunting me, right?! I’m going to give you a taste of all my sorrow, all my anger—right there in your damn front teeth!”

Shedding tears of blood, Kimura-kun lashed out with a punch. He was an amateur, so it was blatantly telegraphed; Macaron saw it coming a mile away. But, he decided, he could be magnanimous and let him get some of his anger out.

*Come at me, boy*, Macaron thought encouragingly.

With a smack, Kimura-kun's fist sank deep into Macaron (Seiya)'s face, but it certainly wasn't enough to take Macaron down. He just stood, arms akimbo, smiling confidently. "Heh... not a bad punch, ron."

"...?!" Kimura-kun was struck dumb.

"But it lacked power. It was weak," Macaron clarified. "You can't beat a former LubDub Melo gang leader with a flimsy punch like that. Now... put your back into it! Plant your feet! Put all the power you have into your fists!"

"Um... uh..." But Kimura-kun just stammered as he took a step backwards. He seemed to have lost his will to fight. Rather, his expression was... fear? Why? What was he suddenly afraid of?

"...K-Kanie..." Kimura-kun stammered. "Your head... I mean, your neck..."

"Hmm?" Now that he mentioned it, Macaron realized his line of sight was off, as if sloping roughly 70 degrees to the right. He checked out his reflection in a nearby window. Kanie Seiya's (in other words, his) neck had snapped a good 70 degrees to the left. In Gunpla terms, it was like the poly-cap of the neck had slipped off the ball and gone hanging. It was rather grotesque. "Oh... that's not good." He'd forgotten he was in a costume. Even if it was a magical bodysuit, it still probably had impact limits. He'd need to be careful (...Though actually, he wondered, where was his own head right now?). He grabbed his (Kanie Seiya's) head and used the reflection to set it back on straight. Fortunately, nothing seemed to be broken, so he was able to get it back to its original position. "Sorry, kid. Now, try that one more time, ron."

Kimura-kun did not try it one more time. He let out a shriek and took off like a shot.

"...Figures," Macaron whispered as he watched Kimura-kun disappear around the corner. Boy, he'd buggered this up. He should have let Kimura-kun's punch

send him flying, then said: “You’ve really got guts. Tsuchida-san, this man has a lot to recommend him.”

“So, um... Tsuchida-san?” he haphazarded.

“Y-Yes?!” Tsuchida-san had been standing still, quivering, but she snapped out of her trance and straightened up when addressed. “Um... are you all right? With your... neck...”

“Oh, yeah. I have a special physique,” said Macaron dismissively. “It used to get me on ‘Believe it or Not’ type shows all the time... I’m fine. It’s really just a party trick.”

“Oh, I... I see.” Tsuchida-san seemed to calm down.

He couldn’t believe she had accepted that explanation; she seemed to be a little less than “all there.”

“But, um... I’m sorry for getting you mixed up in this,” she apologized nervously. “You haven’t done anything wrong...”

“Hey, no big deal. We all make mistakes, ron.”

“But...”

“But if I can give you a word of advice...” He pulled out a Marlboro and lit it with a snap of his 100 yen lighter. He must have made it look so natural that Tsuchida-san didn’t even try to scold him. “For things like this, ron, sometimes it pays to get a mediator involved. When you’ve just got the aggrieved shouting at each other, it’s always going to come down to emotional arguments. You’ll end up going around and around on problems when you could be solving them. So... Terano-san, was it? Get a third party to join you and talk it out at a cafe or something. Choosing a place with lots of people around will help you to stay calm.”

“R-Right...”

“No, I mean it,” said Macaron. “Before my ex and I divorced, we’d ask our best friend to join us, ron. ...Well, we weren’t able to reach a compromise over child custody, so we had to get lawyers involved, but still.”

“What?” asked Tsuchida, obviously shocked. “Divorce? Child custody?”

"Life's complicated, ron. Forget I said that. ...Well, goodbye." He rubbed out his cigarette in his pocket ash tray and turned to leave.

"Um, Kanie-kun!" she called.

Macaron stopped. "What?"

"Th-This has been... alarming in a lot of ways, but... thank you. Because I really wasn't sure... what to do before. Thank you very much." Tsuchida-san bowed deeply in gratitude.

Feeling a bit embarrassed, Macaron waved her away like he was swatting flies. "Stop that. You'll devalue yourself, bowing like that."

"R-Right!" Tsuchida-san straightened up, her eyes shining like a maiden in love.

Macaron quickly strode away, wondering if he had made a terrible mistake. *Well, whatever, ron. It's out of my hands after today...*

That night, in the park after closing—

"And that's all for your report?" Isuzu asked, standing in front of Macaron and Tiramii. Macaron had been that day's fill-in, and Tiramii would be tomorrow's, which was why they were both present. "You tried to go to the nurse's office in fourth period and the gym teacher chewed you out in the guidance office. That's the main point I'm concerned about, but you're saying there weren't any other problems?"

"That's what I'm saying, ron."

"Really?" she sounded doubtful. "That was really the only problem you had?"

Macaron (back in his two-heads-tall form by now) gazed at Isuzu carefully.

"...What?" she asked.

"...Nothing," Macaron said. "I had absolutely no problems regarding anything you told me in your report yesterday."

"....." She sensed a slight edge to his tone, but she didn't feel like pursuing it.

"Anyway, Tiramii. Good luck tomorrow, ron."

“Sure! Leave it to mii!” Tiramii said, patting his cute little pouch.

His confidence, though, just made Isuzu nervous. “You appear to be looking forward to this,” she said.

“Yeah. High school, huh... That really takes me back, mii,” Tiramii whispered, gazing into the distance. “You know Hoppy-Popple Garden High in Maple Land, mii? That’s my alma mater.”

“Ohh? That’s a famous prep school, ron. I’m surprised you came out of such a reputable institution. ...Wait a minute. Wasn’t that place on the news because it burned down, ron?”

Now that Macaron mentioned it, Isuzu had heard of that school too. “I was too young at the time to understand all the details, but I believe I recall hearing about it.”

“Yeah,” Tiramii admitted, “that was mii.”

“.....” Isuzu didn’t know what to say.

“See, growing pot was all the rage in the horticulture club back then, mii. But the teachers were about to sniff out our stash, so I rushed to burn it all behind the school building, mii. But the fire jumped to some nearby fertilizer... it really freaked everyone out! I mean, I was really, really sorry...” Tiramii reminisced, his already adorable eyes growing bigger and rounder than usual.

“Not even I went that far, ron... And what kind of Fairy of Flowers grows pot?”

“Pot’s not that big a deal, mii. I hear certain creators take frequent trips to the Netherlands to indulge, mii.”

“Well, it’s legal to smoke it over there... but bear in mind that I’m still a member of the royal guard,” Isuzu whispered to herself as she listened to their conversation, eyes unfocused. The royal guard was part of Maple Land’s law enforcement body, which meant she had the authority to arrest criminals.

“If you’re talking about the arson, the statute of limitations expired, mii. Plus nobody was injured, and it let them rebuild the old school that was falling apart, so all’s well that ends well, mii.”

“Please do not burn down Kanie-kun’s school,” Isuzu requested.

“Don’t worry, mii! I’ll have a totally normal, unremarkable day!” Tiramii declared, slapping his plush hand against his chest.

“I hope this will be all right...” she muttered.

Despite Isuzu’s concerns, Tiramii was keeping a surprisingly low profile. He spent his time in class messing around on his smartphone, sending flirty texts to married women. Most of the women didn’t text back, sadly, but he was still having fun.

Even Tiramii knew that Kanie Seiya was important to the park. He wouldn’t dream of using Seiya’s body to hit on girls at school. Well... Actually, he was kind of struggling not to. This was high school, after all. It was full of high school girls, and Tiramii liked his women anywhere from three to ninety-nine.

Moffle had once called him the “Sexual Area 51,” a reference to the size of the field Ichiro used to play during his time with the Mariners in jersey 51. (Of course, that didn’t guarantee that anyone would send hits in his direction.)

So about halfway through the school day, he’d started getting a little restless.

“Mii... Mii... Mii...” he whispered. It was lunch break at the moment. He was in a corner of the courtyard, watching the girls come and go, moaning in his mind.

*She’s cute, mii. She’s got a nice ass, mii. So does she, and so does she! Maybe we could all engage in some ‘extracurricular activities’ together... Hmm. Puffin’ good in the neighborhood...*

Just then, his smartphone vibrated. It was an email from Isuzu. 《I expect you’re getting restless around now. I just want to remind you that if you cause any trouble (especially regarding women), I will kill you. Not just that; I will bring you back to life, then shoot you dead again. Over and over, repeatedly. \(^0^)/》 As usual, Isuzu had attached a strange emoji to her text. Did she actually even know what those were for? Well, that aside...

“Isuzu-chan... impressive, mii.” She really knew how his mind worked. While feeling a slight chill down his spine, Tiramii typed his response. 《It’s okay, mii. I’ll be good and warmed up by the time you come by, mii》

Drat. The auto-correct had kicked in. He meant to send “I’ll be good all day, mii” but he had ended up sending “I’ll be good and warmed up by the time you come by, mii.”

Isuzu’s reply came instantly. 《Is that supposed to be a joke? Or is it a threat?》

*No, that’s not right. That’s not what I—*《I made a mistake, mii. Just relax and give my naughty tail a tickle.》Ahhh. Another unintended message. He had meant to type “Just relax and leave everything to mii,” but the auto-correct had terrible lag, which meant it didn’t change the words until just before he sent the message. Puff!

Another reply from Isuzu. 《Even if you don’t cause trouble, I may have to shoot you dead anyway.(`;w;')ブケツ》Ahhh. She really was mad. And what was with that emoji?

Tiramii sent another email, desperately trying to correct the misunderstanding. 《I didn’t mean that! My smartphone’s auto-erotic asphyxiation is never off the table, mii.》No! Why did that happen when he tried to type “auto-correct”? 《Anyway, it’s a misunderstanding, mii. I’ll explain afterwards I’ll puff you on the table, too.》No! He was trying to type “I’ll explain after I get back, okay?”

“Mii... mii! Oh, darn it. I just need to reboot the thing, mii...” he muttered to himself. He was about to hit the phone’s power button when he was interrupted by a voice from nearby.

“Um, Kanie-kun?”

“Mii?!” He shrieked as he jumped off the bench (looking like Seiya).

The person addressing him was a girl he’d never seen before. She was a second year, but she wasn’t in Seiya’s class, at least.

She was cute. Totally cute. From top to bottom... sizes 80-60-83 or so. *Of course... all women are great, no matter what they look like, mii.*

“C-Can I help you?” he asked. Deciding he’d worry about his email problem later, he tried to focus on smoothing things over here.

The girl seemed baffled by Tiramii(Seiya)’s odd behavior, but quickly snapped

out of it and spoke again, hesitantly. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I’ve really been at my wits’ end... And... um, it might be a strange thing to ask, but I was hoping we could talk for a little bit...”

“Ah, sure. I don’t mind if you don’t...” Tiramii said after clearing his throat. He felt like Seiya didn’t quite speak that way, but no need to sweat the details. *Just roll with it*, he thought.

“Can we talk here?” she asked.

“Sure, go right ahead.” Tiramii was sitting on a weatherworn bench next to a flowerbed in the courtyard. He slid over to make room, and the girl sat down right next to him. “Okay. You’re, um...”

“Yes?” she asked.

“Um, your name,” Tiramii bleated. “What was it again?”

An expression of clear disappointment appeared on her face. “Tsuchida Kanae. Did you forget it already?”

*Hmm, maybe I was too blunt. Well, no helping it. You can still recover, mii. Stay positive!* “Of course not. I could never forget you.” He leaned in close to her. His usual move was to say it teasingly with his cute Pomeranian face. But since he had Kanie Seiya’s face right now, he decided not to do that. Instead, he thought, he should say it more like a host club server. Yes. “I just like hearing you say your own name.”

“Huh?” Tsuchida was perplexed.

“Hey, say it one more time,” Tiramii coaxed. “What’s your name?”

“Tsu... Tsuchida... Kanae,” she said, blushing.

“Mm... it really is wonderful. The vowels. The consonants. I could listen to you say it all day.” He whispered it into her ear, and her cheeks turned red.

“P-Please don’t tease me...” she requested.

“Heh... I can’t help it,” Tiramii told her. “After all, you’re such a little cutie. How can I not tease and bully you?”

“Um, um, um...”

"There are so many people here. Shall we move somewhere else?" He put his arm smoothly around her shoulders. She twitched, then silently nodded.

*Yes! I don't know what's going on, exactly, but it looks like Kanie-kun is a man of sin too, mii. He'd said he didn't have any friends, but I guess that bastard's got them where it counts! So if I'm going to keep up my mission to do things like "normal Kanie-kun" would, I've got to satisfy this woman, mii!*

He took her hand and started to walk, but she still seemed a bit disoriented.

"U-Um... where are we going?" she asked.

"Heh heh... I told you, didn't I?" Tiramii leered. "A place where we can have a little fun."

"Huh?! But... but..."

"No need to fear. I'll teach you everything you need to know, mii."

"M-Mii?" she questioned.

"I said... I'll teach you everything you need to know. Okay?"

"U-Um... r-right..."

*Wow, she's coming along! I didn't peg her for such a phore, mii. I'll really have to give her the works! But where was he going to take her? They were in high school, right? His immediate thoughts were the gym warehouse or the nurse's office... But in real life, those places would probably be locked up tight.*

*Hmm? Just then, he remembered the door to the roof. This school didn't allow access to the roof, so they used the landing at the top of the staircase to store unused desks and chairs. Which meant people generally didn't ever go there. I could probably get some puffin' good private time with her there, mii...*

"Um... Kanie-kun... You..."

"What?"

"You seem kind of... different from yesterday. I..."

"You're nervous?"

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

Ah, of course. It was Macaron yesterday. Knowing that guy, he'd probably given her some nonsense lecture that reeked of old man. "That was me yesterday. This is me today. There's nothing strange about it, mii."

"B-But you're so... aggressive," she protested. "It just doesn't feel like you..."

"Heh..." he breathed. "But don't you want to know the real me?"

"Um, ah..."

"Don't worry. Just come along. I'll show you some great sights, mii." He put his arm around her waist and massaged her lightly with his fingers. She trembled, and her expression melted. Whispering things like "You're so cute" and "My little kitten," Tiramii led her up the stairs. *It's so easy, mii! It's never been this easy before! Appearances really are everything, huh? Maybe I'll borrow this suit again, mii!*

Eventually they arrived on the landing just before the door to the roof (in practice, a store room). But there was already someone else there. "K-Kanie-senpai?" It was Chujo Shiina, who had been eating lunch by herself. She had started working part-time in the park in April. She was a shrimpy little thing who looked like she was in elementary school, but she was actually a first year here. She seemed shocked by the sight of Tiramii (Seiya) with a girl—and holding her so close, at that.

"Hey, Shiina-chan," Tiramii greeted her.

"Y-You're coming to school again today?" Shiina asked. "...And who is that girl?"

"Hah. Don't ask such insensitive questions, mii. We're gonna have some fun here, so give us a little space, okay?"

"K-Kanie-kun..." As she dithered, he breathed onto her ear. She looked like she might faint right there.

"Ah..." Shiina didn't know what to do.

"You know, that kind of thing," Tiramii purred. "It's okay. I'll make time for you later, Shiina-chan."

Shiina started trembling violently, then threw her lunch box at Tiramii

(Seiya)'s face.

"Mii?!"

"So forward! I mean... so humiliating!" she shouted, then bolted down the stairs. Soon enough, Shiina was out of sight.

Tiramii muttered while picking rice off his chest, "Mii... That was an unusual reaction. I figured she'd just say 'um, sorry!' and run off."

"Kanie-kun... who was that girl?" the girl with him asked. Her tone had changed; now it was neutral and chilly.

"Hmm? Oh, never mind that. Right now, this world is for the two of us alone. We're about to cross a lot of dangerous bridges, mii..."

"You know, that 'mii' thing has been bothering me this whole time," she said accusatorially.

"Don't sweat the copula! Now, are you ready? I've got a technique that will send you to heaven..." He tried to pull her tightly to him. But she remained immovable, and shoved aside Tiramii(Seiya)'s lips as they drew near.

"Excuse me," she said firmly. "This doesn't make any sense. That first year... Shiina? Just what kind of relationship do you have with her?"

"She's just a coworker," Tiramii tried to explain. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't tell me not to worry about it! What's going on here? She was mad at you, wasn't she? Are you two-timing her? I don't want to be a part of this!"

"No, no! You're the only girl for mii right now. C'mon, close your eyes. Do you see the ray of light in the darkness? That's me. Relax, and I'll handle everything..."

"Huh? But..."

Just then, he heard a buzzing sound. The smartphone in his pocket was vibrating. He took it out to glance at it, and the girl snatched it away.

"Let me see that," she demanded.

"Ah."

Tiramii had his phone set to display the text of incoming emails. As a result,

this was what the girl saw: 《Sento Isuzu: We're going to have a nice, long talk tonight. Be ready. (\*`▽'\*)》

*What's with that emoji, mii?!*

“...What does she mean, ‘tonight’?” the girl asked suspiciously.

“Mmm. She means I need to make my report for work...”

“And Sento Isuzu? Isn’t that the girl they’ve been spreading rumors about with you? Are you with her as well as that Shiina girl?”

“Hmm... That’s not really... look, it’s a complicated situation, mii.” *Puff. Things are going south fast!*

“I think I had the wrong idea about you,” she concluded. “I thought you were a more honorable person than this...”

“H-Honorable? Talk about getting the wrong idea, mii...”

“But, Kanie-kun, I think you’re actually a playboy. And I’m not the kind of girl to mess around with someone like that.”

“It’s not messing around! I’m serious about you, way serious! I’ll treasure you!”

“Then tell me. What’s my name?”

“Er.” After all that, she still remembered their initial interaction? *Never let your guard down around women, mii! Let’s see, Tsu... da? It started with tsu, right? Or was it chi? And her first name... Hanae? Honae? There’s a ‘na’ in the middle, right?* “O-Of course I remember, mii. Um... Tsu... Tsu...”

“Tsu?”

No, not tsu! Chi! “Chitsuda Kaname! That was it, right?”

“...Tsuchida Kanae,” she corrected him coldly. “...Goodbye.”

“W-Wait, mii! I can explain! Or maybe we’d communicate better in the language of love?”

“Stop it!” she fumed. “You... you scum!” She shoved away Tiramii’s hand and flew down the stairs.

Not even he knew how to stop her like this. He dropped to his knees and wept. “Urgh... How... how did this happen?!”

That night, after the park closed...

“Is that all for your report?” Isuzu asked.

Two others were present: Tiramii, who had been the standin for today, and Moffle, who would be the standin for tomorrow.

“Yeah... that about does it, mii,” Tiramii said, looking haggard. She had accepted his explanation about the unacceptable emails being caused by his phone’s auto-correct, but that apparently wasn’t the main thing wearing at him.

“Then other than your problems emailing me, nothing in particular happened. Correct?”

“Yeah... sure...” Tiramii was clearly being evasive, but Isuzu (having done questionable things herself) chose not to press him.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said. “Kanie-kun has recovered, thanks to the considerable rest he’s been getting these past few days. His mood has improved and he’s lashing out less. I would prefer to keep this up, if possible.” Seiya had been more diligent about his office work, and milder with his employees as well. His usual brooding atmosphere was gone, and he was enjoying his nightly conversations with Latifah. It was shocking how much a person could change when you relieved their stress and exhaustion. It was quite pleasing to see.

“So, Lord Moffle, it will be your turn tomorrow,” Isuzu said. “Can you handle it?”

“Leave it to me, fumo.” Moffle thumped his chest and gazed into the distance. “But... high school, eh? That takes me back, fumo... I came out of Fluffy-Wuffle Military High, myself.”

Fluffy-Wuffle Military High was well-known in Maple Land; it was an elite school, run directly by the military. The Royal Guard Cadet Corps that Isuzu had attended was roughly equivalent to middle school in the mortal realm, so she had known of FluffWuff High as one of her options after graduation. Since her grades had been so excellent, though, she hadn’t had to attend FluffWuff High herself—she’d skipped ahead to the Royal Guard Officer’s School.

“Those days were something, fumo. We all lived in the dorms, and the older students never let up on us. They got us up at 5:30 a.m., and if we didn’t make our beds just right, they’d beat us with their fists, fumo.”

More high school reminiscences, Isuzu thought wearily.

“Really, mii? The whole time I’ve been here, you never mentioned that, mii.”

“You knew I was in the army, right, fumo? That’s where I met Macaron. I had my commission and he was an NCO, fumo. He was a sniper during Operation Sweet Storm who... ah, but never mind that. Well, it’s funny to think of Macaron calling me ‘sir’ back then. Certainly hard to imagine now, fumo.”

Isuzu had never heard these stories before. She actually wanted to hear more, but Tiramii immediately switched back to high school talk. “Mii. You have any good times at that school?”

“Oh, not at all. I mostly remember the suffering, fumo. Getting beat up for joint liability, taking care of the guys on the cusp—it was a gray three years, fumo.”

“Hmm... any women?” Tiramii asked. “Any action?”

“No, fumo. There weren’t any girls there. The most fun we ever had was... ah, yeah. Getting to eat out on days we had leave, fumo.”

“What a boring way to spend your youth, mii.”

“Moffu. ...But the idea of ‘beautiful youth’ is an invention of TV dramas, isn’t it? The real thing’s mostly awkward, or boring and rote. Real youth is a dark and brooding time if you ask me, fumo.”

“Is that so, mii?”

“That’s so, fumo.” Moffle folded his arms and nodded, his expression oddly confident.

Isuzu cleared her throat and tapped on the packet of documents on her desk. “Philosophical discussions aside... if tomorrow passes without incident, we’ll move to keep the plan going, and draw on a greater stable of cast members to fill in for him in the future. We’re counting on you, Lord Moffle.”

“You know I can handle it, fumo,” Moffle snorted.

"I'll be going to school tomorrow, too," Isuzu told him.

"As you like, fumo."

The next day...

As expected, Muffle was a perfect fill-in for Kanie Seiya. He just kept his mouth shut and projected an aura that made him seem unapproachable—and as he'd thought, the boy didn't have any friends. Fortunately, Muffle wasn't a nicotine addict like Macaron, so he'd be able to hold off on smoking until after school was over, and while classes were rather boring on the whole, he found some scraps of interest here and there, rather like the Open University programs he sometimes watched when the mood struck him. Most of all, this mundane high school nonsense was a breeze compared to spending each morning running ten kilometers while chanting, "FluffWuff High is invincible! Our spirits will never be broken!" and such.

*Moffu. Although...* It was strange. A lot of students seemed to be glaring at him; girls, mostly. There were girls who watched him from a distance and whispered to each other; girls who wrinkled their noses and backed off when they noticed him; girls who stared daggers at him when he was just passing by...

*Hmm... Strange, fumo.* Lone wolf students weren't usually treated this harshly, were they?

When they changed classrooms for third period, a girl from the class next to his—she seemed the strong-willed type—stage-whispered to a friend of hers: "He's got some nerve, coming to school after what he did..."

There were no other students around him, so it seemed clear that she was talking about him (Seiya). He could have just ignored it, but he decided it would be best, for future reference, to find out what was going on.

Muffle walked up to the girl. "Ah, excuse me..."

"Wh-What do you want?" the girl asked.

"You just said 'after what he did.' Were you referring to me? If so, I'd like to hear more about it." He asked it casually, as much like Kanie Seiya would as he could.

But the girl tensed up, as if clearly on her guard. “I... I don’t know. Why don’t you ask Tsuchida-san?”

“Tsuchida?” he asked. “Who’s that?”

“Playing dumb? Really? You really are scum,” she spat, then swiftly walked away with her friends.

“Hmm...” He folded his arms and thought. Scum? She was clearly taking about Kanie Seiya... It wasn’t exactly his business how the people at school thought about the boy, but given the circumstances, he couldn’t just look the other way. Had Seiya done something? No, Seiya was too earnest (surprisingly enough) for that... At the very least, you couldn’t call him “scum.”

Fourth period ended and lunch break arrived. Moffle immediately summoned Isuzu behind the school building to talk.

“I feel like people are giving me the hairy eye...” he observed. “You have any idea why that might be?”

“Yes. Um. Well...” Isuzu said evasively.

“What kind of response is that? Speak up, fumo. I can’t do my job if I don’t know what’s going on.”

“.....” Isuzu wasn’t sure what to tell him.

“Ah, fine, fumo. I’ll call Seiya, fumo. I’m not getting anywhere like—”

“Wait,” Isuzu interrupted as Moffle pulled out his smartphone. “...The truth is...”

“Moffu. The truth is...?”

“...Kanie-kun doesn’t know about it,” Isuzu confessed. “On my first day as his standin, I ended up in a difficult situation...” She explained about her getting the love letter on the first day; about how Macaron had apparently done something the next day, and Tiramii the day after; then about the terrible rumors that were spreading about Seiya when she arrived at school today.

“I haven’t found out the details,” she told him. “But it seems you did something awful to that Tsuchida girl. I’ve done some asking around, and there

are a few different versions—”

Isuzu had heard several different things. That he'd pinned Tsuchida Kanae to the floor. That he'd tentacle-raped Tsuchida Kanae and gotten her all slimy. That he'd drugged Tsuchida Kanae and gotten her so loopy she'd done the “double peace sign ahegao.” That he'd gotten Tsuchida Kanae to a pregnancy ending and pressed his ear happily to her belly. All kinds of things.

“One way or another,” she concluded, “it sounds like his behavior was something outrageous.”

“I’m not sure how she’d get to a pregnancy end in just a day... but anyway, this is serious, fumo.”

“Macaron... he’s a level-headed person,” Isuzu pointed out. “I think the direct cause is most likely Tiramii.”

“That mongrel! Next time I see him I’m going to stuff him with onions, fumo!”

“I bear some responsibility in the matter, too. I didn’t tell him about what happened with Tsuchida Kanae...”

“Moffu! It’s true, that’s not like you either, fumo. What in the world—”

“It just slipped my mind,” she admitted.

“A rare thing like a love letter? I find that hard to—”

“It. Just. Slipped. My. Mind.” She plunged a hand under her skirt and glared at him threateningly. Moffle, cowed, decided to let it go.

“W-Well... all right, fumo. Anyway, we need to think up a plan. If we don’t, Seiya may lose his good name entirely, fumo.”

“He didn’t have a good name previously,” Isuzu said. “So... I think he’ll be fine.” It was a terrible thing to say so offhandedly.

“You don’t feel any sense of responsibility, fumo?”

“Of course I do,” she told him. “But Kanie-kun has grown quite hedonistic with these few days off. Relaxing over tea with the princess at night... I’m starting to think he might prefer it this way.”

“Hey,” Moffle objected.

“Anyway, Lord Muffle. Hearing you talk that way while looking like Kanie-kun is strangely annoying. Can’t you do something about it?” Isuzu asked.

“You really need to show more remorse, fumo...”

“...I’m just flustered. I can’t think of a plan, and I don’t know what to do.” She said it all matter-of-factly and expressionlessly, as usual.

If she was feeling the way she claimed to, he wished she’d have the decency to look a little depressed or panicked. He wouldn’t ask her to be openly crying, of course, but... no, no. This was just the kind of person Sento Isuzu was. It seemed the best course of action would be for Isuzu to meet this Tsuchida girl face-to-face and ask her what happened. Then, they could figure out how to apologize to her from there. But just as Muffle was about to propose that...

“Kanie-kun! Is this where you were hiding out?!” shouted a female voice.

A group of female students had just arrived behind the school building.

The group consisted of four girls, none of them familiar to Muffle. The one who had shouted was a willful-looking girl, with hair just past her shoulders.

“That’s Terano-san from class 2-5,” Isuzu whispered to Muffle. “She’s the leader of a group of girls. The panicked-looking one behind her is Tsuchida Kanae, the girl at the heart of this. The others must be Terano’s flunkies.”

“Thanks for the explanation,” he muttered back. “So this is pretty bad, right, fumo?”

“It certainly seems that way...” Isuzu further explained that the other two were named Yamamoto and Sasaki. They looked fairly forgettable, and he was impressed that she could remember their names. Muffle himself was bad with names, so he forgot them three seconds later.

At any rate, that Terano girl seemed to be on the attack. She parked herself in front of Muffle (Seiya) and spoke. “Do you remember me? I’m Terano Mutsumi. We were in the same class in first year.”

“Ah... ahh. Yeah,” he said. “Of course.”

“You really are a liar,” she accused him.

“...?” Moffle hesitated, unsure of what to say.

“We weren’t in the same class at all!” Terano fumed.

“Ugh...” *Starting off with a light jab*, Moffle thought. *This girl’s come ready for an all-out brawl.*

“Maybe I’m nothing to you, but I still can’t forgive you,” Terano told him. “You hurt Tsuchida-san, you know that?”

“Hmm... Moffu. Well, there was a... procedural issue, of sorts.”

“I heard everything, you know,” she said. “Exactly what is your problem? Well?”

“Ahh. Moffu. Hmm, what to say... I feel it would be inappropriate to comment until the complaint is officially reviewed...”

“Quit screwing around!” she shouted in a voice that sent a shockwave rippling through the air around them. Even Moffle was stunned into silence; the other girls all went ramrod straight and gulped. “Tsuchida-san was already in a difficult position! You knew that, but then you took her out and treated her like a plaything! It’s unbelievable! She was serious about you! Is that how you seduced *her*, too?!”

By “her,” she probably meant Isuzu. Despite being treated almost like a mistress, Isuzu said nothing, and just seemed to be watching things unfold silently.

“Ah...” Moffle said. “We’re just coworkers, actu—”

“You get pretty cozy with your coworkers, huh?” Terano sneered.

“Really, our relationship isn’t like tha—”

“You think I’ll buy that, huh? You really are scum. Everyone’s been walking on eggshells around you, and you’ve just been jerking them around. Kimura-kun was so traumatized he stayed home in bed today, you know!”

“K-Kimura?” Another name he didn’t recognize. *Give me a break already!*

Tsuchida Kanae took that moment to speak up, hesitantly. “T-Terano-san... It really isn’t that bad... Please don’t be too mean to Kanie-kun...”

“Huh?! What did you say, Tsuchida-san? He almost did something awful to you yesterday, right? You were all trying to do your best by each other, while he was just satisfying himself! And he’s got *her* and that Shiina girl, too! He’s a triple-timing creep!” While Terano ranted away, her two friends (Moffle had already forgotten their names) nodded along in agreement.

“Um... Shiina?” he asked cautiously.

“That first year, Chujo Shiina!” Terano shouted back. “I’ve learned all about her, you know!”

“Ahh, Shiina, eh...” *Tiramii, listen to me. If you did anything to Shiina, I’m really going to lose my temper at you, fumo (in a substitute father sense).* ...Though thinking about it now, he’d told him what his relationship with Shiina was like last week when they were drinking at Savage. Even a fool like Tiramii had a bit of common sense—he should know better than to make a pass at a girl about to make her singing debut at the park, too. What they were suggesting was hard to imagine. “Are you sure there isn’t some mistake?” he asked.

“Absolutely not! Tsuchida-san told me!” Terano blustered. “You took Tsuchida-san to some abandoned spot and tried to do awful things to her with your little trained toy, Chujo Shiina!”

“I-I never said that!” Tsuchida objected.

“Shut up, Tsuchida-san! That’s the gist, isn’t it?!” Terano snapped at the panicking Tsuchida.

*Moffu...* Moffle was starting to get an idea of these girls’ group dynamic. The leader was Terano; the two others were her flunkies. Then there was Tsuchida, who was on the bottom of the hierarchy. Terano had lost her temper when she heard Tsuchida’s story, and she’d been building the story up in her mind as time went on. Despite that, the fact that they called each other “-san” suggested that their relationship must be a rather shallow one. So this Terano girl didn’t know Tsuchida very well, yet she’d come out here to get angry on her behalf—was it possible that Terano was actually just using this situation to assert her group dominance? *Still, I doubt I’ll be able to use that against them...*

As expected, Tsuchida spoke up immediately with a clarification. “I-I ran away

before he could, and he was acting so strangely at the time..."

"You're just biased! He got a lewd email from that Sento woman, didn't he?" Terano demanded. "She was bragging about all the perverted things they were going to do that night—"

"Enough," said Isuzu, unable to endure it any longer. "I swear by the Goddess Libra that I have no such relationship with Kanie-kun. If that Tsuchida woman is telling you that I do, then she is lying," she finished in a harsh whisper.

Terano smirked. "Huh? Oh, please, like Kanie-kun's woman is a credible witness. And who the heck is Libra?"

"If you don't know, then perhaps I shall show you. The wrath of Libra..." Isuzu was about to pull out her musket, but Muffle stopped her.

"Don't," he told her shortly.

"But General..." Isuzu protested.

"I said no, fumo." The words by themselves wouldn't sound too bizarre, except that in practice, Muffle (Seiya) had said them while stopping Isuzu from reaching under her skirt.

Terano and her gang were looking even more confused. "A-Anyway, you've trampled on her pure heart! Apologize at once!"

"I'm sorry (fumo)." Muffle bowed immediately. He looked like Seiya now, so he wasn't ashamed to do it at all.

"That's not sincere!" Terano scoffed. "Get on your hands and knees!"

"Okay. I beg of you, forgive me (fumo)." Muffle got down on all fours. He looked like Seiya now, so he wasn't ashamed to do it in the slightest.

"You've given her a traumatic memory and scarred her for life!" Terano raved. "You'd better stay away from her forever!"

"Okay, I'll stay away (fumo)." He nodded fervently while still on all fours. He looked like Seiya now, so he wasn't ashamed to do it whatsoever.

*Ahh, darn it, he thought, nonetheless. All this nonsense about love and pure feelings... it's making me want to tell her off.*

That's when she decided to rub it in. "You don't mean any of it! You can't fool me! Do you even understand the concept of romance?!" Terano stamped her foot down in front of him, with the force one might use to crush someone's head. The dust cloud kicked up from her toes landed on the crown of Moffle's bodysuit.

He may have looked like Seiya now, but still, he had reached the limits of what he could take. "Don't push your luck, little girl!"

"Ah..." Terano cried out in surprise.

He swept Terano's legs out from under her and stood up, then started screaming at the fallen girl. "I can take all your nonsense about memories and innocence! But a child like you, talking about love?! Don't make me laugh, fumo!"

"General, calm down," Isuzu said.

*"Shut up! I'm telling her off, fumo!"*

This time it was Isuzu who had tried to do the restraining, but Moffle brushed her off and laid into the dumbstruck girls. "All this talk about pain, just to serve your high school clique nonsense... what do you people think life is, fumo?! 'Ooh, look how mad I can get on Tsuchida-san's behalf! I'm so cool!' Cut. The. Crap!!!!" As Moffle screamed, he lashed his arms forward, unleashing a sonic boom that cut a nearby tree into three parts. He'd never used a move like that before, but apparently his sheer rage had made it possible. Well, anyone could do that if they got angry enough. "You're all just playing at love anyway, fumo!"

"Hey!" the girls objected.

"The true pain and agony of love—how could you understand it, fumo?! You can't! Think... watching the woman you've loved for a decade go off on her honeymoon with a man that you hate! Do you know how that feels?! It's torture! It's pain beyond imagining! But you have to endure it! No matter how much it hurts, you can't tell anyone! You bear it for another dozen years! Then the girl you love tells you 'take care of my daughter!' Do you understand how that makes a man feel?! No, I don't think you do, fumo!" He ranted on and on, turning the blame back on them as the girls just stood there in stunned silence.

“Are you talking about the princess?” Isuzu asked him, which snapped Moffle back to his senses.

“Sh-Shut up! That’s a hypothetical! I’m just making a point, fumo!” He wasn’t quite sure what he was saying himself, but one way or another, he wasn’t going to go along with this farce any longer. “You little girls! If you want to make Seiya a villain, go ahead and do it! No one cares about Seiya! But let me give you one word of warning: you’ll never marry a good man, and that’s for sure! Remember my words in twenty years and bite your tongues off in misery!”

His abuse had certainly gone too far. On top of that, he’d forgotten any pretense of the role he was playing, causing the girls to become confused and angry. “What is he talking about?” “It’s so gross,” they whispered to each other. At the very least, there were no signs that it had inspired any regret or sympathy in them.

Behind him, Isuzu said in a gloomy voice, “It’s all over...” There was vanishingly small chance of ever restoring Seiya’s reputation at school now.

“Yes... I think we’re done here. You’ve made it perfectly clear that you’re absolute trash.” Looking disgusted, the girls turned to leave. But it was just then that a new student arrived.

“Ah, excuse me! Could you wait a minute?” the boy called out.

It was a boy in his second year whom Moffle didn’t recognize. Isuzu did seem to recognize him, although only superficially.

“Kimura-kun? I thought you were staying home today,” Terano said.

The boy—Kimura something, apparently—came running up to them. He arrived next to Moffle (Seiya) and stopped, shoulders heaving. “Well... I realized things might be getting a little crazy here... so I changed my mind and came to school earlier. Then I overheard the confrontation...” After catching his breath, Kimura faced the group, put his hands together and bowed down low. “I’m sorry, all of you!”

“Wait. Why are *you* apologizing, Kimura-kun?” Terano asked.

“Kanie, he... he... he did all this crazy stuff for me!” Kimura claimed.

“Huh?”

“All those weird things he said, all the passes he made at those girls... he was trying to get Tsuchida-san to hate him, to get things back to normal,” Kimura explained. “Isn’t that right, Kanie?”

Moffle stared for a moment, dumbstruck as the question was turned to him. “Fumo? Um...”

“Isn’t that right, Kanie?” Kimura asked again.

“Ah... yeah,” Moffle agreed. “Well...”

“I’m really sorry. Things just got out of control.” Kimura let out a sigh and put a hand on Moffle’s shoulder. “Two nights ago, I had a conversation with Kanie. It seemed like Tsuchida-san had stopped having feelings for me. I didn’t know what to do, but Kanie said, ‘I just have to get her to hate me, then. Simple.’ But he went way too far, and now people are spreading awful rumors about him... Right, Terano?” Kimura glanced at her, and Terano averted her eyes awkwardly. Moffle was starting to get an idea of who it was who had spread those rumors.

“But I’ve changed my mind,” Kimura continued. “It’s not okay to put that burden on Kanie, you know? It’s been hard on Tsuchida-san, too... So I’ve decided to forget the whole thing. I’m going to work on my own to become worthy of you, Tsuchida-san! So please, Terano...”

“R-Right...” the girl said.

“Just let this go, okay? I know I’ve made a lot of trouble for you, but...” Moffle didn’t know why it was, but Kimura’s words seemed strangely forceful.

Terano had no reason to refuse his request, and this would preserve Tsuchida’s reputation, too. After a lot of ups and downs, it felt like things were finally resolving.

“I... If you’re both all right with it, I won’t say anything else about it...” Terano agreed.

“Thanks,” Kimura said sincerely. “How about you, Tsuchida-san?”

“Huh? Oh... right,” said Tsuchida. “I... if you’re all right with it, Kimura-kun...”

The two main parties involved had agreed, and in the end, Kimura bowed low

to Moffle (Seiya) and Isuzu as well.

“That should cover everything. Also Kanie, Sento... I know you guys are just coworkers, so I’m sorry for adding fuel to that weird misunderstanding!”

After breathing, “I rushed down here, but I’m still feeling pretty sick,” and dashing away, Kimura moved to an emergency stairway a little ways away, and watched the rest unfold in secret.

Though probably feeling a little disoriented over the problem being resolved so easily, the group of girls, Kanie Seiya, and Sento Isuzu all gave perfunctory apologies to each other, then dispersed to prepare for fifth period.

“Whew. You think this will really calm things down?” Kimura groaned to the girl—Chujo Shiina—who had met him by the stairway.

“Hmm... I don’t really know. But... your performance was excellent, Senpai,” Shiina complimented him.

“Heh. Some things you never forget.” As he spoke, “Kimura” pulled off his head in a manner suggestive of a person pulling off a mask. The face beneath was that of Kanie Seiya. Slightly unnerved, he gazed at the “Gulley Bodysuit” he’d removed, a mask that resembled Kimura’s face. “It was a rush job, but I think it fooled them. I have to say, those Mogutes really know their stuff...”

After learning everything, Seiya had commissioned them that morning, and they had turned it around in just two hours. They only needed to model a head rather than the full body, of course, but it was still an impressive rush job. Luckily, since they only had to make a head, they had just enough material to finish it.

“It’s... a magic bodysuit, right?” Shiina asked. “I guess that explains why you’ve been acting so strangely these last few days... After everything I’ve been through, I’m not surprised by a whole lot anymore, but that one sure threw me for a loop...”

“You certainly seem like an adaptable person, Chujo,” Seiya smiled maliciously, and Shiina averted her eyes.

“D-Don’t tease me...”

"Anyway, thanks for all your help. I'd like to raise your wage, but... well, maybe someday. I'll treat you to something later if you can make do with that."

"Ehm..." Her response was unenthusiastic. Of course, he couldn't just raise her wage that easily; once he did, it would be tricky to lower it again, and he needed to be frugal with these things.

It had been late last night when Seiya first realized that something was wrong. It had been a total coincidence—he'd had a few things he needed to confirm with Chujo Shiina regarding her CD recording schedule, so he'd given her a call. Her reactions to him had been unusual, so he'd pressed her for answers. In response, she mentioned something about him "flirting with some second-year girl."

He grilled Tiramii, who had been on duty that day, just before he went home. Then he talked to Macaron, who'd been on duty the day before, and everything fell into place. He'd thought about questioning Isuzu, too, but eventually decided against it; he could roughly guess what trouble *she'd* gotten into as his standin on the first day. But now he had to figure out what to do about it.

He expected that he (or rather, Moffle) was probably going to get a grilling from Terano's gang in the morning. It wasn't hard to imagine how that might degrade his standing at school. It was true that he had no friends, but he didn't want things to get even less comfortable than they were—and so, he'd come up with a plan.

That morning, he met up with Kimura on the way to school and asked for his help. More specifically, he'd asked "what is the most embarrassing memory of your life?" and used his magic to read the answer. He'd felt a little bad about that, but he hadn't had time to explain. He then used that information to blackmail Kimura into letting him take a few dozen pictures of his face, and also to take the day off from school.

He sent the image files to the Mogute Clan members he'd asked to be on standby, and they immediately set to work making the Kimura mask. Just a few hours later, he'd been able to pick up the costume. Then he just managed to make it to school in time for lunch break. He got in touch with Shiina, whom he'd asked before to keep an eye on them for him, and she'd reported that they

were behind the school. It seemed he'd just managed to make it there in time. Then, he'd spouted that made-up story, and the problem was resolved.

"But I was wondering, Kanie-senpai..." Shiina said, hesitantly. "Why didn't you tell Muffle-san and Isuzu-senpai that it was you? I thought that after the girls left, you'd take off the mask and really yell at them..."

"I thought about it..." Seiya frowned. Of course he was mad about what his standins had gotten up to while he was away; it was ridiculous for them to be so irresponsible just because it wasn't their own lives on the line. But when he'd seen Muffle and Isuzu standing in front of that gang, desperately doing everything they could, he'd found he wasn't mad anymore. To the contrary, he almost felt like he was the one who should apologize. "Well... they've been going out of their way to be my standins," he finally said. "I'm not actually in any position to be angry at them." Seiya wasn't just being polite; that was how he really felt.

In response, Shiina fell silent. An expression came over her face that was somehow both sad and a little bit amused. "Senpai, seriously..."

"...?" Seiya waited for her to continue.

"You told me not to tell anyone, so I won't..." Shiina said, "But you're making me really want to tell Muffle-san and the others about this someday."

*What are you talking about, kid? Seiya wondered. Did you even hear what I said? "What did I swear you to secrecy for, then?" he demanded. "Seriously, don't tell."*

"But it's going to come out soon enough, right?" Shiina coaxed. "Macaron-san and Tiramii-san and the Mogute Clan already know about it."

"Hmm... I suppose it is only a matter of time," he admitted. "But I don't want anyone feeling indebted to me over this, particularly Sento and Muffle."

"Okay. I won't tell anyone," she promised. "Don't worry."

"Really?" he asked. "I can count on you?"

"Yes!"

Why did she look so happy about it? Seiya thought about using his magic to

peer into her mind, but then he remembered his “grenade rule,” and opted against it.

•

That night...

Isuzu stopped by the rooftop garden to report in. Just like the last few days, Seiya and Latifah were both there, chatting pleasantly. “Excuse me, Your Highness.”

“Oh, Isuzu-san. I simply must tell you the funniest thing...” Latifah let out an elegant laugh. “It appears that Kanie-sama always puts half a bottle of strawberry jam on his pancakes. Do you really love strawberry jam that much?”

“Hmm... I guess you could say it’s my favorite food. Is that strange?” Seiya tilted his head.

“It certainly is,” Latifah told him. “How do you ever have enough jam to feed yourself?”

“Hmm... I guess I do finish up a bottle every three days or so,” Seiya said. “But there’s a bargain sale at the nearby supermarket every now and then, so I always stock up when that happens...”

“Then next time,” she promised, “I shall make the jam myself.”

“Hey, that sounds great.”

“It is easily done,” Latifah said dismissively. “Do you really prefer sweet things?”

“Hmm... I guess I do prefer things on the sweeter side.”

“Yes, I see.” She giggled.

Isuzu rarely saw Latifah laugh this way. Still respectful, yet still truly enjoying herself, as if she were standing in a warm, gentle breeze—

“Is it really that funny?” Seiya asked. “I think you’re the strange one...”

Seiya, too... His expression, so gentle. Isuzu only ever saw him when he was

neck-deep in work, which kept his profile always stern and serious.

“So, what did you need?” he said, looking at Isuzu after a chuckle.

“I’m here to pass on the standin job,” Isuzu told him. “You may have forgotten, but tomorrow is your day to go to school.”



“Oh, that’s right. Did you have any problems?”

“...No, I don’t believe so. Please enjoy your lonely school life in peace.” She found, abruptly, that there was an edge to her voice.

Isuzu had been wondering all day how best to report the nonsense she had caused because of her blunder. Kimura’s appearance today had wrapped everything up neatly, but things could just as easily have plunged into disaster. Still, in that moment, she had lost her desire to report to him about it. Things had resolved, certainly, but they had taken a toll on her. Seeing him now, leisurely chatting with the princess about strawberry jam... why, she wondered, should she bow and scrape and apologize to him? She was angry. But at the same time, she felt guilty.

“Hmm...” Seiya went silent for a while, a relaxed, amused smile on his face. Isuzu found something strangely disconcerting about the mannerism, but before she could speculate any further, he declared: “All right. Then please keep this up next week!”

Even as she felt relief flood through her, Isuzu responded awkwardly. “If that is what you want, Kanie-kun...”

“You bet it is. I can get all my credits and also hold a part-time job. It’s a real win-win! Heh heh,” Seiya laughed with a wicked smile.

“Oh Kanie-sama, how silly you are... But you must not come crying to me if you fail to keep up with your studies,” Latifah chided him. She used a small gesture to encourage Isuzu to take a seat, then poured tea into a cup she had prepared.

“Don’t worry. I’m smart,” he said.

“It is not merely about academics; there is a moral issue at play. What you are doing is not unlike cheating. Of course, I would never dream of chastising you, but—” Latifah paused. Her hand holding the pot trembled, and hot water began to spill out. “I would never dream of... but...”

“Your Highness?” Isuzu asked with alarm.

“Latifah?” Seiya was concerned, too.

Latifah dropped the tea pot and collapsed onto the table with a crash. The pot didn't break, but hot water spilled out onto the mat and the coasters.

"Hey!"

"Your Highness!" Isuzu rushed to help her up, while Seiya sopped up the water with his napkin.

"Forgive me... I am... fine..." Latifah said. Her breathing was shallow.

"But..."

"I really am fine. This is not... so unusual..." She was forcing herself to smile, which somehow made the situation even more painful. "I experience vertigo from time to time. My head begins swimming... and I go limp..."

"You should lie down. Get her to that bench—no, her bedroom would be better," Seiya decided. "Which way is it? I wish I knew this place better... Ah, dammit!"

"This way," Isuzu told him.

They put Latifah to bed in the penthouse room near the rooftop garden. It was a simple bedroom that could be entered through a glass door on the upper terrace. Seiya had carried her, and Isuzu led the way.

"Forgive me," Latifah sighed. "I feel so... so ashamed..."

"Don't sweat it," Seiya told her. "Just rest."

"Yes... I do believe... that I will."

Once she was settled in, Seiya suggested contacting the park infirmary, but there was no one staffing it at this time of night. He even recommended calling an ambulance, but Latifah repeatedly insisted that she was fine, and so he eventually relented.

"I'll watch over her," Isuzu decided. "As a man, you should leave."

He couldn't argue with Isuzu there. Seiya did as he was told and went back to the garden. Isuzu unbuttoned Latifah's blouse to make her more comfortable, and eventually, the princess smiled sadly.

"I'm sorry, Isuzu-san..."

“Why apologize to me?” Isuzu asked. “It’s best to rest when the season is changing...”

“Yes... Ah, but do not tell the others...”

“I won’t, of course. Don’t worry.”

“Please...” Latifah’s slender hand squeezed Isuzu’s tightly.

*You’re nervous, aren’t you? Isuzu realized. Poor thing. Presumptuous as it may be, allow me to rub your shoulder.*

“Thank you...”

They spent about thirty minutes this way in the bedroom designed to look like the one in the royal palace of Maple Land. Eventually, Latifah went to sleep. Her hand went limp, released Isuzu’s, and fell down to the bed with a rustle of silk.

Isuzu sneaked back out into the garden and found Seiya standing there, his arms crossed, and facing away. He was looking down at the park from the observation deck, silent and still.

“She’s asleep,” Isuzu told him.

Seiya heard her, but he didn’t respond immediately. He seemed to be thinking deeply about something. This was a side of him she saw from time to time—a forbidding aura that rejected all kind words.

“Is this because of the curse?” he asked.

“Yes. It happened several times last year as well,” Isuzu admitted. “But this year...”

“It’s more frequent?”

“...Yes.”

“It seems park attendance alone isn’t enough,” Seiya said melancholically. “I guess we won’t be out of the woods until we solve the root problem. I just... I don’t know how to do it. I don’t have the slightest clue.”

He sighed.

It was a heavier sigh than Isuzu had ever heard from him.

●

In accordance with his declaration that he was going to “stuff him full of onions,” Muffle dragged Tiramii to the bar, Savage, and ordered three helpings each of nikujaga and Shamo chicken tataki (which came with a garnish of raw onions).

“Go on! Eat, you mongrel!” he commanded.

Tiramii knitted his brow. “Huh? Wait, is this about that thing... that it’s not good for dogs to eat onions, mii?”

“That’s right, fumo. So get eating. If you survive, I might forgive you. If you die, well, it’s one less mongrel in the world. That’s how angry I am with you, fumo!!”

“Mii...” He’d assumed he might try begging for his life, but Tiramii just split his wooden chopsticks and began shoveling the nikujaga into his mouth—onions and all. “Hahmph, mmph... delicious. Delicious, mii!”

“Eh?” Muffle exclaimed.

He then sprinkled garlic-poached soy sauce on the Shamo chicken tatami (with raw onions) and wolfed it down. After stuffing six people’s worth of food into his stomach, Tiramii let out a burp and a sigh and gulped down his highball. “Onions are scary. Wow, now alcohol is scary, mii.”

“..... Ah, you seem fine. What a boring payoff, fumo...”

Muffle sank in his seat. Macaron, beside him, leisurely downed his beer.

“Well, we’re fairies,” he observed. “It’s not like we’re real dogs or sheep, ron.”

“Ah, true enough...” Muffle acknowledged.

“Besides, remember when we went out for jingisukan recently, ron?

“Right. That was mutton, fumo...”

“If you think about it, it’s cannibalism, ron! Bwahaha!” The sheep mascot snickered in amusement as he chewed on his yakitori. Muffle felt vaguely like he should object to the sight, but he wasn’t quite sure where to start.

“Now... enough about Tiramii’s punishment. Let’s do a performance review for our latest assignment, fumo,” Moffle declared, switching gears.

“Mii. Latest assignment?”

“You know, fumo. The Seiya standin plan. We got lucky that time, but it could have just as easily ended in tragedy, fumo.”

“Ah, actually...” Macaron was about to say something, but silenced himself.

“What, fumo?”

“Nothing, ron. I’ll tell you some day.”

“Moffu?”

Just as things were feeling awkward, Tiramii, messing around with his smartphone, spoke up: “Ah! I invited Muse-chan over LINE and she’s coming right now, mii. She’s bringing the others, too, mii!”

Muse was the Fairy of Water for the attraction Aquario, which had been getting remarkably popular lately. She’d always worn a very revealing costume, but thanks to the PV that had gone viral on the Internet in March, rumor had it that she’d been getting a lot more of “those” kinds of customers. “The others” Muse was bringing were her co-stars from that attraction.

“Who are the others?”

“Fairy of Wind Sylphie-chan, Fairy of Earth Kobory-chan, and Fairy of Fire, Salama-chan.”

“Ahh...” Moffle and Macaron both let out a little groan.

“What’s wrong, mii? They’re all cutie pies.”

“Well, Sylphie and Kobory and Muse are all fine,” Moffle began, “but...”

“Salama’s the trouble, ron. You can’t say anything when she’s around.”

Tiramii just tilted his head in confusion at this description of Salama. “Huh? Why not? She’s got a great rack and she’s nice. She’s a good girl, mii!”

“What?! Have you forgotten, ron? What she did on Twitter last time...”

Moffle knew just what he was talking about. It had happened last year. The

Fairy of Fire, Salama, had written some nasty tweets about a guest; a family that had been exceptionally rude. “Shut the hell up while we’re performing. Also, die,” it had read. She’d also uploaded a picture of the family (without blurring the faces), accompanied by the words “never come back.”

The tweet had exploded, naturally, and the park was soon bombarded with complaint emails. Isuzu had been the acting manager at the time; she’d uploaded an apology to the official site, along with a press release saying Salama had been suspended, and they’d managed to calm things down, but...

“What’s wrong with flaming? I’m the Fairy of Fire, after all,” Salama had said to the executives after her suspension was given to her.

“You’re not sorry at all, fumo...” Moffle had told her then.

“Yeah, she wasn’t sorry at all, fumo...” he recalled now.

Moffle and Macaron folded their short arms and nodded succinctly.

“...Maybe it’s not my place to say, as I’ve hit customers myself... but that woman is bad news, fumo. If she thinks she’s in the right, she doesn’t give the slightest mind about how others might feel. It’s a mystery to me why she wasn’t fired, fumo.”

“I don’t get it either, ron. I wish she’d just quit already...”

It was then that Tiramii spoke. “Y-You two. Look behind you, mii...”

They turned back and saw four beautiful girls standing at the entrance to the tatami room. Muse, Sylphie, and Kobory were all smiling awkwardly. Just behind them was the Fairy of Fire Salama, who was silently tapping things into her smartphone.

“Um, sorry we’re late. We just got here...” Muse spoke for the four of them. She was wearing ordinary street clothes.



“H-Hey... Thanks for coming, fumo. Make room, guys. ...You can sit over there, fumo.”

The three mascots made room. The four women sat down. Amidst the awkward atmosphere, Salama, the person at issue, said nothing. She just silently continued tapping things into her smartphone.

“Um... did you hear, ron?”

“Well... yes. Er...” Muse responded.

“U-Um... we were just blowing off steam, fumo. I hope you won’t take it too hard...”

“But I will, Muffle-senpai,” Salama spoke for the first time. “This is unjust treatment. It’s workplace harassment. It requires retaliation. The text of my complaint is already written out. Shall I read it to you?”

“P-Please don’t, fumo.”

“..... ‘I arrived at a drinking party for work and found Muffle, Macaron, and Tiramii there badmouthing me. I thought they were adults. Super gross’ is what it says. Now I just have to press the send button.” Salama held her smartphone in the air like it was the detonation switch for a bomb.

“C-Calm down, ron. We’re sorry, okay? Please don’t—”

“Tell us your conditions, fumo! We’ll gladly negotiate—”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I’m the Fairy of Fire. Flaming is my specialty. It’s time you all learned that!”

“Fumo!”

Click.

The scene descended into chaos.

Salama, pressing “send.” Muffle and the others leaping at her, hoping there was still time to delete it. Snatching the phone back and forth, upending the table. Tiramii taking advantage of the commotion to cop a feel on the other girls and getting stabbed by ice picks, which made things even more chaotic... It continued on like that, right up until they all realized that smartphones didn’t

get a signal in the tatami room.

# Let's Visit a Magical Realm

One business holiday, just after noon in the office...

"Seiya. I need this stamped for approval, fumo," Muffle said, holding out a repair request form for the House of Sweets.

Seiya, who was at his wits' end dealing with the new renovation plans for May, glared at Muffle in annoyance. "So, why did you come to me? Stamping forms is Sento's job. Though actually, I haven't seen her this morning... What's that secretary of mine up to?"

"Moffu. Isuzu's traveling today, it seems. She wrote it on the whiteboard out front, fumo."

"What? ...Ah, you're right. I didn't notice."

Seiya peeked into the secretary's room, which was separated from the rest of his office (although "office" felt like too strong a word for the bare-bones room) by a faded partition, near the door. On the whiteboard of the far wall, there was a message from Isuzu: "Traveling today. Destination: Maple Land Senate, Office of Rep. Yisuzurch. Returning tomorrow."

*That's right, Seiya thought. She said something about this yesterday...*  
Something about going to see how things were in Maple Land, and it having to do with the future of the park.

"Anyway, just stamp it. I need to finish work early today so I can get croquettes at Saigo-tei in Komazawa, fumo."

"I don't know if I can... I told you, Sento usually handles that kind of thing," Seiya explained. "I can't stamp anything unless she confirms it personally." In fact, it was within his authority as acting manager... but he knew that if he stamped it himself, he'd get an earful about it later. He was already at his wits' end with the various problems he was dealing with; he didn't need to deal with Isuzu's scolding on top of that. "Can't you just do it tomorrow?" he asked.

“No, fumo. The Mogutes are getting on my case about it. I want to submit it today, fumo.”

“Hmm... But Sento’s not here, so there’s nothing to be done.”

“Maybe not, fumo...” Moffle pulled out his smartphone and made a call, probably to Isuzu. He waited a little while, but eventually sighed and hung up.

“Can’t get through?”

“Looks like she’s out of service range, fumo. Well, there are plenty of things that block reception between the mortal and magical realms. No Saigo-tei for me today, I suppose. I’ll just go and ask her myself, fumo.”

“Where are you going?” Seiya asked curiously.

“Where do you think? To Maple Land, fumo.”

“You can just... go there?”

“Yep,” Moffle answered without hesitation.

Come to think of it, Seiya had heard talk of “magical realms” in the vaguest of terms before, but he had no actual idea of how people came and went between Maple Land and here. It almost seemed strange that he’d never wondered about it before.

“Can an ordinary person like me go to Maple Land?” Seiya found himself asking. Not even he could resist being intrigued by such a notion.

“Yeah, you should be able to go if I’m with you. ...You want to come with me, fumo?”

“No, I have work... Well, actually, maybe I should...” It occurred to him that he’d cleared up all his most urgent tasks in the morning. And since he was at his wits’ end with everything else, maybe this would serve as a good pick-me-up. “Okay, let’s go,” Seiya decided. “It might be useful to get an idea of what sort of place it is.”

“All right, fumo. Come with me.”

Seiya told a subordinate in the office that he would be out for the day, put on his jacket and followed after Moffle.

Seiya was a realist, but he saw no reason to doubt the existence of magical realms at this point. *Is there some kind of inter-dimensional gate underneath the park?* he wondered. *Will we read from some kind of magic book, then be wreathed in light and teleported?*

“Moffle-san. Where are those documents I asked about, mogu?” Taramo, chief of the Mogute Clan, asked as they left the general affairs building.

“We’re heading to Maple Land to get them stamped, fumo. We’ll be back late, but I think I’ll be able to hand it in today.”

“Thanks a lot, mog.”

“Moffu.”

Seiya stayed quiet and followed Moffle. The mascot punched his time card at the service gate, then left the park. He put on his Lalapatch Charm and headed for the bus station. He waited for a while. The bus came, and he got on board and swiped his prepaid card.

Seiya was confused. This wasn’t going how he expected. “Hey, Moffle.”

“What, fumo?”

“Why are you getting on a bus if we’re going to Maple Land?”

“...? Because the station’s too far away to get to without one, fumo.”

“All right, I think I’m missing something... How do you actually get to a magical realm?” Seiya asked.

“Moffu. Let’s see... You go from Amagi Station to Inaba-zutsumi Station, and change to the JR Nanbu Line there, fumo. Then you take that to Musashi-kosugi, change to the Tokyu-Toyoko Line...”

“Wait one damned minute!”

“What? You don’t like the Nanbu Line, fumo?” Moffle furrowed his brow.

“Not that! Isn’t Maple Land a magical realm? Shouldn’t there be a more... *magical* way of getting there? Traveling through a mysterious gate, or using a teleporting spell, or...”

“Huh? What are you talking about? That’s fantasy. Fantasia. I think someone’s

been reading too many light novels,” Moffle smirked. It was extremely galling behavior, coming from a literal fairy like him.

“Ugh...”

“Anyway, once we’re on the Toyoko Line, we’ll get off at Yokohama, fumo. Then... ah, forget it. Just follow me, fumo.”

As if realizing that it would be too much trouble to explain, Moffle fell silent and started messing with his smartphone. He was playing FreeCell with his big, plush paws. Seiya started to feel silly about asking him any more questions, so he just took out his own tablet and started reading through some old park documents.

Soon, the bus arrived at Amagi Station. They took the Tohto Line two stations to Inaba-zutsumi Station, and from there changed to the JR Nanbu Line. It was around 3:00 p.m. on a weekday, which meant the train car was empty and they got seats easily.

“Moffu... Moffu...” As they approached Musashi-mizonokuchi Station, three stations before Musashi-kosugi, Moffle started to fidget.

“What’s wrong?”

“I guess I should do it, fumo...” Suddenly, as if making a decision, Moffle got off the Nanbu Line at Musashi-mizonokuchi Station.

Seiya was suspicious: this wasn’t where you’d get off if you were heading for Yokohama. “Hey, weren’t we supposed to get off at Musashi-kosugi?”

“Just shut up and follow me, fumo!”

They changed to the Den-en-toshi Line at Musashi-mizonokuchi towards Shibuya and went a few stations down, getting off at Komazawa University Station.

“Why are we getting off here?” Seiya asked.

“Just do it!” Whatever it was, it sounded serious. It was rare to see Moffle so frazzled about anything—maybe there was some special ritual he needed to do in advance so that they could make it to Maple Land. “It’s important, fumo.”

“.....” Seiya didn’t know how to reply.

They walked up the stairs from the underground station, turned northward at Highway 246, took a few dozen steps, and then arrived at a deli-style shop. The sign read, “Saigo-tei Croquettes.” Moffle entered the shop and placed his order with a scowl. “Snack croquettes. Two sets... no, three sets, fumo.”

“Yes, sir,” the store employee said. “We’ll fry them up now, if you don’t mind waiting.”

“Yeah, I’ll wait.”

“Hey!” Seiya, who had so far been quietly following to see what he’d do, now exploded. He couldn’t believe it was just a personal errand.

“...What? I was planning to come here after work from the start, fumo. Latifah’s croquettes are the best, but the snack croquettes here are about on par with hers, fumo. The important thing is that the coating’s not too thick—it’s close to the texture of homemade, but there’s also amazing variety. Twelve snack croquettes, each with different fillings, fumo... and the Mediterranean salt croquettes are the best of all,” Moffle explained insistently.

“Fine, whatever...” Seiya grumped.

“You should buy some for the trip too, fumo. They’re delicious.”

“Uh, I don’t really...”

“Don’t come asking me for any later; I won’t share.”

“I told you, I don’t want any!”

They were forced to wait over ten minutes. At last, Moffle received his piping hot pack of croquettes, and they resumed their journey, changing trains a few more times before they arrived at Yokohama Station.

“Hmm... Yokohama, eh?” Seiya looked around with interest. People living in western Tokyo rarely came to Yokohama unless they had work or school there, since otherwise, they could do pretty much any shopping they needed in Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, or Shibuya. Of course, there was nothing special about the station—it was just a large station, the sort you’d see in any major city.

“Stop goggling like that, fumo. You look like a country bumpkin.”

“So?” Seiya asked. “Where are we going next?”

“Platform 11,” Moffle responded shortly. “Come along.”

“Okay. ...Huh?” Seiya suddenly noticed the station diagram on the wall next to him. The platforms displayed there only went up to 10.

Moffle started walking, weaving through the crowd, and Seiya rushed to follow him. They had just passed the ticket window at the end of the southern concourse when Seiya suddenly realized that the hustle and bustle around them had died off.

“Seiya. This way, fumo.”

“...? All right...”

The passage kept going. He felt sure there had been no passage here before... Then, at the end of this impossible passage, he saw a sign for Platforms 11 and 12. They walked down the stairs onto a completely empty platform; it was old-fashioned, and looked especially desolate in the red setting sun.

Naturally, he could see Platform 10 for the Shonan-Shinjuku Line across from it, and beyond that, many other trains were coming and going. For some reason, though, none of the noise from them seemed to reach Platform 11, where they were standing.

“You won’t notice these platforms if you’re just a mortal human, fumo,” Moffle explained. “Now, we do occasionally get mortals who see them and wander in. Kids in particular, fumo. But it’s not exactly top secret, so apparently when that happens they just give them some candy and send them back.”

“Hmm...”

Because he’d been dealing with magical phenomena day in and day out lately, Seiya found nothing suspicious about this explanation. It was more or less like H\*rry P\*tt\*r, anyway. “I’ll avoid commenting on the magical gimmick, but do they have JR’s permission for this?”

“I wouldn’t know, but I expect so?” Moffle offered. “I heard Maple Land helped finance the station when it was built.”

“I see...” He’d thought JR was a respectable company. Was it all right for them to be accepting investments from some magical realm? It wasn’t really his

business... but still, Seiya worried.

“This platform is where I took my first steps in the mortal realm,” Moffle reminisced. “That was a rough time... I took the Toyoko Line right to Shibuya and it was a madhouse there, fumo. I finally found the Inokashira Line, but when I tried to take it to Amagi, I ended up all the way out in Kichijoji, fumo. Then I missed the last train and had to spend the night on a bench in Inokashira Park. A man’s first time in the big city is never easy, fumo.”

“Hmm... I suppose I can sympathize. I went to Umeda in Osaka once, and I found it impossible to navigate. That place is a dungeon.”

“And people who are used to Umeda get lost when they come to Shinjuku, fumo. You mortals should put more care into planning your stations.”

“We can’t,” Seiya explained. “They expand over time.”

“Moffu. Well, fair enough.”

Seiya looked at the timetable: One train ran each hour. The direct train to Maple Land’s capital, Mapleburg, should be arriving shortly.

“It’ll be here soon, fumo,” The train pulled into the platform the moment Moffle said the words. It was a real live steam train. Smoke billowed out of the smokestack, mixing with the steam as it gradually slowed and entered the platform. The engine was delicate, painted with high-quality green and red paint. “It’s got Sasuraiger’s colors, but it’s a proper direct train, fumo.”

Seiya had no idea what a “Sasuraiger” was, but the train certainly was beautiful. He typically thought of steam trains as being coarse and black.

The passengers began to crowd off. They were all superdeformed animals: rabbits, cats, goats, pigs, and even some rodents that resembled Moffle. They all seemed to be coming to the mortal realm from Maple Land. Even as they passed him by, they didn’t seem to pay Seiya the slightest mind.

Suddenly, one of the disembarking animal-people addressed Moffle.

“Sir? Is that you, sir?!” Seiya looked to see a pink bear, two heads tall, lumbering up to them. “It is you, General! General Moffle Mel Mosenas! It’s been so long!”

“Oh... is that you, Master Sergeant Griber?” Moffle seemed to know him, too.

The pink bear, “Master Sergeant Griber,” walked up to Moffle, came to attention, and gave him a sharp salute. Moffle returned the salute swiftly. “It’s an honor to see you again, kuma. I’m taking a little trip to the mortal realm with the family—that’s my wife and children over there, kuma.” Griber indicated behind him. A family of bears, standing a little ways off, all bowed politely to Moffle.

“I see. I’m glad everyone’s doing all right, fumo.”

“We’re planning to hit up the Atagawa Hot Springs in Izu, kuma.”

“Ah, that’s a nice place. I recommend Bananawani Gardens, fumo.”

“Kuma, kuma, kuma!” Master Sergeant Griber laughed. “...Might I ask where you’re going, sir?”

“Oh, just to Mapleburg, on an errand. Need to get something stamped for approval, fumo.”

“I see. But if it’s for *that*, just say the word. I’ll send someone from the division to your aid at once, kuma.”

Moffle just waved a paw dismissively. “Stop that. I’m a mascot at an *ager* now, no more and no less.”

“But you’re still our general, kuma. Just say the word, and the soldiers of the division will be at your side, all right? Even if it’s the Mapleburg Palace that you’re—”

“Griber, don’t say such things, fumo.”

“Ah. Well... excuse me. But it’s still true, kuma. There are still a lot of soldiers out there waiting for your return, General.”

“I’m happy to hear it, but it’s off the table, fumo. You know what I’m doing now, don’t you?”

“The princess, you mean? Yes... I completely understand.”

“Sorry, Griber, but I want you to pretend you never saw me here. I don’t need anyone starting any rumors... That wouldn’t be good for the division, either.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll just be going then, kuma.”

“Moffu. Be well.”

Griber took his family and left.

Seiya had been standing just behind him, watching the back-and-forth in amazement. But Muffle just turned back as if nothing had happened and said, “Sorry for the wait. Ready to get on, fumo?”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah...” Seiya followed Muffle onto the train, which was waiting to depart. The passenger seats were retro-style booths. The floors and benches were made of wood, and the walls were decorated with intricate patterns. They grabbed a random set of seats facing each other.

“How long will it take the train to get there?” Seiya asked. “To this... capital city of yours.”

“About an hour, I’d say? Departure’ll be in about ten minutes, so if you have to use the bathroom, now’s the time, fumo. There aren’t any on the train.”

“No, I’m all right. But who was that Griber person?”

“An old subordinate of mine, fumo,” Muffle said, gazing out the window. “A long time ago, I was in the army. Your basic desk jockey stuff, fumo...”

“But he called you ‘General’...”

“Ah, that’s basically desk work, fumo.”

“Um, I’m pretty sure it’s not...” Isuzu had called Muffle “General” a few times before, too, Seiya recalled. As dubious as this magical realm of theirs seemed, was Muffle actually a person of importance there?

“Moffu. Just forget about it, fumo.”

“I’m not sure that I can.”

“Hrm...”

After thinking a moment, Muffle spoke again. “...I suppose, given all we’ve been through, it wouldn’t be right not to tell you. Maybe I’ll explain a few things, just in case.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Just things, fumo. Here, eat this first.” Moffle took a plastic case out of the vinyl bag he was holding and offered the snack croquettes within to Seiya.

“I don’t want any.”

“Take one, they’re good.”

With no other choice, Seiya picked up one of the snack croquettes and ate it. He didn’t like getting grease on his hands, but... “Hm. This is...” *Delicious. Extremely delicious. On par with Latifah’s croquettes, at least...*

“Good, fumo?”

“Yeah... But that’s not what we were talking about!”

“I know, fumo. Let’s see, what should I make sure you know...” Moffle thought as he crunched on his snack croquettes.

He never ended up speaking, though, so Seiya took the lead. “Let’s start with the part where you’re a general.”

“Well, that’s just what it sounds like, fumo. I was a general in the Maple Land military—I started as a second lieutenant out of officer school, then after executing a bunch of tricky operations, I moved up in the world, fumo.”

“Hmm.” Seiya didn’t know how old Moffle was, but shouldn’t it take years to advance from second lieutenant to general? That’s the way it was in the mortal realm, at least.

“...It was a swift rise, even by Maple Land standards. I don’t like admitting it, but it’s because of my family.”

“Family?”

“We’re Maple Land nobility, fumo. A barony that serves in the military, generation to generation. But we didn’t have much standing in court, so not many of our men make it up to the rank of general...” Moffle let out a sigh. “My big sister was the king’s consort, fumo.”

“His what?”

“Consort, queen, bride, wife. Clear enough for you, fumo?”

“R-Right...”

“As her little brother, I might be biased on the matter, but she was a really beautiful woman. The king fell in love with her at first sight at a banquet, then spent years and years at wooing her. She ran from him at first, but well... he was the king, after all. You can’t exactly turn him down. In the end, they married, fumo.”

“Ah-hah... No, wait. So if your sister married the king, that means their child would be...”

“Yeah, Latifah. That’s why she sometimes calls me ‘uncle,’ fumo.”

“I see...” Seiya mused.

“The queen’s little brother couldn’t just be some special forces captain, so for political reasons I was kind of half-dragged up the ranks to general, fumo. I was given command of the third division, the strongest and most famous in all of Maple Land. A lot of things happened after that... Griber, back there, was NCO attached to the division, the one who kept the lower officers and soldiers in line, fumo.”

“A real veteran type?”

“Yeah. He really hated me at first. But, as you can see, he eventually warmed up to me.” For some reason, Moffle smirked, like a child who’d gotten away with a prank.

“Hmm...” Before this, there had been quite a few things Seiya had been hazy on; why Isuzu referred to Moffle as general, why Latifah referred to him as “uncle” before correcting herself... He’d found himself thinking of Moffle as being on another level from the rest of the cast, and—“Now I get it.”

“Moffu. Glad to hear it.”

“But... if you’d made it to that kind of lofty position, why do you do what you do now?” he pointed out.

Moffle let out a self-recriminating “moffu” in response. “Well... Latifah got cursed. I wanted to help my niece. And I was kind of sick of the military nonsense, so I quit the army and came here. That’s basically it, fumo.”

“The former general doing juggling for children?”

“Yeah. It’s fun, fumo. And it’s a better fit for my personality.”

Seiya felt deeply conflicted. He’d hated Moffle the first time they’d met, but he’d begun to develop a grudging affection for him. He had his own reasons for working at the park. In fact, it was possible that, just like Seiya, he—

“Although... it’s odd that we haven’t started moving yet, fumo,” Moffle muttered, checking the time on his smartphone. Seiya also found it suspicious. They were past the time indicated on the timetable, but the train hadn’t left yet.

“Is this typical?” Seiya wanted to know.

“No,” Moffle told him, “our trains are about as punctual as your mortal ones.”

“Hmm?”

Just then, an announcement came over the car. “Baa, baa. ...Erm, thank you for riding Maple Dentetsu today, baa. ...At 5:50 p.m. today, an accident occurred that placed an obstacle on the tracks near Mapleburg Station. Trains are currently running behind schedule, baa. We apologize for the delay and appreciate your understanding, baa.”

“An obstacle?”

“Ahh, not again, fumo!” Moffle moaned in annoyance. “It happens all the time on this line... Some idiot jumps on the tracks and jams up the works!”

“Y-You mean suicide by train?!” Seiya was surprised. All this stuff about magic and fairies, and people still threw themselves on the tracks? It hardly seemed wondrous.

“Yeah. Well, they usually don’t die. As I recall, a friend of Macaron’s jumped on the tracks after the ramen chain he managed went bankrupt. He got sent flying three times in a row—even set a distance record.”

“What the hell?”

“Apparently Maple Dentetsu gave him a trophy after the hospital discharged him, fumo.”

“The train company *encourages* it?” Seiya asked incredulously.

“...But all the safety checks and such really throw the trains’ schedules off. They’d be able to bounce back right away in the mortal realm. We might need to settle in for the long haul here...”

“...How much longer do you think we’ll have to wait?”

“I don’t know, fumo. It could be an hour at the soonest...”

“I guess we just wait, then...” Seiya started messing with his smartphone. Moffle did the same.

Over an hour passed, and the train still showed no sign of moving. Occasionally, the announcer would say “We are working at resolving the issue, baa” but that was it.

“...Hmm. I’m thinking this is a wash,” Seiya commented. Even if the train started moving right away, they’d be getting to Maple Land around 9:00 p.m. Then, even if they found Isuzu and got the stamp... “We might not be able to get back today, right? Maybe we should give up on the trip.” To be honest, after getting this far, Seiya really wanted to take the train and get a look at the ‘magical realm’ Maple Land himself. But there was nothing to be done about it. He had a lot of meetings to get to in the morning, after all.

“Maybe so, fumo... yeah. Let’s get back to Amagi.” Moffle put in a call to Taramo, chief of the Mogute Clan, as they got out of their seats. He explained the situation as they disembarked, then hung up.

“How’d it go?”

“He’s willing to make an exception and wait until tomorrow,” Moffle said. “Though, I wish he’d just said that from the start...”

Just then, a whistle blared. The green locomotive shot out a piercing shriek of steam.

“We apologize for the long wait, baa. The direct train to Mapleburg will now depart, baa.” Shortly after the announcement, the locomotive’s heavy wheels began to move, and the train started out. Slowly, slowly, it picked up speed. Trailing smoke and steam, the retro-style train left the magical Platform 11.

“There it goes,” Seiya sighed.

“Yeah... Well, let’s head home, fumo.” He’d actually neglected work for this—for nothing, apparently. If Moffle hadn’t taken that detour to the croquette shop, this probably wouldn’t have happened. He thought about snarking at him for it, but he held back. Even so—if not for that, they wouldn’t have run into Griber, and he wouldn’t have had the chance to ask about Moffle’s past. When he looked at things that way, it wasn’t a completely pointless excursion, at least.

“What is it, fumo?”

“Oh, nothing...”

“If you’re feeling disappointed, I’ll take you there some other time, fumo. I mean, it’s just your standard magical realm...”

“What exactly is a ‘standard’ magical realm?” Seiya wanted to know.

As the other train left, an eight-car train arrived, probably the inbound train from Mapleburg. It must have been stopped for a while due to the accident, as well. The train stopped on the platform and the passengers began to disembark.

“Moffu...?”

“What is it? Oh... it’s Sento.”

Surprisingly, Sento was one of the people getting off the train. She was wearing a long red coat and fur hat and carrying a leather bag. She was dressed like a high-ranking member of the army.



“I thought you were staying the night there,” Seiya commented.

“I was able to get an appointment sooner than expected, and I left once it was done. What are you doing here?” Isuzu asked, surprised.

“Well, the Mogutes had been bugging me about some documents, fumo. We wanted you to stamp them...” Moffle responded awkwardly. He explained the circumstances that had brought them there that day, and Isuzu nodded in understanding.

“Ahh... That makes sense,” she said, “but why is Kanie-kun here, too?”

“Um, well. I needed a pick-me-up,” Seiya explained. “And I was curious to see it, I guess...”

“Maple Land?” she clarified.

“Mm... yeah.”

Isuzu hummed, her expression blank. “It’s a surprise to hear that you’re so interested in our homeland.”

“I was curious. Something wrong with that?” Seiya responded in annoyance.

Isuzu paused, tilting her head. “Well... no. I was just... genuinely surprised.”

Things suddenly felt a little awkward for some reason, so Seiya cleared his throat loudly and turned to leave. “W-Well, never mind. Let’s just go home. This was a huge waste of time.”

As he walked down the now-empty platform, Moffle and Isuzu whispered to each other.

“...What’s with him?”

“I don’t know. I think he’s upset he didn’t get to go to Mapleburg, fumo?”

“He didn’t look upset to me...”

“Well... you know, fumo. He’s got that tsundere personality.”

“I’m sorry,” Isuzu said, “I’m unfamiliar with youth slang.”

“Quit babbling already and let’s get going! We’ve got another busy day ahead of us, understand?!” Seiya barked in annoyance, and Moffle scowled.

“Ah, that’s boring, fumo. As long as we’re in Yokohama, why don’t we grab a meal?”

“What about your croquettes?”

“I already ate them all, fumo.”

“When?!”

Isuzu raised her hand. “...Actually, I am quite hungry. I’d like to request chili shrimp stir-fry from Saika in Chinatown.”

“You too?!” Seiya demanded.

“On the company tab, of course,” she added.

“Absolutely not!” he fumed.

Seiya ignored them and started walking, while Moffle and Isuzu continued to argue. Jabbering at each other, the three left the “magical platform.”

In the end, they did go to Chinatown, ordered chili shrimp stir-fry and twice-cooked pork, spent hours eating and drinking, and ended up missing the last train and having to wait for the first one of the next day, feeling fully satisfied.

The next morning was stressful, but Seiya ended up quickly finishing all the work he’d been at wits’ end about the day before. Maybe the pick-me-up had worked? The real question was, whether or not the company could afford the dinner they’d had the night before...

# Afterword

My decision to write about theme parks has given me a lot more chances to watch Pixar and Disney movies lately.

There are so many amazing movies that feel rude to label “for children.” I finally got to watch *Toy Story 3*, and I cried at the end like a baby.

Speaking of which, as part of research for AmaBri, I visited the Disney park in Florida, too. Maybe it’s pointless to visit the world’s greatest theme park as part of researching a crummy amusement park on the outskirts of Tokyo, but Fujimi Shobo let me go, so I decided to take up their offer (and take it up partly as a ‘congratulations on finishing FMP’ trip).

In Florida Disney, though, there was a musical based on *Finding Nemo*. That’s an adventure story about a fish who has to go find his kidnapped only son. I think that, up until then, I’d been under the impression that the title was “Fighting Nemo,” but anyway...

Next to where my editor Mori and I were sitting, there was this brawny, macho white guy. He looked a bit like a veteran with the Marines. I don’t know why, but he was in the theater all by himself, and he was bawling his eyes out while he watched the Nemo musical.

I wonder if he’d had some drama with his own young son, once. “While I was off fighting in Iraq, my son... I’m sorry, my son! Forgive your father!” Is that what he was thinking while he cried?

Well, I’ll never know either way, but it was a very curious sight.

But anyway.

For a big change in subject, one of the reasons I decided to write this series is because I didn’t want to be tied down to “school” stories; I wanted to focus on a different community, for once. In the case of this series, it’s the idea of the workplace. Of course, given the label we write under, school is probably the biggest large community that most of our readers know, but I’ve always wanted

to write a story that communicated the idea that even if you end up dropping out of that community, it's not that big a deal. There are other places out there to find fun and warmth.

The main story of this book, about Shiina, was actually what I was thinking of making the first story in the first volume. A long time ago, I got a part-time job at a place that I hated going to, and I wanted to quit so much... But maybe if you hang in there a little bit, even if you don't have a convenient talent like Shiina's, you might still be able to blend in? I thought. Sorry to be pretentious. Anyway, that's what I was thinking when I was writing it.

Of course, I want to do more about Seiya's struggles and the larger story, but I also want to portray as many of the lives of the workers as I can.

Thanks to you, volumes one and two of my new series have been a big hit, so I want to get AmaBri media moving as soon as I can!

First, comics! We have a comics series being serialized by Yoshioka Kiyotake, and it's running in *Monthly Dragon Age*. They've given me a few r names so far, and it's really fun! I'm looking forward to it!

And... hmm, can I write one more thing? We're getting an anime adaptation! (Shock!) The production company is... yes, Kyoto Animation! (Double shock!)

...The details are a secret, but I'm sure it's gonna be a lot of fun. I hope you look forward to it.

Well, goodbye for now. I'll try to get the fourth volume out as soon as I can.

November 2013, Shouji Gatou

# Bonus Food Glossary and Recipes!

This volume of *Amagi Brilliant Park* concludes with a trip to Yokohama, followed by a meal out in Chinatown. Yokohama Chinatown is a tourist attraction for locals and foreign visitors alike, a place packed to the brim with delicious foods that will satisfy your desire for spice in a country whose cuisine tends toward the mild. The area traces its roots to the mid-19th century, when Japan first opened its borders for trade. Yokohama was one of the first open ports, and China swiftly came calling, establishing a nexus of Chinese culture not far from Tokyo that continues to this day.

In addition to two Sichuan Chinese recipes mentioned at the end of this volume, we're also sharing a recipe for nikujaga (lit. meat and potatoes), another late 19th century import that has since become a staple food for Japanese families. While it could be thought of as a simple meat and potato stew, it differs from Western preparations in its use of the classic Japanese dashi base (the same dashi-soy-mirin-sugar combination usually seen in udon and soba soups) that is significantly reduced before serving.

Moffle tries to kill Tiramii with an onion-packed nikujaga in this volume as well as shamo chicken tataki with new onions. If you're wondering what "new onions" are, the term refers to onions that are shipped out immediately after they're harvested in the spring, rather than undergoing the preservation process that makes onions such a great pantry veggie. Fresh, uncured onions are sweet and tender and delicious both raw or in soups.

As for the chicken tataki itself? Well, seeing as it amounts to eating raw chicken, we're not going to offer a recipe for that. We'd rather not do to our readers what Moffle was trying to do to Tiramii with the onions, after all.

Do try these great recipes below, though, for a taste of fusion cuisine at its best.

# Twice Cooked Pork

## Ingredients:

- 2 lbs pork belly (skin on, and in 1 piece)
- 12 scallions (ends trimmed and cut into 2" segments)
- 6 slices of fresh ginger, 1/4" thick
- 1 TBSP salt
- 1 TBSP finely chopped ginger
- 2 TBSP finely chopped garlic
- 3 TBSP cooking oil
- 1 to 1 1/2 TBSP sichuan chili bean paste (sometimes labeled doubanjiang or tobangan)
- 1 TBSP shaoxing wine
- 1 TBSP soy sauce
- 2 TBSP sugar

## Instructions:

1. Place the pork belly, 6 scallions, ginger slices, and salt into a large pot. Add water to cover, and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat to medium, and let simmer for 20 minutes.
2. Remove pork from the liquid, wrap in tin foil, and refrigerate for 3 hours. Once pork is chilled, cut into thin rectangles, about 1/4" thick each.
3. In a separate bowl, combine chili bean paste, shaoxing wine, soy sauce, and sugar. Set aside.
4. Heat oil in wok or skillet. When very hot, add pork and stir fry for 6 to 8 minutes, or until lightly browned. Add finely chopped garlic, ginger, and

scallions, then stir fry for 2 minutes. Add contents of separate bowl, stirring to coat, and stir fry for another minute.

5. Serve hot.

## **Nikujaga (Japanese meat and potatoes)**

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 TBSP cooking oil
- 6 ounces thinly sliced beef (cut into 2" lengths)
- 1 white or yellow onion (cut into thick wedges)
- 2 to 3 carrots (cut into bite size pieces)
- 6 small potatoes (peeled and quartered)
- 4 shiitake mushrooms (stems removed and quartered)
- 10 green beans (boiled and cut in half)
- 2 TBSP sugar
- 2 cups dashi
- 2 TBSP mirin
- 4 TBSP soy sauce

### **Instructions:**

1. Warm the oil in a thick-bottomed pot over medium high heat. Add onions and saute for 2 minutes, or until translucent.
2. Add the meat and cook until it changes color.
3. Add potatoes, carrots, mushrooms, and green beans.
4. Add the dashi, turn heat to high, and bring to a boil.

5. Reduce heat to medium, skimming any impurities that rise to the surface.
6. Add sugar, mirin, and soy sauce.
7. Cover pot, and simmer until the vegetables are softened, about 15 to 20 minutes.
8. Serve warm.

## **Sichuan Chili Shrimp Stir Fry**

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 lb raw shrimp (peeled and deveined)
- 2 TBSP finely chopped ginger
- 2 TBSP finely chopped garlic
- 2 TBSP scallions (diced)
- 2 TBSP cooking oil
- 1 TBSP soy sauce
- 1 TBSP corn starch
- 1 TBSP cooking oil
- 4 TBSP chili garlic sauce
- 1 TBSP sugar

### **Instructions:**

1. In a mixing bowl, combine shrimp, soy sauce, and corn starch, stirring until the shrimp is evenly coated. Marinate for 10 minutes.
2. Heat oil in a wok over medium high heat. Add garlic and ginger, stirring a few times until fragrant.
3. Add shrimp to wok, working quickly to spread them across the bottom of

the pan. Let cook without stirring for 20 to 30 seconds. Stir, being sure to flip the shrimp. Continue cooking for 1 minute.

4. Add chili garlic sauce and sugar. Stir to coat shrimp evenly. Cook for an additional minute, or until shrimp begin to curl.
5. Serve hot.



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Amagi Brilliant Park: Volume 3

by Shouji Gatou

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