

MODERN Villainess

IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
A CORPORATE EMPIRE
BEFORE THE CRASH



WRITTEN BY
**TOFURO
FUTSUKAICHI**

ILLUSTRATED BY **KEI**

NOVEL
4

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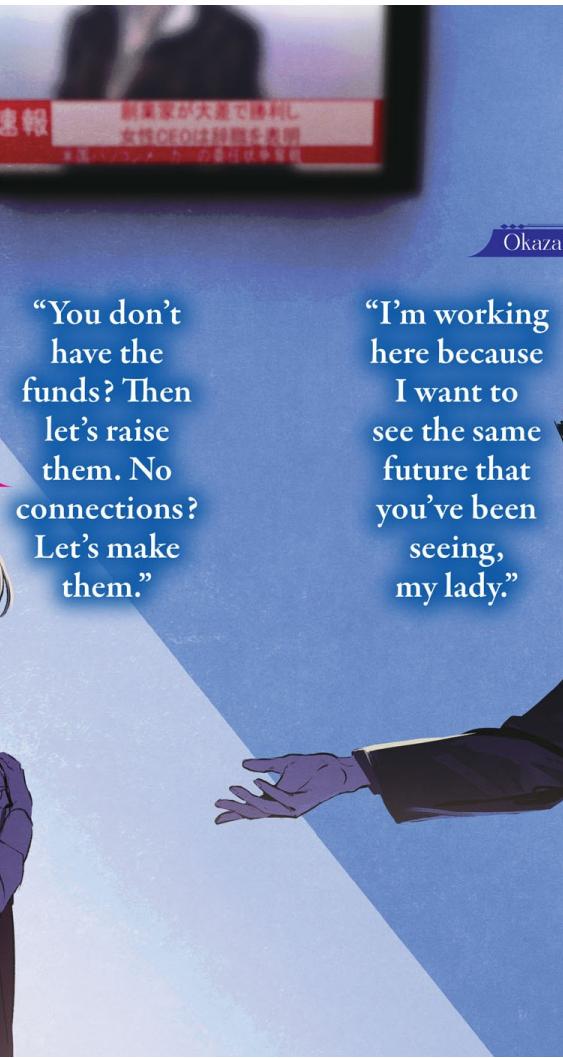
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“As for everything else, just say the word and I'll act.”

Keikain Runa



“You don't have the funds? Then let's raise them. No connections? Let's make them.”

Okazaki Yuuichi

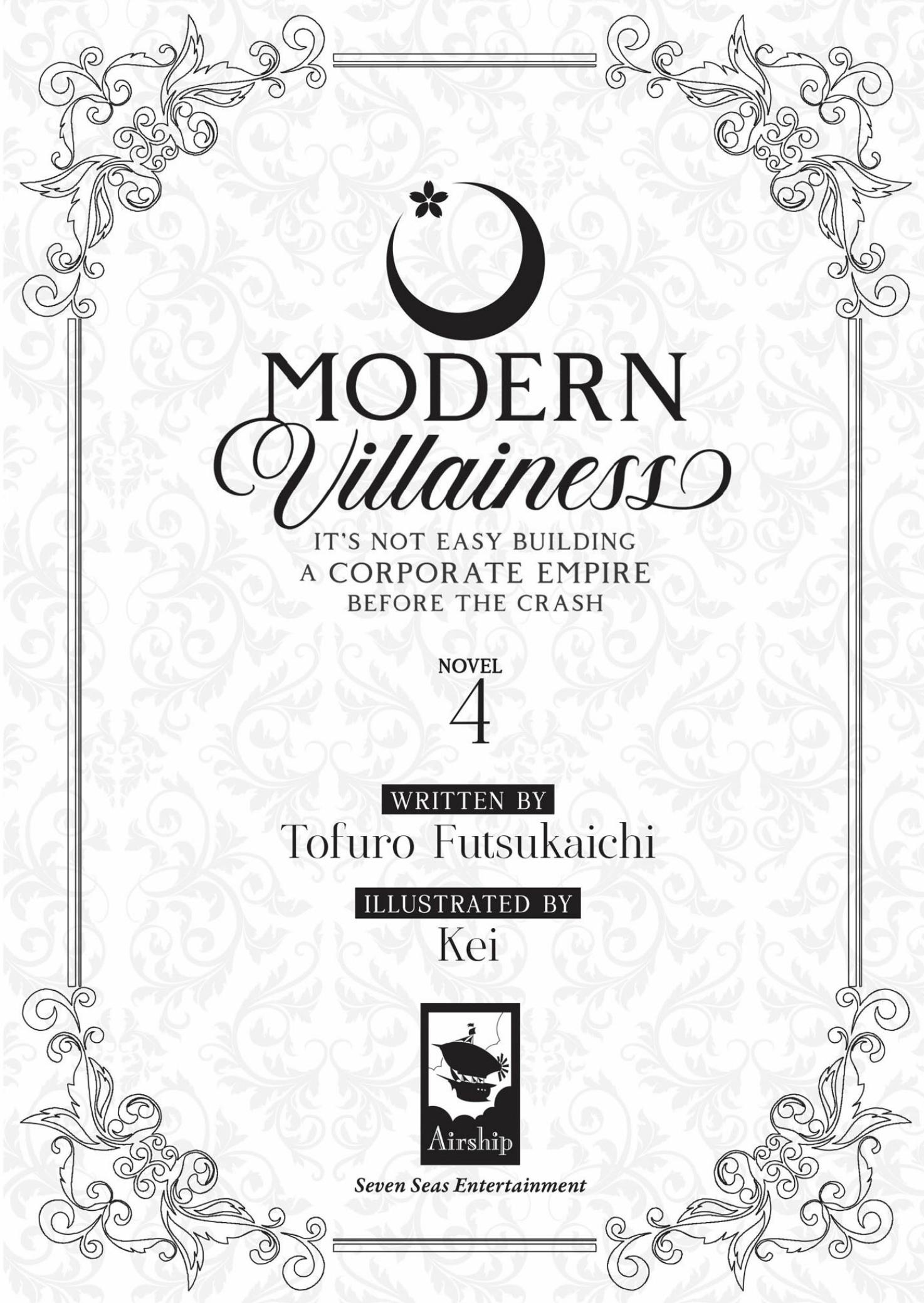
“I'm working here because I want to see the same future that you've been seeing, my lady.”



TEISEI
帝西



TEISEI DEPARTMENT STORES
**RANDOSERU
in SPRING**
**SPRING
BACK-TO-SCHOOL
BACKPACK CAMPAIGN**



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Tofuro Futsukaichi

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Seven Seas Entertainment

MODERN VILLAINESS: IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
A CORPORATE EMPIRE BEFORE THE CRASH
VOL. 4

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wo Suru no wa Chotto Taihen Vol. 4
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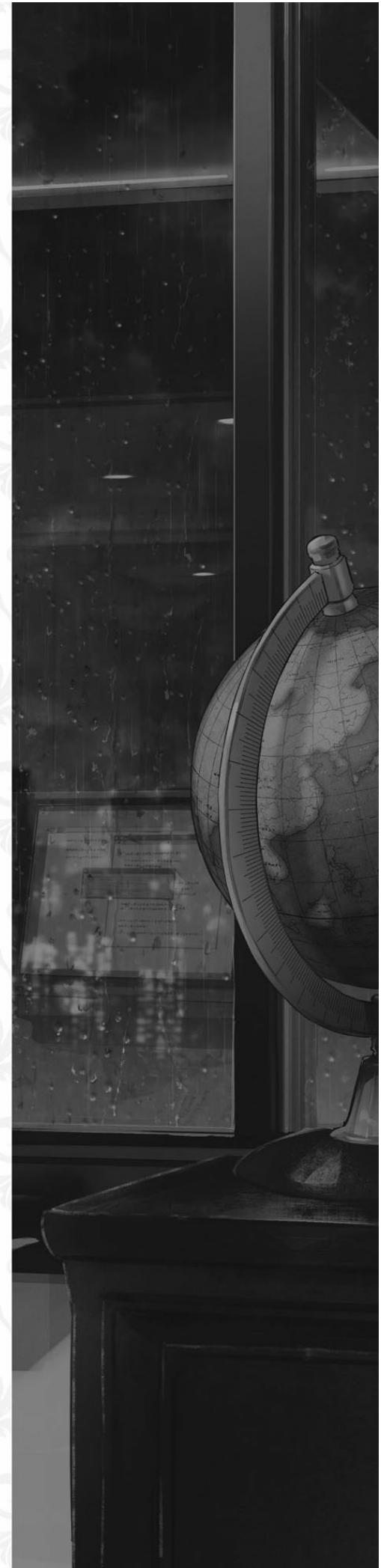
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President
and chief
executive
officer of
Keika
Holdings.

TOUDOU NAGAYOSHI



Runa's
friend.
Comes from
a noble
religious
family. She's
unfindable
in hide-and-
seek.

KAIHOUN HOTARU



Young
employee of
Keika Hold-
ings. Gets
on well with
the young
lady.

OKAZAKI YUUICHI



Keikain
Runa's
secretary.
A former
CIA agent.

ANGELA SULLIVAN



A politician
in the House
of Represen-
tatives for the
Fellowship of
Constitution-
al Govern-
ment. Cur-
rent Prime
Minister.

KOIZUMI SOUICHIROU



Professor of
economics
at a private
university.
The topic of
his research
is "genius."

KANBE SOUJI



TAKANASHI MIZUHO

The main heroine of the otome
game, "Love Where the Cherry
Blossom Falls."

TEIA SHUICHI

Head of the Teia Group and
Eiichi's father.

KATSURA NAOYUKI

Works in the Hokkaido
Kaitaku Bank's integrated
development department.

TAKAMIYA HARUKA

Manager of the Imperial
Gakushuukan Academy's com-
munal library.

MAEFUJI SHOUICHI

Director of Foreign Affairs for
the National Police Agency's
Public Safety Bureau.

KATSURA NAOMI

A descendant of the Keikain
bloodline. Has a son named
Naoyuki.

A villainess reincarnated into an otome video game world set in modern society.

KEIKAIN RUNA



Youngest son to Dietman Izumikawa Tatsunosuke. A potential love interest.

IZUMIKAWA YUUJIROU



Keikain Runa's personal butler. Supports Runa in both public and private affairs.

TACHIBANA RYUUJI



Runa's friend. Her father is a dietman in the House of Representatives. Calls mandarins "oranges."

KASUGANO ASUKA



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

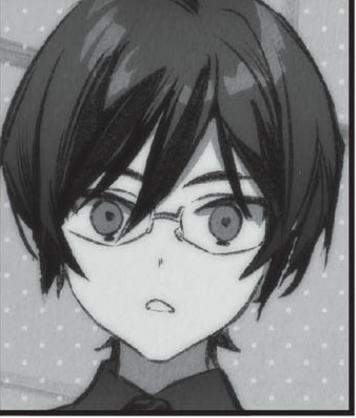
Son to the family that owns Teia Motor Co., Japan's top automobile enterprise. A potential love interest.

TEIA EIICHI



The only son of Gotou Mitsutoshi, a Ministry of Finance official. Dateable character.

GOTOU MITSUYA

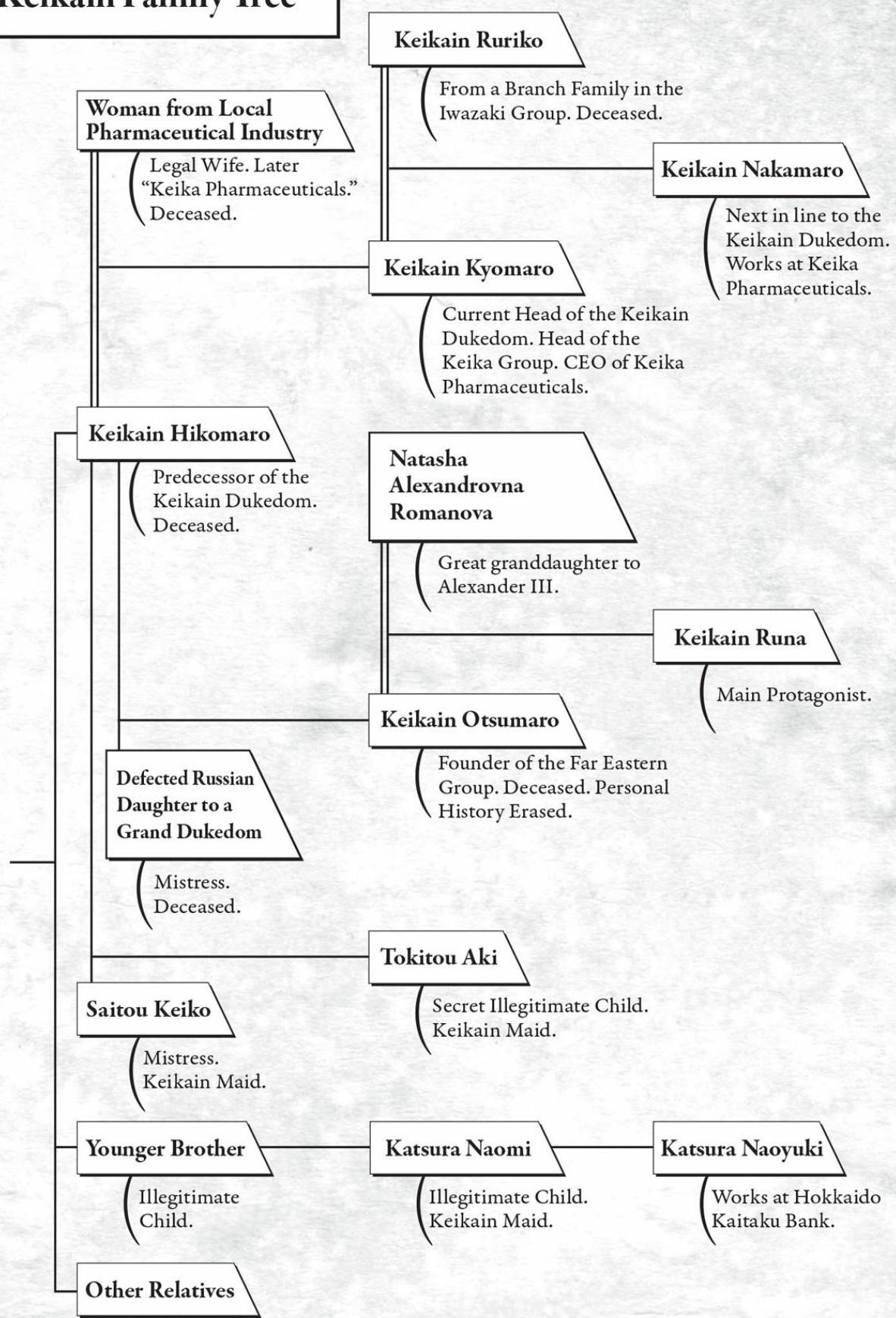


CEO of Keika Holdings. Has a daughter named Erika.

ICHIIJOU SUSUMU



Keikain Family Tree



KEIKAIN DUKEDOM



CHOUFUU
COUNCIL

Keika
桂華
グループ
Grp

PRESIDENTS' COUNCIL/CHOUFUU COUNCIL

MAIN THREE COMPANIES

Founded Company

Financial Management

KEIKA-IWAZAKI PHARMA

MOONLIGHT FUND

KEIKA-IWAZAKI CHEMICAL >> JOINED IWAZAKI ZAIBATSU

KEIKA CORP HOLDINGS

Subsidiaries:

Akamatsu Corporation
Teisen Ishii
Teimen Corporation
Kanegana Textiles

Cell phone companies • Dog Express • natural resource companies • Kitakaba Security • Keika Parts Manufacturing • shipping companies • airplane lease sales companies • textile companies • cosmetics companies • Echigo Engineering Co.

KEIKA RAILWAY HOLDINGS

Subsidiaries:

Keika Railway Group
Shikoku Shinkansen • KYOSHO Rapid Railways Co. • Kagawa Railroad • Keika Bus • Kuzuryungawa Railway • Keika Pacific Ferry • Moonlight Resort • Keika Kinugawa Resort • railroads under construction

Keika Hotel Group

AIRHO • Hokkaido tertiary industry companies • Keika Opera Company • Yufuin Kurokawa development • Keika Advertising Agency • Kudanshita building
Tesei Department Stores Group
Tesei Department Stores • Sougou Department Stores • Tesei Supermarkets • Hizen Co., Ltd • convenience stores • fashion malls • gyudon restaurants • Hokkaido primary industry businesses

KEIKA HOLDINGS

Subsidiaries:

Keika Bank
Keika Life Insurance
Keika Securities
Keika Maritime Insurance

KEIKA ELECTRIC UNION

Subsidiaries:

Shiyo Electric Co.
Hope Memory
Furukawa Telecoms
Portercon
TIG Backup Systems

Chapter 1: The Banker Reminisces

ALLOW ME TO BEGIN with my own background. I originally worked in the loan screening department of Far Eastern Bank. Reviewing the bank's finances in the course of my duties revealed to me just what a terrible state it was in at the time. As a former second regional branch and an institutional bank for the Keika Group, the bad debts it had amassed after the bubble were enough to turn Far Eastern Developments and Far Eastern Hotels into anchors weighing management down.

Far Eastern Bank managed to survive once it cozied up to the Keika Group, but it rapidly expanded after a series of mergers and absorptions. The scheme to get them out of the crisis was reportedly hatched by Ichijou, then branch manager of the Tokyo office and now head of Keika Holdings, and Tachibana, the president of Keika Railway.

Executives took responsibility and resigned. Once the place was cleaned up, high-ranking members of the Ministry of Finance left their positions to snatch up those new job opportunities.

Such a power play was carried out with the help of the Tokyo Branch...no, with the help of the Moonlight Fund's easy access to quick profits.

Far Eastern Bank was the perfect vessel for financial institutions once it was nice and tidy. Its bad debts were settled, and upper management was replaced with former members of the Ministry of Finance. Since the MoF kept a close eye on the rest of the financial institutions being hounded by their bad debts, they probably saw it as quick development when this bank became a vessel to save the struggling ones.

The merger with Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank was actually a hasty proposal by Far Eastern Bank. We saw the crisis Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank was in and knew we couldn't hesitate to act. Their collapse would only worsen the economy and pile on even more bad debts. With this in mind, Far Eastern Bank swiftly

approached the Ministry of Finance to seek a potential merger.

The Keika Rules, their conditions for the merger, were as follows:

- Force out all executives of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank.
- Be sure anyone involved in wrongdoing is punished properly.
- Send any bad debts, including those from tobashi schemes, to the Resolution and Collection Corporation.
- The Bank of Japan will provide special loans for mergers and acquisitions for the sake of stability during the financial crises.

These were the only conditions required for us to take the bank for ourselves. That was why I began to suspect that the whole thing was rigged by the Ministry of Finance. But the cleverest move of them all was the announcement of the bailouts for Sankai Securities and Ichiyama Securities before those merger negotiations took place.

They created a precedent for the use of the Keika Rules and for Far Eastern Bank to take the lead in bailouts, secure a unit to implement those bailouts, and set the unification of financial institutions into motion so that it would be easier to publicly acknowledge the Moonlight Fund—their method of acquiring money to run the business. This must have been what they were aiming for.

Since the Ministry of Finance's management of financial institutions was segmented vertically into banks and securities, the simultaneous crises experienced by Sankai Securities, Ichiyama Securities, and Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank weren't all shared. People say that CEO Ichijou wanted to expand into the securities field, thus organizing the bailout and merger of Ichiyama Securities and Sankai Securities as a condition for bailing out Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank. But one reason the Ministry of Finance gave its approval was the threat that Far Eastern Bank would simultaneously detonate two financial institutions.

I believe this might require a bit more explanation. Financial institutions' day-to-day profits are made via exchanges on the call market. In their professional capacity, they make predictions about the state of the financial conditions of other organizations in their fields. If you find yourself unable to get a loan, it means the other institutions have determined that you won't be able to repay any money they decide to lend you.

Sankai Securities, Ichiyama Securities, and Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank were unable to borrow money on the call market. A better way to put this would be to say that the fuses of their destruction had been lit. Soon, some investors even started to short the stocks of all three firms on the stock market. They were delivering the killing blow to the companies while trying to make off with profits in the process.

But if Sankai Securities and Ichiyama Securities alone were bailed out, Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank would become the focus of attention for short sellers, all but guaranteeing its collapse.

Back then, Minister Izumikawa of the Ministry of Finance had adamantly declared, over and over, that he wouldn't allow any city banks to fail on his watch, meaning the collapse of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank would hurt him personally and raise questions of how responsible he is. But the Ministry of Finance was an over-compartmentalized system of bureaucracy where no one looked outside their own department. As a result, they failed to realize that all three companies needed to be saved at the same time.

This became common sense for everyone at the Ministry of Finance once they were approached by Far Eastern Bank about rescuing Sankai Securities and Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank.

The problem occurred when it came to light that Ichiyama Securities was concealing their losses, paying sokaiya under the table, and keeping debts off the books. This wasn't the kind of company the Bank of Japan could issue a special loan to so easily. Instead, Far Eastern Bank rescued Ichiyama Securities under the pretense of only saving Sankai Securities, which they had merged with Ichiyama.

It was both a reverse takeover and a way to deceive the Japanese public by adding the name "Keika" to the process. The Ministry of Finance, which had been under heavy criticism for bailing out the mortgage loan industry with taxpayer money, must have seen this as a godsend, and they knew enough to keep it quiet. You could say that the Keika Group, with all its political ties, first formed its relationship with Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa around this time.

After using the reverse takeover and Keika Rules in the bailout of Hokkaido

Kaitaku Bank, they went on to save the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan and the Nihon Credit Bank the same way, assuming they would be the next institutions to be targeted. Though those organizations were of lower rank, rescuing three metropolitan banks and one of the four major securities companies gave the Ministry of Finance influence over them.

It was easy to predict that the Ministry of Finance wasn't just going to bail out other financial institutions, but rather use them as model cases for the big bang of deregulation it had been planning internally. After all, this was when many financial institutions were being offered lifelines through accepting the Keika Rules.

At that time, I oversaw debt consolidation for the Sapporo branch—the headquarters of the former Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank. One of the Keika rules was to "send any bad debts, including those from tobashi schemes, to the Resolution and Collection Corporation," which meant my job was to carefully go over the bad debts and forward them as appropriate.

Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank was managed even more irresponsibly than Far Eastern Bank. Still, the Hokkaido people welcomed us with open arms.

"Thank you for saving Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank," they told us.

If the company's ruin led to an acquisition, shares of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank owned by local corporations would become nothing but scraps of paper and the losses would be extraordinary. The merger ratio favored Far Eastern Bank, but by buying up shares of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank when the takeover bid was being shorted, they could support the market price and prevent local companies' shares from becoming worthless. That probably saved the entire Hokkaido economy.

On the other hand, taking on all of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's credits would likely cause them to crumble under their bad debts. This was when the Hokkaido police arrested senior executives for aggravated breach of trust and indicted the company. That was no coincidence. The bank knew it had to be done. They needed to do whatever they could to cut off their bad debts while the anesthesia—the Bank of Japan's massive special loan—was still taking effect.

We ex-Far Eastern Bank employees, along with former Ichiyama Securities and Sankai Securities staffers, were the ones who got to the bottom of things. Ichiyama and Sankai had to go through the same process, which the former Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank workers were there to review.

Each side kicked the other in the shins, not wanting to start another mudslinging contest in the shadows, but then the Bank of Japan arrived with another special loan, along with the Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan and Nihon Credit Bank. I remember chuckling sadly, seeing how people banded together when they saw newcomers as a threat.

The former Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's first headache was its subsidiary companies. They'd been hiding bad debts in those companies—and terrible ones at that. Nonbank banking, real estate, venture capital, resort development... Looking into any of them opened a Pandora's box of bad debts. We sent them all to the Resolution and Collection Corporation.

The next problem was deciding who to finance. Loan expansion policies during the bubble period had backfired, and many companies had begun to take on debts. Many of them would have likely gone bankrupt if Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank abandoned them. Having claims sent to the Resolution and Collection Corporation made it impossible to borrow money, thereby making it difficult to continue running the business. But this problem was resolved largely by the Keika Group's rescue of Teisei Department Stores.

Hokkaido's industrial structure included one of the few abundant primary sectors within the country, which was the backdrop to its large number of tertiary industries. In other words, production centered around agricultural and marine products being sold in urban areas as treats for tourists visiting Hokkaido.

Once the Keika Group got Teisei Department Stores under its control, they made full use of their department stores, supermarkets, and convenience stores to sell Hokkaido agriculture and seafood to urban districts such as the greater Tokyo metropolitan area.

Saving Akamatsu Corporation, the general trading company, probably also benefited the Keika Group. General trading companies excelled at this level of

buying and selling. They might have been planning to revive the tertiary industry when they decided to help establish AIRHO in the third sector.

Still, at that time, we were worried about whether we could actually produce results again. That was because we had to repay the Bank of Japan's special loans distributed during the massive mergers of financial institutions. We ended up handling the 8-trillion-yen debt in multiple transactions through reverse mergers—we laughed and called it a matryoshka doll.

We generally didn't use the 8-trillion-yen loan from the Bank of Japan. The deposit drain from troubled banks was replaced with government deposits. Investment drains from struggling brokerages were reinvested by the government. Their strategy was to temporarily give us the working capital we needed to operate, which meant we never saw our money decrease. It was something to display, showing that we could prevent a loss of funds. The special loans from the Bank of Japan were unsecured and unlimited.

However, because the bad debts on the books were supposed to be worth 10 billion yen, only to go down to 5 billion yen, accepting the Bank of Japan's special loan under those circumstances meant that funds across the board would be reduced at the company when calculating extraordinary losses. This was the same as a reduction in that BoJ special loan. Therefore, we had to make our assets look nicer, even if only on the books, before accepting the loan.

First, we sent Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's bad debts and sold them to the Resolution and Collection Corporation at market price. This resulted in major losses, but the BoJ's special loans were designed to prevent this loss of capital. Far Eastern Bank absorbed Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, its parent company, in a reverse merger, and realized Hokkaido Kaitaku's unrealized gains to sweep away the losses.

Unrealized gains were the exact opposite of bad debts. Five billion yen in assets could rise in price and become worth 10 billion at market price; this sort of thing is calculated during a merger. That was when Far Eastern Bank became Keika Bank.

Next, after selling the bad debts of the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan to the Resolution and Collection Corporation at market price, we absorbed Keika

Bank in a reverse merger and actualized their unrealized gains to sweep away losses. It was a nice benefit that, even though the continuous parent company was the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan, the merged bank got to keep the name Keika Bank.

Finally, when the Nihon Credit Bank came to us around the same time, we went through the same process of selling their bad debts to the Resolution and Collection Corporation at market price, absorbing the bank in a reverse merger, actualizing Keika Bank's paper gains, and sweeping away losses. Of course, the name remained "Keika Bank."

The whole thing was a real tightrope walk. Still, we managed to clear it thanks to the further unrealized gains we were obtaining at that time from Keika Securities' stock holdings, as well as when Sankai Securities, which had become a 100 percent subsidiary company of Keika Bank after a reverse merger, took over Ichiyama Securities, and delivered constant unrealized gains straight to Keika Bank.

The Moonlight Fund in particular, with its massive revenue and reliability, really saved us. It would make us a hundred billion yen in a year like it was nothing. Even back then, there were whispers that CEO Ichijou, who'd been involved with the fund since its creation, would inevitably become its president.

The finishing blow was the Russian bonds in which we heavily invested after that country's financial crisis. When Russia's economy had sunk down into debts and the ruble was in a slump, we formed a syndicate and purchased a large quantity of Russian bonds. Naturally, our paper gains grew bigger and bigger as their economy recovered. We reaped a massive return on those bonds, and I believe that was why we were able to pay back the Bank of Japan's special loans ahead of schedule.

After that, as Japan's first megabank and bank holding company, we acquired Kyomei Bank, Marumaru Mutual Fire and Marine Insurance Company, Kadono Life Insurance, and Kawai Life Insurance. Now we've brought them into a system where they can survive on their own funds alone.

However, the internal restructuring and subsequent power struggle was quite difficult. Between the Ministry of Finance's scandal and their separation with

the Financial Services Agency, employees who came from the Ministry lost their place to return to, and therefore, their influence.

The former Far Eastern Bank workers should have been favored within this new structure, but there were few of them, and their work was worse than that of the city bank workers.

As for city bank workers, those from the former Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan and Nippon Credit Bank felt inferior, while the ex-employees of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank and Kyomei Bank were caught at the center of the power struggle. The ones from the former Ichiyama Securities were a band of demons, waiting vigilantly to strike.

The Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank workers remained proud due to their close connection with their local Hokkaido and its economy, as well as the possibility of secret aid from the Hokkaido prefectural office. As examples of this, Maruima Department Stores joined the Teisei Department Stores Group, and Amazaki Construction received their support as well.

After their managerial crisis, conflict between the president and management of Maruima Department Stores ended with the dismissal of the president, but they traded under Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, which had 9.4 trillion yen in interest-bearing debt. However, with 132 billion in sales, we decided to leave them alone. Though now that I think about it, between the president, who wanted diversification, and the management team, who wanted to condense debts, it was probably only a matter of time.

The Keika Group's rescue of The Teisei Department Stores Group also harmed Maruima Department Stores. Teisei Department Stores had locations in Sapporo, Asahikawa, and Hakodate, which were also the flagship sites of Maruima Department Stores. Even Sougou Department Stores, who had a large store in Sapporo, ended up joining the Keika Group. But the final blow was the redevelopment of Sapporo Station. Maruima Department Stores wasn't included as an important tenant, and they were forced to update their existing stores. However, Keika Bank wasn't going to give them a loan in their current state. Consolidating debt came with the prerequisite of additional funding.

Teisei Department Stores continued to improve their business on a national

level, with the full support of Keika Bank and backup from Akamatsu Corporation. It was probably inevitable that Marima Department Stores, which was attempting to consolidate debt while also letting go of their president, would seek support. After all, they were promised debt consolidation and employment if they got rid of the redundant shops, including the one in Sapporo.

The Keika Group also supported Amazaki Construction as much as they could. Amazaki was a major general contractor with a wealth of technical knowledge, but they ended up with plenty of bad debt after their expansion and diversification during the bubble period.

When Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank became Keika Bank during the bailout and massive merger, the question of whether to send Amazaki Construction's credits to the Resolution and Collection Corporation became a major political issue. Sending them there would represent a business failure for Amazaki Construction. There were said to be two thousand subcontracting and brokerage companies in Hokkaido, and there was no telling how much consecutive failure Amazaki Construction's downfall would cause.

This was another instance where the Keika Group's expansion into the railroad business brought some hope to the scene. Starting with the Shikoku Shinkansen, they involved Amazaki Construction in much of their railroad work. The Hokkaido political world strongly supported this. Amazaki Construction had deep ties to public works in Hokkaido, which meant strong connections to local politics as well.

I'm sure you're aware of the Keika Group's relationship with Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, but his son, Izumikawa Taichirou, was elected by proportional representation to the House of Councilors thanks to the strong business and political support he received from Hokkaido. With business booming, Amazaki Construction was taken over by Keika Bank for their good debts.

On the other hand, the former Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan and Nihon Credit Bank were once called the treasures of Nagata-cho, but they were a Pandora's box: when opened, one never knew what might come out. That box ended up being sent to the Resolution and Collection Corporation without ever

being opened, but they lost influence now that they could no longer receive support from Nagata-cho.

This marked the emergence of Kyomei Bank. It was processed under the Keika Rules, but before anyone noticed, it had started its transformation into a superregional bank with business foundations in Tokyo, Osaka, and Hokkaido.

Keika Holdings was unique as a megabank company since it held banks, securities, and insurance under its name. It was a godsend after the financial big bang, and it also didn't resemble its parent companies, having been born from bad debt disposal. But, as a result, its internal human affairs were quite a mess.

Since they were purchased by the Keika Group, the Keikain family promoted Ichijou Susumu-shi of Far Eastern Bank as CEO. Considering that he'd led many of the big mergers, his promotion would follow established policy. But as you know, what came next would add fire to the secret feud.

At the former second regional Far Eastern Bank, part of the subsidiary line of the Keika Group, CEO Ichijou was the only one who could successfully manage such a massive group of financial companies. I understood why some former executives of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank were pushed forward by the Hokkaido business and political worlds, hoping to become the next CEO—Kyomei Bank, or more accurately the Hokkaido faction, believed this was their due because Osaka management of Kyomei Bank was healthy, and they felt like responsibility lay with the Kanto side.

CEO Ichijou seemed to have anticipated this, as he continuously brought in talented people from foreign capital and created a race for the role of successor.

Over a drink, a colleague told me that the current frontrunner in that race is Miss Angela Sullivan, a secretary for the Keikain family. She had an informal offer to become the fund manager for Silver Woman Securities but was headhunted by President Tachibana of Keika Railway. Now the question is whether she'll become an executive in the securities division or a manager of the Moonlight Fund.

Now that the Keika Group has become a massive zaibatsu, their institutional bank Keika Holdings, forever the target of criticism, will need to be publicly

listed soon and removed from its role as the Group's institutional bank. I'm sure they have the personnel to do this, but there will probably be intense criticism from Nagata-cho: "*You're gonna sell out to foreign money?!*"

This series of events is why the Keika Group isn't getting along with the current Koizumi administration. They also have a relationship with Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, but they were friendly with former Prime Minister Fuchigami too. In other words, it's a big deal that they teamed up with the Hashizume faction, an old enemy of Prime Minister Koizumi's. It may just be a caretaker government, but I hear that former Prime Minister Fuchigami's nomination was a big reason why Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was able to serve as prime minister and party president.

As for my current situation, I'm now an executive in charge of financial affairs at an IT venture company in Tokyo. All these mergers between financial institutions resulted in a duplication of branches, and it became necessary to sort out the larger number of personnel. Quite a few people were sent out to places like local Hokkaido companies or Teisei Department Store clients. They managed to keep their salaries steady for the most part, but they knew they'd probably received one-way tickets.

Fortunately, I wasn't on that transfer list, but I wasn't conceited enough to think I would survive the inhuman race to get to the top of the corporate ladder. It was around that time that the IT craze picked up in our country too, and venture capital firms were looking for people experienced in financial affairs. My kouhai in college just happened to invite me to a venture firm he was starting, so I decided to transfer to a new company. It was my quiet pride as a former banker that I managed to maintain our fundraising even after the IT bubble burst.

In the end, I didn't wear the Keika Bank emblem on my chest for long, but I still carry its memory to this day. The series of financial crises had me at their mercy, but, well, I survived in the end.

Indeed, now that I look back on it, I'm grateful to the Keika Group for saving Hokkaido Kaito Bank, whatever their intentions were.

Now that the Koizumi administration is toughening up on the processing of

bad debts, it's possible that everything under Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank would crumble if the same thing happened today.

That's why I believe many other people in Hokkaido share my view.

Glossary and notes

Institutional bank: A bank with close mutual relations, in terms of both funds and personnel, to a few business firms. Institutional banks focus on financing these businesses and related companies. They often function as the cores of zaibatsu. However, being the zaibatsu's wallet comes with the risk of collapse if the zaibatsu starts to struggle. In real life, they've disappeared into corporate groups after the breakup of the zaibatsu.

Second regional bank: A mutual savings bank that has been converted to a regional bank. It could be described nicely as having a close relationship with the local area, or less nicely as a bank with weak management. They tend to collapse or be absorbed during financial crises.

Vertically segmented bureaucracy: The Ministry of Finance's banking and securities sections failed to mutually understand each other at the time this story takes place, so the banking section ended up taking on Hokkaido Takushoku Bank, the Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan, and the Nippon Credit Bank, while the securities section took on Sanyo Securities and Yamaichi Securities Co.

Maruima Department Stores and Amazaki Construction: The former companies' interest-bearing debts were 94 billion for Maruima Department Stores and 100 billion for Amazaki Construction.

Sokaiya: Sometimes called "corporate blackmailers," sokaiya are a kind of racketeer unique to Japan, often with ties to the yakuza. They use the threat of humiliation, either of their own doing or from outside sources, to extort money from or blackmail companies.

Chapter 2:

The Lady's Pursuits: Horses, Furukawa Telecoms, and Conflict

I WAS HEADED south over the East China Sea on my business jet. As I lay in my bed, enjoying an afternoon nap, I heard an announcement come from overhead.

"We will be arriving at Hong Kong Airport shortly. Please fasten your seatbelts."

Hong Kong. The infamous Kai Tak Airport was gone, replaced by Hong Kong International Airport. This meant I didn't have to worry as we landed, but it would take some time to complete our entry into the country.

Hong Kong's restoration was a good thing, but as Communist China had released them, it was obvious that China was using Hong Kong as a place to accumulate foreign money. In my past life, the financial center of China would gradually become Shanghai, but with Nanjing being China's capital in this world, I didn't know what would become of Shanghai...

"My lady, they've finished with the entry procedures, so you may now exit the airplane and enter the car waiting for you."

"The government has policies while the people have counter-policies." Apparently, those words were still used in this world. To put it frankly, everything came down to connections and money.

I did as Tachibana suggested, exiting the airplane to find three limousines parked in front. I got into one of the black cars, and all three began to drive away from the airport.

"But my lady, I really don't see why you had to come all the way here..."

These words were grumbled by Angela, my personal secretary, who had joined me as well. However, she was planning to head to the business city to get some work done while we were here. As for my own reason for being here, there was only one.

"It couldn't be avoided. I knew I just had to buy a horse when I heard that every lady and gentleman needs one."

"I suppose it's just like you to have your eye on *that* particular horse..."

"What does it matter if I'm not making bets on horse races? When someone's ending their career in a blaze of glory, you always want to see it with your own eyes."

We drove through the streets of Hong Kong as I answered Tachibana's retort.

In this world, where noble families and zaibatsu still existed, horse racing was a beloved sport of the aristocracy. Thus, I was able to witness the most dazzling and intense drama between horses in all of Japan's racing history.

One of those horses was set to retire after this next race, which meant I needed to go see him now. I had a very specific target for this overseas voyage.

It took a painful amount of convincing to get Father and Oniisama to agree to this trip. But as the Keikain family was engaged in forming a major zaibatsu, they decided that a single horse wasn't too much to ask, and so they gave their permission.

Hong Kong Vase.

This international G1 race, conducted on a 2,400-meter course, was taking place at Sha Tin Racecourse. With its large monetary awards and proximity to Japan, it wasn't uncommon to see Japanese horses participate. And I wanted to see the horse that was going to retire after this final race.

We made our way through the visitor's entrance to Sha Tin Racecourse. Enthusiastic Chinese gamblers were rushing around the venue, but people from many different countries filled the nobles' seats. The Europeans were most likely from the United Kingdom. Seeing a place like this in a former colony of theirs was a tangible reminder of the empire's survival.

Then there were the Chinese, who were talking very loudly, but not to be intimidating. This was a means of communicating in China, where the volume of one's voice was a reflection of their logic.

There were lots of Japanese guests too. The bubble bursting was a hard blow

to the country, but Japan was still known as one of the wealthier nations of East Asia. The Japanese spectators cast glances my way and whispered among themselves. Well, it wasn't like anyone at an event like this wouldn't know who I was.

"Please excuse us for a moment, my lady."

"Have a nice time."

Tachibana and Angela left to greet the most important guests. Since a horse race was an event for the whole family to attend, many seats were occupied by children. It was probably unusual for children to be there alone like I was, though.

"Oh, if it isn't the cute young lady."

"Good afternoon. I came from Japan to watch the horses."

The old man sitting in the seat next to me struck up a conversation in English. I smiled at him and responded in kind. I appreciated that the language was seen as the default in Hong Kong.

"Grandfather."

A pretty young boy, seated at the old man's side, looked at me. *What's this? Why do I feel like I've seen him before?*

"Ah, that's right. I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Karl Lothringe, and this here is my grandson, Franz."

"I am Runa Keikain. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I'm Franz Lothringe. Nice to meet you too."

Now I remembered. These were leading European aristocrats from the game's backstory descriptions that were never actually used. This family was said to be entirely of European noble blood, and the environment of Europe after World War II was what led to their revival.

The Soviets were unable to gain as much influence as they'd anticipated. It was Austria, stuck between a Germany strengthened by the Cold War and a Yugoslavia on the way to independence, that helped revive the family to avoid being absorbed into Germany.

The result of that was that the blue bloods of Europe gained considerable influence in the EU integration. Their members accounted for many EU bureaucrats, politicians, and diplomats, and as points of contact for diplomacy with Japan, they were one reason why our nobles were able to operate freely.

The boy was originally written to debut in the game as a student studying abroad in Japan, but due to either length limits or issues fitting him into the plot—perhaps both—he was unfortunately scrapped as a character.

That was probably why similar nobles and oil baron types appeared as characters in later otome games.

“What horse are you here to root for?”

In response to Franz’s question, I pointed at one specific animal. I didn’t particularly understand the feelings of most horse lovers, but I did adore this one’s story. It was the tale of a horse that far surpassed all of Japan’s other stories of extraordinary steeds.

“That one doesn’t win often, although he always gets second or third place. But he finally beat the champion of the World Series Racing Championship at the Dubai SG. This is his final race and his last chance to enter a G1 race.”

“Not many horses get such a fairy-tale ending.”

Franz’s opinion was cold, but perfectly reasonable. How many horses, on the verge of retiring when old age saps their strength, go on to wrap up their stories with a perfect ending? And not just horses. How many people went out on top when they decided it was time to stop competing in something?

I did a bit of research as soon as I decided to buy a horse. That was how I came across this particular horse and saw how he continued to speed onward, even when he failed to win G1. So many of his famous competitors ran past him. Even the horses that would become famous in the future surpassed him. He simply chased after those garlands... He ran and ran, even when it meant competing overseas.

“Don’t you think the journey means more than the destination?”

“Results are all that matter. That’s how it is in the world of competitions, at least.”

Franz bluntly rejected my words, and he was being perfectly reasonable. There was no point to any of it if you didn't win. That was why, as a villainess doomed to defeat, I couldn't help but sympathize with the horse.

"That's why I find myself dreaming about the horse winning."

"Ah, it's about to begin."

We cut our conversation short when the fanfare played and turned our focus to the race. I peered through my opera glasses and watched my horse in all its beauty. Even on the final straight, when everyone was sure he would lose, he never gave up for a moment. I clenched my fists. The words came out of my mouth completely naturally.

"You can do it!"

"No way... He's taking the lead?"

At the end of his journey, my horse broke through to the very front, and I found myself weeping over his victory.

"Why are you crying?"

I accepted the handkerchief Franz offered me, wiped my tears, and answered him.

"I'm not crying about the race. I'm crying about that horse's story."

It felt as invigorating as coming to the end of a beautiful tale. As tears streamed from my eyes, I smiled all the wider at the beauty of it.

Once I returned home, I became the owner of that horse's children. But I never imagined what big things that horse would accomplish...

There were actually a few different ways to purchase a horse. You could buy one that ran in a race, but you could also request its offspring once it mated. At the end of the day, the horse was usually going to be left in the care of a farm, leaving you solely with the title of its owner. I was thinking this process over carefully on the plane ride back.

"I hear that horses tend to be less popular when they start to win in their later

years.”

“What does it matter? The only important thing is winning the G1, and there’s plenty of time for that.”

I chatted with Tachibana. Angela was currently busy negotiating payment and mating options with the farm. We were getting down to business fast, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

“Do you have your eye on the Derby too?”

“That would be even harder than becoming prime minister.’ Although, apparently that’s a made-up quote,” I responded casually as I flipped through the catalog of horses. One with a beautiful chestnut coat caught my eye.

“Well, if it doesn’t win, I’ll just ride it,” I continued.

I would ride the vast farm territory as my horse clip-clopped along. *What a fitting environment for a young lady.*

“This seems like the best option if you truly want to pursue victory.”

Tachibana handed me a few photos of a male horse, currently popular in Japan. *Ah, yes, I’ve heard his name before.* He was also the father of the horse we’d just seen. But I picked up the photograph of the chestnut horse again.

“I want to go with this one. He’s just so lovely to look at.”

I set the horse pictures down and looked at Angela and Tachibana. It had been a bit self-indulgent to go all the way to Hong Kong just for a horse race, which was why I’d agreed to take on some work while I was there—work for the Japanese government.

“Did you get in touch with your friend, Angela?”

“Yes. We exchanged some information.”

Hong Kong was a hub for international finance networks, which allowed us to connect with London via Singapore.

The city was a channel to gather money and information from places like China or Muslim countries. The CIA and MI6 were surely keeping a close eye on it, and Japan was on the receiving end of their information pipelines.

Despite its high approval ratings, the Koizumi administration had its own Achilles' heel: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. More obstacles began to form in diplomatic relations as the Ministry's competence appeared to be declining. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa had prevented issues like terrorism and Afghanistan from spiraling out of control, but the failure of official routes was represented by the darkness behind the Privy Council and the removal of a ruling party secretary general, and those diplomatic routes were reconstructed behind the scenes.

As high-ranking nobles who focused on business, we Keikains were a convenient tool. The young Keikain girl going to Hong Kong to see a horse was the perfect cover story for the outside world. I probably hadn't met that old man at the racetrack by coincidence—I was quite sure of that, at least.

"So, are we looking at another war?"

I played up my leading question, but Angela merely smiled, refusing to let me get the better of her.

I'd heard that Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, was being cleaned up after its recapture by the northern alliance, but an influx of volunteer soldiers from Pakistan had turned the battle into a vicious fight of resistance. The northern alliance and multinational forces were increasing their military presence there to suppress the uprising.

In other words, the influx of mercenaries was partially thanks to the former Northern Japan, and one market for the Eastern weapons that those troops were so used to wielding was none other than Hong Kong. The market price of those mercenaries continued to rise along with their weapons.

"My lady, I believe it would be wise for you to avoid learning too much about this topic."

At Tachibana's warning, I ended the discussion with a smile just as Angela had. He was right, of course. I knew very well that a war in Iraq was coming after Afghanistan—that was why we were able to sell all the things we'd procured for such a war at a high price. Tachibana had come all the way to Hong Kong with me to discuss that very topic with his contacts.

A salon was a perfect place for such business to be done. The Keikain family's

origins gave us influence in the underbelly of East Asian society. I knew Tachibana must have discussed this topic with the others.

“Very well. I won’t press the issue any further.”

“I appreciate your restraint.”

Are they irritated because I’m a child? No, they’re protecting me because I’m a child. At the very least, I knew they’d tried to distance me from adult work since the day the airplanes hit those towers. I appreciated it, but it also frustrated me. Because of my influence in America and the center of Japan, Europeans like that old man at the race tried to meet me to get a read on both countries’ intentions. I needed to do something so that...

“Pardon me for a moment. Hello...? What was that?!”

Angela’s phone call stopped my thoughts in their tracks. She rushed to turn on the TV. A financial channel just happened to be airing the story on its economic news program.

“...Furukawa Telecoms, a major Japanese electronics maker, has announced a takeover bid today. The Machishita Fund has joined hands with Iron Partners, an American organization, to purchase 4 percent of Furukawa Telecoms shares from the companies of the Ashio zaibatsu. Aiming to procure a third of total shares, they plan to propose restructuring of their management and a review of internal strategy for shareholders... Soon, a business partnership between Furukawa Telecoms and Shiyo Electric Co. is expected to...”

What the heck?! This wasn’t supposed to happen!

“Today we’ll be speaking with Machishita-shi, the representative of the Machishita Fund who has just announced a takeover bid for Furukawa Telecoms. Thank you for joining us today, Machishita-shi.”

“It’s a pleasure to be here.”

“Let’s begin with the Furukawa Telecoms takeover. Would you be willing to share your goals in this area?”

“Furukawa Telecoms, a company of the Ashio zaibatsu, is the bedrock of the

telecommunication industry—and Teikoku Telephone Company sits at its peak. This bedrock ought to expand into IT fields such as personal computers. However, management resources at Furukawa Telecoms aren't being used effectively under the influence of the zaibatsu."

"Isn't that to be expected of a zaibatsu company, to some extent?"

"Certainly. I won't deny that point, but that simply shows how the zaibatsu needs to take control of their company. The Ashio zaibatsu is failing to properly regulate Furukawa Telecoms. That is the first issue I would like to raise."

"How so?"

"It comes down to who's really in charge of Furukawa Telecoms. Let me be more direct. Furukawa Telecoms... No, all of Japan's electronics industry is truly owned by the parent company of Teikoku Telephone Company, and they're the ones controlling Furukawa Telecoms. It isn't just a zaibatsu parent company, but a former policy maker in Japan keeping Furukawa Telecoms under his restrictions. Don't you find that strange?"

"That's a rather blunt statement."

"The president of Furukawa Telecoms has been removed, but his father was the general director of Teikoku Telephone Company. Once you know that fact, it paints a very different picture of our current takeover bid. It was the banking groups, starting with Keika Holdings, who urged that president to step down. Something isn't right here. Companies belong to the shareholders, and yet there's been no mention of the shareholders in any of this."

"And your current takeover bid is designed to shine the spotlight on that, Matsushita-shi?"

"Yes. Ideally, we would like to hold the majority of shares and gain management rights, but we do agree with the removal of Furukawa Telecoms' president. Our proposed takeover is an expression of our desire to stop shareholder rights from being ignored."

"Please tell us why you're aiming to acquire a third of shares in your current bid."

"It will be over a third, 33.4 percent, which gives us veto rights. Thanks to

Keika Holdings, who engineered the president's exit, and its bailout of Shiyo Electric Co., Furukawa Telecoms was able to make up the missing capital after cleaning up the tobashi losses through a third-party allocation of shares.

"While nothing could be done about that, it diluted the equity of existing shareholders, putting them at a disadvantage. Furukawa Telecoms is an unprofitable business, but it has plenty of assets. I believe a restructuring of management is one way to prevent any damage to shareholder profits."

"Furukawa Telecoms has stated that they won't cooperate with the takeover and is preparing for a confrontation. What do you say to this?"

"We're not after a confrontation. We simply want to advance the company and increase the share price..."

I was lost for words as I watched the TV program. We'd just returned from Hong Kong and were now on our way to Keika Holdings headquarters in Kayabacho after hearing the news about Furukawa Telecoms. Sure enough, there were reporters waiting for us outside, so we entered through the underground parking garage.

They were just doing their jobs too, but it was pretty scary seeing them rush toward our car with their microphones out.

"Please give us a statement about the Furukawa Telecoms takeover bid!"

"Are you preparing any counterstrategies?"

"Can you comment on the rumors of Furukawa Telecoms joining the Keika Group?"

We arrived in the underground parking lot, then went directly to a meeting room. There were articles about the Furukawa Telecoms takeover bid stuck to a whiteboard, and a few different computer monitors were displaying the stock market developments. There were only a few people in this room, but they were the ones who'd decide our strategy from here on out. It was a meeting of the utmost importance.

"We've been waiting for you, my lady."

"Yes, I clearly came here because I wanted to."

I responded sarcastically to Ichijou's greeting and went to hug Nakamaro-oniisama. This was a special privilege that came with being a child.

"It's been a while, Oniisama."

"It sure has. It's too bad we're meeting under such circumstances. Would you like to have dinner with Sakurako-san and me tonight?"

"Certainly, as long as I'm not in the way."

As a board member of Keika Holdings, Nakamaro-oniisama had a unique role. He was a former representative of the pharmaceutical industry who'd joined this financial institution, which had grown incredibly large due to a series of mergers, yet he had no real powers or connections.

His staff was capable, but not enough time had passed for them to grow comfortable working in this new industry. Fortunately, he'd remained in his figurehead position instead of getting in my way. That didn't mean he was a fool, though.

"Please explain the situation."

I sat down in a chair and asked Ichijou to begin. The Furukawa Telecoms stock price was displayed on the center monitor.

"Furukawa Telecoms was a recommended stock to buy during the IT bubble, and share prices increased to just under four thousand yen.

"But that price has been in decline ever since the bubble burst, and between the terrorist attacks and General Energy Online's Chapter 11 filing, they fell under the two thousand mark for a time.

"This takeover bid has boosted the stock price back up to 2 thousand yen, and it continues to rise. The Machishita Fund's takeover price is set at 1,950 yen, the share price at the time of announcement, plus a 25 percent premium for a total of 2,438 yen per share."

In other words, you could buy Furukawa Telecoms stock now and sell it to the Machishita Fund for a profit, meaning the stock market was full of buy orders. I understood the situation up to this point.

"And is the takeover bid going to succeed?"

"My honest answer would be that I'm not sure. The Ashio zaibatsu's main financial institution, the major regional Shinden Bank, is rumored to be struggling financially due to bad debts from the bubble bursting. The Ashio zaibatsu is selling off a large number of shares to rescue them. I simply can't predict how many of them are going to end up in the hands of the Machishita Fund."

Japanese industry groups often listed both parent and subsidiary companies publicly. While listing stocks was a way of raising capital, it was also a way of earning a reputation in Japan. Selling half of a subsidiary company's stock was a guaranteed means of securing funds.

We did this with Teisei Department Stores and raised hundreds of billions of yen. However, doing it too often could become like a drug, tempting you into letting go of shares whenever times were tough. *"We can always buy them back later..."* the devil whispers into your ear, and that's how your equity ratio goes from 51 percent to 33.4 percent, then 10 percent. If you're hit with a takeover bid at that point, there's nowhere left for you to turn.

"Regarding this takeover, Shinden Bank is requesting to join the Keika Group. We'll need about six hundred billion yen to put them under our umbrella with the usual Keika Rules. It wouldn't be impossible for Keika Holdings to come up with that sum, but it would certainly delay our response to the Furukawa Telecoms takeover bid. However, the Ashio zaibatsu, along with prominent political and business figures from Tochigi Prefecture, continues to approach us for this deal. I imagine the Ashio zaibatsu is more interested in saving Shinden Bank than Furukawa Telecoms, in all honesty."

Ichijou paused and looked around the room with a somber expression.

"The problem is what will happen to regional banks after Shinden Bank."

Keika Holdings was established to deal with bad debts. Even though I'd bought the companies, that duty of taking care of those debts remained in place to that day, and despite the stabilization of metropolitan banks, brokerage firms, insurance companies, and the like, regional and second regional banks were now the ones struggling to dispose of the debts.

"Which banks?"

“Sendai City Bank, Echigo Central Bank, Wakayama Shiawase Bank, Shinmin Bank, Imperial Aiwa Bank...”

Ichijou rattled off the names of banks one after another. I raised my hand and told him to stop.

“Sorry, but isn’t this a bit too much to take in at once?”

“My lady, these banks were all struggling in 1997, but your work in preventing the financial crisis allowed them all to survive. That didn’t eliminate their bad debts, however. The Koizumi administration is now dedicated to handling such debts, in addition to the terrorist attacks and the IT bubble’s collapse in America. It sounds as if their year-end fundraising has them in a tight situation, which is why they’ve come running to us.”

I was learning all this through Ichijou’s explanation—these banks were run by the same management and could be considered a regional zaibatsu. So local economic problems brought local political problems with them, which was a headache for the proprietors.

“Do you think Prime Minister Koizumi will go that far?”

It was a fair question from Nakamaro-oniisama, who’d been listening to us talk, but I was confident in my response.

“Yes, he will. That’s the kind of prime minister he is. But as long as the banks follow the Keika Rules and let us help them, won’t everything work out, one way or another?”

Tachibana was the one to answer me.

“My lady, in regard to the bad loan disposal of these banks, I’d ask you to please think back to the reorganization of Far Eastern Bank.”

Saving a regional bank required engagement with the local economy and politics, and sending their bad debts to the Resolution and Collection Corporation only made things worse.

If we decided that a local business was beyond saving and it went under, we would be the ones on the receiving end of the resulting hostility.

“Now that I think of it, we reorganized Far Eastern Bank before the Keika

Rules were created.”

I murmured this as I reflected on the emotional memory. In other words, we would have to organize and handle the many different claims associated with these banks.

We had the money, just not the manpower for it.

The next report came from Angela, whose true job was to manage this sort of thing.

“The Machishita Fund is backed by Iron Partners, who are controlled by Charles & Edward, a major American securities firm. Financial institutions in America have taken a hit since General Energy Online declared bankruptcy, so they shouldn’t have the necessary funds to manage such an attention-grabbing takeover bid in Japan. They’re attempting to take over with the low stake of 33.4 percent, even though the normal plan would be to secure 51 percent of the company.”

Angela was extremely animated, which amused me. I could tell just how much she loved the career she’d chosen for herself. Her impressive skills were why she’d been scouted to become a financial spy, and why she now served as my protector.

Right now, she was so different from the woman who contacted her former employers, the CIA and their science division, asking them about “spiriting away” in a frenzy... Well, actually, I would just pretend I never witnessed that at all.

“Their goal is to sell off the superb assets owned by Furukawa Telecoms. They’ll probably pursue that end and disguise it as ‘centralizing their core business’ and ‘returns for shareholders.’ That is the crown jewel in their plan.”

I let out a cry of awe when I saw the company name that appeared on the monitor. I would expect nothing less of Angela. She was cunning enough to see this far ahead.

“Furukawa Automatic Machine Manufacturing,” Tachibana interjected. “This company has the largest market share in the machine tool and robotics industries and is one reason why you’ve had Furukawa Telecoms in your sights,

my lady. Furukawa Telecoms owns just under 40 percent of the shares in this company.”

Tachibana understood the situation and sensed that the people providing money to the Machishita Fund and Iron Partners had different intentions.

“That’s fine, then. Who funded this undertaking in the first place?”

When she heard my question, Angela’s smile bloomed into something brilliant and alluring. She sounded almost amused as she responded.

“Oh my. But that’s simple, isn’t it? This entire plan wouldn’t be viable without the capital and political power to take us on. Haven’t you just finished crushing a company run by such people, my lady?”

Ah, so it isn’t a problem of economic efficiency—it’s a problem of who’s behind it all.

In Japan, we refer to some organizations as “affiliated companies.” This is meant to describe companies in certain industries who work closely alongside each other over time. A nicer term for them would be “subcontractors.”

Furukawa Telecoms was subcontracting for a certain company, and a person they employed through their connections with that company ended up rising all the way to the rank of president.

The group of banks that we controlled ousted that well-connected president due to his ineffectiveness, so of course he went and cried about it to the original company. What made things difficult was that this president’s father had been a director since before the company was privatized, putting him at the very top of the parent company—a very strong connection indeed.

I leaned down and hit my head against the table, upset by my own blunder. The dull thud came just as a certain company badge appeared on the monitor. It was the corporation Furukawa Telecoms was subcontracting for—one with a presence throughout the country and one of Japan’s ten largest conglomerates to boot.

“Teikoku Telephone Corporation. That’s the name of your current adversary, my lady.”

Now that I understood the situation, it was time to come up with a counterstrategy. Ichijou started by presenting a humble plan.

“The safest bet is to simply ignore them. In a way, this takeover bid could be described as considerate, but looking at it in a more negative light, you could say it’s a very ‘Japanese’ strategy. Either way, ignoring them should be sufficient.”

Teikoku Telephone Corporation’s goal was revenge for the president I ousted, and they also wanted to save Furukawa Telecoms while they were at it.

The point of the takeover bid was to cast us as villains. Because we’d expelled the president, it seemed like we’d abused our power over the company. They faked a hostile takeover and orchestrated the whole ordeal to look like they were protecting Furukawa Telecoms from us.

Teikoku Telephone Corporation was probably working on a strategy to later buy the shares that the Machishita Fund had purchased.

But the disbanding of their business partnership with Shiyo Electric Co. was the most Japanese move of them all. By going from a business partnership to a merger, Teikoku Telephone was planning to make a move if our side changed course. If the partnership was fruitful, the larger group would just have to absorb Shiyo. This strategy covered all the bases.

“They’ve given the green light on their end. If we announce that we’re rescuing Shinden Bank, they’ll probably put their guns away for now.”

I decided to ask a hypothetical question.

“And what if we decide to fight them on all fronts?”

“We’ll be defeated.”

There was no hesitation in Ichijou’s voice. The potential outcomes were all predictable, so I would be able to get by without crossing any dangerous bridges.

“You’ve bought a few companies too many this year, my lady. An all-out war would require more capital than we have.”

Even the Moonlight Fund, with its seemingly infinite money, had its

shortcomings. The fact that it earned its money overseas was a hurdle we had to deal with.

Naturally, this takeover bid was a battle waged in Japanese yen. The Moonlight Fund used yen to make money in American dollars, which it then employed to purchase resources like crude oil, ship them to Japan, sell them within the country, and reap the profits in yen.

This meant they had to contend with lag caused by the money conversion process. Of course, the Fund could borrow money from Keika Bank as a stopgap measure, but that was going to strain the books this year. We had assets, but not enough time to turn them into cash.

“The same goes for the regional bank bailouts I mentioned earlier, but it comes down to the Shinjuku Shinkansen. It was simply too large.”

Ichijou’s matter-of-fact response caused me to silently look up at the ceiling. We’d received permission to construct the Shinjuku Shinkansen this year, a massive investment of two trillion yen for the railroad project. Paying for it in a lump sum with such investments resulted in a discount. Though this payment was impossible to avoid, Keika Holdings was the one to arrange the financing for it.

We would have had the cash necessary to oppose the takeover bid if we hadn’t made that investment.

And we would almost run out of yen if we bailed out Shinden Bank and the other regional banks.

“Can we postpone our aid to the banks?”

“We’ll be torn apart by both the public and the Financial Services Agency. We’ve only been able to do as we please because it’s always ended up benefiting the people of the world.”

There was a weight to Tachibana’s blunt tone. We couldn’t ignore the public response to this. After all, the public were the ones who owned stock.

“So that’s off the table?”

“I believe so.”

Ichijou mercilessly struck down my groan. I had been determined to remain neutral in this situation, which never occurred in my own past. Therefore, I had to accept Ichijou's plan to avoid a full-on confrontation with Teikoku Telephone Corporation. Not that I agreed with it.

"Then can we say our relationship with Furukawa Telecoms may end up going back to square one and leave it at that?"

"No, we still need to ensure you're protected from this takeover bid, my lady."

"Protected?"

I cocked my head at Angela's response. She pulled up the stock chart of a certain company that belonged to the Keika Group.

"This is Shiyo Electric Co. Furukawa Telecoms is a decoy to keep the vultures from targeting this company."

Shiyo Electric Co.'s founding family was ousted after the discovery of its tobashi scheme. It was Keika Holding who filled in the resulting gap with a third-party allotment which gave us 37 percent of the company's shares.

"Teikoku Telephone Corporation is offering money to save Furukawa Telecoms, but this alone won't be enough to satisfy the vultures. They must know about the business partnership between Furukawa Telecoms and Shiyo Electric as well, so it will likely be cheaper to restrain Shiyo if the prospect of a merger comes up so that they can maintain a hold on the merged companies' shares."

Though they wouldn't become the majority shareholder, they would still claim 14 percent of shares—14 whole percent. A takeover bid was nothing more than a slapping match waged with stacks of bills attempting to reach such an end. With a smile, Angela began to explain our countermeasures.

"Just as CEO Ichijou said, you may not have enough cash left in your wallet, my lady, but even if you do bail out Shinden Bank and the other regional banks, it's not like you don't have the funds to buy 14 percent of Shiyo Electric too. The best move is to make Shiyo buy back its shares to increase the percentage it controls."

Even though Shiyo Electric Co. hit the jackpot in developing batteries and small-scale liquid crystal, they'd ended up deep in the red over things like larger household appliances and were left with no choice but to restructure. One of their trump cards was their business partnership with Furukawa Telecoms.

Nakamaro-oniisama spoke next.

"So, what do you actually want to do with Shiyo Electric, Runa? That's what it probably all comes down to."

I took my PHS out of my pocket and placed it on the table. With everyone's eyes on it, I laid out my plan.

"There'll probably be a lot of money and materials poured into these things to evolve them even further. I've seen it in Silicon Valley. All they need is the technology and the facilities to make them. Shiyo and Furukawa can become the center of that process."

This technology—small LCD screens and batteries—would eventually lead to cellular phones. Partnering with Furukawa Telecoms would give us a good market share once the devices were complete. Sitting back and just allowing this to happen would only make us fall victim to Galapagos Syndrome, but if we acted now, there was a chance that we could set the *de facto* standards for the rest of the world.

"This is how we bring the world under our control."

I was going to change Japan's future. This current problem wasn't one I could interfere with, but I silently swore that next time I would get the upper hand.

"Well, CEO Ichijou? Do you think Runa will figure it out?"

"Who can say? It's not like we can tell her that Tachibana-san and Secretary Angela know this was all a calculated move by our own people. She may very well see through us. But knowing her, if she *does* reach that conclusion, it will be a very dramatic realization indeed."

Before Runa arrived, CEO Ichijou Susumu and board member Keikain Nakamaro both sighed in their executive office seats next to the meeting room.

This spectacular farce of a takeover bid hadn't just been set up by the two men in the room; they were assisted by Tachibana, Angela, and everyone else aside from Keikain Runa herself. Ichijou groaned.

"Well, I assumed we'd see some attempt at revenge after we forced the Teikoku Telephone Company president out...but I didn't expect them to put pressure on our systems development..."



The daily business of a bank involved the exchange of money over long distances, a process that was left to computers. This was known as core banking.

With merger after merger, the system of core banking grew more complex, and as soon as they ordered the implementation of this process—which ran through every department—the systems development companies started to speak of canceling the order, one after another. One developer of this core banking system was Furukawa Telecoms.

The Japanese systems companies were not the only ones who canceled the order; even foreign systems companies backed out, saying that there was no guarantee that their local business partners would comply. It was as if they'd all teamed up beforehand.

With Nakamaro's permission, Ichijou and Tachibana immediately struck a deal with Teikoku Telephone Company in response to their vicious revenge.

Angela followed up by contacting them behind the scenes, and in the end, Teikoku Telephone Company only gave a single condition.

"Get that young lady under control."

So they indirectly caused a setback for the young lady while the rest of them looked for common ground with Teitoku Telephone Company. That was how the current takeover bid began.

It sounded like Teitoku Telephone Company was working with the Machishita Fund and Iron Partners, but to make it seem like they didn't have enough funds to acquire Furukawa Telecoms, the four masterminds brought up the possibility of bailing out Shinden Bank—the Ashio zaibatsu's main financial institution—and the other local banks struggling with bad debts. It was all a cover story whipped up to prevent the young lady from opposing them.

They then diverted her attention to the money spent on the Shinjuku Shinkansen and the defense of Shiyo Electric Co. It was impossible to underestimate the toil Tachibana, Ichijou, Nakamaro, and Angela went through to make her decide to stand down.

"I can't believe the American systems companies agreed to go along with our

little conspiracy.”

“I believe Secretary Angela managed put pressure on the United States. At the very least, I’m sure they’re just as concerned as we are about the course the young lady is on.”

Ichijou held a cheap, unlit cigarette in his mouth. He was currently banned from smoking thanks to the girl’s declaration: *“I hate the smell of cigarettes!”*

Nakamaro, on the other hand, never smoked at all. Though he enjoyed the occasional cigar, he was polite enough not to take one out in front of a man who couldn’t smoke.

“Secretary Angela was complaining about her. ‘The young lady has too much potential. She might even become a dictator at this rate.’”

Runa didn’t seem bothered by it, but if she continued to cozy up with the current Republican administration in America, the Democrats would retaliate fiercely against her if they retook power.

The Democrats were currently the opposition party in the United States and had also been harsher toward Japan in recent years. This was the party that had been in power when Angela was operating as a spy. She knew better than anyone the restraints that they could expect the United States to put on their country in the future.

“That’s probably what Russia was nervous about too. They’re an autocracy whose true nature doesn’t follow the maxim ‘reign, but don’t rule.’ Runa could try to revitalize that country, and people on the inside would respond to her efforts, fracturing their government. Then, when Runa was victorious, a massive Russian-Japanese autocratic empire would be formed. The world would never allow such a nightmare to become reality.”

Nakamaro couldn’t hide the anguish on his face. The year 2001 was sure to become a turning point in the order of the world. When he thought about the possible results of an asymmetric guerilla war on a global scale, where you couldn’t even see your enemy, Nakamaro couldn’t help but feel a slight chill—watching history unfold from his vantage point as nobility.

Human self-determination led to that single shot fired in Sarajevo, and while

two world wars destroyed the old Europe entirely, it was that second war in which dictators emerged.

It was common for such asymmetrical offensives to be suppressed from above as a way to build order, and the best possible outcome was that Runa would be the one elevated as a symbol of that system.

But there was one problem with that scenario. If Runa came to wield the real powers that came with an autocracy, she could very well end up having *her* blood spilled.

The ability to act however one wishes means that there are no restraints. Russia had nuclear weapons. Runa might be the one to press the button and launch those nukes, but there was no telling how her future life partner might change her into a different person.

Knowing that one possible path for Runa involved bloodshed, and that the futures of herself, Japan, and the world would all be constrained, the four adults decided to come together in solidarity for one goal: "*May Runa be guaranteed a good, happy life.*"

"Times have changed. I think Runa gets that, but she hasn't figured out just how strongly she's connected to this new era yet."

Ichijou smiled awkwardly at Nakamaro's words. He'd gone so far as to gather information about the three boys at Runa's side.

"It looks like the young lady's friends have sold their business and purchased Furukawa Telecoms stock. If they were to go along with this takeover bid, they would likely amass up to 6 billion yen in profit."

The thought of three elementary school students earning 6 billion yen was most impressive. However, Ichijou's boss was also an elementary school student, and one who worked with trillions at a time. The young lady had gone so far as to pick a fight with one of Japan's top ten companies all on her own.

"We had Runa meet with the European nobles in Hong Kong, as was forcibly demanded of us. Given her current status, there's no better family for her to marry into. She's going to have to make a sacrifice of some kind if she's to live a happy life."

Nakamaro's tone fell somewhere in between pleased and melancholy.

Runa's future was sure to involve anti-Russian relations, even if she did end up marrying into the family of European nobles. Russia had been unable to hide its unease over the expansion of the EU. Runa joining them was sure to start a conflict.

This problem got more complicated when they considered marrying her to someone powerful within Russia.

The current Russian leaders were people who had endured elite training back in the era of the Soviet Union, which had crushed the Russian empire and gone so far as to slaughter the emperor's entire family to cement their own legitimacy.

Even if Runa consented to a union with a powerful Russian, the oppressed and those who escaped the country would never forget it. The former Communist Party elites would see Runa as an obvious target for violent revenge.

“So she gets to be a bird in a cage?”

“What she needs to learn is that the cage protects the bird from the outside world. Don’t you remember what you saw? On September 11th, as Lady Runa basked in the spotlight at Kudanshita Tower, she carried the world on her shoulders. It was a heavy burden for a girl still in elementary school. If the sight of those buildings collapsing was the embodiment of her failure, history will look back and condemn us adults, wondering what we were doing during all this.”

Nakamaro and Ichijou both sighed. Despite all this, Runa declared that she intended to “take over the world with cell phones” during the meeting, appearing fully motivated to fight Teikoku Telephone Company head-on. The adults in the room all paled at this, and as soon as they started feeling relieved that Runa had agreed to back off from Furukawa Telecoms, the next thing pushed to center stage of this farce was the situation in the United States.

The dramatic buyout of a certain computer manufacturer had just occurred in the US, causing opponents of the deal to cry out, *“If you’re going to buy a company, you should buy out Furukawa in Japan instead!”*

At that very moment, things turned from a farce to a full-on exchange of blows.

When you know the future, you can bet it all and profit in the shortest possible time.

The problems in my way were that I wasn't old enough to participate in such gambling yet, and the fact that I would go up in flames if the unthinkable happened and I was wrong after betting all I had.

I left my room in the Kudanshita skyscraper and made my way down to the Moonlight Fund's office to check the news. It wasn't surprising that the area stank of cigarette smoke, but since I was paying them a visit, they refrained from smoking in my presence.

"Shinden Bank, currently rumored to be undergoing financial difficulties, announces that it will be joining Keika Holdings.

Keika Holdings has announced that they will provide relief to the bank under their Keika Rules. There's no indication that they intend to use public funds in this bailout of Shinden Bank, and CEO Ichijou of Keika Holdings has remarked, 'With this move, we will maintain a strong foundation in Northern Kanto, particularly in Saitama and Tochigi Prefectures.'

"Now that the mergers of metropolitan banks have helped sort out their bad debts, attention has turned to regional banks. Sendai City Bank, Echigo Central Bank, Wakayama Shiawase Bank, Shinmin Bank, Imperial Aiwa Bank, and others are currently preparing to adopt the Keika Rules in the hope of joining Keika Holdings as well.

"Keika Hotels will work with Teisei Rail and East Japan Imperial Railway to assist in the debt restructuring and redevelopment of Kinugawa-Onsen in Nikko, which has been designated the central location in Shinden Bank's efforts to deal with bad debts..."

As I stared at the news on TV, someone suddenly thrust a can of coffee in front of me. I reached out to accept it and saw the face of none other than Okazaki Yuuichi.

“Why the long face, my lady? Isn’t your shopping spree going well? You’re getting all the local banks and even Hope Memory. You also increased your investment ratio in Shiyo Electric with a third-party allocation of shares. Is something missing?”

Memory was a crucial component of computers that allowed data and programs to be saved temporarily. We’d been able to secure just over 10 percent of the shares of Hope Memory, a Japanese memory producer. They weren’t doing as well now that the IT bubble burst, but Shiyo Electric Co. made them an associated company, investing in Hope Memory to have it conduct further research and expand their product lines.

Keika Holdings paid for Shiyo Electric’s investment with a third-party allocation of shares, meaning that their ratio of shares in Shiyo Electric increased and a buyout became even less likely. It was a way of killing two birds with one stone.

Additionally, we sold off some large appliance manufacturers that were having financial difficulties to Matsuyuki Electronics, obtained makers of small liquid crystal displays and batteries that had undergone management restructuring along with Hope Memory, and articulated a clear goal of surviving as a supplier for the IT industry.

Okazaki was a strange man who worked for me, and he spoke with amusement in his voice and hoped to “watch me write the whole world’s history from a front row seat.” He was smart and capable, but also adventurous. Without those traits, he never would have come to work in a place as seedy as the resource management department of a general trading company.

“I have no complaints. They struck a solid deal, and we just didn’t have the funds. There’s only so much we can do.”

I pulled back the canned coffee’s tab, making a louder noise than I expected. My face puckered when I took a sip—it was black.

“Ha ha ha! Still don’t see the appeal of black coffee, my lady? Hey, there’s Furukawa Telecoms.”

Okazaki was pointing at the monitor that was playing economic news. The

Furukawa Telecoms story was just starting to air.

“The takeover bid for Furukawa Telecoms is heating up. The proxy war being fought at a computer manufacturer in the United States revolves around the founder’s opposition to their female-CEO-led merger. They have commented, ‘If you’re going to buy something, then buy Furukawa.’ With this statement, Iron Partners has changed the goal of their takeover bid to 51 percent. On the other hand, Furukawa Telecoms is moving slowly and repeatedly requesting support from the many companies of the Ashio zaibatsu. This has led to disappointing results for them on the stock market, as Furukawa Telecoms stock is currently trading at 2,236 yen per share...”

“There’s about to be a real battle of alliances between computer makers. Japan won’t be able to beat them unless we take this opportunity to expand.”

My words contained no panic or grief. When he heard that, Okazaki gazed at my eyes and asked me a straightforward question.

“Why didn’t you do that with cars, my lady?”

“Huh?!”

The cry came out of me with a strange tone. Okazaki stuck a cigarette in his mouth and moved to light it, but he stopped himself. He ended up putting the lighter in his pocket before I could give him permission to smoke, since I felt bad imposing.

“I don’t want Secretary Angela to be upset with me, much less Saitou-san. I won’t be able to work here if I make her mad.”

The head maid, Saitou Keiko-san, was the woman in charge of training all our junior maids in Japan. She was also one of my few long-time subordinates. It could be said that this building practically revolved around her, Tachibana, and Angela. I understood why he was willing to give up cigarettes if it meant he could avoid making an enemy of Saitou-san.

But Okazaki ignored that fear. After putting his lighter away and giving me a moment to recover, he smirked.

“The economic superpower of Japan counts automobiles and computers as its two biggest industries. Trade friction with the US was smoothed over with

computers, but it's not like their superiority is gone yet.

"Ayukawa Motors and Iwazaki Motors. You took over those two companies and managed to land a punch on the global automobile industry, but you saw computers as your true battlefield. You're not the kind of person to go easy on a friend, my lady. There's only one other reason I can think of."

At times like these, Okazaki was as frightening as he was reliable. I couldn't bear thinking that he could see every last one of the intentions I was trying to keep hidden.

"You're a turnaround manager when it comes down to it, my lady. You look at industries instead of just companies. That must mean you know the computer industry is going to see a decline, and that's why you're trying so hard to make these moves."

"..."

I didn't know what to say. The problem was that, from an outsider's perspective, I seemed to know who the winners were and only saved the losers. Okazaki's words spoke right to the crux of the matter. The Japanese consumer electronics industry really was going to crumble in the next dozen years or so, but I still had time to save it if I acted now. I just didn't have the yen on hand to do that.

"Why not just go for it?"

Okazaki spoke like a child talking about a prank. I stood there speechless, but he didn't hesitate to place his bet on me.

"I'm working here because I want to see the same future that you've been seeing, my lady. You don't have the funds? Then let's raise them. No connections? Let's make them. As for everything else, just say the word and I'll act."

His total earnestness came without a second thought. That was what shook me. My voice trembled as I asked for one last confirmation.

"You're talking about a bet of a few trillion yen."

"Sure, why not? If you go that far, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose,

since we'll know you went for it. Losing only a few trillion yen isn't the end of the world."

He bent down to my eyeline and smiled. His expression filled me with courage.

"My lady, this Keika Group you built has assets totaling more than ten trillion yen. Even if you fail, just like Suzuki Shoten, you'll have something to leave behind."

"You're referring to the trigger of the Showa-era financial crisis?"

Just then, a news bulletin appeared on the monitor. It was what finally made me muster my resolve.

"Breaking news: female CEO of American computer company resigns following proxy fight won by founder's faction."

"Very well. Let's start the game. We'll place a few trillion yen as a bet to control the backbone of Japan's computer industry. If we must bow our heads to anyone, let's do it together, okay?"

"Of course. Now what would you like me to do?"

"Start by scouting that female CEO."

It's time to go change the world.

Later, I heard that Angela gave Okazaki a good beating once she found out he'd sparked this fire in me, and she refused to talk to him for some time after.

Okazaki, the adventurer, acted with utmost cunning. The Keika Group had no internal controls because it had expanded so rapidly in such a short time. That was what made his secret moves possible.

He gathered his money in London rather than New York to avoid catching the eye of Angela or Ichijou. Then he lent the lump sums to oil-producing countries as a way to pull money in.

The Moonlight Fund was a regular purchaser of crude oil for Japan, and once the IT bubble burst, they were looking for a new place to invest their oil money.

"The US is going to attack Iraq soon," I told Okazaki.

"So they're really not going to stop at Afghanistan?"

I leaked this information to him intentionally, to prompt him to secure the oil money of countries around the gulf which were likely to suffer damages if there were a war in Iraq. We'd managed to scrape up roughly 20 billion dollars. That was about 2.4 trillion yen with a yearly interest rate of 9 percent—a massive sum.

Okazaki's final line of defense was that these funds were not registered under the Keika Group or Moonlight Fund's names.

There were probably hints of my involvement, but if Okazaki failed in the end, this was the scary sort of money where he could jump off a building and the fallout would never reach me. He also mentioned that, if he'd used my name, the sum would have changed by two digits.

"Well, I had to do that much, or we wouldn't be able to do business with their oil barons."

After it was all said and done, Okazaki simply laughed it off as he revealed the full story to me, and I realized just how deep his connections were.

A trading company adventurer couldn't do their job unless he was on an incredibly high level.

He moved the money to a paper company on the Isle of Man, transferred it to a few paper companies in the Cayman Islands, then poured it into a few funds he'd established in the Virgin Islands. These were money-laundering organizations that used special computers for buying and selling, meaning there were fewer people needed to handle the process and no chances of leaks.

From there, he received twenty times leverage on this money—a way of using funds to secure more loans. This came out to 400 billion dollars, or 48 trillion yen. He'd raised a massive amount of money. I wouldn't learn the exact amount until later, as careless communications could result in the information getting out.

Meanwhile, the takeover bid for Furukawa Telecoms was heating up.

“The Machishita Fund and Iron Partners announced the end of their business partnership today.

“The new leadership of an American computer manufacturer, who recently ousted their female CEO after a proxy fight, has changed course after publicly committing to a buyout of Furukawa Telecoms. With the outspoken shareholder the Machishita Fund seeking a peaceful path in the takeover, it’s now become clear that this conflicts with the goals of Iron Partners and the US computer manufacturer they acted in tandem with. This clash has resulted in the termination of their business partnership.

“Iron Partners has filed a temporary injunction in the Tokyo District Court regarding ownership of the Furukawa Telecoms shares gathered by the Machishita Fund thus far. They have announced that they will be raising the valuation of the takeover bid to 2,600 yen after receiving funds from multiple European and American financial institutions.

“In response to this, the Machishita Fund called for a meeting with the management of Furukawa Telecoms and revealed that they intend to attempt to block the takeover. Furukawa Telecoms stock has reached its daily price limit...”

With this news, Teikoku Telephone Company finally emerged as the true parent of Furukawa Telecoms.

The mass media didn’t hold back with their PR message. The all-Japanese-companies team was protecting their organization from foreign money.

“Breaking news: The Machishita Fund has taken the lead in the takeover bid for Furukawa Telecoms and announced a syndicated white knight effort with other companies, including Teikoku Telephone Company at its center. They will be attempting a competing takeover at a valuation of 2,800 yen...”

Okazaki reported that his preparations were complete through Ichijou Erika, a maid who knew one of his subordinates. She informed me during our tea party.

“I have a friend at the Moonlight Fund. Okazaki-san, her boss, asked for black tea just like you drink, my lady. Everyone laughed and said it didn’t suit him, but he just said, ‘Lady Runa doesn’t grasp the taste of black coffee either.’”

“Well, I’m still a child, after all. Could you please make some coffee? I may as well try it. Make sure there’s plenty of cream and sugar.”

“Of course.”

I finished off the cup of black tea in front of me and caught my breath. Then I sent Ichijou Erika, who knew nothing about any of this, out of the room.

“Lady Runa doesn’t grasp the taste of black coffee either,” was the code phrase Okazaki and I had agreed upon in advance. It meant “preparations are complete.” I decided it was time to pull the trigger...with Angela at my side, of course.

“There’s something I want to talk with you about, Angela.”

“What could that be, my lady?”

“I’m thinking of buying the bankrupt General Energy Online in next year’s shopping.”

“I remember you researching that company. What caught your attention?”

“The more I looked into it, the more I felt like the auditors were in on the conspiracy.”

“...That can’t be. They’re one of the top five accounting firms in the United States.”

This was the greatest trump card in my entire scheme. I was using my knowledge of the future to get a head start. If something was set to blow up, I was going to make sure it happened on my schedule.

General Energy Online’s bankruptcy had become a scandal within the United States. Their CEO was a friend of and major donor to the US president, so the aftermath rippled into the political world as well.

“See, I’m friendly with the current president too, right? As an opponent of the Japanese prime minister, I want to tidy things up before people say anything strange.”

“You’ve found something, haven’t you, my lady?”

Angela was clever in moments like this. I played along with her question by

showing her a printout of data from a certain company. The name on the paper was a corporation that used the same accounting firm as General Energy Online. It was the second-largest long-distance communication company in the United States.

“WCI?! It can’t be!”

“Okazaki brought it straight to me, considering the situation.”

I listened to Angela’s shock at the whistleblower’s email as I sipped the coffee that Ichijou Erika returned with. Naturally, all of this had been set up by Okazaki and me.

Just to be safe, he’d used a disposable address from an internet café in London to make the whistleblower email look like it came from a third party. While Angela was still in shock, I attempted to guide her train of thought.

“Angela, should we pretend we never saw this?”

“My lady?!”

She instinctively slammed the paper down on the table, spilling the coffee in my cup. I gazed at the café au lait-colored stain on the paper and shamelessly defended my stance.

“Doesn’t it make sense? I’m close to the current president. We need him to win the war on terrorism too, so we don’t want him collapsing because of this.”

I grinned. I was protecting the president...or, at the very least, that was what Angela would report.

At the same time, there was no mistaking the fact that this information would be leaked somewhere, since it was given in the form of a whistleblower report. I didn’t miss the exchange of glances between Angela and Eva, who was standing at her post in the room.

“Very well. You never saw this letter. That will be my report.”

There was little doubt that the whistleblower’s letter would go through the CIA and reach the eyes of the president. WCI Inc. was close with the president as well; in fact, they were another major donor. If he protected them now, it would inflict a fatal wound on him.

He would still be hurt by the backlash if he cut them off now, but it wouldn't be enough to take him down. It would mean an investigation into accounting fraud at WCI and the possibility of a major crash since the well-prepared Okazaki was on the other side.

"Breaking news: The CEO of long-distance communications company WCI Inc. has announced his resignation amid suspicions of accounting fraud. NASDAQ fell sharply in response."

And only three days later, this headline was transmitted to the world:

"Breaking news: Long-distance communications company WCI Inc. has filed for Chapter 11 and will be defunct before the end of the year."

"Short selling" is the act of borrowing shares, selling them, buying more once the price falls, and then returning them. It's a unique system where they make more money the lower a stock price drops. This interesting method is how all billionaire venturers have amassed their fortunes. But, as with a drug, destruction is inevitable if you rely on it too much. This is because if the stock price unexpectedly rises, you will have to buy the shares to return them at that higher price.

Herein lies a problem. What about borrowed shares of a company that goes bankrupt? You aren't off the hook for returning them. You have to return them properly at a stock price of zero. But of course, the other party will probably reject those worthless pieces of paper.

WCI Inc. had gone down to about fifteen dollars a share when it filed Chapter 11, which meant that the difference in price between those fifteen dollars and zero was pure profit for us. But Okazaki was especially clever in how he focused on shorting various high-tech companies on the NASDAQ instead of just WCI. He'd managed to traverse a dangerous bridge, keeping his activities just barely legal by shorting stocks as soon as the first reports came out. The speed of computer trading had saved him there, and with a massive sum of four hundred billion dollars ready to use, Okazaki walked away with tremendous profit in his pocket.

Okazaki ended up making off with a 15 percent return during the crash around the end of the year. Fifteen percent of 400 billion came out to 60 billion

dollars. After fees, expenses, and repaying the loan, we'd parted with 25 billion dollars and retained 35 billion. We lost a bit due to the strong yen, but once everything was converted, we had succeeded in securing about 4 trillion yen.

The collapse of the stock market in New York, scavenging ground of many vultures, was connected to their abandonment of the Tokyo exchange.

Vultures are also in the business of gathering funds and assuring a return on them, so the year-long crash of the New York stock market, their home, meant that they suffered heavy paper losses and were forced to look for other areas to meddle in.

“Breaking news: Iron Partners has announced the withdrawal of their Furukawa Telecoms takeover bid and a sell-off of all Teikoku Telephone Company stock. The business syndicate controlling Teikoku Telephone Company has also acquired just under 35 percent of Furukawa Telecoms shares.”

After the downturn of the New York stock market, their home base, Iron Partners had no choice but to make up some of their losses by selling all their stock to Teikoku Telephone Company, the white knight organization presenting a high price, and retreat from the takeover bid.

This was around the same time that Angela learned what was happening too. As I was surrounded by the flowers in the open-air garden of Kudanshita Tower, Okazaki came to see me with a red tint to his cheeks.

“You’re looking more handsome these days. How does it feel to be a billionaire?”

The funds tied to this whole mess had no connection to me on paper, so Okazaki could have claimed the 35 billion dollars for himself if he felt like it. But he simply smirked, then gave up on lighting the cigarette in his mouth and returned the lighter to his pocket.

“I’m just the underling here. What I really bet on was your trust, my lady. Without you, none of this money would be possible.”

“Ichijou and Angela had scary looks in their eyes. I’m definitely going to get scolded later.”

“Well, they wouldn’t be very good guardians if they weren’t upset.”

“What about President Toudou?”

“He gave me a loud scolding, but when I bowed my head to Tachibana-san and Ichijou-san, they decided to let me live. He used to be like me too, so he said, ‘If I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t have bothered getting Lady Runa worked up. I’d have just done it without her knowing.’”

We both smiled awkwardly. Eva was staring intently at us now that our conspiracy was on full display, but the most important stage of the plan was already over.

“Take a hundred billion for yourself. It’s a fair reward.”

“Sure thing. I don’t really want to spend it on myself, so I’ll stick it in a hidden account for next time. I’ll transfer the rest to the Moonlight Fund.”

“I won’t let there be a next time, Mister Okazaki.”

Eva spoke with a shockingly menacing tone, and I understood why she said it. The failed companies had only ended up in that position due to their own actions, but they weren’t particularly happy to have their stocks’ value plummet and then get shorted on top of that, of course. We thought ourselves clever for revealing our plan to Angela, former supporter of the US Democratic Party. We needed the president to be in our debt so that the US’s increasing political tension didn’t negatively impact their diplomatic or security relationships with us.

“All right. Shall we sweeten things with the president by bailing out the companies at risk?”

“Wasn’t that your intention from the beginning, my lady?”

“Oh, you knew?”

We laughed together, but once we were finished, I let my expression turn more serious as I gave Okazaki an order.

“I want you to purchase Portercon. They’re the number two PC maker in the United States and are currently stuck in management deadlock.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Okazaki gave me a bow of respect.

“You’ve done well...my lady.”

Those were Ichijou’s first words to me when I arrived at Keika Holdings. At the very least, he managed to greet me with a smile.

I knew he must have been seething on the inside, but he realized the returns we’d come back with were like a gift from the gods, so the look on his face was more resigned than angry. That was the difference between him and Angela.

“Okazaki convinced me. I heard Angela actually punched him.”

“Please tell her to let me get a punch in too. Now, my lady, Toudou-san bowed his head to me, so I won’t say anything, but be aware that Nakamaro-oniisama is quite angry as well.”

“Oh, how scary.”

I was acting cute, but the truth was that I really didn’t want to upset Oniisama. The thought of him hating me was like a dagger in the heart. I thought back to the way he’d protected me all this time. It wouldn’t be smart to give in to him now, though.

I would give him my ultimate apology at the very, very end of it all.

“I want to put our core banking system development on hold.”

The farce was over, and I was ready to enter the main stage. When Angela was grilling Okazaki, she’d found out that Teikoku Telephone Company had used her to put pressure on me, hoping to disrupt the core banking system Keika Holdings was developing.

Sensing my thoughts, Ichijou spoke with resignation in his voice.

“Is this the right time to go after their livelihood...?”

“This is the moment when we can actually get revenge.”

I set a few articles down on the table in front of Ichijou.

The new year is off to a bad start, as the IT bubble in the United States has completely collapsed. IT companies find themselves anxiously searching for

ways to increase their cash flow.

The end of the year saw the bankruptcy of WCI Inc., the long-distance communication company, which left lasting effects after General Energy Online suffered the same fate last fall. The Nikkei finished out the year at a value of 17,500 yen.

This was the year of the Furukawa Telecoms takeover bid and other cases of 'activist shareholders,' and it's impossible to predict whether the zaibatsu are going to experience an accelerated downfall or a fortification.

Meanwhile, financial institutions struggling to dispose of bad debts managed to escape destruction, but a difference in stability may still emerge between those who got a head start and those who delayed action, perhaps even leading to company reorganizations.

The first financial institutions to recover include Keika Holdings, Imperial Iwazaki Bank, and Futaki Yodoyabashi Bank, while Honami Bank and Gowa Osan Bank are two who lagged behind. The Financial Services Agency plans to conduct special audits in the hope of clearing all bad debts by the year 2003.

Minister Takenaga has commented on concerns about Keika Holdings becoming an institutional bank for the Keika Group. The company's future stock listing has also become a topic of conversation, with many watching eagerly for the planned listing date. However, the timing has still not been announced, as regional banks still struggling with bad debts, such as Shinden Bank, are now rushing to Keika Holdings for rescue.

Other companies, such as the major retailer Taiei, general trading companies, and general contractors, continue to shoulder bad debts. The market's attention is focused on whether financial institutions will be able to hold out on

disposing of these debts.

With the exception of Teikoku Telephone Company, companies are concerned about the ownership of shares gathered during the Furukawa Telecoms takeover bid.

Amid calls for lifting the ban on current-value accounting, the drop in stock price is likely to cause paper losses, with no place to go for fundraising after the tech bubble burst in US markets. In truth, their goal is to gain cash, with no prospect of a buyout in sight.

A few of these companies are said to have sold their shares to Keika Holdings, the source of this turmoil, which revealed the inner disorder of companies connected to Teikoku Telephone Company.

Keika Holdings is currently attempting to improve relations with these companies by offering work on the core banking system they're developing for internal use. Their true goal is a buyout of WCI Inc. using companies with connections to both Teikoku Telephone Company and the American government...

We'd managed to clean up the mess around our core banking system, but it wasn't a surprise that the carnage at Honami Bank stole manpower from us. I still planned to swallow up Furukawa Telecoms whole, so leaving all the work in their hands would be our last resort.

"Furukawa Telecoms. Are you still planning to go after them?"

"Why would I bother with all this recklessness if that wasn't the goal?"

We glared at each other for a moment. It was Ichijou who broke eye contact with a sigh.

“I owe you more than I can ever repay, my lady. That’s exactly why I don’t want you crossing any more dangerous bridges.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I can’t just stop now.”

I wasn’t so foolish as to miss the fact that he was mentally preparing himself. Still, we were at a tipping point, and I had to keep working no matter what. I knew the future that awaited, and I knew that no one else would ever believe it. Firmly, deeply, I muttered my resolve, as if the person I was trying to convince was myself.

“If I don’t, everyone will turn in their graves...”

Keika Holdings has announced a temporary extension of their core banking system development project.

Keika Holdings, the product of multiple mergers between financial institutions, found itself with a disorganized core banking system and has been planning to implement a new one. However, concerns over the effective integration of the system across so many institutions, the reconstruction of Shinden Bank after its bailout, and the possibility of more regional banks coming to them for aid has led Keika Holdings to temporarily put their development plans on hold.

As an alternative proposal, they’ve now set up a data center in the Tokyo metropolitan area to integrate the core banking system of each financial institution. They are also constructing a backup line. Keika Holdings’ announcement indicates that they will start by organizing their finance, securities, and insurance systems and then transfer them into the unified system in a three-step process.

Expense estimates are 250 billion yen over a five-year period of system work...

American PC maker Portercon, rumored to be operating at a loss, has announced that it is coming under the control of Silicon Valley's Moonlight Fund.

Despite being the second largest maker of computers in the United States, Portercon has struggled in recent years to operate at a profit and recover from the IT bubble burst. They expressed a desire to merge with rival firms in a revival effort, but a proxy fight took this plan off the table.

With the collapse of the NASDAQ after long-distance communication company WCI Inc. filed Chapter 11, Portercon has even fewer fundraising options, sending them into the arms of the Moonlight Fund for help. The fund purchased Portercon for 14.5 billion dollars.

The Moonlight Fund includes the Keika Group, a Japanese zaibatsu, and is headquartered in Silicon Valley. They profit off IT investments, and in recent years they have shifted their focus to resources with an emphasis on crude oil.

Shiyo Electric Co., a company obtained by the Moonlight Fund, maintains a strong production line of memory, batteries, and liquid crystal, while Portercon plans to restructure their business model to focus on direct sales of laptop computers...

The one bright spot on the downtrodden New York stock market was the rescue of Portercon. We'd managed to buy it at a big discount thanks to the current market price, but this was still just part of the overall scheme. And the person who would become the final player in that scheme was currently enjoying her coffee at Vesuna, the café on the first floor of Kudanshita Keika Tower.

"Thank you for waiting, Karin Viola-san."

"It's nice to meet you, Your Little Majesty. Tales of your great feats have

always been popular in Silicon Valley.”

The interior of Vesuna was filled with regular customers. I’d asked to interview her here, of all places, to get a sense of her character.

The typical customers of Vesuna were either large, intense-looking foreigners who liked cute cafés or girls with sweet tooths who paid them no mind and focused solely on enjoying their desserts. Yup. Really, it was chaos. Fortunately, our VIP seats were a bit distanced from the rest of them.

“You said you had an offer for me. Should I take that to mean you’re going to ask me to become CEO of your newly acquired Portercon?”

That would have been extremely ironic, and since I knew she was perfectly prepared to refuse, I decided to play a bit of a prank. I’d brought her into this chaotic atmosphere, perhaps to influence the mood or to entertain her, but she didn’t end up noticing.

“I think I can get you a better position than that. What I’m after is a restructuring of Japan’s computer industry.”

“Another bold aspiration, I see.”

“Japanese computers sell well within the country, but that’s mostly through electronic appliance shops and such, which means we have to sell at high prices. However, the price of computers will likely go down through direct sales someday. Before that happens, we’ll have to expand our scale and lower costs.”

I paused there to take a sip of my grape juice. The café kept it in stock since it was my drink of choice.

“Which means you want to use Portercon for direct sales to capture the Japanese market?”

“One of our companies, Shiyo Electric Co, is prepared to become a major supplier for the IT industry. That means we’re just about ready to shift the Japanese market to direct sales. We can still bring prices down.”

Next, I took a big bite of my strawberry shortcake topped with whipped cream. This was a very delayed reaction, but I suddenly realized how ridiculous it was that an elementary schooler was having this conversation.

“But my main goal is cell phones. We’re currently obtaining that technology. I want Japan and America to work out the details together, then make something that can be used throughout the whole world.”

I glanced at the clock. It was just about time. I signaled for a maid to turn the television to the news.

“It’s time for the three o’clock news. Today marks the birth of a major computer company.

“Furukawa Telecoms and Shiyo Electric Co. held a joint press conference this afternoon to announce a business integration. With the Moonlight Fund announcing the acquisition of US computer manufacturer Portercon, both sides have come together to create a massive new computer company that spans both the United States and Japan. They state that more details will come at a later date...”

“The Keika Group currently holds 35 percent of Furukawa Telecoms stock and 50 percent of Shiyo Electric Co. stock. It will depend on the merger ratio, but I’m positive we’ll end up with at least 30 percent of the company after the merger.”

The news was interrupted right after I finished. Furukawa Telecoms’ would-be white knight, Teikoku Telephone Company, had launched a counterattack in the US.

“Teikoku Telephone Company has announced their intention to rescue US company WCI Inc. The bankrupt company incurred massive losses by committing accounting fraud, but they continue to be the number two long-distance communication network in the United States, and while NASDAQ IT companies are rumored to be suffering management instability, the press secretary to the president has stated that they welcome the offer to bailout WCI Inc. Hours later, the NASDAQ is seeing a positive response to this prospect...”

“I want you to join this large Japanese-American computer company. Will you accept the job?”

I smiled and stretched out my hand. Karin Viola reached out and shook it firmly.

“Absolutely. So my goal is to make this company number one in the world,

right? That's a challenge I can take on, Boss."

I was at the main home of the Keikain family. In the study, I bowed my head to Keikain Kiyomaro, my foster father and the head of the house.

"I'm very sorry for going so much further than a child is supposed to."

Even if it looked like I held real power, I was still a daughter of the Keikain Dukedom, which meant I had a duty to follow the family rules. Though my actions had placed me under the protection of the Keikain family, I still had to obey Father. That meant he was the only one who could formally scold me.

I knew Tachibana, Ichijou, Angela, and Nakamaro-oniisama had already given Father their reports on the incident, so in a way, he needed to call me to the house to hear my side of the story. Kiyomaro-tousama looked at me with the eyes of an adult, then let out a sigh.

"You expanded too much. Your choice of strategies is up to you, but you've now added a hundred thousand employees and easily over a million connected individuals. Did you understand that before you took action?"

The way he questioned me instead of chastising me told me that Father was clever and understood me well. At the very least, I didn't want to lie to the man who was both my parent and guardian.

"Yes, I did. I'll accept your scolding, but I truly believe that this path will lead the Keika employees, related parties, and Japan as a whole to happiness."

Instead of looking at me, Father removed a book from the shelf and set it on the table in front of me.

It was written by the man who was once the Chief Cabinet Secretary of the opposing party's coalition and would later become a key figure in the ruling coalition.

"'Know when to quit.' I love that phrase. In a way, it's how I managed to survive."

I hid the expression on my face since I was standing before Father and receiving his blunt words, but I had to stop myself from cradling my head in my

hands.

It was easy to tell what was going to happen, knowing of the bubble and watching that insane level of prosperity.

Bubbles were like a game of chicken. The winner would be whoever got out before the brakes got pulled and everything crashed. In this case, the Japanese people did as Japanese people do by following the crowd, and they were the ones who ended up with the short straw.

“Runa, you still have a long life ahead of you, and I’m certain you’ll learn when to quit someday. I only pray that this tendency doesn’t lead you to ruin.”

Father murmured to me as he stared at the photograph on the corner of his desk, speaking just loud enough for me to hear.

“...Don’t become like my big brother. Now get out of here.”

“Yes. I’ll go now.”

My heart ached as I took the book and left. I was happy to hear his concern for me, but it hurt to know that he was likely going to get the short end of the stick for my sake.

Nakamaro-oniisama was waiting for me when I left the study. The usual kindness on his face was gone, replaced with a stern look.

“Did Father scold you?”

“Yes. He gave me this book and told me to ‘know when to quit.’”

“I think it was Laozi who first said that...? I believe it was originally said like this.”

Nakamaro-oniisama recited the original Chinese phrasing. It was just like my big brother to be able to pronounce it so easily.

“Secretary Angela and President Ichijou both raked Okazaki-kun over the coals for trying to lead you astray. Do you really still not have enough, Runa?”

His eyes were fixed straight on me. I made sure not to avert my gaze from him either.

“The megabank known as Keika Holdings was born from the Moonlight Fund

which you established. Then you pumped that money into growing the biggest companies in Japan, like Teisei Department Stores, Akamatsu Corporation, and even Keika Hotels. Keika Railway is the first private railway in the country to own a Shinkansen, and now you've started a gigantic new computer company, surely to be called Keika Electronics. Will you really be able to control it from the inside, Runa? Tachibana has already gone to Keika Railway, and I'm part of Keika Holdings."

"I've managed to headhunt a very talented person from the United States."

Despite my words, I knew just how grave the search for talent was. I couldn't tell him the truth, though. My goal was the revival of Japan's economy, and I never once considered the internal regulations of the Keika Group's companies. I was prepared to sell everything off if it meant making a profit.

"Runa, you need to rely on Father and me more, and you need to learn to be satisfied. Secretary Angela warned me that you've crossed a very dangerous bridge."

Ah, so the cost of my big gamble wasn't so cheap after all. When he saw my face twist up with sadness, Nakamaro-oniisama placed his hand on my head.

"You're still a child, Runa. It's only natural for people to protect you at this age. You don't need to rush to become an adult before it's time."

Tears spilled from my eyes. I realized just how badly I'd scared all these wonderful people.

"Sakurako-san and I have finished preparations for our wedding. She said she wanted to be a June bride, so we'll see what the lucky day is when the month comes, then we'll choose the exact date.

"Runa, when that day comes, I hope you'll smile and wish us well."

"Yes."

I've deserted such good people...this country...this era.

I left the main Keikain house without saying any of this out loud.

"Welcome back, my lady."

When I got home, Keiko-san, the head maid, was waiting for me in a state of

extreme anger. It appeared she'd heard about everything I did. Her smile was her main form of attack, and a smile of such beauty wasn't something I wanted to see.

Thinking that this must be what the smile of a yaksha is like, I desperately tried to flee.

"H-hello. I'm going to spend the rest of the evening in my room..."

"My lady."

Two words. Those two words kept me pinned in place.

"I would like to speak with you."

"I know what you want to say, and Father and Oniisama already scolded me about it at the main house..."

"*My lady...*"

"...Okay."

Grin. With a beautiful and terrifying smile on her face, the head maid didn't hesitate to deploy her ultimate feminine weapon.

"You think a woman will be persuaded with reason? You're a child who's made life difficult for her parent. That alone is a *perfectly good reason* to scold you!"



Keiko-san had worked for me for a long time, so just like Tachibana, she was basically a substitute parent to me. There was no escape once she'd gotten worked up into a rage.

Her lecture continued until the clock read past midnight.

Tachibana refused to comment on my sleep-deprived state the next day.

Glossary and notes

Kai Tak Airport: Fans of the show *Mayday* would be about as happy to land here as they would at São Paulo's Congonhas Airport (that is, not happy about it at all).

Right of veto: Its formal description is “the prevention of special decisions on matters of weight,” and it allows for the following actions:

Merge with other companies/divide the company

Modify company statutes

Transfer business

Offer shares for subscription

Partially remove board members

Third-party allocation of shares: A method for a company to raise funds. This process involves issuing shares to a designated third party, whether or not they own shares themselves, by granting them the right to acquire newly authorized shares. The downside of this method is that the increase in the number of shares dilutes the percentages held by existing shareholders, which means the issuing procedures are extremely strict. Naturally, this process is often a target of veto rights.

Stock buyback: When a company buys shares they've issued back from the market with their own money. This makes it easier to increase the stock price and helps prevent buyouts.

Turnaround manager: A contractor who specializes in revising operations so

that failed companies can return to business. Runa buys the failed companies and industries altogether, which means she also revives the entire industry herself, fortunately. This is why Wall Street looks at her and thinks, “What the hell is she doing...?”

Japan-US trade friction: There are many examples of this, but after offering up computers to protect agriculture, it's hard to overlook their link to our current era. Debate about this topic continues to be split.

Suzuki Shoten: A pre-war Japanese zaibatsu and trading company. Its failure warped Japan's history, but the companies it left behind are still alive within Japanese industries.

Showa-era financial crisis: The Privy Council played a decisive role, but it led to the unfortunate outcomes of zaibatsu strengthening and the rise of the military.

Isle of Man/Cayman Islands/Virgin Islands: Places referred to as tax havens. Sending money through paper companies makes it impossible to determine the origin of that money. This is how money from activities like drug and weapons sales can be concealed through the act of money laundering. It's also possible to obscure the owner of certain funds by utilizing multiple tax havens.

Billionaire: One billion = 1,000,000,000. This word refers to having a billion dollars, which makes you significantly richer than a millionaire.

One million = 1,000,000. This is where the word “millionaire” comes from. These words generally refer to dollar amounts, so if you suppose one dollar equals 100 yen, that would mean: Billionaire = 100 billion yen; Millionaire = 100 million yen.

Kinugawa-Onsen: Tokyo's inner parlor, a symbol of both the bubble and of the bubble's collapse.

Convertible corporate bond: The upside of these is that they can be converted into shares set at a specific price beforehand. If the stock price rises above the conversion price, you can convert them to shares and sell them for a profit. On the other hand, if the stock price goes below the conversion price, you can wait until the expiration date and continue to collect the interest that comes with the corporate bonds instead of converting them. However, the

downside is that shares will inevitably be diluted when the bonds are converted. In recent years, convertible corporate bonds have sometimes been issued specifically for that dilution as a preventative measure against takeover bids.

White knight: When a company is experiencing a hostile takeover, this is lingo for a friendly company that approaches them for a takeover or merger, opposing the original hostile buyer.

The book Runa received: *Chiisakutemo Kirari To Hikaru Kuni Nihon* by Takemura Masayoshi, Kobunsha.

(It's the source of the current opposition party's ideology, and it would go on to link to Ishibashi Tanzan's "Small Japan" policy.)

"Know when to quit": These words originally came from Laozi. The original quote, "è±èºèº," translates to "He who knows sufficiency shall prosper."

Chapter 3: The White House's Nervous Smile

WASHINGTON, DC—the capital of the United States. With the Pentagon and White House still recovering from the aftermath of being struck by planes, the White House's main occupant cradled his head in his hands after hearing the report from Tokyo.

“That young lady’s underlings must be behind this. Why isn’t anyone stopping her?”

“There’s nothing that can be done, Mr. President,” the vice president lamented. “These are the selfish whims of a little girl.” They were seated in an underground briefing room built during the Cold War.

The CIA director was equally troubled by this report from Tokyo, but he also had one of his own to deliver about the recent disturbance.

“It appears that multiple funds have indeed conspired in a takeover bid for Furukawa Telecoms. This also allows them to go after Shiyo Electric Co., which the girl controls. The Keika Group bought even more Shiyo Electric stock as defense in this war, vengefully forced us to back off by secretly reporting on WCI’s accounting fraud, crashed the New York stock market, and got the funds in their way to retreat.”

Having information means one must make decisions about what to share and what not to share.

The US intelligence community came out of this looking good partially thanks to the young lady’s reckless actions, so the CIA director had been forced to protect her.

The CIA was also investigating the origin of the terrorist attacks as progress was made in the current Afghanistan war, and they couldn’t overlook the fact that they’d been placed in the line of fire.

“How did ECHELON and the rest of our robust intelligence agencies fail to stop

those attacks?"

"Didn't reports of the attacks end up in the hands of a trading company in one of the allied countries in the Far East? What were you all doing before that?"

The NSA and CIA directors were being questioned together, but the latter was the one who went the palest.

The director of the CIA had been appointed during the rule of the Democratic party. But they were under a Republican administration now, which weakened his position.

If he abandoned the young lady in the Far East—the girl who made the CIA look good in this situation—it was very possible that the CIA itself would be abandoned by this administration. The only option was to protect her.

"So, tens of billions of dollars got wiped out because we didn't catch this setup and stop it. That's a pretty pricey lesson for not doing our due diligence."

The president's smile showed more relief than anger. This was because the administration's under-the-table payments to the now-bankrupt General Energy Online were being investigated by Congress, but now that they could participate in the prosecution of WCI Inc., the US government could turn it around and claim that "we were the ones to dispose of the rotten apple."

WCI Inc. was also a major donor to the current administration, so one could view this as an attempt to pin the blame on an ally. Still, they truly were changing their stance and cleaning up their act.

"The information she provided us was true, and it let us avoid a fatal blow. We can't criticize her for that, even if she *is* acting suspiciously."

The Secretary of State spoke with astonishment in his voice as he praised her skills. This was why the CIA, specifically Angela, had been so distraught about all this.

WCI Inc. had been sloppy in their accounting fraud. Once the authorities investigated them, their mistakes were immediately obvious.

The CIA had never been able to find the informant who leaked the Keika information, either.

They knew it had been sent from a burner address in a London internet café, but they relied too heavily on ECHELON and other net surveillance systems, so they were unable to pin down the human behind the computer.

While they were still reeling from the loss of safety following the terrorist attacks, an economic spy went in and hit them where it hurt.

This was how Okazaki achieved his victory: he went through multiple intermediaries and had a local third party plug a USB drive into the computer, so that when another intermediary used the computer to look up dirty pictures, he wouldn't notice the virus sending the email from there. This was a strategy he never revealed, even to Angela.

When WCI Inc. was investigated, their wrongdoings were as clear as day. The bursting of the bubble had taken their funds and the end of the year left them with no time, giving them no choice but to hide their massive losses with accounting fraud. In the end, the company had to file Chapter 11.

"So Deep Throat is lurking in the shadows, huh? And they're as sloppy as a call girl," the president murmured to himself.

His administration had come under all kinds of criticism, but he was a smart man and willing to listen closely to the opinions of those around him. It was why he felt the need to voice the honest question on his mind.

"Here's my problem. If they could line all this up now, why didn't they expose General Energy Online back when all that was happening?"

His question thrust them all into a labyrinth. If they could successfully speculate this successfully, why not use those skills back during 9/11 or the General Energy Online incident, when they could have made much more?

Well, it was all part of the girl's plan. They didn't know her motives.

"And she's going to take the funds she got from it to save Portercon and set up PACs in swing states. It doesn't make any sense."

"The girl is generally our ally, and she only counterattacked when we were hostile toward her. She'll usually go along with us; she wants to be amicable."

The CIA director was the one who answered the president's question.

Everyone looked satisfied with this explanation.

With that issue resolved, the attorney general gave his candid opinion on the president's support for the WCI Inc. bailout.

"I'm sure you understand that we can't sell WCI Inc. to Teikoku Telephone Company."

"Yes, although I know they don't actually think they can buy it either. The profit they made from selling Furukawa Telecoms to Keika gives them some bargaining power. Even if they don't actually intend to go through with it, I was glad to hear their announcement. The market definitely welcomed the news, although they'll have to confirm it again if they want to strengthen that effect."

It appeared that Teikoku Telephone Company was serious. Later, they would be completely defeated in an ugly battle with the Department of Justice, but that's a story for another time. The CIA director presented a single report to the president.

"Those are their publicly stated reasons, but I believe that they're a decoy. The girl took 10 billion dollars of profit and poured it into Bahrain, calling it infrastructure groundwork. Akamatsu Corporation, which she controls, is building a mining railway in Saudi Arabia, a railroad between Dammam and Hafar al-Batin, and a branch line connecting to King Khalid Military City."

The president and the lower-ranking officials looked at the map of Saudi Arabia. Bahrain was an island nation in the Persian Gulf, connected by bridge to Saudi Arabia's Dammam Port. The US military had been stationed in King Khalid Military City ever since the Gulf War, and a few dozen kilometers to the north of Hafar al-Batin was the border with Iraq.

Everyone in the room knew what it meant to link these spots with a railway. Construction costs also included mercenaries, who they said were needed to guard construction sites. In short, this was the girl's trump card.

"You're going to invade Iraq, right? Then allow me to help you."

It was the earliest declaration of any party that they would participate in the war. This was an even clearer display of precognition than her latest dealings in the business world, and it frightened both the president and the vice president.

The Secretary of Defense offered them all a reminder.

“I’m sure you understand that we can’t withdraw PMCs from Afghanistan considering the current state of the country. Remember that the girl is giving them a lot of provisions.”

The United States had yet to forget the Vietnam War and how, with each loss of an American soldier, the anti-war movement slowly forced them to give up. Now, instead of American troops, it was Japanese and Russian soldiers losing their lives in Afghanistan, with Indian troops next to attempt to join the war.

Indian soldiers who were technically retired wanted retribution for the attack on their house of parliament and revenge on the Afghanistan insurgents who had connections to those terrorists. They entered Afghanistan territory and carried out multiple massacres in the bogs.

The girl’s mercenary company was responsible for assuring their status as a PMC.

“As you well know, wars cost money. If we need the girl’s funds to support us in Afghanistan, we should think of it as a necessary expense.”

“And that necessary expense is the tens of billions we lost in the crash? Wars are starting to come with quite a hefty price tag,” the Secretary of the Treasury joked at the Secretary of Defense’s comment. The military ate up money and constantly required more and more of the budget. This is why you could say the greatest enemy of any country’s military is their financial ministry.

The others couldn’t remain silent after the Secretary of State bluntly pointed out those fundamental facts.

“If we skimp on the cost and the Statue of Liberty gets taken out next, history will look back on us and wonder how we could be so stupid as to give up over tens of billions of dollars.”

It was good luck for the girl that the United States was in wartime. Of course, she knew about all this in advance.

It meant that the war would be prioritized over all else. She’d also overcommitted to the US’s war and the reasons behind it. Through anger or despair, if she kept committing to those reasons, she would be tolerated during

the coming Iraq war.

“I’m sitting here today thanks to a few thousand votes in Florida, but that was a gift from her company’s extreme support.”

The president muttered those words in a nostalgic tone. The midterm elections were happening this year—another election like the last one.

The girl was setting up PACs in swing states.

The issue with PACs was that they didn’t actually own any of their funds. They gathered a maximum of five thousand dollars from each of their supporters to give to politicians. But using that method alone would be pointless. The girl was creating numerous companies that could participate in these PACs, targeting failing businesses in swing states and obtaining their shares through third-party stock allocations. The daily news that she had rescued even more companies was having a great stabilizing effect on the markets.

“In other words, we’ll have a slight advantage in the election, and we don’t have to worry about getting crushed so badly that our entire political course changes. So that means our plans remain unchanged, correct?”

The CIA director nodded silently at the vice president’s question.

Since attacking Iraq out of revenge for the terrorist attacks would be close to impossible, the White House was working on a plan to invade Iraq over “weapons of mass destruction.” However, they already knew that Iraq had no such weapons after economic sanctions following the Gulf War, so their choice was between pressing forward or creating a fake cover story.

It was a convenient development for the White House when that girl discovered the missing nuclear missiles. It supported the story that the terrorists didn’t steal the missiles and instead committed the 9/11 attacks with funding from Iraq.

The funny part was how similar this story was to the girl’s recent outrageous business endeavors, with the CIA making up a narrative to control the definitive outcome—a narrative that required the girl’s cooperation without fail.

More specifically, they needed Japan’s cooperation due to their experience dealing with terrorists.

“Then there’s no problem. If we’ll be paying for the lost money with blood, then let’s make the best of it.”

A few days later, the president declared, “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil” in his State of the Union address. Like it or not, the world was forced to prepare for yet another war.

Glossary and notes

Intelligence community: A generic name that includes domestic intelligence agencies such as the CIA and FBI as well as liaisons between them.

ECHELON: A communication surveillance system centered in America that monitors military endeavors.

Deep Throat: This term began as sexual slang. However, after Watergate, it came to refer to an informant who works on the inside.

Antitrust legislature: The United States’ Antitrust Act.

Swing states: Battleground states that fluctuate between majority support of the Democratic and Republican parties. Election results in these states end up deciding the president and majority party in Congress. Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Florida are particularly large sources of presidential votes, and a candidate has no shot at winning the election without securing at least two of these states. Florida was the state that played the biggest role in the extremely close 2000 election.

Chapter 4: To Admit Defeat Is to Grow as A Person

THE THREE BOYS had gathered in a café called “Avanti.” They were putting their heads together to come up with some kind of use for the money they’d earned from the Furukawa Telecoms takeover bid.

“We came out with a win...but Runa’s still sprinting ahead of us.”

Teia Eiichi hated to lose, but the only thing he could muster right now was a dry laugh. The merger of the three companies, Furukawa Telecoms, Shiyo Electric Co., and Portercon, under the name “Keika Electronics Union,” was the subject of much discussion throughout the world. The massive computer corporation held assets in the trillions.

“I wonder how far Keikain-san is going to reach? She has banks, logistics, railroads, and now electronics. She’s built herself a massive zaibatsu.”

Izumikawa Yuujirou could do nothing but offer a strained smile too. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was a political backer of the Keika Group, and he had joined forces with the likes of former prime minister Fuchigami and Governor Iwasawa in an attempt to oppose Prime Minister Koizumi.

“Someone from the Machishita Fund called to ask if I would work for them. I said no, though.”

Gotou Mitsuya drank his coffee while turning the page of his book. A place as big as the Machishita Fund would have surely researched their histories. Still, he’d been scouted all the same. It was a clear sign of how good his reputation was.

“I never heard from them, though.”

“Me neither.”

Teia Eiichi and Izumikawa Yuujirou answered at almost the exact same time, with Eiichi the one who moved the conversation along.

“All I got was a scolding from my grandfather. He told me, ‘Stop playin’ around with money.’”

As an artisan at heart, Eiichi’s grandfather probably wanted to warn his grandson against gambling with his finances. The Teia family were business founders, but also perfectionists when it came to craftsmanship.

“I get what he means, but the pinnacle of this money game was what Keikain walked away with.”

“That’s probably why he told me not to play around. I would have to put the entire Teia Group on the line to bet the same amount of money as Runa. That’s not something I’m interested in,” Teia Eiichi muttered in response to Gotou Mitsuya.

In a way, Eiichi was acknowledging his own failure. But admitting defeat and giving up on Keikain Runa were two separate things.

“Anyway, I want to start another business with the eight billion yen we made.”

“I’m fine with that. It’s easy money for us. Grow it or lose it, we’ll leave it in your hands, Eiichi-kun.”

“Agreed, but I want to help manage it. So, what kind of business are you going to start, Teia?”

With approval from them both secured, Teia Eiichi placed a financial article on the table.

“‘Keika Holdings suspends development of core banking system...’ Is this what you’re after?”

“Yeah. We’ll be stealing Runa’s job, but I want to set up a temporary placement agency full of core banking systems engineers. We’ll get them from America.”

“I see. We can get engineers cheaply since the IT bubble burst so bad over there. But don’t you think someone like Keikain-san would come up with the same idea?”

Their approval of his idea filled Teia Eiichi with confidence, so he spoke with

certainty.

“I don’t think she’ll get there. Everything that’s happened has been a big gamble for her. I know that because she was willing to postpone investing in Keika Holdings’ core banking system, which is the infrastructure for all of her funds.”

Teia Eiichi had been clever enough to reach the correct conclusion from the information that was available, but he and his friends still didn’t understand the true disarray inside the current Keika Group. Still, they’d still obtained another one-way ticket to success by correctly interpreting the core banking system issue.

“Investing in a core banking system will require a huge budget and a lot of personnel. The good thing about being able to hire people from America is that we can make them work online from where they live, and we can also get employees who can work at night in Japan.

“Development of a Keika Holdings system starts by constructing backups, then putting together systems for banks, securities, and insurance, and then finally linking them all together. We’ll employ people temporarily and manage the work of starting and maintaining that backup. That’s my idea for our next business.”

“So, if we get the job, we’ll raise the financing for it, get servers to build a backup line for financial institutions, then start getting contracts with those institutions, right?”

“Even if it doesn’t go well, we can sell it off to Keikain and liquidate without any debts. But Teia, can Americans really develop a Japanese system?”

“Even if they can’t, we just transfer people out wherever possible, then move the Japanese employees from that location to another department. Mitsuya would know more about that.”

Gotou Mitsuya, who knew more about computers than anyone else in the group, placed his hand to his chin in thought. He’d been watching the steady progress of advanced technology, so he knew just what to say.

“It might be best to have them work on development fundamentals, like

libraries, frameworks, databases, security, and things like that. Now that we can use Java, enterprise systems are only just becoming freely available. The patent on public key encryption expired in 2000, which eliminated the issue of IT handling for critical data. It's a big strength if you can control the center of it all. With that result as a base, we can leave development of that real-life business model in the hands of domestic vendors."

Izumikawa Yuujirou spoke next. The skilled negotiator shared his honest impressions from negotiations of his own.

"Can we focus on finding people on the east coast instead of the west coast? The time difference means 5 p.m. in Japan is midnight on the west coast and 3 a.m. in New York. We can use this difference to make mirror servers of the Tokyo backup server on the east and west coasts, where we can conduct backup server maintenance.

"If we work all the way to 9 p.m. in Tokyo, it'll be 8 a.m. in New York. We can have their office take over maintenance and then send them home, or even let the New York branch out two hours earlier. Then we can make overtime last to 7 p.m. and take over from there. It'll take a lot of the load off our people here."

Izumikawa Yuujirou had expanded on Teia Eiichi's thought, with Gotou Mitsuya covering all possible outcomes. Mitsuya pressed Eiichi for confirmation once more.

"But are you sure about this? We're just assuming that Keikain will cooperate with us."

After gulping the rest of his cola down, Teia Eiichi spoke confidently.

"I'm sure. Win or lose, we'll never catch up to Runa. She'll find some other boy to cultivate. I just haven't come up with any ideas for that yet."

"Yeah."

"Me neither."

The three fell silent at that point.

Ignorant of the atmosphere she'd just walked into, Keikain Runa, the subject of their conversation, arrived next.

“Sorry I’m late. What were you boys talking about?”

“How to use you to make money.”

“What?! I want to hear it.”

Keikain Runa’s face had been in “dessert mode” after she ordered cake for herself, but now it was starting to transform. Now there were yen signs appearing in her eyes.

“Hang on. If I give you half the money for this, could you have the servers up by spring?”

“It depends on the situation. Does that mean you really haven’t gotten to a core banking system yet?”

“As you all know, I sort of took on a major gamble, so I haven’t been able to look at certain things yet.”

“I knew it. But really, there’s not enough time to build it all from scratch.”

“Huh? Didn’t you say you wanted to buy an IT firm on the east coast that knows about that sort of stuff? You can get them for cheap since the IT bubble burst over there.”

“Oh! I didn’t think of that!”

The difference between Keikain Runa, who was always acquiring companies, and Teia Eiichi, who had been thinking of founding his own company, was fully apparent here.

Teia Eiichi also realized exactly why Runa had been expanding her enterprise so widely: she saw it as buying time with money.

“Thank you for waiting. Here is your cake, my lady.”

With Keikain Runa’s face back in dessert mode at the arrival of the waitress, Teia Eiichi asked her a blunt question.

He didn’t really want to ask it, but he needed confirmation of what she’d made off with in her victory.

“How much did you end up betting?”

“Ummm, somewhere in the trillions?”

TIG Backup Systems would purchase an IT firm on the east coast with financing from Keikain Runa, but the three boys had no idea at this time that Honami Bank would later suffer a massive system failure in the spring and end up a regular customer of theirs—instead of Keika Holdings, whom they had planned to service.

Their company's first-year financials amounted to 42.5 billion yen in revenue and 10.5 billion yen in net profit. The success of this high-grossing business would become yet another new page in the lives of the three boys.

Glossary and notes

The book Gotou Mitsuya was reading: *Hyouka* by Yonezawa Honobu, Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko.

Chapter 5: The Lady's Daily Life: First Half of 2002

THE NEW YEAR of 2002 had arrived. We were due to become sixth graders in April, and the elementary school student council elections awaited us. With Eiichi-kun taking the lead, the rest of us in the Quartet were eager to participate.

“Is there anyone else even planning to run aside from us?”

As they worked on homework in their usual spot in the library, Yuujirou-kun cocked his head in response to Eiichi-kun’s question.

He had essentially been set on that exact course in life, so he didn’t let his guard down when it came to gathering information.

“It sounds like a fair number of people in the Stewards want to join. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

When he heard that, Mitsuya-kun half-smiled, half-grimaced. There was a bit of malice in his voice because he sensed the broader implications.

“Well, we’ll make the perfect alliance if we all team up.”

The school cliques were loosely broken down into the Courtiers for children of nobles, the Lords for children of zaibatsu, the Stewards for children of politicians, and the Heralds for children of bureaucrats.

The Courtiers consisted of many students who had a great deal of authority as nobles, but what they didn’t have was money. This was Kaoru-san’s faction, and they were currently using her to see if they could drag me into joining them.

The Lords was for zaibatsu students. They had money, but there were few of them in elementary school because servants couldn’t enroll until junior high. They naturally thought that Eiichi-kun was going to join them.

The Stewards consisted of students from the families of politicians. Just like The Lords, they were few in number because their servants couldn’t attend

school, but they had the most powerful connections. It was assumed that Yuujirou-kun would eventually join this group.

The Heralds was a group for students of bureaucrat families. Many of its members had excellent grades, but neither connections nor money to speak of. They could be described politely as independent and self-operating, or to put it more unfavorably, they lacked connections. Mitsuya-kun went out of his way to avoid their sales pitches, so they never invited him to join.

The power balance of the cliques in our elementary school was roughly 3:2:2:3 between Courtiers: Lords: Stewards: Heralds, but that balance would change dramatically in junior high when servants would be able to join them.

“Did they say something to you?”

There were only a few of us, but we were still at the top of our school’s elementary grades, so we had our own powers that came with that status. There was a budget, but being able to give out even more money would be a big deal. Older zaibatsu members used to spend above the budget to boast of their powers, reaching even greater heights of prosperity with their connections as a foundation.

“It sounds like some people in the Stewards want to get me out of the running so they can push someone else forward. I’ve got Oniisan, so I’m always second in command. The first in command wants to make himself known to us.”

There was a natural hierarchy within each group based on the positions of the students’ parents. For the nobles, it was their parents’ rank; for zaibatsu families, it was the scale of the zaibatsu; and for bureaucrats, it was their parents’ post in the government. However, Diet members sat at the top of the politician faction, with the hierarchy decided by who would be next to take over their base.

The game’s original story had Yuujirou-kun at the very bottom of this political clique due to his family’s scandal, but he managed to climb his way up to the very top. He was written as a character with a meek smile but a scheming personality on the inside.

“What about you, Eiichi-kun?”

“I’ll decide my own fate. I don’t care about that council crap.”

When I heard Eiichi-kun say that, I flicked my eraser. It struck him right in the face.

“What the hell was that for, Runa?!”

“First impressions are important. That’s just a basic rule, you know.”

When a victory was assured, thinking about what would come next was even more important. I didn’t want him forming grudges now and making the situation so complicated that parents needed to get involved.

“That’s why I think we need to greet each of our factions. It’s easiest to be sure an election is won before it even starts.”

Elections often meant that the first step in the process hadn’t gone as planned.

The next day, we gathered as usual to share our results.

“It sounds like my group doesn’t have any issues.”

“I managed to come to an agreement with my group as well. I don’t think they’re happy that I’m running, but they have no reason to oppose me.”

“I never bothered with those guys anyway. They’re not brave enough to resist me at all.”

The reports came from Eiichi-kun, me, and then Mitsuya-kun. Yuujirou-kun was silent for a moment before mustering up the determination to share his results.

“They told me they want to have a primary election.”

“A primary election?”

Yuujirou-kun half-smiled and continued in response to Eiichi-kun’s question.

“This election is basically a grand coalition. That means we should really be approaching this not as the Quartet, but as a union of factions. The primary election will choose the representatives for each faction.”

“Can’t we just ignore everyone else?”

Yuujirou-kun shook his head in answer to Mitsuya-kun's question. That was an easy way to end up on the bad side of the parents who interfered with their children's election.

"The son of a major opposition Diet member is in our grade. It sounds like he wants to get his name out there by beating me."

"Then why not just crush him head-on?"

The question came from Eiichi-kun. Yuujirou-kun took out a few photographs to show us. They appeared to come from the mass media, since they'd been taken with cameras stationed near our academy.

"The opposition party has been watching us, hoping to use us as pawns in an attack on the ruling party. The media is also preparing to go after us, calling us more of the same Ancien Régime. If we crush our opposition, we'll get a lot of criticism from the outside."

Political battles in Japan didn't come with much of a need to worry about external affairs. Problems only arose from internal strife and the possibility of your opposition deciding to drag outside influences into the fight. The current Koizumi administration had high approval ratings, but they were quietly plotting to take down the secretary-general of the ruling party, who did too much without permission. I assumed this story would be noticed by the political world and leaked to the news. They were trying to include this as part of the story to be given to the media.

"But a primary election... Can we really win?"

"It'll be close. That boy might be a future Diet member, and that's something I'll never be. That means the politicians' faction might all vote for him. He's campaigning on eliminating school cliques and reforming the student council, so he's probably getting a lot of backlash for that, but he'll still fool some people. Actually, the media is trying to make that happen."

We were in the era of TV choosing the prime minister. The television stations themselves knew that better than anyone, so their goal these days was to install a prime minister who would most benefit them.

The future heroine of the game, Takanashi Mizuho, would be on the receiving

end of considerable plot armor thanks to those mass media companies.

As someone unchanged from the old times, I would be defeated by Takanashi Mizuho, the embodiment of the average citizen. I now understood that I was the queen with her head on the chopping block.

“Let’s ignore them.”

“Huh?” said three voices in unison.

The three boys froze when they heard me say that. People who were able to ensure their victory before the battle were strong *because* they understood the system they were playing within. Those unable to do so were forced to start by brawling outside the stadium itself. If we understood the situation, then we’d already won before the fight had even begun.

First were the prerequisites. Candidates for elementary student council president would come from the class committee members as decided by a vote of those same committee members. That was very important. If you wanted to run for student council president, you had to be on the class committee by the third trimester of fifth grade.

Eiichi-kun was after the role of student council president, and, of course, he was already a class committee member. I missed that requirement this time and was instead a ceremony member. Management of the student council election also fell under the ceremony committee’s jurisdiction. One of the students joining Eiichi-kun on the class committee was Kasugano Asuka-chan.

“Next, the vice president, secretary, and treasurer will be selected by the student council president.”

So the president was selected by the class committee members, a total of six boys and girls from three classes. But once he won, Eiichi-kun wouldn’t be forced to work with a rival, as the elementary student council president had a heavy load of responsibilities.



“Now, this is important. Is the other boy a class committee member?”

In response to my question, Yuujirou-kun smiled awkwardly and shook his head.

“I would be surprised if someone so insistent could become a class committee member.”

That was what it all came down to. Eiichi-kun’s candidacy and victory were all but assured. Even if the unthinkable happened and our plan was foiled, we still had Asuka-chan with us, so our class wasn’t likely to be divided. Logically, the boy only wanted to use his school clique to enter the administration in place of Yuujirou-kun. However, if he took a step back and told us to include Asuka-chan, the situation would have become much more complicated.

“The student council president is the only one who can decide the other leadership positions. Eiichi-kun, if you want to appoint that boy and have him work with you, be my guest.”

“Quit with the jokes, Runa. There’s no way I’m gonna shut Yuujirou out.”

The plan was set. The next thing to decide was how to crush the boy in defeat.

“Keikain’s got a really scary smile on her face. Poor kid...”

“Mitsuya-kun, have you ever heard the phrase ‘silence is golden’?”

The next day, students who had finished their lunches were lounging around the cafeteria like it was a salon.

“Kaoru-san, may I have a moment?”

“Runa-san. I don’t see you here very often.”

I approached the Courtiers’ gathering place alone. Next to Kaoru-san were the girls we’d traveled with on the field trip: Machiyo Sanae-san, Kaihouin Hotaru-chan, and Kazuki Shiori-san.

“What brings you here, Runa-san?”

“Remember when we talked about a donation to refurbish the Courtiers’ Hall? I’m here to deliver it to you.”

“Oh my, thank you. Now we can start construction.”

Naturally, I’d already met with Kaoru-san in advance. This sort of theater was the necessary groundwork to build a sense of trust. Elegantly, and speaking in a loud voice, I pulled out the check from my uniform and handed it to Kaoru-san.

“Of course. Sorry to pay with a check, but this is for one hundred million yen. I hope you’ll take it.”

Everyone in the room froze. I never knew that Hotaru-chan could look so puzzled. Sanae-san seemed taken aback, like she couldn’t believe what was happening. I didn’t miss the brief glimmer of disgust in Shiori-san’s eyes, which was unexpected. I made a mental note that I might need to look into her later.

“Is this real?”

“It’s real. The payment will come from my account with the Kudanshita branch of Keika Bank.”

Once she confirmed the authenticity of the check, Kaoru-san stood up and formally expressed her gratitude.

“I speak for the Courtiers when I thank you for this generous donation.”

The story immediately spread throughout the school.

“Did you really need to do all that this afternoon?”

“Of course. Smacking someone with a stack of bills is most effective with a captive audience, although that makes it even more indecent.”

Eiichi-kun, having heard the story already, quietly confirmed it with me, and I gave the only natural response.

I’d already checked the school rules, of course. It would be very strange if there were one against buying student council elections.

Imperial Gakushukan Academy was a place to grow elites and powerful figures, meaning there was some wiggle room for playing dirty politics.

This leniency was probably left over from the game. As the villainess, I needed outlets for my evil deeds and eventual downfall, but for now, I was happy to use those outlets to my advantage. It was still child’s play compared to the real-life

presidential election of the Fellowship of Constitutional Government.

“A hundred million yen to fix an elementary school student council president election. I just know all the factions are in shambles right now, wondering if it’s really worth that much.”

Mitsuya-kun spoke critically of my methods, seeing through to my true motive. His eyes were saying that I’d won a head-on battle, but I objected to that conclusion.

“That money was a premium payment. It meant, ‘If you break our agreement, you’ll need to raise more money than that.’”

The person spreading that around was Asuka-chan, who’d heard about it through Hotaru-chan.

Slapping someone with money was worthwhile when they weren’t a directly related party. You had the excuse that they had no stake in the battle, but it was also an indirect message: “You know what you have to do if you want that money, right?” A hundred million was a small bribe to pay for the future of the elementary school, junior high, and high school levels of the student council.

Ichijou and Angela were dumbfounded when they came to ask me what the money was for, but they agreed to let me handle it my way after a brief warning not to rely on this tactic too often. Tachibana only gave a strained smile and said, “Just try not to imitate your grandfather in all the worst ways.”

“Runa’s set the stage for us so far. Yuujirou, I’m not gonna let you back out of the running now.”

“...Now I think I finally understand how Taichirou-niisan feels.”

As expected, when the election was over, Eiichi-kun was officially made student council class president of the elementary students. Underneath him were the following council members:

Vice President: Keikain Runa

Secretary: Izumikawa Yuujirou

Treasurer: Gotou Mitsuya

“We must make a change! Despite the corruption of this country, we fail to reflect on our wrongs and reform...”

A few days later, a lone student was standing on top of a mandarin orange crate and giving a fierce speech in front of the school. He seemed prepared to make his home on a bed of thorns. All around, I could see the cameras of the mass media peeking out. They were using the boy as PR for his parent in the National Diet. Little by little, theatrical political techniques were starting to emerge in this country.

(—Don’t you find it strange?! We’re all humans here! And yet...)

Ah, now I remember. There was a CG confrontation scene in the game where Takanashi Mizuho stood here and gave a speech. *In that case, I wonder if... Oh, there they are.*

I’m sorry, but unfortunately, you’re not going to bring me down. Takanashi Mizuho is the only one who’ll do that, with her allies, Teia Eiichi, Izumikawa Yuujirou, and Gotou Mitsuya.

With the eyes of the camera in mind, I passed through the scene resolutely and gracefully. Of course, the next day, I had to laugh when I saw the weekly paper article headlined *“Arrogant Duke’s Daughter Ignores Inspired Speech by Opposition’s Son, Passes by Without Acknowledgement.”*

I was upset. Why shouldn’t I be? Sure, it was a special event, but I still had to go see Ishikawa Nobumitsu-sensei, who was none other than *that* photographer. On top of that, I was the subject of the event in question.

“Can’t someone put a stop to his little project?”

When she heard me muttering under my breath, Angela rejected my question mercilessly.

“If you want to stop him, he’ll probably suffer an unexpected, intense counterattack just like you, my lady. I’d be perfectly fine with that.”

Angela was holding a grudge from the series of events which had started at

the end of the year, from the takeover bid to the birth of the giant computer company, so her words particularly stung. I'd had to seize the opportunity when I had the chance, but I did feel bad about the people I'd deceived, so I decided to pipe down and behave as I stood at the entrance to the venue.

Ishikawa-sensei had real talent. His event photographs, including the Teisei Department Store poster campaign, were always lauded as prime examples of his skill. Today's show was going to display all of his photography collections that included me, but the first poster to greet us was the original.

"What can I get for you, Your Little Majesty?"

"Thinking back on it now, this was the start of it all."

I didn't know if the name came from my own nature, or if my nature had changed to fit the name, but I now ruled over my domain as a duke's daughter, as Japan's little fixer, and as the shadow ruler of a major zaibatsu. Looking back on it now, I'd come a long way.

"When you run, you head toward your future."

The next picture was from the sports festival, where I'd been given juice and was running at full speed. I was starting to realize how skilled this man was at capturing a sense of fast motion in his photographs.

"Huh? He was there for that?!"

The next photo was at Prime Minister Fuchigami's residence, when I was acting as a goodwill ambassador for Hokkaido agriculture. I was eating food and having a pleasant chat. But looking closer, there was no amusement in the eyes of Prime Minister Fuchigami, or in my own. Both of us must have been biding our time before the media was kicked out.

"The moment when Hokkaido's future was decided."

It wasn't decided there. It really wasn't. Who gave it this title...? Oh, it was Ishikawa-sensei, huh? It was a questionable moment, but I was too busy trying to stay away from the sparks that threatened to set me aflame. However, my relationship with Hokkaido had indeed started growing stronger after that event. I think he also took... Oh, there it is. I found another picture I remembered him taking.

“From Narita Airport to Chitose. The wings of the north spread wide.”

It was a picture he'd taken of me in the departure lounge of Narita Airport, about to go on a journey. But I remembered the photographer laughing at me when he learned I'd never been in the lounge before. *Then that means...yes, there it is, all right.*

“Departing from Tokyo to the eighty-eight temples. Bringing you closer to enlightenment.”

It was a poster from the opening of the Shikoku Shinkansen. I was posing in a pilgrim's outfit on the Tokyo Station platform with the Shinkansen at my back. Next to it was a follow-up picture I expected from this photographer.

“Angela, it's that awful picture he took of us.”

“I'm never making that mistake again!”

“Eleven hours from Tokyo to Takamatsu. That's how long it takes for an awakening.”

That “awakening” was represented by the faces of Angela and me after a terrible trip, so I wondered how much penance high priests had to pay. It wasn't my fault for forcing the photographer to be booed the previous day, when we arrived in Takamatsu by plane, and he took pictures of our energized faces. He'd captured the entire thing with his camera already, but I paid that no attention.

“Together with her backpack, the young girl walks the road to adulthood.”

This was a Teisei Department Store back-to-school ad campaign from the following spring. I wore a school uniform and backpack in this photograph, but the ads have supposedly been so popular that people ripped them down to take home. Teisei Department Stores had to start selling them for money, and they sold out right away. These posters had an interesting history indeed.

“Her Little Majesty's military parade.”

This picture came from Café Vesuna in Kudanshita. I'd asked the photographer to watch the maids, but now that I looked at the pictures, I saw that they were receiving their training. That really did make it look like a military

parade, unfortunately.

“Whether it’s a mountain or life itself, you just have to keep climbing.”

This picture was from Mount Takao. It was a well-shot photograph; in fact, he’d probably taken advantage of the large-scale security measures there. I later heard that the goods I’d cheerfully prepared for the mountain-climbing trip were sold off to the girls in the blink of an eye.

“The secret flower garden in the megalopolis. God, please turn a blind eye to the garden in this tower.”

My honest impression was that this was a fantastic photo. I wasn’t in this one, but he must have found out about the garden somehow, asked to photograph it, and displayed the results here.

Then I faced the single most memorable photo that had swept all the awards last year.

The TV monitor in the background showed the Twin Towers, and Prime Minister Koizumi was cradling me in the picture’s foreground after I had collapsed.

“It was the only one I couldn’t add to. You don’t need words to understand that this was the moment when times changed forever.”

Ishikawa-sensei had come to stand behind me at some point. His usual joking tone was gone, replaced with the words of a true artist. I wished he would act like this all the time, but I decided not to say that.

“You’re going to become a great lady, I guarantee it. So be happy—despair doesn’t suit great ladies.”

His words pierced me. Had he found out I was a villainess somehow? But Ishikawa-sensei laughed at my confusion.

“There are no photos in the best spot in this venue. Do you know why that is?”

I cocked my head. Boldly, he declared his answer.

“The best spot is where I’ll shoot you nude... Ow! Was that really worth kicking me for?!”

“Shut it! Gimme back the emotions I was just feeling!”

I'd kicked the photographer's shin as hard as I could, but the two of us were able to continue working together because I recognized his talents. He was trying to capture me fully as a subject because he was a pro. That was probably why he could read my thoughts so well through the lens of his camera. He was able to make me look beautiful in pictures even when I was upset, so I couldn't truly hate him.

“You leave me no choice. I'll just have to settle for a shoot in a wedding dress.”

It was because he casually said things like this that I couldn't help but hire him again and again.

With a bitter expression on my face, I lashed back at Ishikawa-sensei.

“You *know* I can't promise you that!”

Sure enough, the photo exhibit was apparently a big hit. What was I supposed to do about that...?

I was singing at Teisei Department Store for the first time in a while. I'd been watching a really great late-night anime, and I'd come to love one of the songs they used in the middle. My driver and violinist, Watabe Shigema-san, came with me to perform it. It was sort of like karaoke, in a way, although it didn't quite seem right to perform such karaoke as a mini concert in a packed Teisei Department Store hall.

“You really do seem to enjoy yourself when you sing this song, my lady.”

When I read the translation, it actually turned out to be a song about an eternal farewell. Watabe-san had to grin and bear my use of a lyric card, just like a real pro would.

Though this was a mini concert, my performances were pretty much always free, and they took place whenever I felt like it. I sang Micaela's Aria and two or three other songs, and the twenty-minute event was a success, even attracting a standing audience once the seats were filled.

“All right. All that’s left is to do some shopping, eat something tasty, and head home.”

“Um... It looks like that’ll be a problem for the Teisei Department Store workers...”

Angela was busy with her secretary work, so my maid, Ichijou Erika, was with me today instead. Kitagumo Ryouko-san led my guards, but even she had been forced to deal with the audience.

“Has something happened?”

“Yes. Apparently, an idol scout showed up uninvited.”

“Excuse me?!”

Pleasant and gentle, and perhaps not a laughing matter... That was how this impromptu act began.

“I’m sorry, but Lady Runa is...”

“I can’t talk to you! Bring me the girl! The *girl*!”

When I went to see for myself, the situation had turned into carnage. More accurately, the scout was rattling on and on and on.

“What’s going on? You’re being so loud.”

“Ah, my lady...”

The man interrupted Kitagumo’s report and tried to break away to approach me, only to be stopped by my guard-maids. He cried out in anger.

“Can’t you just let me through?! I wanna talk to the girl! The *girl*! Do you want to join me and take over the world together as an idol?”

He was a man already past middle age and clearly up to no good. Judging by his rough way of speaking to people, it seemed like he wanted to belong to the self-employed industry that started with a “Y.” The man could clearly tell what I was thinking, and he smirked.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already cut ties with them. I just honestly fell for your singing. You could become a diva of the Heisei era and fill the Budokan. I guarantee it!”

He had a rough manner of conducting himself and was bad at persuasion, but his passion was the real deal.

Still, I smiled softly at him and rejected the offer.

“I’m sorry. I make more money than an idol.”

“People are coming close to understanding your commercial value, my lady. That fellow must have gotten ahead of himself.”

When I told the story to Tachibana, who was devoted to railway work, that was the answer he gave me.

I’d thought that Tachibana had conducted countermeasures against both criminal groups and the mass media, but when I asked him a bit more about it, the response I received was no laughing matter.

“These days, there’s nothing that the media can’t do if they use television. They occasionally reach out to us about turning you into an idol for the new millennium.”

“But I’m still on TV, right? Isn’t that enough?”

“They want to showcase your every moment, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, on TV. That’s how you should think of it.”

The media industry, while eye-catching, was also exploitative. Late-night broadcasts were becoming more normalized, so they could have someone on TV at any time, any place if they felt like it.

“Oh, how scary. But haven’t your countermeasures made them plenty of money?”

“My lady, if higher-ups had come to an agreement, *that incident* never would have occurred.”

This “incident” mentioned by Tachibana involved a first-class Hokkaido food company who caused an outbreak of food poisoning, and who also lied about using beef in their products. It ended with the company having to go through Teisei Department Stores for aid.

"The media has all the power in the world these days. And within that media, who do you think wields the power? It's the middle class."

Japan's national trait was a complicated means of forming structure. *"The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."* Between that culture and the demon of "reading the room," anything too foreign was eliminated. Looking at it that way, the "villainess" known as Keikain Runa was also a sacrifice, taken down by Japanese culture and its systems.

This did make sense to me.

"The mass media knows you're a fixer for the Keika Group and its political ties, and that you're the one who truly controls it behind the scenes. At the same time, that makes them want to see your downfall all the more."

The media gained so much power during the late 1980s and 1990s because they were endlessly producing content that people wanted to see.

It started with celebrity scandals. Then capturing political strife became the goal, as they spent a whole year covering the change of prime ministers and ridiculing politicians. Top companies collapsed when the bubble burst, and government officials, the last stronghold, were also dirtied with scandal.

"One person's misfortune is another's delight."

There was no denying that the Japanese people took joy and delight in watching the downfalls of others. This would eventually come back to hit them like a boomerang, but even if the people of the future tried to warn those of the present, they'd never be able to hear that warning.

"You'll be miserable in the future."

Impossible.

I was one such victim on the list.

"Well, there's no way I can step away from it now."

"Sure there is."

Tachibana smiled at my casual remark. Looking quite amused, he emphasized each word.

“You just have to get married, my lady.”

Both downfalls and marriages delighted the mass media, and they both meant the end of coverage.

A nice example of this would be an actress who retires at the peak of her career and marries a prince.

Tachibana reminded me with a bit of a jocular tone in his voice.

“It’s your life, my lady. I won’t comment on it, but if you want to step down, you can tell me any time. Toudou-san, Ichijou, Angela, your father, your brother, and I all want you to be happy.”

In my bedroom that night, I was singing the song from the performance as I looked at my reflection in the mirror. That was when it hit me.

“You really do seem to enjoy yourself when you sing this song, my lady.”

Watabe-san’s words rang true because I was singing it to my future self.

A few days passed. That man from the performance came to Kudanshita Keika Tower at Tachibana’s request.

It turned out that he had no idea who I was. He was just taken with my voice.

“Damn it, I really thought you could become a Heisei diva, like the ones of the Showa era...”

I answered that ultimate praise with a smile.

Sunday. I was woken up at 9 a.m. on a perfectly ordinary weekend.

“It’s morning, my lady. Please wake up. How late were you up reading last night?”

I opened my eyes in bed to the sound of Ichijou Erika’s voice.

“Good morning...?”

“Good morning, my lady. Please take a shower, then it’ll be time for breakfast.”

“Kay...”

After my shower and change of clothes, Ichijou Erika combed my hair, and then I had breakfast. I always had at least one maid eat breakfast with me so that I wouldn't be alone. After all, food didn't taste very good without anyone to share it with.

“Good morning, my lady.”

“Good morning. I see it's Aki-san and Eva-san today. Let's enjoy our meal.”

Today's breakfast was a Japanese-style meal of fried eggs, salmon filets, white rice, and miso soup. We could also have pickled vegetables and natto if we wished. Ichijou Erika and Tokitou Aki-san ate with me while Eva stood off to the side, showing the difference in our cultures.

“Your schedule is free this morning, my lady. Your vocal coach will be here this afternoon from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

“You mentioned that you'd like to go shopping, so I've cleared your schedule from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

“I was thinking of serving dinner at 7 p.m., but if you plan to eat in Ginza, please decide by 5 p.m.”

I mixed my natto with grated daikon and soy sauce, listening to Aki-san absentmindedly as I focused on the act of stirring. When she noticed this, she looked at me sternly.

“My lady?”

“I'm listening, I promise. If there's any family business I need to take care of, I'll finish it up this morning, so bring it straight to me.”

“Very well. You have no visitors on your schedule and there are many people seeking an appointment with you, so I'll bring that list of names.”

I stared out at Tokyo from the window. Maybe it was the warmth of the heater, but looking at the blue sky of the city in the winter felt so nice. Well, it was still cold, of course.

“I think I'll do some running this morning.”

Aki-san reacted when she heard me murmur that. She was still eating, but she didn't wait to speak.

"You may not be able to get a full five kilometers in unless you cancel your voice lesson."

"You're right. I'll go from Takebashi through Chidorigafuchi, then come back to Kudanshita. Someone will have to come with me."

"We'll send Anisha-san and another two maids."

I scooped my natto mixture onto the white rice and took a bite. Once I cleaned my plate, I pressed my hands together in gratitude.

"Thank you for the food."

After my light run, I took another shower, then it was time for lunch. Lunch today was a sandwich and grape juice, with apple slices dipped in yogurt for dessert.

My vocal coach told me about the state of music in Europe during my lesson. The music we practiced would normally be performed in Europe, where there were different places to study it even further. There was Paris, the city of art, Vienna, the city of music, Rome, the city of eternity, and other European centers where musicians gathered, such as Berlin. Even the recovered Russia was beginning to attract famous people. St. Petersburg had the potential to be one such city.

"I believe you should study the orthodox method, which would put you in Vienna. However, considering the style of opera you sing, it's hard to rule out Paris or Rome. Whichever route you go, take my letter of recommendation with you and any school will welcome you."

I could hear the grief in my vocal coach's voice. I was known as one of the leading coloratura sopranos in Japan today, but he was aware that I wouldn't be following the path of music with my life, and that bothered him greatly. Each time he praised me, I could do nothing but smile awkwardly back at him.

I didn't have anything specific in mind to buy during my shopping trip to Ginza. I controlled Teisei Department Stores and could get what I wanted through them. I was simply at the age where I liked to window shop.

I dressed up nicely and wandered the streets with my maids, Ichijou Erika and Tachibana Yuka, and my guards. I was cold, but more importantly, I was having fun taking in the fashion trends.

“Who’s that kid? I feel like I’ve seen her before...”

“Keikain Runa! She’s so cute!”

“The maids with her are cute too.”

Naturally, the other customers talked about me too, but they didn’t try to approach me. I opened my made-to-order watch, checked the time, and started thinking about today’s dinner.

“What’s for dinner again?”

“Watsuji-san, the head chef, said that it was scallop and lobster poêle. For hors d’oeuvres, there will be tomato salad with olive oil and a dessert of pear sorbet.”

Tachibana Yuka answered my question. Of course, my stomach wasn’t big enough to consume a full-course meal yet, so the chef knew to make everything in smaller portions. I placed my hand on my stomach and pondered it. How was I feeling today?

Finally, I made a decision.

“Let’s go home. I’m looking forward to dinner.”

I enjoyed a leisurely bath after dinner, wrapped up my homework and lesson prep, and closed my unfinished book. With that, my weekend came to an end. *Good night... Zzz...*

Amane Mio had three older sisters. She wasn’t related to them by blood, but she called them “Oneesama” adoringly, even once she entered elementary school.

Children found parties to be dull things, which is why they usually play in separate rooms after dinner was over until their parents come to get them. Televisions in these kids’ rooms often show children’s anime or have video games to play with, but some of these children choose to play board games,

and I was one such child.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! How did I just roll a three?!”

The high soprano shriek of the oldest sister—me—echoed through the kids’ room. The second oldest, Asuka-chan, watched me drown in the despair of my terrible luck and cackled like a true villainess, gathering wheat because of that three.

“Oh ho ho ho! Runa-chan, if you’re going to roll three threes in a row, you should have placed thieves on this space!!”

“The probability’s too low for me to do something so wasteful!”

“Excuse me... Please trade that wheat for my lumber.”

“I’ll give you a two-to-one trade, Mio-chan.”

Tug! Tug!

“Hotaru-chan, you want to trade wheat for sheep? Hmm, let’s see...”

Asuka-chan had no mercy when it came to this sort of thing, but games came with the possibility of failure. I couldn’t just rely on the help of those close to me. But that was the point where the youngest of the older sisters, Hotaru-chan, who’d had no bad luck with the dice at all, pressed forward and defeated me.

Please notice, Asuka-oneesama! Hotaru-neesama has the longest trade routes and biggest group of knights! She’ll win if she pulls one more point card!

Amane Mio-chan, being the youngest sister, couldn’t say it out loud, but she silently begged Asuka-chan in a display of her reserved nature. Then there was Hotaru-chan, who was clever enough to see from Mio-chan’s pale complexion that she was onto her, but who continued to trade with Asuka-chan all the same. It was just like Hotaru-chan to go on and draw a victory point card to win the entire game.

Mio-chan watched as Hotaru-chan held up a peace sign while Asuka-chan and I sulked, and we all swore to ourselves that Hotaru-chan was the last person we should ever become enemies with.

After that, I brought out a board game I’d come across, and this time more

kids came to play. Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, and Mitsuya-kun agreed to join, but we all had yet to realize that the game I'd chosen was going to turn into a massive uproar with so many players.

"A game about claiming countries in Europe before World War I...? It doesn't have many rules."

"If there're no dice, that means there's no element of chance."

"Ah, is this the one where the player negotiations decide who wins before they even move?"

The boys quickly grasped how intense this game was, but the four girls didn't exactly understand.

Feel free to read into the fact that Angela, my secretary, was the one who'd made this game available.

"Okay, let's assign players to the major nations. Let's start by playing for five years, so that there'll be plenty of time for negotiations."

Keikain Runa: Russian Empire

Kasugano Asuka: British Empire

Kaihouin Hotaru: Ottoman-Turkish Empire

Amane Mio: Kingdom of Italy

Teia Eiichi: German Empire

Izumikawa Yuujirou: Austro-Hungarian Empire

Gotou Mitsuya: French Republic

The game began.

"Mio-chan, let's form an alliance."

Right off the bat, I made an offer to Mio-chan. My country of Russia had a lot of land, but I wouldn't be able to protect it unless I knew who would attack me and who would defend me. I wanted to go with the strategy of protecting

countries near me while attacking the ones further away.

“I’m okay with that, but who are we attacking?”

“Why don’t we form a girls’ alliance and beat up the boys?”

“But if we do that, aren’t both France and Austria going to focus on me?”

I separated from Mio-chan and went to Hotaru-chan next. This game consisted not only of hushed conversations, but exchanges of secret messages as well.

“Let’s make a non-aggression pact. We’ll both decide on our own territory and not set foot over those lines.”

Nod, nod.

“Eiichi-kun is definitely going to attack us, so let’s target him. We’ll make the Black Sea neutral territory and keep all our boats out of it. You’re planning to attack Austria, right, Hotaru-chan? Mio-chan and I have formed an alliance, so that should be easy for you.”

Nod, nod.

After some time, the players all wrote down their planned moves and handed them to Angela, who was playing the judge. With that, each country began to slice into the pie of Europe.

“Aaaaah! Hotaru-chan, I told you to keep the Black Sea neutral, but you sent out your navy!”

“Runa, you knew we were coming after you with everything we had, didn’t you?!”

Eiichi-kun and I both stood up and shouted at almost the exact same time. The revelation of each country’s move was accompanied by another scream and angry yell, which was a highlight of this game.

“Whoa, Kaihouin-san’s attacking Hungary without a shred of mercy...”

“Gotou-kun! I said I wanted the Iberian Peninsula!!”

“I bet he didn’t take the peninsula, he just ‘happened’ to send his navy in that direction.”

Naturally, we elementary schoolers, who'd experienced the screams and rage and resentment and plotting that came with the shadowy conquest of Europe, were on bad terms for a little while. Still, one of the strengths of elementary schoolers was how quickly they could make up.

As for who won the game? It was exactly who you'd expect.

Peace!

One Saturday afternoon, I was visiting a certain private university with Ichijou Erika. It was her alma mater.

"This way. Professor Kanbe should be teaching in this classroom. He gives his 'sociology of genius' lectures on Saturday afternoons so that people with jobs can attend as well."

As she spoke, Ichijou Erika opened the door for the two of us to enter the classroom. Class had just started, and the students stirred a bit at the sight of a maid and an elementary school student of all people attending a college lecture, but that was their only reaction. Professor Kanbe, standing on the podium, continued his speech without any interruption even as he watched us.

"Let's start by discussing what makes a genius. Think of the definition. Indeed... Miss Maid, would you be so kind as to give us an answer?" He turned to address the class once again, explaining, "She's taken this class before."

The ever-relaxed Ichijou Erika, unbothered by all the eyes in the room turning to her at once, stood up and answered the professor's question.

"I believe it was the first monkey of the pack to stand up on two legs, or maybe the first human to use fire...is that it?"

"Yes. Correct. I was planning to meet with her after class, but it looks like she's showed up early."

"Ah ha! My lady said she wanted to see the lecture."

"You hear that, everyone? You don't want the cute young lady to catch you dozing off, so please stay alert."

The classroom laughed at Professor Kanbe's joke before quieting down again

to allow the class to continue. The man's use of humor made him an entertaining teacher, but the content of his discussion was grave and merciless.

"Humans are social creatures. We have made advancements by dividing up labor, which is made possible by our living in packs. In this class, we define a genius as the first person who created the opportunity for an advancement to occur. Now I have a question for you. Why doesn't such a genius appear in Japan?"

Everyone cocked their heads, but Ichijou Erika remembered this answer, so she whispered it in my ear.

"It's because this country doesn't make allowances for a genius to emerge, and also because the genius doesn't advance their opportunity until it's too late, my lady."

Professor Kanbe repeated that same answer and wrote it up on the blackboard.

"On the topic of allowing a genius to emerge, this is divided into environmental reasons and societal reasons.

"This country has many things to fear: earthquakes, lightning, fires, and fathers. Well, perhaps not so much the fathers now, but when it comes to natural disasters, it's more effective to prepare as a group than individually. Therefore, a genius cannot create the initial impetus."

The genius's impetus is very much the nail that sticks up. Even in modern times, this country's history has been tainted by natural disasters. Now I understood that a genius couldn't create an impetus in such conditions.

"The societal reasons are even simpler. 'The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.' The environmental circumstances that I first mentioned hamper human society and create an environment in which it is difficult for geniuses to emerge. What's interesting about this is that, if that impetus appears, a bright person will take it, develop it, and work it into society—in other words, outstanding people who are ordinary, but work hard. That's why geniuses are not valued very highly in this country. Sad, isn't it?"

This "sociology of genius" class was so popular not only because you received

credits for it, but also because it was proven that students who diligently came to class and listened had better chances of getting ahead in life. One such former student, among the most successful, was Ichijou Erika, who was now listening to the lecture with fond memories. She'd supposedly had some of the top grades in her class too.

"I was hoping to discuss how countries throughout the world cultivate geniuses next, but it looks like we won't have enough time. We'll continue next week. That's all for today."

The students filed out of the classroom. Once most of them were gone, Ichijou Erika and I approached Professor Kanbe.

"It's been a while, Professor Kanbe."

"You seem to have taken well to the maid uniform, Ichijou-kun. My lady, thank you very much for coming here."

"And thank you for agreeing to help the Keikain family. I had the chance to sit in on your interesting lecture too."

I was there at the request of the Keikain family. I might have been scolded for my speculative gamble on a global scale, but Kiyomaro-tousama and Nakamaro-oniisama still observed me for the strange specimen that I was. When Ichijou Erika heard about this from Saitou Keiko-san, the head maid, she made this proposal:

"Why not consult with Professor Kanbe, then? He's researching geniuses, so he might be able to give some sort of advice about Lady Runa."

They agreed to it, and now I was going to find out just how badly the Keikain family had failed to measure me.

All I could do was force a smile on my face and accept this outcome.

"Let's head to my office to talk. Afterward, would you care to have tea at the college cafeteria?"

Professor Kanbe gave me a smile perfect for TV and extended his hand. I took it and put on a happy face as well.

"Yes, certainly."

With that, we headed to the Kanbe Seminar room. On our way through the campus, I spotted maids from time to time. That was probably because nobles and the children of zaibatsu had their own people accompanying them, like Ichijou Erika for me. Times like these made me reflect on how different my past life was to this world.

“Please have a seat. I only have instant, but I’ll make you some coffee.”

“Ah, in that case, Professor, I brought some coffee from a shop with me. Please try some of this instead, if you’d like.”

Ichijou Erika began to prepare the coffee set she’d brought in her basket. She ground the beans purchased from Vesuna, filling the room with a delicious smell.

“What a great aroma. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“I’m not so arrogant as to I think I can ban a man from smoking in his own room.”

“Sorry about this. I’ll try to keep the smoke in the other direction.”

We were in a seminar room. It could have also been called the professor’s office, but the bookshelves and table were neatly stacked with documents. It also reeked of tobacco. The owner of this room was king of its territory. In a way, looking at someone’s room was like peering through a window into their personality, especially when it came to the adventurous souls of men. A state-of-the-art computer sat on his desk. He seemed like a simple, rational type of person at first sight, but his adventurous soul contradicted all of that.

“All right, then. The Keikains asked me to speak with you to evaluate your unusual characteristics, but personally, I don’t want to pick out those traits.”

Professor Kanbe casually abandoned the request he’d taken and cut right to the chase. He placed his cigarette on the ashtray before looking straight at my face.

“Keikain Runa-kun, you are a ‘gifted’ child.”

“Gifted” was a word that would often be used in later games and light novels. Its original meaning was “a person blessed with talents given by God.” Professor

Kanbe stood up and wrote the word on the whiteboard.

“Do you know of this word’s true definition?”

There’s a different definition? When I shook my head, Professor Kanbe held a paper out in front of me. The fact that it was written in English proved right away that he didn’t see me as a child.

“Gifted people have remarkable latent capabilities in areas like intelligence, creativity, art, leadership, or a specific academic field. The word also refers to children, students, and young people who require support outside of normal schools to fully develop their talents...’ Is that right?”

I read the definition as it was written in English. In America, these criteria were used to select gifted children who would be given special education. When I finished reading, Professor Kanbe spoke again.

“Exactly. You are special, but not in a sense that anyone can speculate about. To put it in a strange way, you’re a normal genius.”



I couldn't help but chuckle at that expression. At that moment, Ichijou Erika handed me a cup of coffee full of cream and sugar.

"Professor, would you like cream and sugar?"

"Black's fine, Ichijou-kun... This is good stuff. I guess we don't need to meet in the cafeteria after this, eh?"

"I know I can make good coffee, since my senpais taught me how to do it."

While Ichijou Erika proudly stuck out her chest next to us, Professor Kanbe continued to speak. He set his coffee cup down, sat up straight in his chair, and looked directly at me with a gaze that never faltered.

"I'll teach the Keikains how to deal with you. The right way is to have you leave the country. This place is too small for your talents."

"Why do you say that?" Ichijou Erika chimed in from the side, but this didn't bother the professor. He picked up the coffee cup with one hand and answered her question.

"A person can only be a genius for a very limited amount of time. It partially comes down to a matter of spirit, but one can assume that the bare minimum condition for genius is to simply *be* a genius. There's the old expression 'a master at ten, a prodigy at fifteen, and an average person by twenty.' Just as it says, there are few people, particularly in Japan, who are perfect enough to remain geniuses at the age of twenty. After all, this country is a society of clans, and the nation itself is like a large rural area outside of the cities. As minorities, the geniuses get rejected."

I could hear a bit of resignation in Professor Kanbe's voice. He was an educator. Perhaps he'd come to see these rejected geniuses, or the ones who feared rejection, turning into ordinary people.

"Do you know what your biggest problem is?"

I felt like he must have been hinting at it throughout our conversation. I responded very deliberately to his question.

"Is it that I'm gifted?"

"No. It's that you're a child."

Professor Kanbe removed the cigarette from the ashtray, puffed on it again, then stood and opened the window. He blew the smoke outside as he continued.

“You can avoid taking responsibility because you’re still a child. Sure, you may be punished if you commit a crime, but that punishment will still be light because of your age. The adults around you will cover for it.”

He stuck the cigarette back in the ashtray and picked up the coffee cup this time. Instead of drinking it, he savored the aroma as he spoke.

“You have infinite time and possibilities. I don’t know why you’re in such a rush, but what comes next is up to you. At this rate, you may become the kind of person who can achieve anything, only to leave nothing behind.”

His words made me uncomfortable. Infinite time and possibilities. Those were things I’d never had in my past life.

“I think that’s so arrogant.”

“My lady?!”

Ichijou Erika was startled by my opinion, but Professor Kanbe continued to watch me, cup in hand.

He wanted me to keep going.

“I understand that I’m more skilled than most people, but I’m not so conceited as to think of myself as a genius. Nor would I say that I have infinite time to live up to my potential.”

The professor stared at me. He set his empty cup down and pressed me further.

“In other words, you’re saying that right now is the only time that you can be a genius?”

“Correct,” I answered without hesitation.

Professor Kanbe broke out into a smile.

“That’s a good place for us to stop for today. I hope you’ll come visit me again sometime.”

“Of course. Your lecture was very interesting, so I’ll definitely be back.”

It was February of 2002. The Winter Olympics had started in Salt Lake City. Politicians thoroughly took advantage of these games, seeing as they came after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. I was one of those people who was caught up in politics. I’d completely covered for the president when he was suspected of wrongdoing with General Energy Online and WCI Inc.

“Hello, people of the United States. I’ve come from the Far East. Because my homeland was also a target of those tragic attacks, I’ve taken some time off from school to come here and help console our allied country of America. Ah, please don’t include that part about leaving school.”

Using the Olympics for political gain came with risks, including the inevitable criticism. Because of that, I set my eye not on the official event, but on the private charity events taking place alongside it. I got the president of the Olympic committee to help me find such events and attended every one I could, eager to improve Japanese-American relations.

I even flew to New York and laid flowers at Ground Zero before going to Salt Lake City. The American media had made a big story out of that, continuously broadcasting it to the world.

I made full use of my brand—the daughter of a dukedom, princess of House Romanov, and owner of the major fund that was making a splash in Japanese and American economics. All of these were things Americans loved.

Meanwhile, diplomats were gathering in Salt Lake City under the pretense of watching the Olympics while they all discussed a completely different topic. They were talking about what would be next now that things in Afghanistan were settled.

“America’s really raring to go.”

“I know that. The issue is *when* they’re going to act.”

“The midterms are this year. If he moves too fast, the president’s gonna relive what his father went through.”

"Still, if we take too long, the enemy will just have more time to prepare. Calling them the 'axis of evil' was the same as publicly declaring that they're next."

This unpleasant discussion continued, but I was there to change the subject to business. While I was busy with charity work, Okazaki, who'd been beaten by Angela and a few others, wore a very Japanese smile on his face as he made his sale.

"We're building a large distribution complex in Bahrain in a lot that borders a US military base. It's set up on the gulf and has a huge amount of storage, runways and living spaces, a power plant, and even a water desalinator. It's guarded by PMCs, and we promise it can handle tens of thousands of workers logically. Its centerpieces are the wind power generator and the desalinated water it produces. Bahrain's yearly precipitation is only about eighty milliliters, after all. We've brought over the plant that was originally headed to California.

"Additionally, we at Akamatsu Corporation are working with the Saudi Arabian government to build a mining railway from Dammam Port, next to Bahrain, that will stretch to Hafar al-Batin. We're also constructing a branch line connecting to King Khalid Military City to form a distribution network from Bahrain..."

There were some people who despised Okazaki for rejecting the chance to become a billionaire, but Toudou, the director of Akamatsu Corporation, came to bow his head to me. Thanks to Okazaki's outstanding performance, as well as my own decision, he'd been made a company executive and was currently enjoying making the most of his new job. Apparently, everyone who feared his promotion had given up after a single word from me.

"He'll probably act however he wants no matter where he goes. I have to keep him under my control at all times, or he'll definitely end up making real trouble."

Their faces said that *I* had been the one making trouble, but I couldn't comment on that, as I was a villainess. Okazaki's suit-clad business partners all stood up straight as well. This project had cost ten billion dollars, but a paper company PMC from Bermuda would buy it for 1.25 times the cost and take over

the entire facility and network once it was complete. It went without saying that the PMC would be using these things for the military of the stars and stripes when they arrived.

The Saudi Arabian mining railway wasn't included in this deal, but the local government owned half of it, and they feared that they might suffer missile damage if a war in Iraq broke out. If American diplomats managed to convince the Saudis, then the US would probably end up buying this railroad from them.

"Ahhh, I'm exhausted."

"I'm sure you are. You're the darling of the American media, after all, even if that's due to your own actions."

"Don't say that, please. I promise, I really *do* feel bad about all that."

I gulped down my grape juice in the Olympic waiting room while listening to Angela's complaints. She and Okazaki had been overseeing all the shady discussions during this trip to America while I retained my status as a private citizen bettering the cultural exchange between Japan and America.

I'd attended every last event recommended to me by the Olympic president while avoiding any political statements and distancing myself from that world. My plan was to observe Portercon, the company that I'd purchased, after the opening ceremonies.

Just as I was feeling like this wasn't a job for a fifth grader, the door of my room opened and in walked the president and his secret service agents. Angela stood up in a panic and bowed.

"M-Mr. President?!"

"Yep. Don't mind me. It looks like I got the wrong room. Do you mind if I stay here for a bit until I get the all clear that it's safe, Your Little Majesty?"

"Of course not. If I'll suffice, I'd be happy to entertain you."

This man had been on the receiving end of various criticisms, but this was one part of him that couldn't be criticized. He listened to people speak and asked them questions if he didn't understand something. That was why he questioned me too.

"There's something I want to ask you. Are you interested in setting the world in motion?"

"No. I want to change the world, not set it in motion."

The president looked at me curiously. The fact that you could practically see the question mark above his head was a display of his particular charm.

"And what do you want to change?"

"I want to change the history that will follow me, Mr. President. I'm sure you don't want to bring about a second Vietnam for the United States, right?"

"No, I sure don't."

The president smiled with amusement, and I chuckled too. After we laughed for a moment, he finally shared his true thoughts.

"I was thinking of complaining to you about all the things you've done, but after everything you've given us, I'm just confused more than anything. It made me want to come talk with you."

"I apologize sincerely for my actions that have caused you trouble."

I bowed my head, but the president stopped me with a wave of his hand. When I looked up, he placed his hand on my head to pat my hair.

"I know that you tried everything you could. Even if they couldn't be stopped, there's no denying something much worse would have happened without your information about those terrorist attacks. I don't have the best memory. I forget things, both the good and the bad, although I write the good things down, at least."

At that point, the president's face turned serious. I knew this was probably what he really wanted to ask me.

"When do you see us starting the war?"

He said it without an ounce of hesitation. This very question was why I'd come here as well.

"The spring of next year. It's too much of a waste to use a true military victory just to get through the midterms. You should accept a loss in the election while

you prepare a large army, like in the Gulf War, to invade next spring.”

The ruling party almost always lost in the midterms and forcing a victory would mean going too far in some area or other. The president feared a midterm defeat, as he was currently under fire for the General Energy Online and WCI Inc. situations, and now the US military was already weakening Iraq’s military with economic sanctions and making use of high-tech weapons. It was groundwork for a plan to go in with a limited number of troops.

But this would leave them politically underpowered after their victory. If Iraq failed to rule itself, the US would be dragged back in again. They needed Congress’ approval for their military scheme, groundwork laid with the international community, and the organization and mobilization of multinational forces. No matter how much they rushed, that would take time.

“But if we’re defeated, will Congress really approve the start of the war?”

“You can make them approve, and I’ll work to make sure your midterm defeat is still within acceptable limits. Fortunately, a lot of businesses are still seeing their stock prices slump and failing to function, so you can announce that you’re personally saving them, which’ll make left-leaning companies give their support to the Republican party. That strategy will help you a lot.”

“But then you won’t get any of the spotlight. Are you really fine with that?”

America’s traditional approach to winning through superior resources always required fixing in advance by diplomats. Naturally, things would go more smoothly if that help came from Japan. Unable to go through proper channels due to the dysfunction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they’d made unofficial approaches about reviving those channels.

This meant a concentration of power for Prime Minister Koizumi. He had the highest authority over the military while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was being restructured at his command. The Ministry of Finance also had no choice but to provide him with war funds if he ordered them to do so. The prime minister, whom I stood opposed to, had a lot more executive rights during wartime.

Perhaps the high price at which we’d sold the distribution complex and network was a form of apology.

I promised the president I would use those profits to handle the US Congress. It was a promise of a political donation worth 2.5 billion dollars. For the remaining 10 billion, I would bail out American companies as a way of assuring turnout in the election.

If I lost in Japan, I would make it up in the United States. If the mass media and Prime Minister Koizumi's policies were going to get in my way, I would simply have the US put pressure on them. I could also work in America to fulfill my goals.

"There's nothing I can do about it. The world simply won't allow a child to set it in motion."

These Olympics had been criticized for doing nothing but serving the interests of the United States, but they succeeded in stirring up patriotic feelings throughout the states. Having participated in that propaganda, I appeared on TV screens throughout America, singing the tune of the next war over and over and over again.

"Welcome to our company, CEO, Lady Runa."

This was the head office of Portercon, located in Texas. CEO Karin and I were here for a visit since we were already in the United States. They explained their technology and future strategies to us.

"We're getting ready for the merger this fall. It takes a particularly long time to reorganize a production method and distribution network..."

"Can you wait just one moment? What, specifically, do you mean by reorganizing production methods and distribution networks...?"

Karin Viola asked them detailed questions while I watched. She'd taught me the trick she used to come as far as she had.

"Be sure you know what you don't know. Then find someone who does know and ask them."

That was her strategy, and she was carrying it out with me there to watch. As a result, I began to see some problems come up as well.

“Why does Furukawa Telecoms get things done faster when you’re ordering flights to arrive on the west coast earlier than they are?”

“We accumulate products ordered in East Asia in Hong Kong before flying them over, and Furukawa has a base in the Port of Yokohama...”

“Is this something that can be integrated?”

I see. So that's how she'll do it. CEO Karin Viola was currently nothing more than Portercon's president and CEO. She was going to take full command of it starting this fall. But she felt that fall was too late to start, so she traveled back and forth between American and Japan and spent as much time at the company as possible.

“We'll adjust things with them and take the best measures...”

“I've already confirmed that there's extra space on the overseas freight you order. I'm aware of your production quantity and the state of orders. I'm this company's CEO, and the young lady at my side is its one and only shareholder. Now, do you have any questions for me?”

I see. So this is what a world-class CEO is like? But she's going to make enemies if she acts like this. With those thoughts in mind, I watched the meeting very carefully.

“How did you enjoy seeing a management meeting?”

“I didn't understand much of it, but I did see that the CEO was able to get the results she wanted.”

We'd left Portercon and were having dinner at the hotel. It was a luxury establishment serving the finest foods, but at times like these, I couldn't help but miss rice and miso soup.

“It's not the best way of going about things, but I have to get everything in order internally by fall, or else I'll be looked down on by the people from Furukawa and Shiyo. I need to have a grasp on Portercon, even if it's only a small one.”

The merger was going to come in a particularly unique form. First, Furukawa

Telecoms and Shiyo Electric Co. would merge, and then Portercon would buy the resulting company. However, since Furukawa Telecoms was such a large-scale organization, Portercon would hold just over 30 percent of its shares.

Even though it was uniting with two other companies, Furukawa Telecoms was inevitably going to start out in a strong position. In other words, if the other shareholders and management ranks came together to oppose Karin, I had no way of protecting her.

“Does that mean there might be another fight with Teikoku Telephone Company?”

“I actually think Furukawa Telecoms’ management is going to use them against me.”

It was common in this type of merger for the management ranks to split. First, the employees would divide themselves up into factions based on their previous companies, then an opposition group would emerge to protest management’s course for the company. However, it wasn’t like we didn’t have a chance.

“You control Shiyo Electric Co., my lady. You’ll also be in charge of Portercon by fall. They’ll most likely listen to you by that point.”

The first steps were the most important. Karin, in particular, had been looked down on for being a woman and was from the first generation to break the glass ceiling.

That was why her words carried so much weight.

“I won’t fear change. I’ll make allies, especially with the most important people. I’ll ask when I don’t understand something. That will be enough to greatly reduce my chance of failure.”

However, she’d already lost her position once. Perhaps that was simply what it meant to manage a company.

“What do you want to do with the board of directors? If you want people on your side, I’ll send you some.”

I held thirty percent of the shares, meaning I could appoint a certain number

of directors to the merged company. Karin thought about this for a moment before answering my question.

“I’m fine with three people, one of them being me. I’ll give you a list for the other two.”

“That’s not very many. You’re sure about that?”

“That’s on purpose. I can go on the attack with a majority, but a counterattack means at least one person must have betrayed me. I understand the management styles of Furukawa and Shiyo, so I’ll start small. The attack can come after I’ve gotten some actual results.”

There was no hesitation in her stance. One thing was certain: she was trying to do her very best.

“Let me ask you something while you’re here, my lady. This cell phone business you’re taking direct control of... That’s your core business, correct?”

“Yes. That’s how I’m going to take over the world.”

Silence dominated the table. American managers were taught to optimize the use of their funds.

“Right now, I believe the cell phone business can fight on a global level. However, it’s still on too small of a scale to take over the world.”

Not only did she understand my core business, but she realized that the cell phone industry was still too limited if I seriously wanted to dominate the world. She knew that I would need to control communication carriers too, and that such a business would require an outrageous amount of money.

“...Yes, I know that.”

After that, we did a lot more heart-to-heart talking than eating. Her management reform of Porteron would later occur at a rapid pace. Operations were reorganized and distribution was streamlined. No one was laid off, but there was still a large-scale reshuffling of personnel.

“Thanks for having us!”

"I can really see how powerful the Keika Group is. This building is so beautiful on the inside!"

"Welcome, young ladies. Please enjoy yourselves."

Asuka-chan was the first to speak after they got off the elevator at the highest floor, where I lived. Akiko-san was glancing around restlessly. A few other guests were with them. Though it was easy to forget sometimes, I was still an elementary school student, and I was also a girl. I'd come up with the idea to strengthen my friendships by having a girls' party, so I sent invitations to the girls I'd bonded with on the field trip, resulting in today's get-together.

Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan were the first guaranteed invitees. The others were as follows:

Asagiri Kaoru: Imperial Court nobility. Asagiri marquess family. Courtiers member. Her mother has ties to Iwazaki zaibatsu.

Katsuki Shiori: Branch family of the Keikains. Katsuki viscount family. Courtiers member.

Machiyo Sanae: Imperial Court nobility. Machiyo count family. Courtiers member. Kaoru's friend.

Kaihouin Hotaru: Nara nobility. Kaihouin baron family. Courtiers member. Runa's friend.

Kasugano Asuka: Shikoku politician family. Kasugano family. Stewards member. Runa and Hotaru's friend.

Kurimori Shizuka: Niigata local zaibatsu. Kurimori family. Uses Keika Bank as their main bank.

Takahashi Akiko: Family manages kendo dojo. Takahashi family. Heralds member. Her father is the director of the prefectural police.

"I'll be here to serve you today, my ladies. My name is Tachibana Yuka. Please do not hesitate to come to me if you need anything at all."

Tachiabana Yuka greeted them as a representative of the maids. Ichijou Erika, Nagamori Kaori, and ten other maids had prepared our tea and sweets.

“All right. Let me show you my favorite place.”

With that, I brought them to my secret hanging garden. The greenhouse was full of flowers in bloom, and it had a full view of the city, including the Imperial Palace. Kaoru-san let out a cry of wonder.

“How amazing!”

“Isn’t it? Although Ichijou Erika, my maid, is the one who cares for it.”

“I’ll always accept more praise, my lady.”

Ichijou Erika and I had similar personalities. That was why, despite the difference in our ages, she felt like a friend to me.

The garden contained nemophila, alyssum, tulips, hyacinths, daffodils, and more. The sweet scent of the blossoms tickled my nose. Eventually, I called out to the girl who was completely absorbed in the flowers.

“How do you like my garden?”

Shiori-san quickly hid her surprised reaction and gazed lovingly at the space. Her voice wasn’t directed at me, but at someone else.

“Yes, it’s lovely.”

Honestly, I hadn’t expected her to come, but I wanted to do whatever I could to become friends with her now that she was here. I also hoped to eliminate some of the distance between us since I didn’t fully understand her actions and situation in life yet.

“Hey, why don’t we have some tea now? I’m feeling thirsty.”

“Sure, let’s go inside... Hotaru-chan? What is it?”

After responding to Kaoru-san’s suggestion, Hotaru-chan smiled, pointed at the flowers, then turned her eyes to the room. I realized what she wanted to say and asked Ichijou Erika to bring us an arrangement of flowers.

“All right. Let’s begin the tea party!”

With that announcement came a round of applause, for some reason. Then

the girls began talking.

Thinking about it now, this was something right out of a normal life. I realized just how much I'd lost sight of myself.

"This tea is so delicious."

"It's white Darjeeling."

"Huh?! The kind that's famous for being served to royalty?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

Listening to Shizuka-san and Tachibana Yuka's exchange, I felt like today I was learning Tachibana Yuka's true personality for the first time. She would attend school with me as my servant starting next year, so I made a mental note to start communicating with her more.

"This mandarin orange pound cake and mousse... Could it be...?"

"Indeed. They are the mandarins my lady received from Kasugano-sama."

"Can you give me the recipe sometime?"

"Certainly."

Asuka-chan averted her eyes, listening to Sanae-san and Ichijou Erika chat. Asuka-chan, also known as Orange Asuka, traveled to school by car, which she used to transport three mandarin crates for her polite-gift-giving attack.

It was good that she decided to give them away if she couldn't eat them, because Watsuji-san, the head chef, came up with a way to use them. They'd become a famous seasonal menu item in the first-floor café.

I wanted to thank her for the mandarins, but I also didn't want those thanks to turn into more crate deliveries, so I decided to remain quiet.

"Seeing your lifestyle like this makes me feel like you're so different from us, Runa-san."

"You say that, but it's not like I'm an alien."

"I don't know, it's just like, the real life of a noble is on full display here. Not even shojo manga shows such picture-perfect lives for young ladies."

Everyone nodded in agreement with Akiko-san. *How rude.*

“Now that I think of it, didn’t you run in Akasaka recently?”

“Whoa, you were watching me, Shizuka-chan?”

“Of course I was.”

“It was broadcast on TV all over the country.”

Kaoru-san and Asuka-chan’s jokes made me cradle my head in my hands at the memory of such an embarrassing event. Everyone laughed when they saw me like that.

“Why don’t we have seconds?”

“.....”

Nagamori Kaori anticipated Hotaru-chan’s attempt to ask for more tea, bringing her a refill.

Apparently, the concierge maids would serve anyone, even Zashiki Warashi, although that wasn’t the type of thing that could be said out loud.

“Oh, Runa-san, while I’m here, I wanted to ask you about something.”

“What might that be?”

Kaoru-san sat up straight and turned to look at me, so I made sure she saw I was listening. The subject she brought up had something to do with both of us.

“My sister and your big brother are getting married on a lucky day this June, right? I was hoping to come up with some sort of surprise for the two of them.”

“Oh my! Weddings are so lovely!”

Machiyo Sanae-san, who seemed to have the most girlish nature of any of us, cried out with joy. Looking at her, I couldn’t help but show a nostalgic expression on my face, thinking about how I used to be like her too.

“...Runa-san?”

“I’m listening. I was thinking of singing a song.”

“Getting to hear Runa-san sing would be lovely!”

I invited Sanae-san and the rest of them as my friends. I’d have Tachibana

Yuka tell Tachibana about it later.

With spring break over, I was in a state of chaos thanks to a certain bank's system failure, but a new school year was beginning. We'd reached the top grade of elementary school. I headed to school feeling emotionally refreshed, only to find a few different situations waiting for me.

"New students, congratulations on starting elementary school. As the student council of Imperial Gakushukan Academy, we welcome you all."

I was half-listening to Eiichi-kun's address, but his charismatic personality was on full display as always. Our current student council was said to be the most powerful one in recent years, not that I knew whose fault that was.

"Congratulations on starting elementary school, new students. My name is Keikain Runa, and I'm the vice president of the student council. I'd like to tell you what's going to happen from here on out. First off..."

If Eiichi-kun could charm them with his charisma, then my selling point was my ability to fine-tune things to an overwhelming extent. Yuujirou-kun was a skilled negotiator, while Mitsuya-kun was great at turning policies and ideas into reality.

With our election, the elementary level of the student council turned from a subcontractor for the upper grades into an independent entity. Of course, we would still honor the students above us, but it was easier for the elementary student council to get their opinions through to each of the elementary committees.

Thus, the new elementary student welcoming ceremony was a great success to add to our record.

"Club president? Me?"

"That's right. I felt like you were the only one for the job, Keikain-san."

There hadn't been many members of the girls' kendo club at first, but that changed after I started practicing the sport, and they were now wondering how

to adjust the budget and find a bigger practice area to accommodate so many new members. With my strong ties to the student council and class committees, I understood why they wanted me to be the club president.

“Gosh, I don’t think I’m good enough for the job.”

“...If you’re not good enough for it, I don’t think anyone is.”

Yuujiroku-kun, a member of the boys’ kendo club, had been practicing at my side. I fell silent at his retort.

The judo club used the martial arts hall, so the kendo club would need a powerful president if they wanted to enter that power struggle.

“Please! To be honest, I never thought we would get so many new members! At this rate, I’m not going to be able to teach them, and *the club will fall apart!*”

The kendo club member in my grade put her hands together to beg me. I sighed, knowing I had no choice but to accept. The club had only grown so big after a certain someone won her city’s kendo tournament, and that someone was me.

“All right, I’ll take the job. I’ll introduce you to the person who trained me in kendo as well.”

“I keep telling you, that’s Systema...”

I ignored Yuujiroku-kun’s entry into the conversation.

“Hm? Keikain, what are those documents for?”

I showed Mitsuya-kun the papers he was asking about.

“It’s the curriculum for a junior high school graduation test and college entry exam. A college professor I know asked me if I’d like to take them.”

This college professor was none other than Professor Kanbe, the one who’d told me that the time for me to be a genius was now.

“In that case, when you become a normal person, you’ll need time to think.”

That was what he’d said when he advised me to take the tests.

The junior high school graduation and college entrance exams could get me into a college where students could skip grades. I knew this might allow me to graduate college by the time I would normally be halfway through high school, which was why I'd asked the professor to provide the documents. If the unthinkable happened and my life did end up going the same way it did in the otome game, it wasn't like I would be going to college at all.

"Are you going to study abroad?"

"That again? Why do you think that?"

"I was thinking the same thing. I know the only colleges where you can skip grades are overseas."

I see. I took my eyes off the papers and turned to face Mitsuya-kun.

"Actually, there's a college in this country that's working hard to allow grade skipping right now."

Naturally, that school was Professor Kanbe's college. He'd told me that the board of directors was eager to implement this system if it meant nabbing someone like me as an advertisement for their school. If I would take the college entrance exam, they offered to branch out into a new system of grade skipping in return. However, I also intended to make a large donation to the school when that time came.

"Really? So you won't have to go overseas after all."

"Exactly. I truly do love this country."

That feeling had only grown stronger, perhaps because of my many trips to America. I'd been a victim of unfair treatment, yet I still loved this country all the same.

"Can I ask why you love it so much?"

"The food, miso soup, the four seasons, and light novels."

Mitsuya-kun smiled nervously at my instant answer. There were lots of things I hated, but listing the things I loved first reminded me just how important those things were.

"True, foreign countries don't have those things."

“Right? I’m not patient enough to stay somewhere where I can’t get the latest publications right away.”

“That’s right. I remember you screaming ‘Don’t tell me it ends like that!’ in Avanti and scaring Teia.”

“Well, you all read it and screamed the same thing as me, so we’re all guilty.”

Humans all did the same things, even when they were aware of it. Masterpieces had a way of drawing you in when you saw the title and making you go “Ah...” even though you remembered how it burned you once before.

“Anyway, about skipping grades... You’re not going to do that, Mitsuya-kun?”

“Even if I pass the junior high and college entrance exams, it’s the actual exams *in* college that’ll be the problem.”

Mitsuya-kun casually explained why he couldn’t do it. In a way, I agreed with his reasoning.

“People who make up the backbone of Japanese bureaucracy graduate from Tokyo University’s law department, which doesn’t let you skip grades.”

“You’re in elementary school now, so I want you to become a fine young lady.”

Keiko-san would occasionally encourage me like this, but what exactly is a “fine young lady” in the first place?

I tried asking Aki-san, but she just cocked her head in confusion, so we decided to go ask together.

“Keiko-san, can you tell us what a ‘fine young lady’ is?”

She thought about our question for a moment before answering. She held up one finger and smiled, taking a very appropriate pose for a lesson.

“There are many definitions, so I’ll give a brief one that you can understand. ‘One’s shortcomings may be forgiven, but never her negligence.’”

I soon learned that those words came from Coco Chanel, a fashion designer who helped define the 20th century. Despite creating styles for independent

women of her era, she lived a life going from man to man. I wondered if she was like a compass for Keiko-san's life, as Keiko-san had been part of the nightlife of Ginza. Aki-san struck her palm with her fist in realization.

"I remember that policy being drummed into us during maid training."

"If you can follow that rule, you'll become a wonderful lady."

Keiko-san had a smile on her face as she declared that, but I found it a strange premise and raised my hand to ask a question.

"Teacher, how do you make sure you're not being careless?"

Keiko-san responded that Coco Chanel, the source of those words, may have been told the same thing once herself.

Her reply itself was a good example of a "fine lady's" ideas.

"She once said that 'simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance.' You should start by trying to live a life of simplicity."

It was easy enough to say, but actually going through with it was harder. However, I'd be prioritizing the wrong thing if I couldn't do it at all. Keiko-san had her own way of comprehending and implementing that way of life, though.

"For example, in this house, we might ask Tachibana-san for a fully automated dishwasher, laundry machine, and dryer. That would reduce the amount of time we need to work. We would also bring workers in to clean parts of the house other than private areas such as your bedroom. After all, that makes the place cleaner than it would be if we did it by ourselves."

"Ah..."

"I see."

Aki-san and I let out convinced responses. The concept of "carelessness" from the quote was something unknown to Keiko-san. She wasn't incorrect in seeing women's household chores—cooking, laundry, and cleaning—as major endeavors.

They were hard things to deal with, and if the alternative was leaving them undone, it was better to pay for workers or machines to do them for you. The result was extra time that could be spent on tackling the next job.

“But doesn’t that way of life cost a lot of money?”

Aki-san questioned the cost that would naturally come from outsourcing. My first memories were of the early ’90s, when we already had a dishwasher, laundry machine, and dryer. They were expensive back then, but the maids must have purchased them anyway without hesitation.

“Indeed. That’s why someone living then would have to work a lot and earn lots of money.”

Keiko-san had apparently given Aki-san, Naomi-san, and the other maids perfume as birthday presents. That tradition continued now, even after the staff had grown much larger, where Keiko-san was buying expensive perfume and giving handwritten cards to every last maid on their birthday. With them, she included the words of the person she modeled her life after:

“A woman who doesn’t wear perfume has no future.”

I felt that I would finally be a young lady myself when it was my time to receive perfume from Keiko-san.

I was both excited and nervous about that day, but Keiko-san simply patted my head and smiled softly at me.

Fortunately, June in Karuizawa turned out to be nice and sunny. It was a bit chilly out, but a solemn atmosphere wasn’t out of place for the coming ceremony. It was the day of Nakamaro-oniisama and Sakurako-san’s wedding.

“Congratulations. You look lovely.”

“Thank you, Runa-chan. I’m looking forward to seeing you wear a dress like this someday too.”

Sakurako-san smiled in the church waiting room. It was nice to see Kaoru-san at her side, looking pleased with herself. This was a marriage between a top Japanese zaibatsu family and the Keikains, who were on a winning streak in the business and political worlds. It was impossible to avoid the politics of it all.

But those formalities had all been finished off at the Tokyo reception, and now it was time for a relaxed ceremony in Karuizawa with only those close to

the bride and groom in attendance. A nice perk for Sakurako-san was getting to wear a wedding dress here at the church and a traditional Japanese outfit at the earlier reception, allowing her to showcase the best of both worlds on her special day. But the downside was the fatigue that came with two gatherings. And unpleasant conversations were still popping up, even at a time like this.

“Can I have a minute, Runa-kun?”

The voice came from the grandfather of the bride, President Iwazaki Yashirou of Imperial Iwazaki Bank. After leaving Sakurako-san and Kaoru-san in the room, he launched right into an unpleasant topic.

“Keika-Iwazaki Pharma has been approached for a merger. The other party is Hatabe Pharmaceuticals.”

“And why are you telling me this?”

“I thought I should go through the proper channels if possible. I’ve already spoken to your father and brother.”

Iwazaki Pharma had originated from Hatabe Pharmaceuticals, so merging with it now would be a return to its roots.

Pharmaceutical companies were making and breaking alliances throughout the world, leaving fears that a company would be eaten up unless it continued to expand. It appeared that the same trend was now finally starting in Japan.

But even with this merger, the company still wouldn’t be one of the top five in the country.

“I think these sorts of mergers are just going to keep happening,” I said.

“If we want to get the jump on it, we could also buy up its stock now and get it delisted. That’s the sort of thing I thought I should talk to you about.”

It was going to be difficult for Keika Pharma to seize the necessary initiative if the company merged multiple times. In the original game, Keika Pharma ended up losing its power due to a poor merger, but we could avoid that now. That was what President Iwazaki was telling me.

“I’ll talk to Father and Oniisama.”

“Please do, and come talk to me if it’s too difficult for you to do. I owe you a

lot more than this after what you've done for me."

With that, President Iwazaki returned to his daughter's waiting room. I sighed and headed toward Oniisama's room.

"Nakamaro-oniisama, congratulations on your marriage."

"Thanks, Runa. I'm not quite sure I'll be able to say the same when you get married someday, though."

"Ugh. Please don't say that."

Compared to women, men had much fewer preparations to go through. Since he had nothing better to do than wait, Nakamaro-oniisama's friends, mentors, co-workers, and bosses kept filing in to interrupt. I watched them all with one eye, unable to go without wishing my brother his happiness.

"I'm so exhausted."

"I'll bet you are, Runa-san."

I flopped down in the room I'd been given and stared up at the ceiling. The face of Kaoru-san, who was there as part of the family, entered my field of vision. She saw that I was trying to sit up and offered me her hand.

"But don't you think it must be nice to be a June bride? That's when I want to wear my wedding dress."

"I'm not sure... Yes, she did look beautiful..."

But I'd spent my past life just desperately trying to survive, and I knew a future of ruin awaited me in this world. I looked at the bridal garments from afar, feeling certain that I would never wear them myself. Still, I was a girl, even if I wasn't much of one.

Wanting to wear that dress as I stood at a man's side was probably inevitable.

"Oh? Do you have your eye set on a certain someone?"

Kaoru-san, appearing to read my mind, gave me a teasing smile. I shrugged my shoulders, neither confirming nor denying the question.

“Congratulations!”

“Many blessings!”

It was a peaceful ceremony held in the small Karuizawa church. Naturally, the climax of the event would be when the bride tossed her bouquet, but she ended up calling Kaoru-san and me over to hand half of it to each of us.

“Don’t tell the others. I know I’ll be happy, so I want you two to have happy lives too.”

There was no arguing with a woman in a wedding dress. Her appearance and smile were her means of displaying the future that awaited her. Sakurako-san’s happiness was inevitable with Oniisama as a husband.

“Right.”

“Of course.”

Kaoru-san and I accepted the bouquet. Sakurako-san took another one, walked out of the church with it, and threw it straight at her group of friends who were waiting at the entrance.

Watching Sakurako-san and Nakamaro-oniisama smile at the women fighting and screeching over the bouquet, I realized what a happy thing a marriage could be. I felt personally detached from the idea, though.

The wedding was such a joyous affair that I even found myself forgetting about the bouquet of joy in my hands, and when the ceremony came to an end, even that was joyous too.

With international affairs in a bad state, the pair were going to spend their honeymoon relaxing at a vacation home in Karuizawa instead of going on a trip. Oniisama had to work, so he could reach his office by taking the Shinkansen from Karuizawa.

I was sitting in a first-class car on the Shinkansen to return home as well. I’d learned that the potential merger with Hatabe Pharmaceuticals was going to be Oniisama’s first official decision as the heir to the Keikain Dukedom.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet, Runa, but I have every intention of bowing my head to you when the time comes.”

When he whispered those words into my ear on the Karuizawa Station platform, I felt assured that he would become a good company president.

I simply nodded with a big smile on my face.

“Will I really be able to wear that kind of dress someday too...?”

I murmured that to myself in the first-class car, looking at the bouquet I’d received. Tachibana overheard me and responded firmly, smiling at me.

“I’m certain you will, my lady.”

But who will be the one at my side on that day? Eiichi-kun? Yuujirou-kun? Mitsuya-kun? Or someone else? While those thoughts ran through my head, the Shinkansen raced straight toward Tokyo.

Glossary and notes

Primary election: A vote within one’s party to decide which candidates will participate in the main election. These are often held for organizations like the US Congress. If the incumbent loses the primary, they’ll usually have to force their way into the candidacy.

Runa’s song: “Canta Per Me” from “Noir.”

Self-employed profession that starts with a “Y”: They have deep ties to the entertainment industry.

The book Runa was reading: *Kino no Tabi* by Sigsawa Keiichi, Dengeki Bunko.

The board games: The first is “Settlers of Catan.” Crops are decided by rolls of the dice, so a number such as a 3 or 11 can sometimes start a real frenzy. The second is “Diplomacy.” They say this game is used in the business classes in Europe and America, but who knows? It’s a game of negotiation that shows you just how scary the creatures known as humans can be. Negotiations are essentially just verbal promises, so punishments for betrayal seem lax. But once they find out, the other players will be on guard around you, causing you to suffer total defeat...

Gifted: In 1993, the American Department of Education defined a gifted child as: “A child with notable intelligence and spirit who can accomplish extraordinary things compared to other children of the same age.”

Spinout: The act of making a subsidiary company independent or selling it off. American companies do this often so that they can focus on winning businesses.

Junior high and college tests: These are officially called the “Junior High School Graduation Equivalent Examination of Compulsory Attendance Exemption” and “University Entrance Qualification Examination.” The college test’s name has been changed to “Certificate for Students Achieving the Proficiency Level of Upper Secondary School Graduates.”

The light novel: “*Maria-sama ga Miteru: Rainy Blue*” by Konno Oyuki, Shueisha Cobalt Bunko. It’s a legendary book that spawned the phrase “*rainy-dome*” (“stop the rain”).

Graduation from the Tokyo University law department: Something that surprised me while discussing this with a foreigner is that it’s apparently more unusual for foreign countries to have such well-known paths to guaranteed success. Of course, whether or not you can get that far in the first place is a different story, but having these sorts of paths to elite status that the majority of the country knows about has the benefit of a stabilizing effect on society. Without that sort of thing, it seems much harder to escape poverty as society becomes a place where you simply must know the right people.

The Karuizawa church: Kyukaruizawa Chapel.

Chapter 6: The Keika Group's Reorganization

“PRIME MINISTER KOIZUMI has good luck.”

These were words commonly heard in Nagata-cho. The secretary general had been ousted during the cabinet reshuffle, and the Diet members suspected of embezzling secret funds ended up seceding. Then the Diet members in charge of the investigation, who belonged to the opposition party, had to resign when they came under suspicion themselves. In this way, the administration managed to survive such calamities despite plummeting approval ratings.

A highlight of the cabinet reshuffle was when Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was entrusted with the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs and the task of normalizing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That resulted in of foreign affairs resigning, officials from the ministry being punished and dismissed, and announcements in the media that both sides were to blame for the fighting.

The reform was clearly unpopular, and the administration's approval ratings took a hit, yet they declared that they were continuing their policy of reform.

Yanagitani, the State Minister in Charge of Financial Affairs and a member of the Izumikawa faction, was removed. Takenaga, serving concurrently as Minister for Economy and Finance and as Yanagitani's replacement, aimed to end the disposal of debts by firmly telling the media that no public funds would be used. He appeared on television to emphasize that he was going to aggressively take on not only the opposing party, but also the resistance forces within his own.

The storm of independence surged forth during this political chaos, and shockingly, an independent candidate even won in the Yokohama mayoral election. Prime Minister Koizumi's sworn friend and rival, former Chief Secretary Katou, was forced to resign over a scandal. This raised expectations that the anti-Koizumi faction within the party led by Deputy Prime Minister

Izumizawa would make a move, but he instead busied himself with reforming Japanese-US diplomacy.

The economy, on the other hand, was worsening after feeling the aftereffects of the IT bubble bursting in the United States. The government was ignoring it, choosing the policy of “no reform and no growth,” but the economy didn’t fully collapse thanks to their support for a public works project: the massive railway work being done with the Keika Group at its center.

Then there was the full-fledged birth and operation of the megabanks and the failure of Teisan Bank in Fukuoka Prefecture, causing them to run to Keika Holdings.

Rumor had it that this was the result of a strict investigation by the Financial Services Agency, forcing them to deal with their bad debts all at once.

This caused the other regional banks, rumored to be in similar trouble as Shinden Bank, to rush to Keika Holdings at the same time.

The financial industry was already prepared for megabanks to eventually be pressed for bad debt disposal. Everyone’s attention turned toward the currently dissolving Super Taiei and the general contractor industry.

The Keika Group wanted to revive the general contractor industry by sending in a lot of money. The Koizumi administration harshly opposed that move, instead wanting to handle the general contractors—a stronghold of bad debt—as a keystone in their reforms. But the situation in the National Diet was like a scene right out of a war.

“It’s so big...”

I was at a certain temple in Fukui Prefecture, staring at the large Buddha statue.

The taxi king of the Showa era had built this temple for his hometown, but unfortunately, the only things left were the debts from the bubble.

Gazing at the area around the temple, now a ghost town, I spoke up to Tachibana.

“Very well. Let’s buy this too. If they forgot to add a soul to the Buddha

statue, we need to be the ones to put it in.”

I’d originally come to buy a failing railroad in the nearby town, but I decided to ride it for myself while I was there. That was when I saw the gigantic structure. Having come for sightseeing, I instantly decided to buy it too.

Next year, the temple would be used as the location for a samurai movie, and eventually a Hollywood samurai film after that. It would also inspire the setting for a later internet novel about ninja in a megalopolis, and the wild delusion of calling it the town in the north ruled by the mysterious and dark zaibatsu, Empress Moon Flower. But I’m getting off topic.

“We should get going, my lady...”

“Right. Let’s head out.”

It took a little over two hours to get from Fukui to Osaka.

The purchase of the railroad in Fukui Prefecture was something of an afterthought that came with our main trip to Osaka.

“The Naniwasuji line. I never thought we’d be able to make a move so quickly.”

“Me neither. We have to do something to avoid getting dragged into the American recession, or else we might get knocked out for good just as we’re getting back on our feet.”

Eastern Japan was feeding the general contractors with railway work, particularly on the Shinjuku Shinkansen in Tokyo, but Western Japan had no such appeal. Stimulating the economy was difficult now that the Shikoku Shinkansen construction project was finished, leaving only the addition of platforms to Shin-Osaka Station. That was why we were starting work on the Naniwasuji line, as Tachibana had discussed on TV. It was going to cost about 400 billion yen.

You could also say that we’d prepared the amount needed to pressure the Osaka Diet members.

“To put it bluntly, if we’re going to oppose the prime minister, shouldn’t we be thinking about forcing him out?”

“Definitely not! Then the opposition party will get all the power!!”

I made a show of just how much I hated that idea, and Tachibana looked puzzled.

That look made me realize what kind of expression I must have been making, so I forced a smile to distract him.

“Have you forgotten what the opposing coalition government once did, under the wave of popularity that came with the new party? Now that we have a single-seat constituency system, they could probably grab even more power.”

Districts located in urban areas and the large prefectural capitals, also known as one-district precincts, had continued to urbanize, gradually becoming bases for opposition Diet members.

Independent votes were also increasing in response to this, and TV and other media influences would make it easy to defeat a political administration under these circumstances. Despite these troubled waters, the Koizumi administration was still going out with full-fledged attacks.

“If you drag me down, I’ll break you up.”

That was the unspoken threat behind his actions. Understanding this, I knew all too well that I had no choice but to obey him.

If the other option was to have the opposition take power and abandon me with no sense of gratitude, it was still much better to have Prime Minister Koizumi acting as the perfect defeated party.

On top of that, both the opposing party and the inner opposition in his own party were self-destructing against Prime Minister Koizumi, so this was no time for an election.

“While Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa is working so hard for us, we can’t make any moves ourselves. It’s irritating, but we need to get back on our feet before the next election.”

“I understand. The Aichi situation is also related to these countermeasures, isn’t it?”

I casually confirmed Tachibana’s question about my motivations, but I was

still slightly grumpy.

“Yes, obviously.”

“Yo, Runa. I thought you’d be here.”

“Of course, Eiichi-kun. This will help improve freight traffic quite a bit.”

Keika Railway had announced the purchase and construction of three routes: the Johoku line for Nagoya’s transportation business, the Nanpo Kamotsu line, and Aonami Railway. They existed as freight lines already, and our stated goal was to increase freight traffic in these local areas. The whole thing would cost about 200 billion yen. The biggest benefit of this freight capacity was that the Teia Group was placing its headquarters here.

“I have an honest question, Runa. How are you planning to break even with this?”

“I guess that would be the Shin-Osaka Station system?”

That sentence alone was enough for Eiichi-kun to get it. Formerly national railways, now privately owned, ran at Nagoya Station. But that station was tiny, chaotic, and very crowded.

“I won’t do anything to make Tokai Imperial Railway mad at us, of course. It’s a railroad to access Chubu Centrair International Airport, which is under construction now. I was thinking of borrowing that place for a special platform.”

Keika Railway would be getting in as a third party between Tokai Imperial Railway and the private railroads. We would then extend into the Tokaido main line from Kanayama Station and use their platforms. The Shinkansen platform was nearby, which gave us the selling point of improving access. We were going to make a bypass on the Jouhoku line, which connected with the Chuo main line, to divert traffic from railroads between Nagoya Station and Kanayama Station.

We were also going to pay most of the construction fees, but we wanted to maintain our relationships with local businesses and politicians, so we had the Teia Group and other local zaibatsu lay the groundwork before we got the

thumbs up.

“We have to reduce CO2 emissions because of the Kyoto Protocol anyway, and we’ve got to make the Aichi World Expo a success, right?”

“...You know, I don’t hate this side of you.”

“Did you say something?”

“Who knows?”

The ceremony was a boring affair, and I was glad that Eiichi-kun was there to help me kill time. Afterward, we went to Nagoya Station and ate some delicious kishimen together.

“All right. Please begin the report.”

After I spoke up in the conference room, the old man began talking with an apologetic look on his face. I may have been a child, but I knew it was probably still difficult to report about financials in the red to someone who was essentially the owner. Especially in a situation where the red went so deep that there was no hope in sight.

“All right. AIRHO has reported a loss of 7.4 billion yen in 2001. They currently predict losses for the first quarter of this year as well...”

All airlines were struggling with losses due to a lack of customers after the recent terrorist attacks. The downturn was mercilessly continuing into the first quarter of 2002, which was why the current emergency meeting had been called.

“Demand for travel has fallen steeply around the globe, and if we don’t do something about AIRHO’s losses, numbers for the entire Keika Hotel Group may fall into the red as a result...”

With an organization as big as ours, factions were naturally going to form. The Keika Hotel Group, which had joined with Far Eastern Hotel, and Keika Holdings, which held the Moonlight Fund, had worked particularly hard together to avoid going into the red, due to things like Kudanshita Keika Tower maintenance and my own pride in the first company that I directly controlled. Nevertheless, I was

now having to face the report of losses at this emergency management meeting.

“All right. So how far in the red are we predicted to fall? An estimate is fine.”

The manager of the hotel group began to sweat as he answered my question.

The number he gave was, indeed, worthy of calling me here to bow his head to me.

“AIRHO is likely to experience losses of 2.2 billion yen in the first quarter. The first quarter for the hotel section is going to garner 1.8 billion in profit, and at this rate, AIRHO’s 2002 annual financials will amount to a loss of 8.8 billion while the hotel section profits by 7.2 billion. This will put us in the red by 1.6 billion yen.”

He quickly confirmed the estimates of our other subsidiaries. Kudanshita Keika Tower aside, most of the other businesses were also making money, but their profits were predicted to sink to less than half of what they’d been in 2001.

“Demand during the World Cup won’t save it?”

“That demand should help recover our profits a bit, but the main hotel, Far Eastern, is seeing the effects of its age now, meaning it’s time to consider renovating it. We don’t know how much that project might cost.”

Renovation would require borrowing money from the bank, and although it was reassuring to know we could ask Keika Holdings for that money, I wanted to keep things clean when it came to borrowing.

The hotel group couldn’t support AIRHO on its own.

The conclusion of this meeting was that we needed to cut them off while they were still in the black.

“How did it go?”

Tachibana, who’d been standing outside, asked me that question once the meeting was over. He was currently the president of Keika Railway, which was where I wanted to send AIRHO when I pulled it away from the Keika Hotel Group, so I’d asked him to sit the conference out. It was a demerit that came

with such a massive company expansion.

“The hotels really want to cut AIRHO off. I do understand that feeling, though, because AIRHO’s losses are eating into all of their profits.”

“Then are the rumors that you’re thinking of turning it into a holding company true?”

The rapid expansion of the organization meant there was an urgent need to restructure the chain of command.

In any case, the Keika Group was currently nothing more than a one-woman company with me at the top.

I also generally operated under the motto “reign, but don’t rule” and refused to meddle in operations as long as they were making a profit.

In a way, it was natural that the Keikain family wouldn’t retain leadership—we’d relinquished it in the first place.

“I’m thinking of turning it into a holding company to get it under control, but I don’t see why everyone’s talking about it like it will happen. Does it really mean that much to them?”

“Yes, because the government is considering dissolving and reorganizing the Keika Group.”

Keika Holdings was currently the central company of the Keika Group. We used it to gather stock of Keika Group companies and included the dividends and profits in our calculations, but Keika Holdings was also the wallet for the railroad work I was carrying out so publicly.

It was also the final stop where the Moonlight Fund unloaded its profits into the country.

If government pressure forced Keika Holdings to list their stock publicly, even if we sold 49 percent of shares and received trillions of yen in profit, it meant that we wouldn’t be able to use these tactics any longer.

I supposed that meant people wanted the tactics to continue by having us transfer the stocks to another holding company beforehand, therefore retaining leadership control.

"We've grown too large, and we must change our structure to suit this size. As things currently stand, reports must be made to you, my lady, for any decisions to be made."

In other words, every company in the Keika Group was going to start calling for me to attend meetings too. I would have too many meetings on my schedule to even go to school.

The Choufuu Council, the presidents' board, was really a social gathering in the end, and they lacked decision-making authority.

The group's main hub, Keika-Iwazaki Pharma, couldn't comment on other companies now that it had joined the Iwazaki zaibatsu.

"In that case, Akamatsu Corporation will become the central point for your railroads, Tachibana. Are you okay with that?"

"That is, in fact, exactly what I want to happen before Keika Electronics Union is ready."

I'd created Keika Electronics Union, knowing that everyone had a very close eye on me. The company would begin operations this fall, and not only was it very large, but it was also feared by other corporations.

"It sounds like you've found yourself on the same wavelength as a certain CEO, but that woman's true skills may enable her to understand the management of the Keika Group and start to meddle in it. That is what everyone is afraid of."

American management tended to run on choices and centralization. A mixed-up mess of a system like the Keika Group would result in a spin-off.

A spin-off was the act of selling off financially unsuccessful companies that didn't seem necessary or related to the core business, then using the money from that sale to strengthen the core business. It happened often in America, and I knew that must be what they feared here.

"They could have freedom of management if they went independent, so why don't they choose that option?"

Tachibana smiled awkwardly at my murmured question and answered me.

“That’s because you’re the most convenient person to have on top of the companies. You reign without ruling, yet you still protect the workers’ employment, collect new achievements, and even guide them onto the right paths. If they listen to you, there’s little chance of failure.

“They say to look for a large tree if you want shelter, and there’s a feeling of relief to be a part of something as big as the Keika Group.

“However, for our sake—and for yours, my lady—it’s about time for that course to come to an end.”

That was how the Keika Group came to be reorganized, with the following tasks carried out together.

The most important early step was to adjust shareholding ratios in preparation for the public listing of Keika Holdings. To avoid institutional banks, Keika Holdings sought to remove 50 percent of their stock holdings. However, the government didn’t want us to sell everything and lose control over the company completely, which was why veto rights were granted between 33.4 percent and 49.9 percent of ownership, and the profits from the sale would go to their owner, the Moonlight Fund.

“We’ll take the 5 percent that Keika-Iwazaki Pharma owns, as well as 5 percent from the Moonlight Fund, and donate it to a foundation that the Keikain family controls. Next, Akamatsu Corporation and Keika Railway will each buy 10 percent of shares from the Moonlight Fund. That amounts to 30 percent in total. The Moonlight Fund retains 19.9 percent, and the rest will be sold to the market after the public offering.”

Ichijou had just recited a compromise between the public listing that the government demanded and Keika Holdings’ firm condition that it retain control. The six other people in the room, Tachibana, Toudou, Angela, Kiyomarotousama, Nakamaro-oniisama, and myself, all gave their approval.

The sale would net us a few trillion yen in returns, but that money was already set to be used for things like railroad construction. I didn’t know if this would be a large or small return to a financial institution that had been waging a war against bad debts, but by taking one hand off the reins, I couldn’t help but

feel that Keika Holdings was trying to take a step forward as a normal company. That was why conversations like this came up.

“Angela-san, how would you like to become an independent director at Keika Holdings?”

“Me?”

“Think of it as my form of greed, or maybe a dream. Our lady created the Moonlight Fund, something that never could have been done in Japan. Japan’s first investment bank—that’s what I’m hoping to create.”

Keika Holdings had been criticized as an institutional bank because my own massive returns were its sole support. Without that, there would be no bad debts, but there would be no structure for earnings either.

We could make profits with stable assets like government securities, but we would need more bite if we wanted to be known as a financial institution that could go up against the world.

“In other words, you want me to prop up the securities and insurance division?”

“Since we’ve taken over not only city banks, but regional ones from Kinki and eastward, we have a decent foundation set up there.

“I’m sure more regional banks will come running to us in the future, so I know we can function as a retail bank on a national scale. We’ve also expanded to online banking, and it sounds like our settlement system is highly regarded. I believe this is as much as I can do in this job. In the end, I haven’t been able to find a successor.”

Ichijou smiled, though he looked a bit sad. He had no intention of letting go of his right to represent the company after the public offering, but he had risen to the role of president and decided to hand the CEO job over to the winning side from the great factional fight within the bank.

But that had little to do with actual skill, so the securities and insurance division he stuck together wouldn’t function properly.

With that in mind, it wasn’t a bad choice to leave it in the hands of Angela,

who could handle it better than anyone else. At the same time, this meant that both Angela and Tachibana would be spending less time with me.

“Runa, I planned this to happen alongside the public listing, but I’m going to resign as a director at Keika Holdings. I don’t want the government watching my every move, and who knows if I would get stuck there.”

Matter-of-factly, and with a bit of astonishment in his voice, Nakamaro-oniisama announced that he was stepping back. In the end, the issue of Ichijou’s successor couldn’t be solved in the mudslinging match, and we were forced to admit defeat to the former city bank workers, who used this public listing as an opportunity to eliminate the Keikain family’s influence and restore their own rights.

For Nakamaro-oniisama, who held a figurehead role with no expertise, this was probably the end of the line.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done. But what’s next for you, Oniisama?”

“I’m going back to Keika-Iwazaki Pharma. I’ll work hard, and hopefully I’ll become a good president there someday.”

I glanced at Kiyomaro-tousama. Somehow, he seemed to already know about this.

“This is just a rumor, but I hear the pharmaceutical industry is looking for a major merger. If that’s true, feel free to use as much money as you need from the Moonlight Fund—”

“Runa.”

That was all Kiyomaro-tousama said. Then he smiled. I couldn’t speak another word about it.

“That job belongs to Nakamaro and me. If you involve yourself in every little thing, you’ll have no time for yourself. Isn’t that why all of this started in the first place?”

I gasped, feeling myself turn red. *This is bad. Was I always butting into things without the slightest thought?*

“You’re right, I overstepped. I apologize.”

“Father, please don’t get mad at Runa for looking out for me. She’s right that there’s been discussion of a buyout or a merger. I’ll be sure to count on you if I need your help.”

Hearing Nakamaro-oniisama cover for me, I could offer nothing but a strained smile in return.

The three central foundations of the current Keika Group were Keika Holdings, Akamatsu Corporation, and Keika Railway.

Keika Railway was promising as a potential foundation of the Keika Group because it was constructing railways in various locations, and it was also where we would establish a holding company to stick Keika Hotel Group and Teisei Department Stores Group together. The gated communities being managed by the Moonlight Fund and the Keika Pacific Ferry under Akamatsu Corporation would also join this company.

Keika Kinugawa Resort was a collection of Kinugama hot springs, ryokans, hotels, and golf courses that the bankrupted Shinden Bank had financed, so of course they were mountains of bad debts. But with such outstanding tourist attractions, the resort could see profits after some reorganization, and so we took it on.

Teisei Department Stores Group was already traded publicly, so their remaining holdings would be transferred to the holding company. Keika Hotel Group would also sell 49 percent of its shares once it was listed, but the railroad companies wouldn’t go public.

“But why not?”

“Railroad projects are long-term endeavors. They can’t be visualized from quarterly reports.”

This made sense to me, in a way. The public nature of infrastructure companies meant that they had more important purposes than just amassing shareholder profits. As I pondered this, I decided to ask the question that popped into my head.

“We won’t publicly list the holding company, right?”

“No, because this company will become the cornerstone of your business, my lady,” Tachibana replied. “Combining 10 percent of the shares from Keika Holdings and 19 percent from the Moonlight Fund adds up to 29 percent. As long as we hold on to these shares at all costs, it will be easy to protect Keika Holdings. I’m sure Akamatsu Corporation will be pressed to do a stock offering as well.”

One of my goals in reorganizing the business was to free myself from the burden of being a one-woman management team. By publicly listing the stock, the goal was to decrease my managerial responsibilities by having shareholders' eyes watch over things. At that point, it was somewhat natural that Akamatsu Corporation would be the next target of a public offering after Keika Holdings.

“We’ll organize the system and pass the baton again in three years. That will probably be the limit.”

Tachibana smiled wryly as he looked at the list of affiliated companies. Unifying them all would take more resources than we had. We’d built this massive railway company from the ground up. When I thought about all the hard work Tachibana had put into keeping it successful, I didn’t want him to have to do anything more.

“Who’s the next prospect?”

“I’ll promote someone from the railway business. These companies can stay on the defensive once they’ve finished expanding. I plan to choose the person based firmly on their loyalty, so I think my successor will be easier to find than Ichijou’s.”

Tachibana smiled a bit sadly. Naturally, he would grow old by the time I was an adult. I was forced to face this fact, as much as I wanted to ignore it.

“So you’re looking for someone like Ichijou, huh?”

“I’ve tagged along after you through all your excessiveness for a few years now, my lady. Perhaps I shouldn’t say this myself, but I think I did a good job keeping up, considering the circumstances. You still have your entire life ahead of you. I believe you’ll still need at least thirty more years before you can lead not just Keika Railway, but the Keika Group itself.”

Thirty years. I would be in my forties, and Tachibana would be...

“Live a long life so that you can keep on supporting me,” I said.

“I will support you as long as I possibly can. However, please don’t forget that I’m farther along than you. You’ll have to keep searching for replacements, my lady.”

Tachibana placed a piece of white paper in front of me. I cocked my head in confusion, so he explained further.

“For the sake of finding that replacement as well, could you please think about your corporate vision?”

A corporate vision. Fundamentally, businesses were about making money, but how they sugarcoated that fact and how they gained those profits was part of their DNA. Teisei Department Stores’ cultural management was one such example.

This was a bit exciting to me. I’d never thought about it before.

“‘Connecting your present to the future.’ How about that?”

“I like it. That’s the sort of concept I would expect to hear from you.”

Tachibana took the paper I’d written on and placed it in a frame. Beginning to reorganize this company had made me realize a few things.

Everyone would leave someday and, as always, we were still short on personnel.

Even if I still stood at the front lines ten or so years from now, those problems still wouldn’t be solved at all.

Finally, I realized that I had even fewer people with me in the game. No, I was all alone in the first place.

Keika Holdings (Holding company and stock privatization planned)

■ Keika Railway Group:

- KYOSHO Rapid Railway/Kagawa Railroad/Keika Bus/Keika Developments/Kuzuryuugawa Railway

- Keika Pacific Ferry/Moonlight Resort/Keika Kinguawa Resort/railroad under construction
- Keika Hotel Group:
 - AIRHO/Hokkaido tertiary industry businesses/Keika Opera Company/Yufuin Kurokawa Development/Keika Advertising Agency
- Teisei Department Stores Group:
 - Department stores/supermarkets/convenience stores/fashion malls/gyudon restaurants/Hokkaido primary industry businesses



If Keika Railway was our defense, then Akamatsu Corporation could go on the attack. We ended up reorganizing their businesses too.

“We’re the ones who manage the natural resources around which your business is centered. If possible, I’d like to avoid the government getting involved with us.”

Okazaki, the executive in charge of unifying the business as the resource management department, had an aloof tone in his voice. He was extremely despised by a few people in my life.

“The government getting involved?’ Are you up to something again?”

I glared at Okazaki, which made him raise his hands and shake his head to look harmless. But the obvious acting only made him look more suspicious.

“The government is trying to make general trading companies reorganize. That means they want us to absorb the lower general trading companies.”

A surprisingly obscure fact was that the industry of general trading companies was known as a bomb in the shadow of bad debt disposal. Those companies had made all sorts of moves to expand their businesses, and therefore they had a load of bad debts to carry. However, they survived due to the divine winds in the form of rising resource prices.

“Very well. We’ll say we’re doing a commendable public service. Specifically, which places are they going to make us absorb?”

“Teisen Ishii and Teimen Corporation.”

Not only were they two of the lesser general trading companies, but conditions from this year’s merger of Gowa Osan Bank had left behind the major distributor, Taiei, and cleaned up the rest, which meant it was probably time for them to be dealt with. These two companies had also invested quite a lot in Southeast Asia, resulting in cries of agony when the Asian currency crisis hit. Between their accounts receivable and loans, the two companies had amassed the large sum of 2.75 trillion yen. Those claims were a Pandora’s box, as we couldn’t see if there were bad debts inside until it was opened.

“Fine, then. Let’s eat them up. Now we don’t have to jump into the public

stock offering so aggressively.”

“You want to acquire them?”

“We’ll start with a business integration.”

We would begin by making a holding company, then place the two companies underneath it.

Then we would launch a takeover bid, get a few shareholders out of the way, and then reduce capital and dispose of bad debts. Naturally, there wouldn’t be enough funds for this, so the Moonlight Fund would take total control over management with a third-party allocation of shares. Afterward, we would send them to Akamatsu Corporation as their parent company, consolidate the many subsidiary businesses, and turn them into something profitable.

Of course, these plans would take a long time, so the stock listing would have to be put on hold for a while as we reorganized the two general trading companies. Even I couldn’t help but find it impressive that we were so easily prepared to take on debts in the trillions.

As I pondered this, the kanji “men” caught my eye.

“Men’? As in ‘menka,’ or cotton wool?”

“That’s right, my lady. Many general trading companies started in the textile industry. They purchased the cotton wool, processed it in Japan, then sold it to the world. Cotton wool used to be produced in India, and we ended up planting cotton here to begin selling to the West. The textile industry is the pioneer of our current processing trade, and since that cotton had to be sold to other places in the world, it was the origin of the general trading companies.”

“I see... Huh?!”

That was when it hit me. We were on the verge of seeing Kanegana Textiles go bankrupt due to accounting fraud.

Their cosmetics department had been a stopgap keeping them afloat despite extreme losses, but when they tried to work with current-value accounting, they ended up embellishing the numbers in a way that led to the opposite of what they intended. Their debts totaled 350 billion yen.

“While we’re at it, why don’t we buy Kanegana Textiles too?”

“Knowing you, I’m sure you’ve spotted something, but most company presidents aren’t brave enough to go and buy three companies when a possible reorganizing is on the table.”

Okazaki sounded amazed, but I still spoke casually. We would be taking on 3 trillion yen in debt at the most.

Well, that was an amount we could figure out how to deal with. I decided not to tell Okazaki and Toudou, his boss, that we were on the verge of coming face-to-face with hell.

“Well, why not? Keika Holdings and the companies under Keika Railway keep doing stock offerings, so we have more money than we need. Besides...”

“Besides?”

With Okazaki listening, I pretended to be a ditzy girl. That was the age I was at.

“I’m a girl, and I’m old enough to be interested in makeup now.”

“...And if that interest makes you decide to buy a cosmetics company, then compared to the rest of the girls your age, you’re a total weirdo—Ow! I’m sorry, my lady! Don’t hit me!”

Slap! Slap! I struck Okazaki on the back to act upset, but I was apparently stronger than I realized, as he seemed to be in genuine pain. As we joked around, Anisha watched us from her post, the coldness in her eyes seeming to ask, *“What the hell are they doing?”*

Later, as soon as I babbled on about buying three more companies in the reorganization meeting, everyone else in the room turned to stare at Okazaki. Their eyes said, *“Don’t tell me you said something stupid to her again!”* but he just frantically shook his head at them.

“Akamatsu Corporation has announced a business integration with Teisen Ishii, Teimen Corporation, and Kanegana Textiles. These three companies carry many interest-bearing debts, and among calls for a lift of the ban on current-

value accounting, they are rumored to be undergoing massive losses. However, Akamatsu Corporation's business integration will provide them with much-needed relief. The four corporations will establish a holding company and are currently sorting the hundreds of subsidiary companies and more than ten thousand clients between them, as well as optimizing management efficiency. Keika Holdings is also providing a bridge loan, with a merger surrounding Akamatsu Corporation scheduled in three years, followed by a stock offering..."

Though it was my shopping list, the ones doing the actual buying were Ichijou, Tachibana, Angela, Akamatsu Corporation president Toudou Nagayoshi, and Okazaki Yuuichi, the company executive. Even I couldn't help but be dumbfounded by the gigantic list of subsidiary companies when I had it in front of me.

"Wait, this isn't news to me, but are there really so many?!"

There were a few hundred subsidiaries alone, and tens of thousands of client companies too. Those were general trading companies, for your information. I sorted them as best I could.

Akamatsu Corporation:

Cell phone companies, Dog Express, natural resource companies, Kitakaba Security, Keika Parts Manufacturing, other companies

Teisen Ishii + Teimen Corporation:

Automobile construction/sales companies, airplane lease sales companies, shipping companies, railroad companies, machinery/infrastructure companies

Natural resource companies, chemistry companies, communication companies, food product companies, textile companies, retail companies

Kanegana Textiles:

Cosmetics companies, textile companies, food product companies, pharmaceutical companies, housing companies

That's so many. These were the businesses we were going to sort and reorganize. First up was dividing the companies belonging to Kanegana Textiles.

"Kanegana Textiles can be used as a base to merge their textile industries with the ones from Teisen Ishii and Teimen Corporation.

"I'm not sure if this alone will be enough to restore the company. If it fails, we'll have to restructure these businesses."

Toudou's declaration had a weary tone. One condition of Kanegana's purchase had been the survival of these textile companies. That was why they were left in as a last chance.

"The housing companies can be sold to Keika Developments of Keika Railway. We'll also sell the pharmaceutical companies to Keika-Iwazaki Pharma. The food products can join with the operations departments of Teisen Ishii and Teimen Corporation, then they can be transferred to Teisei Department Stores Group."

Toudou's report continued. This deal allowed us to incorporate Kanegana's greatest treasure, their cosmetics companies. In exchange for handing Teisei Department Stores Group over to Keika Railway, Akamatsu Corporation was going to acquire the cosmetics businesses, which would likely become the most profitable divisions of all three of these companies.

"Automobile assembly and sales can be integrated into Keika Parts Manufacturing. Railroads, machinery, and infrastructure will be transferred to Echigo Engineering Co. as subsidiary companies. Retail and food products will be given to Teisei Department Stores. Chemistry companies will merge with Kanegana's cosmetics companies. Communication companies will be integrated into our cell phone companies. Natural resource companies can join the ones we already have."

Sorting out all these changes would probably take about three years. After that would be the public offering.

"I'm sure they'll be listed on the stock market at some point. What should we do about that?" I asked.

"Before that, there's something that needs your approval, my lady," Toudou said.

I cocked my head, and Toudou continued, looking extremely serious.

“I would like to change the company name to ‘Keika Corp’ after the mergers. Please allow us to use the Keika name at our new company.”

What, that's all? I nodded and asked for his reasoning. “I guess I don't mind, but why use the Keika name now?”

“We're gaining three new companies all at once, so there will be unease about our internal control. Since we're the figurehead of the Keika Group's companies, it bothers many employees that we don't operate under the Keika name.”

He had a point. The current flagships of the Keika Group were Keika Holdings, Teisei Department Stores, Akamatsu Corporation, and Shiyo Electric Co., but Teisei Department Stores was now under Keika Railways' control, while Shiyo Electric Co. was going to be combined with Furukawa Telecoms and Portercon to form Keika Electric Union.

My one-woman company would no longer exist, but in exchange, they likely wanted to give the business a sense of belonging by using my name.

In the end, the strain of rapid growth had fallen on Akamatsu Corporation.

“Very well. I'll discuss it with Father and have him give you the Keika name.”

Toudou bowed his head in response to my dignified response. He then looked at Okazaki and prompted him to do the same.

“Thank you very much. I believe my term of office will come to an end three years from now, when the mergers are finalized. Afterward, I'll promote a successor from within Akamatsu Corporation. I believe that Okazaki will have to wait for the opening after that to sit in the president's seat.”



Despite all the trouble Okazaki had caused, Toudou apparently wanted him as president. I questioned him with awe in my voice.

“Perhaps this isn’t for me to say, but are you sure? He might team up with me to stir up trouble again.”

“You really shouldn’t be saying that, my lady.”

Angela responded to Okazaki’s retort with a sharp glare. She truly hated him to an impressive degree. Well, it was his own fault.

“That’s probably how long it will take for me to lose my adventurous spirit. And once I do, I’ll probably become a loyal subject who works only for Lady Runa. Please wait patiently for that day to come.”

After all the chaos, Toudou had supposedly bowed his head to Tachibana, Angela, and Ichijou, unable to part with Okazaki and his talents. Okazaki knew this, which was why he seemed genuinely remorseful.

“Very well. I’ll be waiting, then.”

If Okazaki were to become the next successor, that day would come ten or twenty years in the future. If I hadn’t met my downfall by that point, I would make sure to rely on him.

-
- Keika Corp Holdings (Akamatsu Corporation + Teisen Ishii + Teimen Corporation + Kanegana Textiles)
- Cell phone companies, Dog Express, natural resource companies, Kitakaba Security, Keika Parts Manufacturing, shipping companies.
- Airplane lease/sales companies, textile companies, cosmetics companies, Echigo Engineering Co.

The usual four of us had gathered at Avanti for a relaxing tea party.

This time, we’d come to talk about unpleasant things too, as the four of us were the management team of TIG Backup Systems.

Honami Bank had undergone a system failure and was now in total chaos, but they contracted TIG, meaning we were already raking in big profits.

“We focus on backups, so we’re a step back from the main systems. But the main system department is apparently working on something different every day, so they’re really confused.”

Mitsuya-kun, who oversaw technology, sounded shocked. I took a bite of my strawberry shortcake, an unsurprised look on my face.

Part of the problem was a power struggle between the three merged banks, with each faction giving different instructions, resulting in a mess. I pitied the poor systems engineers who had to keep up.

“Why are you acting like this doesn’t concern you? Furukawa Telecoms is responsible for working on the main system.”

Mitsuya-kun’s retort snapped me out of it. Furukawa Telecoms, the systems engineers, had cried out for help, which was why TIG Backup Systems took the job as their combat support.

CEO Karin Viola, who understood their position and reasoning, made me laugh when she came to me and said, “I want to make them our subsidiary. Sell them to me.” Today’s meeting was to decide on that proposal.

“For now, taking my own position into account, I’m gonna remain neutral!” I said. “The three of you can work it out on your own.”

“This girl...”

Eiichi-kun was exasperated by my carefree tone, but as a stakeholder, he understood that I couldn’t say the wrong thing here. He sighed and drank his coffee.

Eiichi-kun loved cola, but he always ordered coffee whenever he was thinking about something serious.

“I just want to be sure of something. How exactly are you investing in us, Keikain-san?”

Yuujiroku-kun, in charge of accounting, had asked me that question, so I put my fingers to my temples and tried to remember.

As I ordered some grape juice, I murmured quietly: “I think I didn’t want to bother anyone, so I decided to take the money from my personal account.”

The company's funds were sixty billion yen that came from me and another sixty billion that the other three had made in profit. That was sixty billion plucked straight from my own account. Even I couldn't help but smile awkwardly at the amount.

"Then shouldn't you be the one to decide instead of the Keika Group, Keikain-san?"

"That's true. I brought CEO Karin here, but she said she wanted to buy my shares and turn us into a subsidiary company during the Keika Electric Union merger this fall. The first financials that come out after the merger will be a display of CEO Karin's leadership skills, so she wants to acquire this high-grossing business to boost her profits."

We were currently a Keika Group company, but we wouldn't become part of Keika Electric Union at this rate. Her idea to buy my shares and turn TIG into a Keika Electric Union subsidiary wasn't bad.

"But CEO Karin wants to control this corporation directly. She probably wants a foothold in the company since she doesn't have one right now."

The massive company had already seen a fierce factional war break out before Keika Electric Union was even active.

The former Furukawa Telecoms and its secret parent company, Teikoku Telephone Company, had recovered quickly thanks to my direct company reconstruction. According to CEO Karin, the former Shiyo Electric team cared about my opinions because I bailed them out during a crisis, but to the former Portercon staffers, who'd seen a failed merger with their own eyes, CEO Karin would need to establish her power.

"Big companies come with a lot of problems, huh? So anyway, what exactly will the sale look like?"

Mitsuya-kun had been glaring at me, so I reached into my bag, took out documents describing the buyer's offer, and handed them to the three boys.

This level of preparedness was to be expected from America. These were official documents drawn up by a venture capital fund's lawyer.

"A premium of thirty billion, with the assumption of ten billion in yearly profit

for five years.”

“There’re even documents for us to use for the sale.”

“Looks like they want to tempt us with all this money to show they’re sincere.”

Sales of companies like these, which weren’t public, usually involved plenty of blind sales attempts. However, as an executive myself, I’d shown her the entire company with the boys’ permission. I would be selling my 50 percent, giving the company a valuation of sixty billion yen. This was a return of ten times the investment, which was quite extraordinary.

“In America, many successful entrepreneurs sell companies and then start new ones, which is probably the idea behind this proposal. But it doesn’t sound like that happens in Japan very often.”

In Japan, it’s common for representative directors to become co-signers when a company borrows from the bank, giving them a virtually unlimited amount of responsibility, so founding businesses to sell them again isn’t a great business model to get returns. It also encourages many company presidents to see themselves as the one and only lord of the company.

“So, what do you want to do, Teia?”

“We’ll abide by your decision, Eiichi-kun.”

Mitsuya-kun and Yuujirou-kun expressed their opinions after seeing the proposal on paper. Since I was remaining neutral, I threw my hands up in a surrender pose and refused to talk.

Eiichi-kun set the papers down and said something else entirely.

“There’s a company asking for our support—it involves Teia Motor Co. They were abandoned due to losses, so they came crying to me about it.”

Eiichi-kun spoke plainly about that company, but he couldn’t hide the uncertainty on his face.

“They’re a joint venture company from our main body, but they’re in a slump from overinvesting, and the higher-ups aren’t sure if they want to keep supporting them.

“They were merged with another company, which is why they have to watch them panic. Since things weren’t working at the main company, they came to me about it. I don’t want to bother the main Teia branch if at all possible, but I’d like to save them if we can.”

I looked at the company’s documents. They were the first large-scale LAN service in Japan and were struggling with initial investments. They had roughly seventy billion in debts.

“By the way, why are you interested in saving them if you can?”

Eiichi-kun answered Yuujirou-kun’s question; with no sign of hesitation, he casually gave up responsibility for the decision.

“We’ve got Runa, right? I know she built her fortune in IT, so even if there’s something we don’t understand, I’m sure we can use her for something.”

“You’re leaving it to me?”

The three boys nodded casually at my shocked response. I couldn’t help but laugh too, seeing them all nod together so perfectly.

“We made this company to catch up to Runa in the first place. We could sell it to her, but Grandfather will probably get mad if we do.”

Eiichi-kun smiled awkwardly and drank his coffee. Feeling curious, I asked him about that.

“What would you do if you were the head of the Teia Group, Eiichi-kun?”

“At the end of the day, I’m still just an elementary schooler. I can’t even think about running a massive company. But there’s one thing I’ve decided. Since it all revolves around Teia Motor Co., I’m not gonna think about it until I’ve used a car, or in other words, until I get my license and can drive.”

We’d become completely absorbed in his words as he spoke. It was a great opportunity to see his stance on things.

“I’ve been wondering how to even learn what decisions could save or ruin a company. Watching Runa has made me realize she has the foresight of the gods, but I can’t say the same about myself. If I just kept rolling the dice over and over again like that, I’d go bankrupt in the end.”

Eiichi-kun closed his eyes and spoke quietly as if to convince himself. I could guess that his grandfather was the one who said those words to him. Some people could certainly tell that I was going about it by pinpointing specific targets.

“Gamblers in life have to win to succeed, but not making a gamble at all is just abstract idealism. I would be betting the lives of the Teia Group workers and their families.”

He opened his eyes and looked at me. I saw a person reflected in his eyes, but it didn’t feel like it was really me.

“We’ve successfully created a company twice now. That’s why I think we need to show that we can maintain our success.”

I see. It appeared that Eiichi-kun’s grandfather had taught him some good ways of thinking. It was a smart difference for a person to have to someone like me, who strapped on a jet pack and shot up straight to space.

“Teia, how is that related to the company you want to save?”

In response to Mitsuya-kun’s question, Eiichi-kun picked up the buyout proposal I’d brought along.

“This plan will have us sell half and get thirty billion yen. If we can make ten billion yen in profits every year for five years, that will allow us to borrow the funds needed to save the company. In other words, the decision is to expand the company, which would probably happen in the future anyway. Of course, I’ll respect your opinions too...”

At this point, Eiichi-kun probably didn’t need to use the Teia name to get funds, especially from foreign investments.

Even if he didn’t have the connections to use, creating *two* successful companies would be persuasive enough to any bank financier, despite that he was still a child.

Eiichi-kun kept his eyes on me as he spoke to Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun next. Now that they’d secured a valuation for their company, they knew they could be defeated without taking any damage. That was the venture they’d be gambling on.

“What do you think? I’m sure our heights will be lower than the ones Runa already enjoys, but don’t you want to go see them too?”

Yuujiroku-kun and Mitsuya-kun exchanged glances. Eiichi-kun didn’t take his eyes off me. It was Mitsuya-kun who spoke first.

“I think we should decide once we’ve figured out whether or not Keikain is buying the business.”

“I agree. Like Eiichi-kun says, we need to know if Keikain-san sees value in this company before we decide.”

Eiichi-kun nodded in agreement to both statements.

I sighed, then asked a question of Eiichi-kun.

“By the way, what did you think I could do with this company?”

Eiichi-kun pointed at the data center listed on the company’s documents.

“You guys are going to be unifying cards soon, right? Not just bank cash cards and credit cards, but really cool stuff that works in place of tickets and personal ID. I thought you could use this data center to process the information. You buy time with money, Runa, so I thought you could make something of this facility that’s in a slump. That was what I thought.”

With that, Eiichi-kun continued, sounding a bit upset.

“I think I can only make naive decisions. At the very end, we need Runa to decide; she can see more of it, and she grasps the numbers better than I do.

“Someday, I want to see the same heights as you.”

The bitterness in Eiichi-kun’s words was a bit cute to me, but that would remain a secret.

Refusing to speak a word about that, I decided instead to leave the decision up to someone else.

“It’s not like I see everything. I’ll give the decision to someone who really *can* see it all... Hang on, actually, let’s ask her.”

I made a phone call using my PHS. Mitsuya-kun asked me who I was calling.

“Is it someone trustworthy who can make the decision?”

"I believe so. She was in charge of the biggest American phone company... Hi there, Karin. Do you have a minute to talk?"

I spent a few minutes explaining the situation in English. Even over the phone, I could tell she was excited.

Ah, I recognize this sensation. It's the feeling of getting exactly what you want.

"What?! Just wait...! Hang on, please! Don't get so excited about... Hello? Huh?! Hello?!"

With the eyes of the three speechless boys on me, I set my PHS down, smiled awkwardly, and bowed my head.

"Sorry, but do you guys have a little more time? CEO Karin wants to come here and talk."

CEO Karin burst into Avanti roughly an hour later. She was wearing her usual crisp business suit, but her smile glimmered with sweat.

"Hello! Are these your friends, my lady? I'm Karin Viola. It's nice to meet you."

CEO Karin introduced herself in a friendly, bright tone, then shook the boys' hands and exchanged business cards.

Elementary school students having business cards might sound like a joke, but the four of us at TIG Backup Systems were executives, so we gave them out to everyone at places like IT seminars.

Eiichi-kun and I also had our respective Keika Group and Teia Group business cards with the company badge on them, but we were officially TIG Backup Systems executives, so those were generally the cards we used. After that exchange, Karin ordered a coffee and got straight down to business.

"Allow me to be frank. You need to buy this company. If you don't, then I will."

It was an instant answer. CEO Karin believed it was that valuable. She continued.

"Data centers don't just gather information. They also sort it, analyze it, and

sell it. They're gold mines. Those sorts of businesses are already on the verge of starting up in the United States."

Even now, as we ordered our coffees and colas with credit cards, our financial data was being recorded. Credit cards held mountains of information about names, jobs, genders, ages, and so on. When you processed and sorted the data of tens of millions of people and what they were buying and when, you could start to see what information was valuable and what wasn't.

Companies could then use that information to profit. For example, one such company sold the information to a drinking water producer, which they used to make product development easier.

"I see. So my instincts were correct. But can we break even on a seventy-billion-yen purchase?"

CEO Karin responded simply to Eiichi-kun's question. She provided the numbers and outlook in such detail that she sounded like she was the current president.

"Japan has a population of 140 million. Of that, an estimated 40 million are going to use the Keika Group's unified cards when they're released. That means the sales data for 40 million people will be available. Do you have any idea how beneficial that will be to Teisei Department Stores Group's sales? You can use it internally, and since you also have the sales data from Hokkaido and Karafuto residents, you can sell it off and make back your investment from that alone."

CEO Karin was confident that the company would make money. She also explained the reason why they'd failed.

"The slump was to be expected. They built a birdhouse, but never got the birds to put in it. Our cards are that massive flock of migratory birds. There's no way it won't be profitable."

At this point, even we understood. Eiichi-kun looked at all of us for confirmation.

"Then it's settled. Let's rescue them. We'll sell half of our shares like they asked and get the rest as loans from the bank."

"Huh? You're not going to sell us all of TIG Backup Systems?"

CEO Karin sounded puzzled. We laughed, realizing we hadn't gotten to the main discussion yet. From her perspective, she probably wanted to absorb this company entirely and use it as her own foothold.

This launched a war of words between Eiichi-kun and CEO Karin.

"We'll sell the majority of our shares, but I'm sorry to tell you we're not going to let go of management rights. That's an order from my grandfather."

"Does that mean the Teia Group is going to take on responsibility for this company?"

"We've been with the Keika Group ever since we were founded. As a matter of fact, we admit that we based our strategies on Runa's example. But we want to see the same things Runa sees. That's the whole reason we founded this company."

CEO Karin cocked her head in response to this. She appeared to find some fault in it, and she said so.

"I don't mean to be rude, but my lady is the investor, not the president."

"...Ah."

With only a few words, she'd managed to point something out that Eiichi-kun himself had failed to realize. That was a world-class CEO for you. Listening to this from the sidelines, I couldn't help but poke fun at them.

"Oh, I was actually just an investor?"

"Investor? Well, the world might see Keikain more like an invader than an investor."

"That's true."

The mood lightened thanks to Mitsuya-kun and Yuujirou-kun's retorts. On the other hand, Eiichi-kun and CEO Karin had smiles on their faces, but their eyes were deadly serious. I decided to step in and help them.

"You'll have to make do with half the shares for now, Karin. That's plenty for a subsidiary company, but most of all, if you can accept that..."

"Yes...?"

“Then you can boss around the four of us, including me, when it comes to company matters.”

CEO Karin finished her coffee and set the cup down on the table. The hard noise signaled the end of the arguing.

“Okay, my lady. Does that mean you want me to be a teacher too?”

Eiichi-kun smirked at CEO Karin’s strained smile. Her next words clearly asserted her own position.

“Please don’t worry, Boss. I’ll be sure to take over the company in a way that doesn’t cause you any trouble. But my tuition fee is quite high, children.”

Between the half of TIG Backup Systems shares sold by all of us and the loan from Keika Bank, we purchased the company that had merged with Teia Motor Co. It would eventually join the Keika Electric Union that was starting up in September; until then, it would exist as part of Furukawa Telecoms.

With CEO Karin’s direct control of the business and the name recognition she held with the company directors, the former Furukawa Telecoms and Shio Electric Co. employees all lost their disdain for her. She had crossed her first hurdle as CEO of a merged company.

However, CEO Karin’s classes were extremely strict, and the boys had to put in a lot of hard work to handle them. The story of TIG Backup Systems’ further expansion would come later.

“Excuse me. Please let me through.”

I was at the headquarters of Honami Bank. I held up my guest ID at the employee entrance and smiled at the guard. Then I showed him a letter.

“You’re here to bring a lunchbox to your uncle, who works for TIG Backup Systems? What a nice kid.”

He patted my head but had no idea who I was.

I clearly looked like a foreign girl, so I wanted to yell that he should be suspicious of me. But this world had a much higher ratio of foreign workers compared to my past life, so I supposed it wasn’t so unusual to see someone

like me there.

But people's ability to recognize me as a famous person appeared to come down to their television habits. Older people watched different time slots and programs, so since I wasn't a criminal, perhaps my presence on TV didn't register me with them as a real person.

"Right this way."

"Thank you."

With my basket in hand, I was able to enter Honami Bank headquarters.

There were only a few places I could go with a guest ID, but that was no problem. When infiltrating a Japanese organization, generally the outer layer was impenetrable, while security inside was laughably weak. Instead of going to the waiting room at the front entrance, I headed to the vending machine corner instead.

To my surprise, perhaps as countermeasures to help with extreme overtime, there were not only cup noodle vending machines, but also ones with bread and sweets, and even warm food like onigiri and hot dogs. As for my ideal pick... *All right!* Conveniently enough, the button for grape juice was on the highest row.

I can do it! I stood up on my toes but still couldn't reach it, so I hopped up and down, intentionally failing to push it. That was when a bank employee who'd been watching me spoke up.

"Want me to get that for you?"

"Thanks, Gramps!"

"Really...? 'Gramps'?!"

"Ha ha ha..."

I bought my juice and began to chat with the old men. I showed them my guest ID and basket with the lunchbox, telling them I'd come to bring it to my uncle, and found that they were easily fooled.

"TIG Backup Systems?"

“Aren’t they one of the subcontractors working on our core banking system? I hear there’s a lot of bad blood between the systems developers and their subcontractors, what with our system failure. Maybe that’s where he works?”

“Should we take her to the development floor, then?”

“I’ll call for him at the entrance, so you can come with me.”

That was easy. I grinned at the kind bank workers and expressed my gratitude.

“Thank you very much, Big Brother!”

We’d come to the thirty-fifth floor of Honami Bank. The Japanese project manager who was playing the role of my uncle spotted me in front of the system development department. He raced over once he saw me and took me near the windows, where there were fewer people.

“My lady, what are you doing here?”

“I’m the vice president of operations. Here, there’s enough for everyone. Honami Bank’s system director is being too demanding, right?”

The upper ranks making reckless demands and placing extra burdens on the lower ranks was a common occurrence. Between the system failure and restoration, reconstruction, and the building of a new system, the power struggles within the newly unified bank were steering it onto an unsettled course.

The consequences of that situation fell on us subcontractors.

“We’re not a backup system in the first place. We can’t insert that into the main system, can we?”

That was why I’d come here in secret. As the head of operations, I had a responsibility to protect the subcontractors from reckless demands. There was also another, more trivial circumstance behind my reasoning.

“Our true job is to make a system for Furukawa Telecoms, after all. We can’t complain that the Furukawa Telecoms project manager is ruling with an iron fist.”

It was Furukawa Telecoms’ core banking system that had damaged Honami

Bank's system. It wasn't hard to predict that they were being blamed during the recovery and reconstruction process.

Honami Bank had been born from a merger with the Commercial Bank of Japan, DK Bank, and Fuyou Bank, but since each bank had a separate core banking system, they were secretly fighting over which one would be used after the integration. A bank's core system is essentially decided by the forces within the bank itself.

As the quarrels continued, work on system integration was further delayed, and the current result was a compromise where each bank worked on their separate systems, connected by relay computers.

Furukawa Telecoms' involvement in this work was what started the trouble.

Furukawa Telecoms was being merged into Keika Electronics Union that fall, which kept the higher-ups very busy. Furukawa Telecoms' project managers wanted to stay away from any liability, so they forcibly launched their fighting power and normalized worsening conditions at the company.

Our TIG Backup Systems team had gotten wrapped up this mess as well.

"There's a meeting this afternoon, right? Let me slip in too."

With a sigh, the project manager gave his approval.

"Why aren't you in school today?"

"It's fine. I always make sure to count how many days I've been absent."

My project manager got me a project ID for TIG Backup Systems.

I traded it for my guest ID and entered the development floor. *Wow, the people in here are all moving like zombies.* I moved through them into the conference room.

The Furukawa Telecoms system manager was right in the middle of a tirade.

"What idiot brought this brat in here?! Get her out of here at once!"

That was when I decided to force Furukawa Telecoms into a full withdrawal from working on Honami Bank's core banking system. The manager was too busy complaining about the state of the meeting room to realize who I was and

what he was saying to me.

I put a perfectly lovely smile on my face and introduced myself by presenting him with my TIG Backup Systems business card.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m the vice president of operations at TIG Backup Systems. My name is Keikain Runa! I’m so happy to be here!”

My energetic, childlike voice boomed throughout the room, making the zombies freeze before they all started to murmur among themselves.

Some of them appeared to be familiar with my name, but the Furukawa Telecoms project manager in front of me, who was probably under pressure from the Honami Bank systems director, still hadn’t figured it out.

“An elementary school student playing house as vice president?! Bring me someone more sensible than this! But even after that, you and all your employees are still going to the main system section!”

The Furukawa Telecoms project manager was acting inhuman at this point. I decided I needed to help him regain his humanity.

“I see. Then I’ll give my boss’s boss a call, so please go ahead with your lecture and orders.”

I made the call on my PHS. When I handed it to the project manager, his face turned pale.

It was only natural for someone in an organization to follow their boss’s orders.

He was still holding the PHS, but his face was as white as a sheet, and his body was trembling now. *Ah, he dropped it.*

I picked it up and decided to continue the conversation.

“There you have it, Karin. I’m going to consider a withdrawal from Honami Bank’s core banking system development. We’ll still focus on backup but step away from the main system. In exchange, we’ll continue work on the development of Keika Holdings’ own core banking system...”

I turned off the PHS, smiled at the zombies looking my way, and cast a spell to revive them.

"I'd like to speak to the system manager in charge of Honami Bank. I'm going to decide if Furukawa Telecoms should withdraw from this project. All right! Let's get rid of this system and build a real one."

Seeing the Furukawa Telecoms systems workers send their documents flying as they screamed was like watching a movie.

This incident led to almost ten billion in extraordinary losses before the merger, but we forced them to go along with the construction of Keika Holdings' core banking system, and they didn't harm CEO Karin.

As a result of it all, the former Furukawa Telecoms owed Karin a huge debt.

When Honami Bank learned that Furukawa Telecoms was backing out, the former DK Bank's collapse was assured. The Financial Services Agency's lectures and misgivings about credibility didn't result in an investigation, meaning we could set it aside and officially reconstruct our system like other banks.

Glossary and notes

The spring theater:

- Democratic Party: House of Councilors member Oohashi Kyosen. Resigned after opposing his party's policies.
- Liberal Democratic Party: Tanaka Makiko of the House of Representatives. Fired as foreign minister.
- Liberal Democratic Party: Suzuki Muneo of the House of Representatives. Resigned as House Steering Committee Chairman and seceded from the party.
- Social Democratic Party: Tsujimoto Kiyomi of the House of Representatives. Resigned from Diet.
- Yokohama mayoral election: Mayor Nakada Hiroshi. Elected mayor with support of independents.
- Liberal Democratic Party: Katou Kouichi of the House of Representatives. Resigned from Diet.

Kyoto Protocol: An international treaty passed to reduce CO2 emissions. This

was the point where the word “environment” started coming up on TV regularly.

Quarterly financials: These are the public financial results for every three months, or four periods per year. They’re a good way to get a detailed look at a company’s management, but on the other hand, the downside is that you can only see what’s right in front of you. Quarterly financials are very important for companies in Europe and America.

Shareholders’ eyes: Managers who only think “The company belongs to the shareholders, and operations should always think about how to increase the stock price.” This expression is often used when control of the company passes from the single founder to a group of leaders, as it’s acceptable to everyone.

Business cards: Extremely important items in Japanese business.

Chapter 7: Mission Impossible

THE PLACE was Kudanshita Station, located directly under Kudanshita Keika Tower. It was the only train station where you could see maids passing by security guards on duty. Kaihouin Hotaru was walking briskly down the underground hallway.

She was traveling along invisibly, knowing that if she managed to reach her friends, Keikain Runa and Kasugano Asuka, without being noticed, she'd be rewarded with the decorations on the cake they were having for their snack today.

“Who are we supposed to be looking for?”

“Weren’t you listening to the briefing? She’s a friend of Lady Runa. This girl is abnormally good at hide and seek, so much so that even adults can’t find her. That’s why young Lady Runa asked us to fully mobilize and catch her.”

“I heard it was the secretary, Angela-san, who mobilized us, not Lady Runa. She said this friend crushed Lady Runa in a game of hide and seek.”

“Ahhh. So that’s why the plainclothes gang are out here, acting so strange. I assume they’re from the company.”

“Um, we’re getting complaints that the level of security at the station is scaring people...”

“Tell the complaint department we’re just training the guards. The armored exoskeletons have sashes that say ‘Guard Training’ and everything, so why’re people complaining...?”

“Well, it’s not the sort of thing you want to see in an underground passageway. They were a symbol of the terror in Toyohara’s underground shopping center, after all.”

Trot, trot, trot...

“Welcome to Vesuna, the maid café! You again, Detective? Your boss will have some choice words for you.”

“I’m on the job now. This is an open space where I can see who comes through the entrance, so it’s a handy spot to watch from.”

“Ah, are you on a stakeout?”

“Bingo. Anyway, I’ll have a coffee and the three o’clock snack.”

“Coming right up, Master. All the maids, including myself, are currently rather busy with the guard training, which has completely messed up our shifts. Nagamori-san, the assistant head maid, looked completely overwhelmed...”

“That sounds rough. The foreigner on the right there and the one who just came in... They’re up to no good.”

“I’ve heard her name is Angela-san. Here’s your apple pie set... Detective. Did you eat that?”

“No, I didn’t, and the check is supposed to come once you’ve finished. I’m not so honest that I’d leave a hundred-yen coin before I even start eating.”

An awkward silence hung over the two.

“I’ll go make a call.”

“Please do. I’ll send in a report too. And don’t let them spot you.”

“Of course I won’t. I’m a maid, after all.”

Trot, trot, trot... Munch, munch...

“I hear the target has already entered the building. What the hell are they doing down there?”

“She’s Lady Runa’s friend. Don’t they know that she doesn’t show up on surveillance cameras?”

“So the exosuits don’t even pick her up on their thermographs...”

“Should we stop the elevators?”

“I think that’s where we’ll get her. Won’t we be able to tell she’s there if the elevator starts moving, even if we can’t see her?”

“But it looks like the elevator is moving...?”

“*We’re in front of the direct elevator. It’s moving.*”

“*Roger. We’re going in once the doors open.*”

Staaaare.

“*We’re on the top floor, but there’s no one inside. Over.*”

“Roger... How long are we keeping this going?”

“Until we find her, probably. Maybe we should cover the stairs too?”

“Another group is on top of that... Good work today, Okazaki-san.”

“You too. What’s with all the security everywhere?”

“Secretary Angela got really eager for us to find Lady Runa’s friend, but it sounds like she already broke through the underground level and first floor.”

“Ah, I’ve heard about her before. If someone evil had that power, they would probably use it to become a terrorist. Can I take the elevator with you?”

“Of course.”

Ding.

“...It’s hard not knowing if you’re even around. But I guess I might as well say this out loud, just in case. I bet some money on you, so do your best. If you’re not here, I’ll look like a real idiot...”

Ding.

“Good work today, Okazaki-san. Regarding oil futures in the Middle East...”

“The NASDAQ today has been...”

“The theme for today’s briefing is...”

Trot, trot, trot... Clang, clang, clang, clang...

“*We’re in front of the stairs. Reporting to say that everything looks normal.*”

“Is she really going to show up? It sounds like they’re really panicking downstairs.”

“That’s hard to understand, isn’t it? We *were* ordered not to let anyone

through, though."

"Reporting to all units. The target may have entered the Moonlight Fund office below us."

"We're on alert, as the recordings of the automated doors showed a discrepancy."

"Send reinforcements to the stairs. That's probably where she's headed."

"Roger that."

"Line up, everyone! We're going up, so block the other side!"

"Understood!"

"...!"

Skip, skip.

"Who goes there? Who called me here...? Ah, it's you. Trying to scare the girl? Of course, of course. I'm a supernatural tanuki too. I love to startle people, and I won't complain, since you're the one who found me when I was collapsed in the city street. You have a good personality too."

...

"Eeeeeek!"

"What was that?!"

"It was on the floor below us. All units, hold your positions!"

"Something... Something just touched my neck..."

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp...

"I hear something coming down! Follow her!"

"Contact the lower floors!"

Staaare... Trot, trot, trot, trot... Knock, knock.

"Coming. Ah, Hotaru-chan! See, Angela-san? You can't beat Hotaru-chan when it comes to hide and seek!"

"...Yes, I've come to understand that all too well."

“Why does Asuka-chan look so proud...?”

Eh heh!

A few days later.

Box, box, box...

“My lady? Why are you hiding in a box?”

“Nooooo! I wanna have hide and seek powers like Hotaru-chan too!”

Glossary and notes

Supernatural tanuki: *Tanuki Bayashi*. By the way, *Pom Poko* came out in 1994.

Box: *Metal Gear Solid*.

Keika Railway Thread #38

[The young lady] Keika Railway Thread #38 [Our Railroad Queen]

1: Anonymous : 01/10/13 19:58 ID: ???

This is a thread to chat about the Heisei era Railroad Queen and the Keika Railway Group. Relax and discuss things like KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co., Kagawa Railroad, the Shikoku Shinkansen, and lines currently under construction.

2: Anonymous : 01/10/13 19:59 ID: ???

Second.

Here are the stops on the Shikoku Shinkansen route:

Shin-Sakaide - Shin-Chayamachi - Okayama - Aioi - Himeji - Nishi-Akashi - Shin-Kobe - Shin-Osaka

Express: o-----o-----o---o

Standard: o---o---o---o---o---o

3: Anonymous : 01/10/13 20:00 ID: ???

I think they said it's two trains an hour for both the express line and standard line.

Shin-Chayamachi Station really stands out.

They couldn't make this schedule if that station didn't have evacuation facilities...

Aren't they the train depot too?

4 Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:01 ID: ???

>>3

Yep. It's built in a good spot, since there's no junction point between the Seto Ohashi and Uno lines. They should be using it as a maintenance point for Okayama's trains.

They made it nice and convenient now since Shin-Sakaide Station means you

can cross-platform transfer to Shikoku's express train. It's great that you can wait at Shin-Chayamachi.

But why didn't they make Okayama a base for everything?

11: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:08 ID: ???

>>4

They say it's so people from Shikoku can get some experience.

They'll probably move the train car base to Tadotsu at some point.

18 Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:10 ID: ???

Whether it's the Shinkansen or more traditional train lines like Seto Ohashi and Uno, I'm sure no one thought that a bankrupt company like Kagawa Railroad would manage to hold on to them.

On top of that, who was dumb enough to leave management in the hands of Western Japan by going through the three kinds of train operators?

It sounds like Kagawa Railroad's return to profitability was decided by the Shinkansen platform usage fee from Shin-Osaka's station building L000OL

20: Anonymous : 01/10/13 20:11 ID: ???

What else are they supposed to do?! That area's got no people in it!!

29: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:15 ID: ???

Still, isn't this really just a bunch of hype about Shikoku's eighty-eight locations, centered around Hokkaido?

Pilgrims take AIRHO and stop at Tokushima Airport, see all the temples, take the Shinkansen to Osaka, then go home on AIRHO from Kansai or Itami Airport in what's basically a "living hell tour," right?

They're pilgrims, but they still end up in a living hell...

30: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:18 ID: ???

>>29

It's all that TV show's fault.

That show's also why Hokkaido and Karafuto are going through an udon craze

LOL

32: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:19 ID: lunakeikain

>>18

Back then, they supposedly said, "We'll lend them to Western Japan and have them help us secure lines for Shikoku," but Tokai wasn't just going to stand by and watch right before the collapse, so they stole from them, platforms and all ROFL

In exchange, they connected in Okayama to the eight-car express from Hiroshima and were able to go to Tokyo with a sixteen-car train, which seems good...

>>29

Then there's that Takamatsu-Tokyo night bus that Kagawa Railroad operates. Apparently, the young lady got interested and bought a ticket to write her summer research paper on it. She took her secretary with her as an attendant and ended up having a terrible time. The attendant demanded they prepare a luxury setup, or something like that.

It sounds like the people of Kagawa who use that night bus owe the TV show and the secretary a lot.

A photographer from the show was the one who took the pictures of the girl and secretary looking so defeated. Someone said on the radio that he got in trouble for taking nothing but scenery pictures, despite both the young lady and secretary being so beautiful LOL

33: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:21 ID: ???

>>32

I knew that was why they docked at Okayama, but what's gonna happen with the Tokai sixteen-car train? Didn't Western Japan's high-speed train chase them out?

38: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:23 ID: ???

That wouldn't work. Tokai would go under without their Shinkansen.

40: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:31 ID: ???

Actually, I know about Keika and Shikoku being on that TV show, but why is Oita of all places building a railroad? It connects with Oita Airport, right?

41: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:32 ID: ???

>>40

Yufuin and Kurokawa Onsen are booming, so property around there is getting snatched up because of the bubble. Also, development permits just happened to be easier to get because of the World Cup, and it was in a hard to utilize place too. Supposedly that's why they're pretty much only running the airport line.

It's still under construction, but the big curve in front of Kitsuki Station is being split into three turns so the station can have a bus service, and they've only built stations at Oita Airport and the Kitsuki Station in the city. You start at Kitsuki Station and cross straight over the Yasaka River on the elevated section, into the city, then straight through the mountains until you reach Oita Airport.

Once they finish the single-track electrified line, Kyushu Imperial Railway will probably run a four-car 787 series as a limited express to the airport.

42: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:33 ID: ???

Here's the stops:

Oita Airport-Beppu-Oita

They found a clear solution... Wait, but won't Keika lose Yufuin, which they're after? Yufuin is in Kyuudai, and their main line is unelectrified.

43: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:34 ID: lunakeikain

>>42

I heard they're going to make their own KiHa 72 series and pay for it themselves. It'll have five cars, a luxury class, and maids on standby at all times. The trip should be about two hours or so.

48: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:35 ID: ???

>>43

Kyushu Imperial Railroad had servers in their cars, didn't they? Now that I think about it, the Shikoku Shinkansen also has a luxury class above the first-class cars, right?

51: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:38 ID: ???

Oita can make trains like these because their highway is a joke.

It closes because of fog when it rains, closes because of snow when it gets cold, and there's speed limits when it gets windy. What's the point of a highway with speed limits?

68: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:40 ID: lunakeikain

>>48

And that means people who come from Hiroshima because they want to see maids in Okayama can move freely in Shikoku. What a wonderful scene...

But those maids aren't sky marshals, they're train marshals.

69: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:41 ID: ???

>>68

Ah, because of the terrorist attacks? Didn't they start bombing Afghanistan?

I just hope we don't get hit with anything like that too.

70: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:43 ID: ???

Now that you mention it, weren't there more anthrax attacks very recently, after the ones from three weeks ago? I heard the US was in a big fuss over it. If that happened here, our distribution would totally collapse.

71: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:45 ID: ???

That's why more people are following in Keika's footsteps and using train marshals.

Hiding them as women is pretty clever.

72: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:50 ID: ???

And the Shikoku Shinkansen makes those train marshals do the in-car sales...

86: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:53 ID: ???

To think that in another car, they have things like anti-riot model guns with rubber bullets strapped to the walls. It's like they're on the Tohoku Joetsu Shinkansen.

87: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:54 ID: ???

We can see it when the Shinjuku Shinkansen's finished!

Word is that part of it is like an underground city or nuclear shelter...

88: Anonymous: 01/10/13 20:58 ID: ???

That's possible, considering the times.

Shin-Tokiwa Railway Company's station in Akihabara is probably going to be a maid heaven.

89: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:00 ID: ???

Speaking of hot topics, the extension and crowding of the Tozai line is getting crazy, but please don't forget about KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co. who managed to achieve peak chaos by extending the Soubu line and Etchujima branch line to connect with the Keiyo line!!!

90: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:01 ID: lunakeikain

>>89

They say the pro schedule planner threw in the towel because there was no way to extend the interim schedule.

The Tozai line is frantically trying to improve their route, but when will they be able to extend those schedules...?

94: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:02 ID: ???

They're really pouring crazy amounts of money into railroads.

It's not just the Shinkansen, but KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co. and Shin-Tokiwa Railway Company too, right?

I heard a rumor they might even pick up the Saitama subway as well.

100: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:05 ID: ???

>>94

They're really gonna buy that too?! They've already spent over a trillion yen! What's with these big investments?!

113: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:07 ID: ???

They're going to use all the easy money they made during the IT bubble, and everyone's saying Keika Railway construction might be supported by government-funded public works.

That's why, when a few local governments go to pay their respects at Nagata-cho or Kasumigaseki in Tokyo, they also make the pilgrimage to Keika Railway in Kudanshita.

117: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:09 ID: ???

Well, Keika Railway's the last big spender who can draw iron to water their own field right now.

Didn't they say something about concurrent conventional trains too?

119: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:11 ID: ???

You mean how Keika Railways is going to run a night train with two kinds of operators?

It's been decided that everything past Hachinohe will be divided into concurrent conventional lines, but is Keika going to manage the night trains to make operations smoother?

121: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:15 ID: ???

>>119

The Keika Group owns Dog Express and the Keika Pacific, and they work with Imperial Freight Railway Company for cargo and let the long-distance transportation drivers go. They deal in air cargo too, right?

130: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:24 ID: ???

>>121

Aren't they also making a new type of night train?

They have a low-cost airline, so it seems like they're putting way too much money into land and sea routes.

132: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:30 ID: lunakeikain

>>113

That's why they said the Shikoku Shinkansen would extend into Takamatsu, but Tokushima prefecture wants it to go all the way up to them, so they begged to have it stop not at Takamatsu Station but right before. Kagawa Prefecture and Takamatsu ended up getting pretty upset.

"You're gonna complain about our Shinkansen?!"

"Shut up! No more water from Yoshino River for you!"

"You eat too much udon!!"

"You're gonna complain about soul food?!"

That was the fight that broke out at Kudanshita Keika Tower...

Now, Ehime Prefecture has mostly figured out their prefectoral route, but they can't do much because of Kagawa Prefecture's situation. They have that argument in their minds and don't want to make an enemy of Tokushima Prefecture.

Kochi Prefecture? They're being left out as usual.

>>121

You mean AIRHO? Their big losses caused a bunch of arguments within the group, leading to the reorganization of the Keika Railway Group.

>>130

Supposedly, they started setting it up after they took a limited express night train on a trip to get udon and it left them deeply moved. It's a lot nicer than the night bus.

Their plan, thinking about the Kozuke departure at 9 p.m. and Aomori arrival at 9 a.m., is to have the train stop around Sendai at 5 a.m. without running night trains, and the reverse also happening at the same times.

It'll be equipped like a business hotel with all private rooms, breakfast, and coffee included. That'll make it more expensive than the night bus, but those layers of comfort are what will help it win.

133: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:33 ID: ???

>>132

Yeah, the night bus is cheap, so going around Tokyo-Nagoya-Osaka would have them stuck between planes and night buses.

138: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:38 ID: ???

The quiet headache for them is the Shinkansen. You don't need a night train if the first departure gets you to Shin-Osaka by 9 a.m.

The night bus has them beat in price too. Could they beat out the sleeper car train in the north, maybe?

140: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:40 ID: ???

Instead of beating it, they probably want to get a second line.

Everyone knows that Karafuto and Hokkaido are saturated with transit.

I hear lobbyists are also trying to set up talks for a new Hokkaido Shinkansen.

141: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:41 ID: ???

>>140

But everyone says public works projects are bad, and didn't some minister say it was a waste to invest so much money in railroads?

142: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:42 ID: ???

How ironic that his statement pissed off Keika Railway, who resorted to making a Shinjuku Shinkansen that apparently cost 2 trillion yen LOOOOL

143: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:44 ID: lunakeikain

>>141

Then, when that put them on the radar of the prime minister's office, they were labeled as opposition and got bullied in secret. It sounds like they're desperately fighting back, but how long will they hold out?

145: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:46 ID: ???

>>143

Huh? A private company like Keika getting bullied by the government?

150: Anonymous: 01/10/13 21:51 ID: lunakeikain

>>145

Hint: Keika Holdings. They're a former national policy maker with a public listing coming up, but they pay for most of Keika Railway's construction.

168: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:10 ID: ???

Ah, they must be worried about it becoming bad debt. They've put in 3 or 4 trillion yen by now, right? You really wouldn't want that to become an unpaid debt.

169: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:12 ID: ???

>>168

Huh? Isn't it being built with earnings from the Keika Group?

170: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:14 ID: ???

It can't all be paid with cash, right?

It's probably a case where their easy money is in stocks and hasn't been turned to cash yet, so they use the stocks as collateral for loans. They're a Japanese company that flourished during the bubble, but if those paper gains turn to paper losses, they'll collapse as fast as Super Taiei did before it got dissolved.

171: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:16 ID: ???

But Keika Railway takes in a lot of profit, so I don't think we need to worry.

KYOSHO Rapid Railway brought in about 10 billion yen, right?

172: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:18 ID: ???

>>171

But they're as much in the red as AIRHO.

AIRHO's losses came from profits going down in the third and fourth quarters, but they're only gonna lose customers this whole year, so who knows how bad those losses will get.

186: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:20 ID: ???

On that note, it's lucky that they're having the World Cup this year.

People say the Salt Lake City Olympics was used for political gain, but won't this mean more people coming into and out of the country to give them the boost they need?

202: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:22 ID: ???

I just remembered that Dog Express from the Keika Group is building a railroad in an interesting place.

203: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:24 ID: ???

You mean the cargo terminal they're putting on the reclaimed land in Hakata Bay?

Fukuoka complained that they were extending the Kashii line, which goes through the sea, up to the cargo terminal, but they called in some political favors to force it through. It has an interesting history.

205: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:25 ID: ???

Can't we do something about Fukuoka's Monroe Doctrine?

Didn't they get upset about the bus empire and threaten to discontinue the Tenjin Omuta line? I'm surprised they managed to make a deal.

210: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:26 ID: ???

Hint: Yokatopia and Solaria

213: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:27 ID: ???

Wasn't Fukuoka going to build an ark city because of their population increase from Northern Japan?

216: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:29 ID: ???

Supposedly, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism shut

them up by offering to make reclaimed land.

Current reclaimed land is going to get special deregulated zone privileges, so it'll become 24-hour cargo terminals. Dog Express' freight lines are being called "barter dealings," though.

219: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:31 ID: ???

Fukuoka has its airport to think of for development, so they can't build anything tall in the urban district. They're focusing their efforts on Momochi in the west to make a new urban center with high-rise buildings, and I'm sure there's no area that wants to get stuck with slums.

221: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:32 ID: ???

But slums won't go away without jobs, and Fukuoka has a lot of influence as a stopover for Asia.

227: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:34 ID: ???

The line will start at the manmade island cargo terminal, then go down the Kashii line to Kashii Station, then enter the Kagoshima main line and connect to the cargo terminal station of Imperial Freight Railway Company. Is that right?

I hear that Dog Express partnered with Imperial Freight Railway Company to get a train operator's license.

232: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:38 ID: lunakeikain

>>227

You need a type one operating license to go from the manmade island cargo terminal to the Kashii line.

That was where Fukuoka came in hot.

It depended on whether the manmade island development had a train station in the middle, so the plan was to stretch a station from the Miyajidake line, the bus empire.

They made a deal, but after they were treated so badly, getting the cooperation of the bus empire got caught up in red tape...

233: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:39 ID: ???

>>232

Oh nooo...

237: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:40 ID: ???

Is Keika also taking part in the artificial island building, Kashii subcenter redevelopment, and the Kyushu Imperial University relocation thing? Aren't they seriously pissed off at this point?

241: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:41 ID: ???

That's why Fukuoka Prefecture is pissed, and Fukuoka City isn't worried at all...

245: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:42 ID: ???

An artificial island freight line and *two* connecting railroads, one to Kyushu Imperial University and the other to Kitakyushu Airport? Do I have that right?

No wonder Fukuoka Prefecture owes Keika so much.

247: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:44 ID: ???

>>245

There's also the construction work to renovate Hiyamizu Tunnel on the Haruda line. What are they going to use that for?

254: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:48 ID: lunakeikain

>>247

The area around the Kagoshima main line is getting overcrowded from urbanization, particularly near Hakata, and that's supposedly why they let freight get away. Assuming that the Moji cargo terminal, as Kyushu's main freight location, is going to merge:

Nippo main line freight for Oita Prefecture and Miyazaki Prefecture.

Kagoshima main light freight for Fukuoka's urban area and the artificial island cargo terminal.

Chikuhou main line freight for shipments heading to Kumamoto Prefecture, Saga Prefecture, Nagasaki Prefecture, and Kagoshima Prefecture.

That's how they say they're going to split it up.

Dog Express says they're going to build a cargo terminal in Tusu, which is convenient for the Haruda line since they only ever did freight shipments in the first place.

255: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:50 ID: ???

Dog Express has really been getting rid of their long-haul trucks ever since they entered the Keika Group. I read in some article that between planes, boats, and railways, they're covered for mid-to long-distance travel, so they're making their drivers focus on shorter distances.

261: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:51 ID: ???

Truck driving is tough work. They've been saying there's a manpower shortage for a while now.

267: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:57 ID: ???

Now that you mention it, there's been a lot more trouble involving truck drivers lately.

Second-class citizens take those jobs, and I've heard news about missing trucks too.

268: Anonymous: 01/10/13 22:58 ID: ???

That's why the big logistics companies are putting navigation systems in their trucks. GPS tells them their locations, so the control center knows where they are. Wasn't Dog Express one of the first ones to get their drivers using cell phones and navigation systems?

271: Anonymous: 01/10/13 23:01 ID: ???

Now that I think of it, Dog Express built the system to carry air freight to urban areas on connected railroads. They can invest in high-tech equipment as much as they want.

273: Anonymous: 01/10/13 23:03 ID: ???

That must be why big logistics companies are trying to buy them.

The scale of their business works to their benefit, so if a company manages to

copy Dog Express' system completely, their costs will go way down. So why is Keika refusing?

280: Anonymous: 01/10/13 23:10 ID: lunakeikain

>>273

They have convenience stores in the Teisei Department Stores Group, so it looks like the strategy of setting up convenience stores changes completely if you're able to pay your own way.

Department stores and supermarkets are basically storage rooms for cities. They use the strategy of sending out deliveries from those storage rooms, so since Dog Express already pays their own way, they're a lifeline that connects those department stores and supermarkets to convenience stores.

287: Anonymous: 01/10/13 23:17 ID: ???

Other convenience stores are setting up combined distribution bases nearing high-speed IC. Can they really stay competitive?

293: Anonymous: 01/10/13 23:33 ID: lunakeikain

>>287

The “battle to the death” between these companies seems to have a pretty high survival rate.

People like being able to get their purchases from department stores and supermarkets at convenience stores, and it was always inconvenient to have to go back to the store to get your clothes altered.

Expenses for these convenience stores are high, but a plus is that they can get public institution payments for things like having ATMs.

295: Anonymous: 01/10/13 23:25 ID: ???

>>293

Those Keika Group “KeiCards” are really powerful.

They work as photo IDs in Tokyo, Hokkaido, and Karafuto, and other places are starting to accept them too.

They live up to their reputation as a huge conglomerate.

300: Anonymous 01/10/13 23:30 ID: lunakeikain

>>295

The stock market doesn't appreciate them, though...

313: Anonymous: 01/10/14 07:05 ID: ???

[Breaking News] A new passenger station is being set up on the Hakata Bay artificial island freight line! It connects Kaizuka Station directly to Kyushu Imperial Railway and the Fukuoka municipal subway!

According to the newspaper, the city of Fukuoka, Kyushu Imperial Railway, Imperial Freight Railway Company, and Dog Express held a joint press conference where they announced the construction of a new station on the artificial island, with direct routes to the subway, Kagoshima main line, and Kashii main line...

Glossary and notes

Oita's unusable highway: Not only does the elevation suddenly descend 734 meters between Yufuincho and Beppu, but there's also the risk of freezing at Mizuwake Pass in Fukuoka, making for a merciless journey. Even now that the Higashi Kyushu expressway is open, the merger point is at a high elevation, so it hasn't gotten much easier to use.

Bombing of Afghanistan: Began on October 7th, 2001. The fall of Kabul took place on November 13th, 2001.

Anthrax attacks: Occurred from September 18th, 2001, to October 9th, 2001. The world was shaken up, fearing that these were the next of the coordinated terrorist attacks, but the culprit was eventually revealed to be someone unrelated to terrorist organizations.

Drawing iron to water your own field: If you draw water from canals to water your field, then the iron refers to railways. In older times, from the Meiji era to the middle of the Showa era, politicians did everything they could to have railroads built in their local regions.

The Shikoku fight: This dispute caused the inscription on Sameura Dam to turn from “Shikoku Is One” to “The Life of Shikoku”...

The emotional night train ride: Sunrise Seto. Sunrise Izumo is also popular with visitors to Izumo Grand Shrine and customers traveling on business.

Artificial island on Hakata Bay: An island city. Kashii’s new urban center was being developed at the same time as this, and “Chihaya Station” would later become a sacred spot to the producers of a certain idol group.

Kyushu Imperial University’s relocation: Moving a university to Itoshima Peninsula was fine, but this took it out of the urban Fukuoka area, resulting in a temporary loss of prospective students. Railroad access to the school remains a problem.

The stock market not appreciating conglomerates: The conglomerate discount. Companies that control multiple businesses are rarely valued properly on the stock market. It’s easier for investors to comprehend a company with a focus on a single resource, and the pressure of specialty businesses being valued over conglomerates has often been a factor on the US stock market.

Chapter 8: One Day on a Talk Show

“WITH THIS RECENT cabinet reshuffle, the chief secretary has been replaced and the prime minister’s approval

rating has dropped sharply. We’ve also seen the chairman of foreign affairs resign, and the undersecretary and many other members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been removed. No one is walking away from this unscathed.

“However, in the middle of all this, there are a few people who’ve managed to avoid drawing the short straw.”

(A guest is angered by the announcer’s explanation.)

“How unfair. Who are these people?”

“Ambassadors and envoys from noble families.”

(Another guest interjects abruptly.)

“I don’t get those nobles. It’s like they’re untouchable.”

“These are the kinds of people who would be called nobles even in Europe. There are barons, viscounts, counts, marquesses, and dukes. Descendants of the daimyo in the Edo period, elder statesmen during the Meiji Restoration, the imperial court, and zaibatsu leaders were given these titles to hold.

“All right, then. Today we’re going to take a look at the daily lives of nobles that few people get to see.”

(The monitor shows a young girl running in the Akasaka Marathon.)

“Ah, this is the girl everyone’s been watching lately.”

“Wasn’t she the campaign model for Teisei Department Stores? She really sprinted through the last Akasaka Marathon.”

“Indeed. Her name is Keikain Runa. She leads the zaibatsu Keika Group and is

a daughter of the Keikain Dukedom.”

(The monitor displays the Keikain family crest along with a list of companies held by the Keika Group.)

“There’s so many!”

“There certainly are. The Keika Group is a zaibatsu that grew rapidly after the bubble burst, with total assets somewhere close to twenty trillion yen.”

“Twenty trillion! Isn’t that on the level of the national budget?!”

“It is. Some people criticize them for their close relationship with certain political administrations, but the company has constantly worked for the good of this country, with their handling of bad debts being one example.”

(An image of Keikain Runa chatting pleasantly with former Prime Minister Fuchigami at his official residence is shown on the monitor.)

“She built an especially close relationship with Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa and is referred to as the source of funding for the Izumikawa faction. She was put on the firing line when the deputy prime minister fell under suspicion.”

(The monitor shows Keikain Runa throwing her arms up in Izumikawa’s office during the House of Councilors election.)

“Huh?! Why is such a little girl involved in the investigations of politicians?”

“That’s related to the special noble privilege of diplomatic immunity, which we’ll be discussing today.”

(The monitor shows the words “diplomatic immunity.”)

“Diplomatic immunity is a special privilege which allows the heads of noble families to decide what happens to their own households. Though suspicion fell upon certain diplomats and envoys in the current Ministry of Foreign Affairs scandal, they avoided arrest for this very reason.”

“That doesn’t seem fair. So they can’t be punished?”

“There is, of course, a mechanism for handling them. It’s known as the Privy Council. Nobles used to belong to the House of Peers, which eventually

developed into the current House of Councilors. However, when the war ended and democracy progressed, the Diet was opened, and they attempted to continue with a separate system for themselves.

“Similar examples include the British upper house and, in the past, the French parliaments. The members of the Privy Council are referred to as the watchmen of the constitution, as they are an advisory committee for the emperor. They can also function as a proxy for the National Diet when the Diet is closed.”

“I see. But how does that relate to Keikain Runa, a girl from a dukedom, getting involved in political scandals?”

(Keikain Runa’s picture appears on the monitor. She’s singing opera this time.)

“After the war, the Privy Council left crimes of this level to be addressed within the families, and there are no examples of them punishing the perpetrators themselves. In other words, they protect the families by demanding they clean things up themselves. Now, if this girl were to do something wrong, it wouldn’t be the police, prosecutors, or judges who would punish her, but only her father, Duke Keikain Kiyomaro.”

(A picture of Duke Keikain Kiyomaro is shown on the monitor along with the words “head of the Keikain Dukedom.”)

“In other words, the parent is in charge of punishing the child? But there’s no way of knowing if they’re going easy on them.”

“Indeed, and that’s probably on purpose. The Keika Group has placed all of its assets in the hands of young Keikain Runa.”

“Whaaat?!”

(A diagram of the Keika Group’s financial ties appears on the monitor.)

“As you can see from this diagram, the Keika Group is united by the Moonlight Fund, headquartered on the west coast of the United States. In fact, the fund is owned by the girl herself.”

“That can’t be right! No one would believe an elementary schooler owns a company worth almost twenty trillion yen!”

“On top of that, suppose she did something wrong! Her father would be the

only person who could punish her. How can we believe that punishment will be fair and just?!"

"Exactly. Diplomatic immunity is being used in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' secret funds scandal so that the nobles won't be arrested."

"Can't anything be done about this? We're standing by and watching injustice in action."

(The monitor displays a photo of Keikain Runa ignoring the son of an opposing party politician as he gives a righteous speech.)

"The Koizumi administration is prepared to go up against opposition forces, so we can assume he'll seek reform in this area. However, the Privy Council reform currently in place is being led by Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, their chairman. And now that former Prime Minister Fuchigami has recovered, he's received the title of count and belongs to the Privy Council as well. The current Privy Council is a stronghold for these opposition forces the Koizumi administration speaks of..."

Glossary and notes

Britain's upper house: Governmental affairs were managed by the lower house, while the upper house was the constitutional court, functioning the same as a supreme court. However, when the United Kingdom joined the EU, control was transferred to the UK Supreme Court.

France's parliaments: The places that established the foundation of the House of Bourbon and allowed clerical nobles to participate. They were abolished during the French Revolution.

Chapter 9: The Lady's Defensive War

“Do you know how much money you'd need to save this country?”

I had gone to visit Professor Kanbe in his seminar room for a bit of fun when he presented me with that question. Seeing I was cocking my head, he began to write out an equation on the whiteboard.

“At times like these, my lady, you start by writing whatever numbers you can think of. For example, if you need 4 million a year to live, and you live for eighty years, then that's a total of 320 million yen. Multiply that by Japan's population of 140 million and you get 44.8 quadrillion yen. However, the country's assets are just over a quadrillion yen.”

“That's not nearly enough.”

“You'd think so, right? There's a trick to these numbers, though.”

“A trick?”

I cocked my head once again. The sheer overwhelming and persuasive power of the numbers left me lost for words. Looking at the numbers, I'd assumed it was impossible. If a year of life

cost 4 million, you could probably live comfortably so long as you didn't overindulge, but it would be impossible to gather enough money to save the country.

“It's simple enough. You just have to create that much money.”

“Won't that cause inflation?”

A mischievous smile formed on Professor Kanbe's face when I asked that. His next words would spark an epiphany in me.

“Then what about using leverage like they do on the financial markets? If you gather all of Japan's assets and apply fifty times the leverage, you get fifty quadrillion. See? Now you have enough.”

He was right. International money markets already held empty money that had been turned to data—well into the quadrillions. But that made it all the more puzzling.

“Can you actually do that?”

“Probably not. But isn’t it a fascinating thought experiment?”

With that, the professor chuckled. I decided to ask him a question that had suddenly popped into my mind.

“If the money is right there and we have a way to do it, why don’t we do what will make everyone happy?”

Professor Kanbe lit a cigarette and began to answer. The maids didn’t like the smell of tobacco, but I didn’t want to be so arrogant as to ban him from smoking. I was the one who’d asked to learn from him, after all.

“That’s a tough question. You should try thinking about that concept some time. What is this happiness you speak of? The answer changes depending on the definition.”

I thought about it as I drank the milk tea Ichijou Erika had made. Indeed, I felt that a life without luxury items like tea couldn’t be a happy one at all. However, I’d been looking at it from the point of view of my own life, which could never be the standard.

“Let’s see. I’ll use the family life of a long-running TV anime as my criteria for happiness.”

“Good idea. It’s important to have perspectives like that when you set your standard, so that anyone can accept your premise. Some people say the life they live on that anime would be difficult these days too, though.”

One house was a two-family home in the metro area with a garden, and the other was a one-family home in the greater Tokyo metro area. That was a life that felt like a distant dream in my past existence. Even in these times, it was still half a dream.

“Setting up the standard like this starts to make it clear why not everyone can be happy. There are physical reasons, for one. The entire population can’t all

live in the city together. There are also handicaps, and that part is very important.”

Professor Kanbe wrote the word “handicap” on the board and circled it. I could really tell that he wasn’t treating me like I was a child. That was just one reason why I felt so comfortable around him.

“What handicaps, for example?”

“The physical kinds would probably be easy for you to understand. When people can’t fit in the cities, a game of musical chairs starts up, but not at the same time for everyone. The ones who already live there have to give up their chairs, and if they don’t, they’re automatically the winners. That’s the handicap.”

Professor Kanbe was great at teaching classes. The way he gave clear examples that students could picture with ease, like he was doing now, was probably one of the main reasons. The professor then moved on to the main topic.

“Neoliberalism. This country has an image of personal responsibility, but its true essence is in the way it gives handicaps. To put it differently, it’s about equality of opportunities and results.”

We were there that day to talk about neoliberalism, which wasn’t exactly a normal topic of education for an elementary school student.

“As I mentioned before, giving everyone in the country four million yen would be equality of results. That is what’s called communism or socialism. Around the time you were born, the Eastern Bloc countries failed the pilot study for these systems in a major way.

“Neoliberalism also comes from a model of struggling for existence. ‘I’ll give you a chance, but it comes with a handicap.’ That’s the true nature of the philosophy.”

It was natural, in a way, which made the law of struggling for existence so much more unforgiving. I understood this, but the question slipped from my mouth anyway.

“But isn’t that unfair?”

“Sure. It’s based on the premise that people aren’t equal.”

So that was the way he thought about things. Professor Kanbe placed his cigarette in the ashtray, then spoke of the struggle for survival.

“Many animals kill and eat the weak of the pack if they won’t be able to make it through winter otherwise. That sacrifice is a way of reducing the cost of their food for the continuation of the species. Do you know why humans protect those who are weak?”

“Because humans are special?”

“No, it’s because we want to believe we’re special.”

The conversation had turned to the subject of me, because I *was* special. This man’s discussions were truly interesting. It was why he was in such high demand from TV stations.

“‘I’m special.’ One extreme reason for thinking this is the act of saving our kind. When there are personal interests alongside social inequality, the strong may save the weak as a clear sign that they believe they are special.”

Professor Kanbe wrote two words on the whiteboard, a four-character idiom that read “privileged class.”

“The privileged classes are generally always such people. They don’t just prey on the weak, but they also donate to them because they couldn’t exist without them. Those people are called nobles in this country. That’s why I want you to be sure you memorize this term before you leave today.”

The professor wrote new foreign words with a red marker this time.

“*Noblesse oblige.*”

“Someday, you’ll probably come face-to-face with the weak, and you’ll try to save them. But you only have two hands, and that’s not enough to save all of Japan.

“Come to understand that weak person thoroughly. Decide if you want to save them or force their sacrifice, then select as many of the weak as your hands can hold. If you do that, you’ll be able to remain ‘special’ for some time.”

I knew what lay ahead. One such weak person was going to bring about my

downfall. If I was going to go down in history as the loser no matter how much I struggled, I needed to be a good loser at the very least. That probably wasn't the point of Professor Kanbe's lecture today, but it was still very useful to me.

Whether or not he knew what was on my mind, Professor Kanbe wrapped up the class with these words:

"Noblesse oblige. From the bottom of my heart, I'm praying that you become a true noble."

These days, secret meetings between politicians were held at members-only clubs instead of the traditional Japanese restaurants. These were often located in high-class hotels, so they were said to be easier for young Diet members and ministers to attend. Professor Kanbe, who had been invited to one such members-only club by Minister Takenaga, called out to his host when he spotted him.

"Sorry, Minister. My TV taping ran late."

"It's fine. For the time being, let's just make a toast now that we've met each other again."

They drank a few glasses of amber-colored liquid before moving to the main topic of discussion. Minister Takenaga signaled his readiness with his eyes, causing the guard and secretary with him to bow and leave the room.

"So, did you call me here because of the young lady? I'm required to keep things confidential, of course, so there's not much I can tell you."

"That's fine. I want you to know this—because she might turn against us."

Minister Takenaga emphasized his words somewhat forcefully due to the effects of the alcohol. Professor Kanbe was a bit surprised to learn that even the minister feared getting on the young lady's bad side, but the host didn't notice that look on his guest's face.

"The most important political matters of the next Diet session are the complete elimination of bad debts and the introduction of current-value accounting. There will also be promotion of public stock listings for financial

institutions.”

Every last one of these policies was something that could make the young lady turn against them. Except for Super Taiei, which was in the process of dissolving, the main focus of bad debt disposal was on the general contracting industry. CEO Ichijou of Keika Holdings, one of the young lady’s main clerks, had strongly opposed current-value accounting as a private member of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy. Then there was the last matter, which clearly referred to Keika Holdings.

This robust policy course forced Professor Kanbe to sober up.

“But that’s...”

“I know. That’s why I wanted to ask you a few things. The world is currently at the mercy of the young lady’s whims. It sounds like, at the very least, the Prime Minister isn’t going to allow that.”

The Koizumi administration had been bolstered by high approval ratings, but they dropped after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs scandal and the fight with the secretary general. On top of that, the economy had suffered from autumn to the end of the year after the IT bubble in the United States burst.

Still, the good approval ratings came from the construction of unofficial diplomatic lines with the US centered around Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. And while the economy may have suffered, strong public investment in things like the Shinjuku Shinkansen, at a stock price of 17,500 yen, was also a factor.

The young lady was at the center of this construction. Professor Kanbe couldn’t help but get a serious look on his face.

“With no reforms, no growth,” said Minister Takenaga. “The prime minister is going to use that slogan to start picking fights with people.”

“Is he out of his mind?!”

The professor couldn’t help but cry out in response to Minister Takenaga’s words, and the minister had to gulp down more of his liquor.

“The US has unofficially told us that they can’t overlook the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs' dysfunction any longer. They also gave that 'axis of evil' speech. They're serious about this."

The two men weren't so stupid as to overlook this reference to Iraq. The country had turned to a full wartime regime, and the young lady was an obstacle in their way. That was why Minister Takenaga expressed his clear-cut opinion.

"Having the two of them at the very top during a war would be a total nightmare. Unless we build a top-down system, we might end up losing the next war. Besides..."

Times like these were the only occasions when Minister Takenaga's face softened into an awkward smile. It was impossible to tell if that came from his true emotions or the effects of the alcohol.

"The prime minister says he doesn't want the girl dealing with any more matters of blood. She's still young enough that she needs to be protected."

"I told her to leave this country because it's going to kill her talents."

"Just killing them would be better. She's going to be unfairly judged. At the very least, that probably wouldn't happen in the United States."

The United States was a multicultural society of immigrants and a country centered around hard work. Money was the only way of measuring a person there. While the top elites of the country probably earned money because they wanted it, they knew all too well that it allowed them to keep their place in society, which was why they continued to greedily build their fortunes. The money wasn't meant to be spent on their livelihoods, it was the reason they existed and a total obsession.

"We're rich. That means we're successful and outstanding. And that means we must be happy."

This syllogism had convinced much of the US. It was an ideal that had been exported to the rest of the world after the globalization that followed the Cold War.

"It would be different in Europe. The blue bloods have the people locked up in the birdcage even more than they do here. People in the United States can gain

approval simply by earning money, so it's probably an easier place to live than Japan.

"The young lady is maintaining and operating gated communities throughout the US, including one in the state of Florida. If she felt like it, she could escape. Don't forget that."

Minister Takenaga nodded at Professor Kanbe's words. At the very least, the professor was the first person who saw that the young lady was mixed up in matters that affected the entire country.

However, he didn't fully comprehend what it meant to give that information to Prime Minister Koizumi through Minister Takenaga.

The public was growing excited about the World Cup that June. As for politics, the ruling party had erupted into a fierce internal conflict. Minister Takenaga had put the financial restoration programs on the chopping block. The main points were as follows:

1. Conduct more thorough assessments of assets based on market values.
2. Unite the divisions of major creditors.
3. Publicly announce the differences between the banks' self-assessments and the FSA investigations' assessments.
4. If necessary, make clear the provisions for using public funds, as well as examinations of public fund injections.
5. Adjust assessments of deferred tax assets.
6. Issue business improvement orders to banks who fail to achieve their management restoration projects.
7. Introduce current-value accounting with these programs as a prerequisite.

These could be called natural programs to add, but in a world that had mostly passed the peak of bad debt disposals, people wondered whether it was

necessary to go this far. With stock prices hovering around nineteen thousand yen, companies like Keika Holdings, Imperial Iwazaki Bank, and Futaki Yodoyabashi Bank had mostly completed their bad debt disposal, raising questions about whether they truly needed public funds. But no one complained about safety nets for places like Honami Bank, which had been exposed for its lack of internal control after a major system failure; Gowa Osan Bank, which was currently a scene of carnage over bad debt disposal; and the regional and second regional banks that were just beginning their bad debt disposal. The problem was the addition of current-value accounting as an addendum. That was the real bomb. Bad debts that could previously have been hidden with book values would come to the surface all at once. It also meant that banks that had already finished their bad debt disposal might be forced to return to it again.

“We’ll do whatever we can to dispose of bad debts to make sure that situation doesn’t arise. We’ll also use public funds to ensure that no management crises develop. Instead of ignoring the problem, this is where we’ll handle it for good, so that the economy of Japan can be steered toward renewal!”

The Koizumi administration saw their approval ratings plummet during the cabinet reshuffle, but they still maintained a base of 40 percent approval and began cutting into all sorts of vested interests under the banner of reform.

While the bad debt disposal was paraded through the media, the administration set up a committee to explore the privatization of public highways, which allowed him to cut into the ones that were strongholds for anti-Koizumi sentiment. Prime Minister Koizumi knew how to pick a fight, that was for sure.

General contracting companies were also being put on the firing line around this time over things like the Civil Rehabilitation Law and debt forgiveness, which meant that they couldn’t make any moves. Seven general contracting companies had been disposed of so far, adding up to a total of 1.23 trillion yen. It was impossible to deny that, in a way, this was an advertisement for the cabinet that gained them more approval.

“I’m calling for major banks to reduce their bad debts by half leading up to

March of 2005. We are also considering the possibility of injecting banks that fall behind on debts with public funds in a nationalization process.”

Minister Takenaga was making clever use of television to go on the offensive. When they heard his proposals, banks were nothing but astonished. Naturally, we weren’t let off the hook either.

“Keika Holdings eliminated their bad debts from a state of borderline nationalization. We want them to consider a public listing as a symbol of zaibatsu dissolution and completion of bad debt disposal.”

He’d called us out by name. Ichijou called a press conference in response to this situation and mounted a thorough resistance.

“I won’t deny that we could have been described as nationalized, but we’re a private company now and nothing more. I question the government’s desire to change that course.”

Anti-Koizumi factions tried to use this as an opportunity to get the Keika Group on their side, but with Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa in the cabinet and unable to publicly make any anti-Koizumi moves, this effort failed. That was what I wanted as well.

“Are you sure about this? If you make a move, you’ll just get sabotaged.”

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa couldn’t hide the concern in his voice over the phone. National Diet sessions in Japan usually ended at the start of July, and this was the time for them to speed up talks on important matters with an extension on the horizon.

The sabotage mentioned by Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was a reduction of the Diet’s extension, the goal being the rejection of financial restoration programs and related bills. I responded to him in a cheery voice.

“Taking out the minister will cause a backlash that reaches the prime minister too. I’ll hand over the achievements and step back myself.”

“Even after talking with you about these things for so long, sometimes I still wonder why you’re willing to sacrifice yourself. Yet you always achieve more than you give away.”

I agreed with his thoughts. Who was it who said that if you wanted to gain something, you had to be the one to grant something first?

That was the way of life I currently adhered to.

“The prime minister is a wounded beast right now. Friend or foe, he’s not going to go easy on anyone who stands against him.”

I was referring to the former Secretary General Katou, who was bound to Prime Minister Koizumi out of friendship—and self-interest as well.

The former secretary general had taken responsibility for suspicions of tax evasion at his former office as well as misappropriation of political funds, eventually having to resign from his post.

This resulted in a sharp decline in approval ratings and a purge of both enemies and allies. In the end, the current Prime Minister Koizumi had few people left to oppose him. With his foothold solidified, the wounded beast kept his eyes on me.

“My lady! Please wake up!”

Tokitou Aki-san, a vice-head maid, woke me up in a panic. It was 5:30 in the morning. Still half asleep, I looked at Aki-san, wondering what was going on. She wore a grave expression as she spoke.

“The Tokyo Public Prosecutor’s special investigations department says that they’re going to investigate Tachibana-san and Keika Railway. There’s going to be a compulsory search.”

That left me with no choice but to wake up.

The investigation was taking place because former Secretary General Katou’s company representatives were suspected of tax evasion, which had forced him to resign.

There were many cases where organizations in charge of developments leaked information to acquaintances, allowing those acquaintances to purchase the land cheaply and sell it for a profit once the development brought the price up. It was what my father had done with Far Eastern Developments and their

construction of a chemical complex in Sakata.

Far Eastern Developments applied for corporate rehabilitation and went insolvent, but they were later absorbed by Keika Railway during the Keika Group's rapid expansion and became Keika Development. The Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's special investigations department was really targeting Keika Development as a part of Keika Railway.

This was getting down to the crux of the issue. The complex in Sakata had been planned during the bubble, but when the office representatives bought at the height of the market, they approached Keika Development with the same price that the land had been worth in the bubble, forcing Keika Development to pay a steep price.

This could be seen as an-under-the-table payout to former Secretary General Katou, but carelessness came into play when he committed tax evasion by failing to report profits on the sale.

The office representatives had dodged taxes in many other ways, sparking a scandal that forced the secretary general to resign. In other words, we'd been struck by a stray bullet from former Secretary General Katou's problems.

"Why?! Why is the Keikain family invoking diplomatic immunity over this?! It's like they're saying there's a reason to suspect us!"

My wail echoed in the dining room at breakfast. It was six in the morning. At the base of Kudanshita Tower, underneath the bright blue sky, there was a small gathering of reporters who'd already heard the news. Tachibana answered my question, though it looked like it pained him to speak.

"The Tokyo Public Prosecutor's office isn't going after former Secretary General Katou. I believe they're digging up the old issue of Far Eastern Development's collusion with the East that ended up buried under diplomatic immunity."

If Keika Development ended up in the spotlight over this, attention would be forced back onto my father's collusion with the East. That was why the Keikain family was left with no choice but to cover it up with diplomatic immunity.

"The secretary general resigned from his post. I only hope the public will be

convinced that the responsibility ends there.”

I couldn’t share Tachibana’s optimism. If that were the case, former Secretary General Katou’s resignation would have stopped this investigation. The public might not only fail to accept that responsibility had been taken—they might even fan the flames.

However, even without my consent, the diplomatic immunity rights were going to be invoked. It was the will of Duke Kiyomaro, the head of the family and my foster father, leaving me with no right to criticize the choice.

“By the way, how exactly does diplomatic immunity work?”

This seemed like a good opportunity to ask Tachibana. I found myself dumbstruck over what turned out to be a colossal privilege.

The number of people who belong to a family and the way that status is determined is decided in accordance with their rank, with the entrusted person carrying out judgment as determined by family rules. A report and review of the incident is then reported to the Privy Council. Since the nobles include former daimyo, the allocation of people depends on a family’s rank, and a duke would be allowed quite a large number.

Of course, the families were always falling behind their quotas, and it had become normal for families to incorporate criminals such as tax evaders in exchange for a kickback. Tachibana believed that this case would end as a typical example of a crime concealed by the nobles.

“However, criticism in the mass media has increased over the past few years, so most cases are reviewed by the Privy Council, which sometimes results in the perpetrator not being protected.”

An example of this outcome was a person indicted for tax evasion who tried to depend on a destitute baron to obtain diplomatic immunity. They reported to the Privy Council that the subject had been tried under house rules, only for the subject to get attacked by the media for their lavish lifestyle. The government pressured the Privy Council into overturning the house rules judgment, resulting in the tax evader being removed from the family and arrested in the end.

“Yes, I’m here in front of Kudanshita Keika Tower! There’s been a new development in the case of former Secretary General Katou’s tax evasion! The representatives of his office are under suspicion of evading taxes related to a land deal with Keika Development in Sakata, Yamagata Prefecture, and the special investigations department of the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor’s Office will now be conducting a compulsory investigation of Keika Railway. However, it’s believed that the Keikain family, the owners of Keika Railway, will be invoking diplomatic immunity...”

It was 7:00 a.m. Every TV was abuzz with this news. Between the Diet member scandal that occurred this year and the controversy involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the nobles were already under a lot of criticism, and now the issue of diplomatic immunity was returning to the public eye. Some form of purification was being demanded, even of the Keikain family. I had a feeling that Tachibana would be forced to resign.

“Huh?!”

“My lady? What’s the matter?”

I smiled at the worried Aki-san, told her that nothing was wrong, and took a sip of my grape juice. I’d figured it out.

This was an attack from Prime Minister Koizumi himself, and his ultimate target was me.

“My lady, the response team from the opposition Democratic League Party wants to speak with you.”

“Send them away. They won’t be any help.”

Things had taken a very bad turn. The media was launching attacks left and right, highlighting the repeated use of nobles’ special privileges and accusing zaibatsu of being above the law. It was the opposition party, the Democratic League Party, that got on board right away. The opposition had already been questioning the ruling party’s platform of “removing the special rights of nobles” and “zaibatsu breakups,” so having them connected to our side would only be used as a weapon for the mass media to bash us with. The Koizumi administration was already following the will of the people.

Currently, Prime Minister Koizumi was good at reading the desires of the independents, who were practically a majority now, and his ability to bring those desires to reality was how he'd managed to maintain power. On top of that, the scandals involving both the ruling and opposition parties had resulted in the prime minister's opponents being wiped out across the board.

"I'm curious. If I fled to America, how many days do you think I could survive?"

Angela, a pro in that regard, delivered her response bluntly and with a blank look on her face.

"If you ran away now, Eva would kill you before you even crossed the international date line. I'm pretty sure of that."

"That sounds right..."

I was still receiving special treatment as "a person important to our allied country." Once that treatment ran out, the United States wouldn't forget the huge speculative battle I'd started when the IT bubble collapsed at the start of the year. Hegemonies were always going to take revenge.

"Why do you think this is happening now?"

I looked around at everyone in the emergency meeting in the Moonlight Fund's operation room.

Anisha thought about it and raised her hand.

"Let's see. If the goal were to get rid of you, I'd call the whole thing 'half-hearted.'"

That was an answer to be expected of a former KGB agent. Her immediate interpretation of a political battle as a matter of life and death was rather heavy.

"They're going after Tachibana-san from Keika Railway, and Ichijou-san is being criticized over Keika Holdings' public listing too. Yet Toudou-san from Akamatsu Corporation, who can't really do anything right now because of the mergers, and Keika-Iwazaki Pharma, where Duke Keikain Kiyomaro-sama

himself serves as president, aren't being attacked at all, which is a good thing. They're only trying to cut off your own functioning limbs, my lady."

At least they weren't aiming for the ruin of the Keikain family itself. The prime minister was after people, not money. Kitagumo Ryouko, a former Northern Japanese government intelligence agent, added on to Anisha's explanation.

"The Izumikawa faction, which is basically your group of allies within the government, is stuck in the cabinet and can't make any moves. On top of that, the Koizumi Administration has reined in the ministers, meaning their factions have less influence. You could plot a rebellion right now and you would only end up like former Secretary General Katou."

The prime minister still had approval ratings of 40 percent even after they dropped. It would take guts to go up against him. Again, losing the anti-Koizumi politicians in this year's scandals had been a fatal wound. It meant there was no one around to stop him from forcing his policies through.

"I have an unpleasant report for you, my lady."

It was Okazaki Yuuichi who stood up and spoke. I noted Angela and Eva's harsh glares at him and knew they must not have forgiven him yet. *Well, it's only been half a year...*

"It's about the work in Bahrain. The Cabinet Information Research Office has been sniffing around. I believe they're onto you."

"Ah..."

I dropped my head down onto the table. There was one thing the prime minister had every right to be furious with me over, and that was my involvement in the upcoming war in Iraq.

It would be no good to have an elementary schooler running that sort of thing instead of the government. I wanted to complain that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was already in a state of dysfunction after their scandal and the turmoil within the ruling party, but I kept it to myself. Instead, I tried to think of a way to break the deadlock.

"Is there anything we can do?"

The person who unsparingly shot down my hopeful question was Tachibana, the man at the center of the controversy himself. Matter-of-factly, he rejected my desire.

“It’s clear that the prime minister only has one goal in mind: ‘Make the girl behave.’ I don’t think there’s anything more than that.”

That was when everyone but Okazaki glared at me with scornful eyes. *Hang on, Okazaki. You’re my accomplice. Can’t you save me? Don’t look away!*

“My lady, all of us, including Tachibana, acknowledge all the work you’ve done for the Keika Group and the country itself. However, this needs to be said: why don’t you take a break for a while?”

Ah, that’s right. Even before the collapse of the IT bubble and the speculative maneuvers, Tachibana and the others had been prepared to settle and close accounts.

In other words, this attack from Prime Minister Koizumi was a natural step. It was an *“I told you so”* in retribution. Tachibana spoke for everyone when he made a plea for surrender.

“My lady, please withdraw from Iraq.”

I realized that the prime minister wasn’t my only enemy in this case—Tachibana was against me too. Angela and Eva didn’t respond to his definitive statement either, which meant that both the United States and Japan had decided to remove me together. The United States had found a reason to abandon me, even if it meant losing support in the primaries.

“Is that what the whole world wants?”

“I don’t believe that’s something for an elementary school child to feel.”

I wasn’t going to be imprisoned, nor were my assets and status being taken away. Compared to the usual condemnations and banishments of villainesses, this was a rather lukewarm outcome. However, I’d been forced to reflect on my conclusive loss this year. Prime Minister Koizumi hadn’t put his moves to waste.

“All major megabanks will be injected with public funds so that financial institutions may bring their bad debt disposal to an end.”

"The government will also establish a system for purchasing stock holdings that have led to bad debts."

"This fall, we will present a bill to the National Diet to outlaw the recent use of nobles' special privileges in criminal cases."

The independents backed Prime Minister Koizumi in these attacks. That was when he spoke on television of his highest aspiration.

"We aim to enter discussions with Russia about the Northern Karafuto Crisis and establish a peace treaty."

I was having a dream—a dream about the game I hadn't seen in so long. It was a scene I loved from a game I loved.

"Why?! Why are you all agreeing?! Do you know what you're doing?!"

I... No, Keikain Runa was in high school, screaming in the meeting room. The class committees—elementary school, junior high, and high school—had split into yeses and noes for whether the school rules should be changed. It involved the special privileges held by people like nobles and zaibatsu children in this school, with the majority made up of scholarship students who'd reached their boiling point over the discrimination they'd faced. Takanashi Mizuho was the face of this reform, and since this was a dream, I could see the panicking Keikain Runa too.

Eiichi-kun, the student council president, was running the meeting. To his left and right were Yuujirou-kun, the secretary, and Mitsuya-kun, the treasurer. They silently stared at my empty seat. I, the vice president, had stood up to confront Takanashi Mizuho.

The school building where we were having this meeting was surrounded by scholarship students crying out at us, giving Takanashi Mizuho, the heroine, a clear advantage. This was an otome game, so naturally there were multiple endings, but the biggest focus of all three years of high school was this issue of scholarship student discrimination.

This scene told the story of Keikain Runa and Takanashi Mizuho's showdown for power.

“I promised we would improve! We even tried to make things more convenient! You! And you! And *you*! You were all lying when you said you’d join me!”

As privileged nobles and children of zaibatsu had never been required to work as class representatives, the class committee had become a stronghold of reformist scholarship students.

But Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, Mitsuya-kun, and I had probably been chosen for the high school executive spots because we had skills above those of the privileged classes. The game most likely wanted things to work out that way too.

As a class committee member, Keikain Runa formed her own faction, split the opposition, and was frantically trying to find points of compromise between her own interests and those of the reformists. Her confrontation with Takanashi Mizuho was a way of stealing the boys for herself, but it was also a difference in positions—the heroine versus the villainess.

I didn’t hate this scene, and that was why I could realize something now. Keikain Runa was a reformist despite being a noble. Still, the game made her the loser in the end.

“Member Takanashi’s proposed school rule reform has resulted in a tied vote. The tiebreaker will be the president.”

The president. In other words, it went to the very student council president who had just spoken—Teia Eiichi. A smile of relief formed on Keikain Runa’s face. Well, of course it did. Teia Eiichi came from a zaibatsu family, and he was also Keikain Runa’s fiancé. She never thought that he would betray her. That only made her all the more unprepared for his next words.

“As president, I have decided to adopt this proposal.”

Between the look on Keikain Runa’s face, the cheers of the students, and the smile of Takanashi Mizuho, it was the perfect triumph of good over evil for the climax of the story. That was why Teia Eiichi’s words after the meeting were so particularly memorable.

“Keikain, both of us are behind the times.”

Teia Eiichi's words made perfect sense to me, perhaps because it was a dream.

That's right, I don't mind losing. Not to Takanashi Mizuho and not to Teia Eiichi.

Not to Koizumi Souichirou.

They were all first-rate actors—stars, even. If I lost to them after giving it everything I had, I would simply have to give up. However, the one thing I didn't want to defeat me was posterity. Eras of time were like gigantic waves that destroyed everything in their path, no matter how much you struggled or how hard you worked. The time was right in the middle of the global financial crisis.

It stole all the power from the zaibatsu, and nobles had disappeared as opposition forces some time ago.

It was the gray-haired politician, Prime Minister Koizumi, who crushed their power.

“...A dream? Or is this whole life a dream?”

I opened my eyes. Still in my child's body, I sat up in my bed in Kudanshita Keika Tower. When I opened the curtains, I was met with the sight of Tokyo underneath a clear blue sky.

“At the very least, if that time does come, I'll have to play the role of the loser a bit better.”

I certainly didn't hate Prime Minister Koizumi. In fact, when he took power, I thought I might be able to cut corners a bit.

The economy was in trouble, and I knew what kinds of problems awaited him in the future.

My memories were probably rosier than reality, which made me want to rely on them. Like many others, I believed that he could destroy the sense of hopelessness we felt. I was still prepared to go up against him, but I'd never thought he would aim for me personally with so much intensity.

“Good morning, my lady. Are you awake?”

“Good morning. Yuka-san today, I see? Remind me what my schedule's like.”

“After school, you’ll be visiting the prime minister’s residence as a goodwill ambassador for Hokkaido to sell the idea of the prefecture’s goods to him.”

There was a handshaking ceremony, as well as a chance to ask some questions directly to Prime Minister Koizumi. What was it that had incurred his wrath? Was I not keeping up with the times? I was sure I would find my answer.

“This is delicious. If the food’s this good, I should go to Hokkaido myself to have some.”

“Please do. Hokkaido’s delicious food will be waiting for you, Prime Minister.”

The two of us kept smiles plastered on our faces for the sake of the media. The pictures and videos from this meeting would probably end up drowned out by celebrity news. Once that was done and the reporters were chased out, we got down to the real topic.

“Have I done something to upset you?”

“It’s an adult’s job to stop children when they’re heading in the wrong direction.”

“Wrong direction?”

I’d thought I was headed for the right outcome in the shortest possible time, but Prime Minister Koizumi didn’t hesitate to disagree. He was both a powerful person and someone who wore the mask of human kindness.

“A child is trying to help kill people. Don’t you think any adult would put a stop to that?”

That was a sound argument, and it put me at a loss for words. Seeing me in that state, the prime minister continued.

“When you fainted during the terrorist attacks and I caught you, I was shocked at how light you were. I had to chastise myself for letting such a small child take on the fate of this country, and even the whole world.”

“Isn’t it a politician’s job to grin and bear that sort of thing if it’s the best option?”

I'd managed to fire back at him, but then he attacked my counterargument from a different direction. I was at the mercy of his logic.

"This country is a democratic nation. At the very least, the person who sits in my seat represents the will of the majority of our people. Keikain-kun, do you intend to leave both me and the people who chose me in the history books as those who helped a child commit murder for the good of their country?"

"Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried." A British Prime Minister once said those words, if I remembered correctly. *Ah, I can't argue back against this line.* I knew that I'd been like a sort of dictator.

"...That's a cowardly way of putting it."

"This is what it means to be an adult, Keikain-kun. If I had to criticize you, it wouldn't be because you're a child. That's part of the problem too, but it's not the real reason."

"Then what is?"

Prime Minister Koizumi smiled at my anger. His next merciless words would leave me speechless for good.

"You simply aren't qualified. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

He smiled as he said the words that were even crueler when spoken to a child. It was an unmistakable dark side to the powerful Koizumi Souichirou.

"You aren't a Diet member. You may belong to a dukedom, but you aren't a duke. You aren't a soldier, and while you probably control the Keika Group, you don't represent them. You leave everything to proxies."

"Think back to the fixers of long ago. Even they came to face the public when the time was right. Right now, you can't even choose to do that. That's why you'll end up betrayed in times like these."

His words sounded like a threat. This man, the country's leader, who sat at the peak of Nagata-cho, the place where evil spirits of rivers and mountains squirmed, was taking on those demons through tears, pain, and muddy water to sit in this seat.



“You can never appear at the very end and ask to be sacrificed for the good of the country. The people around you wouldn’t let you.”

“In that case, what if I don’t become qualified until it’s too late?! What if I’ve met with my downfall?!”

My cries of rage failed to move Prime Minister Koizumi. No, he was smiling because I’d made those cries.

“You’ll just have to live with it. Accepting the past from one’s predecessors and giving the future to people like you is the job of adults.”

I was crying. I knew I just couldn’t convey what a terrible past we’d been given. He wouldn’t believe me.

“Keikain-kun, at the very least, I believe in this country’s people. I believe in their will to change.”

He held out a handkerchief to comfort me, not knowing that his words wouldn’t reach me.

“So, Keikain-kun, can’t you wait a little longer? Don’t take on the dishonor of letting the people sacrifice you for this country’s prosperity.”

With that, Prime Minister Koizumi and I parted ways.

My PHS rang on the car ride home. I looked at the caller ID and saw that it was Eiichi-kun.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Runa. You sound well.”

I suddenly felt better. Whether or not he knew it, Eiichi-kun’s voice was the same as always.

“You reached out to Yuujirou when everything happened last time, right? I figured it was our turn now.”

“Thanks. It makes me really happy to be cheered up when I’m in a bad state.”

A smile naturally formed on my face. Who was it that said being weak made

you appreciate the value of friends? The Eiichi-kun in my dream had abandoned me when I was down.

“Hey, Eiichi-kun, if you were going to betray me, when do you think you would do it?”

The question came out naturally. After a bit of silence, Eiichi-kun’s voice came through my PHS in a different tone.

“Right now, I’d go find the version of me that betrays you and beat him up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean, you’d be a wounded beast at that point, right, Runa? There’s no way your risk management would be any good.”

Somehow, the answer he’d given me sounded half serious, half joking. But I could tell that his next words were honest.

“Still, if I had to go up against you, I’d never win unless I took you down with me.”

It was the same as the Eiichi-kun in my dream. Now that I thought about it, otome games ended in a romance with a single character, so there was a two-thirds chance that Eiichi-kun wouldn’t end up with Takanashi Mizuho. Then who did Eiichi-kun say those determined words to?

(Keikain, both of us are behind the times.)

Now I understood Eiichi-kun’s resolve. He’d gone down with me so that he could *win*.

“...That’s just like you, Eiichi-kun.”

“I don’t care if you laugh at me, Runa. I just couldn’t think of any way to win, no matter what I did. I said we could take each other out, but I bet you’d find a way to avoid that too.”

“I’m not going to lose to you so easily, you dummy. But thank you. I feel a bit better now.”

“You should call Yuujirou and Mitsuya. They’re worried about you.”

“I’m sure you already told them to call me. Goodness gracious...”

“Yeah, you sound better when you talk like that.”

Just slightly, my mood improved. Just slightly, I felt my heart leap.

“Thanks, Eiichi-kun.”

“Sure thing. See you later, Runa.”

I hung up the PHS and took a deep breath, then I called Yuujirou-kun.

“Hello? Yuujirou-kun?”

“Hello? Keikain-san?”

His voice sounded the same as always too. That was exactly what I wanted to hear at that moment.

“Eiichi-kun just called me. He told me to call you and Mitsuya-kun.”

“You really can’t keep a secret, Keikain-san.”

Yuujirou-kun laughed awkwardly at my words. I thought back to my conversation with Eiichi-kun and decided to ask him the same question.

“Hey, Yuujirou-kun, if you were going to betray me, when would you do it?”

He responded without the slightest pause.

“Let’s see. If I were going to betray you, it definitely wouldn’t be my own choice. Either Eiichi-kun talked me into it or something had me blinded.”

It was the kind of answer I would expect from the son of a politician. Before I could even laugh, something hit me.

“Hey, you like Prime Minister Koizumi, don’t you?”

“I don’t so much like him as I admire him, honestly. I mean, he never goes back on a public commitment. You know, like that promise to break the Fellowship of Constitutional Government.”

Yuujirou-kun’s words had an honest, commendable quality to them. The people of the country had followed that man, a person who hated compromise and always pressed forward with his decisions. Takanashi Mizuho found herself in a similar position during our confrontation partially because she was the heroine, but also because the heroine reflected the values of the world at that

time.

In the game, Yuujirou-kun used shady political maneuvers to put my back against the wall. Takanashi Mizuho must have seen the same appeal in Yuujirou-kun that the people of this gridlocked country saw in Prime Minister Koizumi.

“However, moral obligations and human empathy are important in the world of politics. At the very least, my father and brother feel that they owe you greatly, so I’m well aware of the drawbacks of betraying you right now. Please don’t worry about that.”

“That’s quite a big statement. What if I put your father and brother out of a job?”

“You wouldn’t do that.”

Yuujiro-kun’s words rang true. His declaration sank into my heart.

“After all, you compromise, Keikain-san. You can’t just keep running through everything like the prime minister, so when you can’t get a major victory, you aim to avoid a major loss instead. It might be a different story when it comes to finances, but there’s no need for you to take such high risks in politics, which isn’t your main battlefield.”

It was embarrassing to hear myself described from someone else’s perspective like this—all the more so if he meant it as praise.

“Hello? Keikain-san?”

“I’m listening. I just felt a little embarrassed.”

“Ah ha ha! Well, I know what you’re going through, so I promise not to betray you. It’s logic that convinced you, not emotions, right?”

Yuujiro-kun was always like this. Eiichi-kun had probably told him to call me, but he never mentioned it at all. He simply encouraged me.

“Thank you. I feel a bit better now.”

“Father was worried about you too, and I think he’s making moves. So...”

He stopped there on purpose. To a child, the right political move was to say

nothing further, as it was the reason I was under criticism.

“Talk to you later.”

“Yeah. See you at school.”

I hung up the PHS and saw we were almost in Kudanshita. I called Mitsuya-kun when I arrived back to my room in Kudanshita Keika Tower.

“Hello?”

“...Ah, Keikain? I thought you’d be calling me soon.”

I held my PHS with one hand as I talked, all alone in my room. Mitsuya-kun sounded completely normal as well.

“I talked to Eiichi-kun and Yuujirou-kun, and I wanted to thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal.”

This was how we always spoke to each other. As the son of a bureaucrat, the Mitsuya-kun in the game knew all the school rules and attacked me with logical arguments.

“Still, it made me happy, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

After that, I asked him the same question I’d asked the other two boys.

“Hey, Mitsuya-kun. If you were going to betray me, when would you do it?”

“...Betray you? Not go up against you?”

“Right, betrayal. Going up against me works too. Aren’t they the same thing?”

“No, they’re not. A betrayal is more serious because it means we used to be allies. Keikain, there must be a reason for betraying someone. All it does is turn you from an ally to an enemy.”

I found myself completely agreeing with Mitsuya-kun’s description. Whether or not he could tell that, he continued.

“One reason to betray someone might be disappointment. It’s easy for a betrayal to happen after one person gives up on the other.”

I nodded on the other end of the phone. It wasn’t like he could see me, but he

continued anyway.

“The other reason is good intentions.”

“Good intentions? Not malice?!”

Mitsuya-kun left a moment for me to be startled. Then he continued to spell out the reason why a betrayal could occur out of good will.

“Right, good intentions. Malice would just turn two people into enemies, and good will turning to malice would fall under the ‘disappointment’ category. But there’s no way to defend oneself against a betrayal born of pure good will. After all, I would only betray you out of concern for you, Keikain.”

I watched myself gasp in the window’s reflection. That was what Tachibana, Ichijou, Angela, Kiyomaro-tousama, and Nakamaro-oniisama had tried to do, but I’d brushed them off and invited Prime Minister Koizumi’s interference. There was no denying it was the result of my own actions.

“...Hello?”

“I’m sorry. That just made me understand so many things, I was lost for words.”

“So you get it, huh? Now let me ask you, are you still going to stay on the same path, Keikain?”

My silence was the answer. Mitsuya-kun let out a big sigh.

“If we ever betrayed you, that would probably be why. I’m warning you as your friend.”

Soon, I would learn the truth—the truth of what lay ahead when Prime Minister Koizumi stopped me.

Chapter 10:

Conference Call: Japanese-American Leaders

“THAT WAS QUITE a show. You did a good job shutting up the young lady.”

“I couldn’t do it on my own. I was able to silence her thanks to the people around her.”

“But her strategy revolved around the United States and was linked to profits. Since you’re the one who silenced her, Prime Minister, should I take that to mean you’re going profit from that strategy yourself?”

“That’s only natural, don’t you think, Mr. President? As allied countries, let’s promise to get through the crisis together as partners.”

“Well, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel guilty, having silenced the girl who said that in the first place.”

“Mr. President, we represent our respective countries. We’re working for the good of our people and the interest of our nations. Can we really allow the history books of those people to one day say, ‘A young girl successfully brought prosperity to her country by becoming a murderer’? That’s something we can’t allow her to do.”

“...And that’s why the people in her life sided with you?”

“Your country also fears that she might turn into a monster, do they not? Russia feels the same, by the way. The girl’s plans influence Russian domestic policies as well. I heard there was even a coup d’état movement that held her up as their symbol.”

“I heard about that too. I’m sure a lot of the big shots on Wall Street lost a ton of money because of her as well. It sounds like a funny joke if you don’t know any better. ‘An elementary school girl started a war against the American, Japanese, and Russian governments.’ But she sees everything clearly and she moves with wisdom. Some people here call her the ‘Moon Mistress.’”

“Is that from the Heinlein novel?”

“A cruel mistress of the night doesn’t suit our world today. We can’t allow Karafuto’s independence, even as a federation. Come to think of it, the same goes for your country and Russia being governed by one leader. We don’t know how the world order would change with that young lady in control of a nation. That transformation could easily become a threat, to both the states and your country.”

“We don’t want that either. Only half a century ago, we made a play for the mainland and suffered for it.”

“And it wasn’t too long ago that we learned the same lesson in Vietnam.”

“Ha ha ha...”

“HA HA HA HA...”

“Mr. President, let’s promise to stain our hands with blood. Can I have your word on this? You don’t want a second Vietnam.”

“Of course. I’ll do anything to avoid a second Vietnam. We’ll take out Iraq’s dictator and leave the rest to the Iraqi people.”

“That’s a relief to hear. We’ve learned the full story about those terrorist attacks from suspects we arrested here and intend to announce it publicly at the same time as the United States.”

“Of course. The dictator had a plan to get nukes, but when that failed, we ended up with the terrorist attacks. Even if that country doesn’t have weapons of mass destruction now, it’s clear that they could still use them to attack our country or yours in the future. We’ll make this fact public, appeal to the international community, and get the UN to give us approval...”

“Let’s go over the schedule leading up to next fall, Mr. President.”

“After we go public, we’ll report to the United Nations Security Council and have them vote on it. After the vote, we’ll organize the multinational forces.”

“This issue will become a major topic of discussion in the Diet this fall. I would like to speak with the higher-ups of your country, both to appeal to the international community and to silence those within my own country. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa will be Japan’s point of contact on this issue.”

“Ah, Izumikawa? Very well. Either way, you’ll probably need a witness for the Northern Karafuto Crisis. I’ll send over our Secretary of State.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. President. It was wrong for an elementary school student to be involved in such a questionable situation. I appreciate that you agreed to listen to something so obvious.”

“Ever since I took office, I’ve been ready to do anything that would benefit my country. But right now, it’s the people who set the world in motion. Their will means everything. Even if it’s justified, it wasn’t a divine message coming from a young maiden.”

“Indeed. That’s why we need her to become Cassandra, although it’s hard to say how long she’ll need to stay in that role.”

“It’s impossible not to want to grow up as fast as possible. Once she does, she’ll probably fall in love someday and use her powers for her partner.”

“And then the spell on the princess will break, and she’ll become a normal girl? That would make us the clock that strikes midnight.”

“At the very least, why don’t we have her lose her glass slipper?”

Chapter 11: Time to Eat

A FEW DAYS had passed. The former Desert Hero, who worked as the CEO of a mercenary company, came to see me. He looked both upset and sad. Despite Angela's attempt to stop him, he went straight into a report for me.

"Boss, I've got something you need to hear. The folks in Washington are fighting each other. To be specific, the Department of Defense is fighting with the State Department about Iraq."

Perhaps it was my punishment for attempting to cross the Rubicon. It also explained why the prime minister and so many adults had set me back.

"...Blegh!"

"My lady!"

I vomited while reading the report the former Desert Hero had given me. Eva rushed over in a panic to take care of me. Angela was angry that something she'd wanted to hide had been revealed, but when the former Desert Hero saw me vomit, he let out a sigh of relief.

"Good. I was planning on quitting this job if you finished reading the whole thing and kept your cool."

"What have you made her read?! Everyone worked so hard to keep this a secret...!"

Angela's words left me with no choice but to accept that this was legitimate. I rinsed my dirty lips and wiped them with a handkerchief Eva gave me, then threw the report away.

"What is this?! Am I supposed to just let it slide?!"

"It's a report on the most efficient returns the US could receive in the Iraq war, as drawn up by a think tank in Washington. As I'm sure you're aware, cries to do something with this report are growing louder by the day in Washington."

A Jewish think tank had come up with the following method for maximizing returns: use NBC weapons on all fronts, which would result in twenty-three million Iraqi civilian casualties.

“Do you know what a rentier state is? They’re common in oil-producing countries, so please think of the nations whose operations are financed by the revenue from natural resources that come from their land. A rentier state has the following traits:

“Government funds have no relation to the country’s economic state. There are few domestic workers involved in natural resource production.

“Economic activity outside of natural resources is very limited. Revenue from natural resources has a major influence on national finances, and that income is covered by exports. Iraq fits all of these criteria.”

Now that I’d calmed down, Angela, the former financial spy, was giving me a rundown.

She must have realized it was pointless to keep it hidden now.

“How does that relate to a genocide of the Iraqi people?”

“Because they want Iraq’s oil, not their people.”

Angela spoke clearly and firmly. There was nothing I could say in response to that.

“Drilling for oil requires the use of technology. They’re going to have experts and supervisors come in from the US, then alternate them with other oil-producing countries. There’s little need to employ the local residents of countries harboring anti-American sentiment.”

That was the way of thinking behind those words.

A “bad debt” of twenty-three million people.

This would, at the very least, benefit the United States. They were advocating an all-out strike to deal with this debt efficiently, using nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. In that case, steps would be taken to avoid destroying the equipment on the oil fields.

To them, the Iraqis weren’t humans. They were debt. They weren’t even

people—just numbers. This disgusting calculation had made me vomit. Now I finally understood why the adults had forced me to distance myself.

I was involved in the outbreak, logistics, and intelligence of this war. Before the adults chased me away, I was so close to signing off on the execution of twenty-three million people.

Tears formed in my eyes—tears from learning the true kindness behind the adults' rejection of me, and tears over the fact that they would approve of this mass murder for national profit.

"There is also a question of value here."

Eva, who'd given me her handkerchief, swapped places with Angela and began to explain. I would later learn that Eva was Jewish.

"It's about what rate they can exchange the victims who died on 9/11 for."

Two things had set the United States back in their strategy. One was Vietnam and Somalia, where the loss of American soldiers had stirred public controversy in the US and forced the country into defeat. Then there was 9/11.

That was why the US felt pressured to decide on a rate.

They wanted to show the world that the murder of a single American civilian would be repaid a hundred or a thousand times over.

In the event of a genocide, they also wouldn't have to think much about the local government afterward. After all, they could just kill everyone. It would start with indiscriminate bombing of urban areas, then destroying infrastructure like railroads and highways, then they would use nuclear attacks to set an example. *Ah, it's like the Empire of Japan in 1945.*

They were apparently going to reenact the history that never happened in this world here in Iraq.

"It's revenge for the Gulf War as well. The think tank that produced this report is also supported by the government of Israel."

The United States' strategy during the Gulf War was linked to the Arab-Israeli Wars, and Iraq had fought against those strategies by firing Scud missiles at Israel.

Israel wasn't going to forget about that so easily. They'd probably been waiting patiently for their opportunity.

"Why did you show me this?"

Once I'd finally calmed down, I glared at the former Desert Hero. He met my gaze and opened his mouth.

"You based your anti-Iraq preparations on the Gulf War, didn't you? You're working on logistics for a force of three hundred thousand soldiers. With this report going around, some in Washington are starting to say we need even less military power.

"The State Department and the generals on the ground are against this report, but the top brass at the Pentagon are eager, and they can probably push it through. I need your help to hold them back, my lady."

I knew about these people. They were called neoconservatives, or neocons. The battle in Washington continued to drag me across the Rubicon.

"I don't really feel like eating."

I pushed my dinner away without taking a bite. At this rate, I was on the verge of a breakdown. Ichijou Erika, who had been staying with me, spoke with concern in her voice.

"My lady, you're going to collapse."

"Yeah, I know that. Can you prepare an IV for me?"

"...Very well."

She called for the medical office to arrange the IV. This building contained medical facilities for my use alone, with doctors on standby around the clock on opposing shifts. Of course, I wasn't employing doctors who were currently in great demand; instead, I used my connections through Keika Pharma to hire those on the verge of retirement, offering them a bit of spare change to show up.

My maids were also trained in basic medical knowledge, so at times like these, I decided not to hesitate in talking to them.

"What's the matter, my lady? I asked Watsuji-san, the head chef, to make your favorite foods today."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a little upset by something that happened, so I'm feeling very down."

"I'll tell that to the doctor."

"Please do."

Angela seemed to know about this already. When I went to the medical office, I found that she'd prepared a doctor specializing in acute stress disorder in advance. I talked to the doctor while I received my IV, and whether it was due to the sense of relief or the sedative in the IV, I ended up falling asleep.

The state of chaos in the United States military originated from their defeat in the Vietnam War. The CIA's repeated failures to manufacture outcomes had led the US to station as many as 500 thousand troops in the country at one point, and with their hands tied, they were driven to defeat. But the backbone of the neocons was a refusal to forget that war in Vietnam.

"The CIA never gets anything right. That's why American troops were killed in Vietnam!"

The Gulf War grew out of these feelings, with the neocons' military doctrine becoming "Destroy them with cutting edge weapons and prevent the dispatching of troops as much as possible."

The first military strategy that came from this doctrine was a wonderful armchair theory: secure air superiority, then send in exclusively mechanized squadrons to clean it all up. At any rate, they were thinking that they could prepare fewer than fifty thousand soldiers in all.

There was a reason for this as well. They never intended to gain control of Iraq. If they destroyed the government and forced their troops to retreat, the rest could be left in the hands of the UN.

Essentially, the death of each American soldier in enemy territory raised the meter determining the possibility of losing the war, and once that meter

reached a certain position, the United States would be forced into a defeat, even if they were winning. The neocons knew this very well.

That was why they were so overjoyed by my participation in the war. Foreign mercenaries, so long as they weren't Americans, could die without any effect on the management of the conflict.

Naturally, this was a ridiculous idea to the generals on the ground, who were the ones seeing the bloodshed.

Mercenaries themselves were reserve troops, and the military was glad to be able to use them. But since these mercenaries were working for a paycheck, with little regard for morals and laws, they knew how foolish it would be to use them as their main fighting power.

Additionally, the political situations of the neighboring countries would lead to other changes.

Iraq was a mosaic nation, achieving balance between three different influences underneath a dictatorial ruler. These three forces were the Sunni Islamists, who led the Iraqi dictatorship; the Shia Islamists, who shared the national religion of nearby Iran; and the Kurds, who were the largest group but had no country of their own.

The Sunnis were represented in Iraq by the Baath Party, and underneath this dictatorship the other two groups were oppressed, persecuted, and even repressed during the revolt that took place after the Gulf War.

Destroying the current Iraqi regime would require the uprising of the other two factions, but other countries in the area had their own reasons for not welcoming this.

If the Shias gained power, countries around the gulf would be affected. A shock came to other monarchies in the gulf region when Iran, which had been ruled by a king, experienced a revolution and turned into an Islamic state. This was why they'd sided with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.

A disturbance in the gulf countries would cause a third energy crisis, likely delivering an economic blow to Japan, which was still getting back on its feet.

The Kurds were an even more complex issue. If a region were set up for them

to be independent within Iraq, this would disturb the government in Turkey, where even more Kurds resided. At this point in time, the Turkish government was expending great effort to suppress the Kurdish guerilla formations.

If the Kurds managed to form an independent state in Iraq, it wouldn't just pour oil on the fire of Kurdish independence within Turkey itself; it would also signal Kurdish guerilla domination by treating the independent state as holy ground. The Turkish government absolutely couldn't allow that.

There were also Kurds in Iran and Syria, so those countries would see the effects as well.

Well, Europe had drawn these border lines arbitrarily as they colonized, which was causing major distortions to appear now.

It wasn't just Washington calling for a genocide of the Iraqi people—the problem was that Iraq's neighboring countries also saw this as an appealing option. The United States, burning with an urge for revenge over 9/11, was ready to direct their grudge and bloodlust toward those who were backed into a corner.

"I know this isn't nice to hear, my lady, but Iraq is involved in the treaty negotiations between Japan and Russia."

I couldn't blame Okazaki for telling me this, even while I was sick from trauma, as just hearing about it was worthwhile.

"Russia's primary issue in the negotiations is the restoration of Northern Karafuto, or in other words, whether they'll need to let go of oil resources there. Of course, Russia is never going to give them up for free, so they'll probably leave things vague, but that'll change if there's something that could compensate for their loss."

"...And that something is Iraq."

"Correct. You already declared your involvement in Iraq from the very start. From the perspective of securing oil, you're in a position to receive the best returns of anyone involved. Russia is probably planning to address that in their negotiations. Personally, I think this genocide is going to start with Russia. A democracy wouldn't be able to do something so decisive. Did you know, my

lady, that one of Russia's conditions in these negotiations is that 'the young lady never be made the head of Russia or any neighboring state'? My lady, if you wished, you could even create your own kingdom in Iraq after the genocide."

"...Blegh!"

Unable to contain it, I vomited again, but then I woke up. I'd apparently fallen asleep while receiving the IV. I hadn't actually thrown up, but I couldn't stand the ugly side of me who'd just sensed that a genocide was, from my perspective, the optimal solution.

I was alone. I had to love loneliness. I loved no one and received no love.

That was the kind of person I'd been in my past life. I had a family and a few friends, but I set boundaries with them, despising the idea of ever getting closer than that.

I was scared—scared of how people change.

I was born into a modest middle-class family. That family's house was finished just as the bubble burst, and they were swept up in the collapse of real estate prices. With loan repayments putting pressure on them, their financial state deteriorated.

Still, I believed the economy would improve when I went to college on student loans. But that was when I witnessed the nightmarish financial crisis with my own eyes.

Needing to repay my student loans, I started working at a company that would later become known for its exploitative conditions. The extreme workload left me isolated from my friends. It harmed my health, and in the end, I was abandoned. The only things I enjoyed in my short life were video games.

I'd lived my second life in the world of this game. That was why it took me far too long to realize the truth.

This world wasn't just made of beautiful things. There had to be losers to go along with each victor. This wasn't just playing a game—other people here had wills of their own.

“My lady, your friends have come to check in on you. What would you like to do?”

Tachibana Yuka, my maid, asked me this as I lay in my bed. It had been three days since the incident, and I’d stayed home from school because I was unwell. That was clearly why Eiichi-kun and the others were concerned and wanted to pay me a visit.

“I certainly can’t send them away, can I? Please get an IV ready. I need a bit of nutrition.”

“I’ll contact the medical office.”

I still couldn’t keep any food down. My every move could result in millions or tens of millions of people’s lives being twisted. No, what really pained me was my guilty conscience, as I knew I could bring people misfortune.

Were the people on top under this much pressure? Or did they just stop thinking because they couldn’t bear it and abandon their consciences?

“Keikain-san, we’re here to see you!”

“I heard you were sick, but I’m glad to see you look okay.”

We were in Kudanshita Tower. I got to speak with everyone in the reception room that had been added to my personal space on the top floor, but I didn’t want to overexert myself, so I stayed seated in a chair. Asuka-chan, the first one to speak, held a jar of jam in her hands. Kaoru-san was next to her with a basket of snacks to give to recovering patients.

“We all made this together. Please feel better, Runa-oneechan.”

Mio-chan, my kouhai, smiled at me while Hotaru-chan nodded at her side. Seeing them like that, a smile naturally spread over my face as well. Behind them were Machiyo Sanae-san, Kurimori Shizuka-san, Takahashi Akiko-san, and Kazuki Shiori-san. They all looked relieved to see my expression.

“You never seemed like the type to get sick, Runa. You must have been working too hard, so be sure to use this time to rest up.”

Eiichi-kun was blunt, but his kindness sank into my heart. Yuujirou-kun spoke next.

"You probably don't need them, but I took notes in this journal for all the classes you missed. Also, I wrote some information for you here, so I hope you'll take a look when you're feeling better."

"I feel bad bringing so many people here like this, but the girls forced their way in. If it's too much, us boys can just leave."

I met Mitsuya-kun's consideration for me with a pleased smile.

I could feel that my heart had grown lighter with everyone here.

"Stay and have some tea, at least. I'm not sure if I can have any yet, though."

"We heard you were feeling sick. Are you really all right?"

"Well... I just can't eat anything. I've been getting IV drips for the past three days."

I said it cheerfully, but everyone else flinched at the seriousness of the situation. Mio-chan cried out in shock.

"Waaaaaaah! Runa-oneechan will die if she can't eat!"

"It's okay! I brought our Great Master Tanuki orange jam! That'll get rid of Runa-san's illness in a flash! It has Hotaru's seal of approval too!"

Flustered, Asuka-chan tried to comfort Mio-chan. Hotaru-chan joined in by stroking Mio-chan's hair.

With a scary look on his face, Eiichi-kun spoke up to ask me something.

"You're sure you're all right, Runa?"

"I feel a little better seeing your faces. I think I can drink now, so why don't we have Russian tea with the jam Asuka-chan brought?"

"Very well. I'll prepare it at once."

Tachibana Yuka, who'd been standing nearby, left the room to make the tea with the other maids.

At that moment, Ichijou Erika arrived with something in her hands.

"Perfect timing. The co-head maid asked me to bring this, since you're all here together..."

She was holding a video tape. I thought back to today's maid shifts and remembered that Aki-san was the co-head maid on duty...

"Wait! Noooooo!"

"Aw, you're so cute, my lady!"

It was a video of my school entrance ceremony. Asuka-chan and Eiichi-kun, who also appeared in it, cringed along with me.

After everyone laughed and squealed, the young me on screen started speaking to the me outside of it.

"Um, this is a message for the adult me.

You haven't gone bankrupt, have you?

You haven't joined a company that forces you to do useless tasks and drives you to bad health, right?

Your future isn't pitch-black, is it?"

I was struck by her smile and her words. *That's right. Now I finally get it.*

I'd only ever known misfortune. I'd only ever known loneliness.

But now that I'd experienced happiness and understood the necessary price of that happiness, I felt like I couldn't allow myself to feel joy.

"I'm warning you, the me of the future, not to turn out like that.

Right now, I'm happy.

Are you happy in the future?

Even if you're not, please remember that you had this happy past once.

Remember how you smiled like this.

To the future me...

I'm sending you this smile so that you'll never forget it."

I smiled. The tears spilled from my eyes.

Mio-chan looked like she was about to cry again too, but through my tears and my smile, I spoke to the me on the screen.

“Yes, I’m happy. So please don’t worry.”

After this surprising event, the tea was ready, and I was served a steaming cup of Russian tea with orange jam. Everyone stared at me as I picked up the cup.

The words came naturally from my lips.

“It’s okay. Everything we eat involves taking a life. That life, that blessing, is something we must digest with the utmost respect.”

Those words came from my mother in my past life. I savored them along with my Russian tea.

“Thank you for the drink.”

The first sip of drink I’d downed in a few days gave off the rich scent of mandarin oranges.

It was summer break. I’d decided to spend two weeks at my vacation home in Karuizawa to recover.

“Lady Runa is recovering from her acute stress disorder, but that doesn’t mean we can rest easy. There are always going to be victims in politics and economics. Her state may continue to worsen, perhaps even turning to PTSD, if she’s continuously exposed to this information. She absolutely needs time to herself where she can relax without thinking about anything else.”

The final stages of the recovery program Angela had designed for me happened to overlap with summer vacation, so I decided to take some time to rest and forget about the outside world completely.

Keiko-san, Aki-san, Naomi-san, Tachibana Yuka-san, Ichijou Erika-san, Angela, and Eva were the women with me at the Karuizawa vacation home. The men

there were Keikain family employees like Watabe-san, Sone-san, and Akanezawa-san, taking refuge from the summer heat.

At my request, Tachibana remained in Tokyo to watch over things.

My guards? They had their own accommodations and were on alert.

Rehabilitation didn't come with any specific requirements. I simply took it easy and let time go by.

Watabe-san played the violin for me to enjoy, and I sang along sometimes.



Ichijou Erika and Tachibana Yuka came with me for strolls around Kumoba Pond and fun trips to shopping malls. Those were very childlike experiences for me.

“You are still a child, my lady. You should be treasuring these times more than you do.”

I was lost for words, hearing Ichijou Erika of all people point that out.

The subject had come up when I had the idea of making sweets together as a group.

“I watch over you, my lady, and I’ve learned how impossible your way of life is. I also work hard every day to make sure I’ll be able to get myself a good man. Things like cooking and making desserts are required skills for a young maiden.”

“But didn’t you receive a lot of offers to discuss marriage?”

Ichijou Erika froze up at my retort. Her dry laugh was painful to hear.

“My lady, only a few years ago, I was partying at karaoke and photo booths with my friends. Do you have any idea how radiant the pictures and work histories of the men arranged to marry me were? They were presidents of top companies, sons of Diet members, heirs to nobility, officials from the Ministry of Finance...”

Yes, I know. I’m the one who caused that wave.

“I was scared because I’d barely learned any skills of sophistication at all, yet the men were all so proper, handsome, and completely flawless! The world demands you marry for love, but I never knew we lived in such a hellhole...”

I laughed dryly and looked away. On the other hand, Aki-san had been immersed fully in this world, so her presence stood out for its dependability.

“Oh my. But isn’t that a good thing? Aside from Lady Runa, I’m sure you can find the best husband of any of us here. I only ever get set up with executives.”

“You’ve been set up for marriages too, Tokitou-san?!”

Ichijou Erika jumped at this topic, completely ignoring me in the conversation. Aki-san replied casually as she whipped up the heavy cream.

"I've had offers to meet about possible marriage prospects from the son of a Hokkaido faction member at Keika Bank, a member of the Shiyo Electric Co.'s founding family, an executive at Akamatsu Corporation, and that sort of thing. As for government officials, mine is from the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry."

When I later returned to Tokyo, I would learn from Tachibana that marrying Aki-san would mean being adopted* into the family, and that the Tokitou family would stand as a branch family of the Keikains. In other words, this would sort out grandfather's bloodline, but also make the Tokitous the family that protected me. That was why Aki-san was usually set up with the second or third-eldest sons of families for potential marriages. But I'm getting off track.

"I get the appeal of a marriage for love, but this world is so harsh."

We had a tea party once our sweets were ready. Ichijou Erika responded to my casual comment with a merciless follow-up question.

"What are you talking about? Do you have feelings for one of those three boys?"

"*Pfffft!*"

I spit out my grape juice, but could you blame me? The reason I'd hired Ichijou Erika in the first place was because she was an average person who said things others knew not to say, but I wished she'd considered the time and place a bit more. She also failed to notice my silent reaction.

"All three of them are good candidates, aren't they? So, which one do you like?"

Okay, I love this sort of girl talk, but I wish I wasn't the victim of a concentrated attack.

"Um... Well... I..."

"Didn't you meet with that family of European nobles in Hong Kong?"

Aki-san's question sent my mind into complete disarray.

"I just happened to sit next to them when I watched that horse..."

"My lady, don't they always say there are no coincidences in high society?"

As I sat there in total silence, unable to respond, Ichijou Erika and Aki-san were getting fired up off to the side.

“Tokitou-san, what was the man she met with like?”

“He’s apparently from one of the original European blue blood families. If Lady Runa ends up studying abroad in Europe, I’m sure they’ll grow closer to each other.”

“Wow, that sounds like our lady. Even in arranged marriages, you’re on a completely different scale from us.”

“Hang on, it’s not an arranged marriage or anything yet...”

Confused now, I tried to get them off the subject, and Ichijou Erika casually gave up on her pursuit.

“I don’t understand complicated things, but I’m smart enough to ask people who *do* understand them. I think it’s fine to live that way. Trying to figure out everything myself would be wrong if it ended up making me fall apart. Well, I can’t say anything about this European nobleman, since I don’t know if he’ll be the one or not, but I won’t complain if you decide to go with your heart and choose one of the three boys.”

Ichijou Erika. I was so glad I hired her. With that thought filling my heart, I took a bite of the shortcake we’d all worked on together.

“Thanks for the food... Hm?”

It was one of the cakes I’d made, but since it was my very first time making it, the flavor was clearly much worse than the ones made by the others.

I needed to practice more. At the very least, I wanted whoever ate my cakes to say they were “delicious.”

“May I have a moment, my lady?”

Angela arrived in the middle of this tea party with a question for me.

“Teia-sama has contacted me, and apparently he’s in Karuizawa. He wanted to know if he could meet with you.”

“Huh?!”

Looking at the smiles of Aki-san, Ichijou Erika, and Angela, it was easy to guess what my own face looked like.

Aki-san and Ichijou Erika were never going to let me refuse. We ended up going to Karuizawa Station.

“Runa! You look better!”

“I guess so. You look good too, Eiichi-kun.”

He couldn’t come to the vacation home, of course, so we met at a café near Karuizawa Station to chat. Lots of private stores in Karuizawa catered to the upper classes, which was part of the city’s appeal. That made it easier to rent out the entire establishment for security purposes.

“But why did you come here, anyway?”

“It’s nothing big. We just happen to have a vacation home here too, so I thought I should check in on you while we were staying here. Now I feel better that I did.”

Cake and black tea sat upon our table. Eiichi-kun had a cola for himself. The fancy music that played in the chic little café, with a view of Karuizawa Station from the window, made everything about the experience feel extraordinary.

“Right. I just overdid it a little.”

“We’re still in elementary school, you know. I always forget that when I’m with you, though.”

“What do you mean?”

Outside the window was Karuizawa Station, crowded with tourists escaping the heat. Every last child among them was smiling and running alongside their parents—every child except us. I knew our world was far away from those scenes.

“To be honest, I knew something about the position you’ve been put in. I was even thinking about telling you to stop, but I didn’t.”

That was Eiichi-kun for you. He probably teamed up with Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun to investigate me, then figured out what I was trying to do and who stopped me along the way. But I cocked my head, wondering why he didn’t

end up warning me like he wanted to. Casually, Eiichi-kun revealed his true thoughts.

“I guess I really do want to beat you. I wanted to catch up to you, since you just keep running further ahead.”

I wasn’t sure if he simply hated to lose or if he was jealous of the new heights I’d reached, or maybe both. I took a bite of cake and decided to tease him a bit.

“Becoming an adult isn’t a very good thing.”

“Then why are you rushing to become one, Runa?”

Eiichi-kun’s retort made me realize that I’d been defeated, so I sipped my black tea instead of answering him. His victorious smile only made me feel that he was still a child.

“By the way, it sounds like I might be getting set up with a potential fiancé.”

“What?!”

This time, I was the one to smile victoriously at Eiichi-kun’s dumbfounded reaction.

I didn’t remember who said the words “girls are girls from the moment they’re born,” but it was true that boys had a period of time before they became boys.

Eiichi-kun wouldn’t have been able to come see me all the way in Karuizawa if he thought about that sort of thing, but by the time we were middle schoolers going through puberty, something like this definitely wouldn’t happen.

“Well, it’s a way of introducing myself to a noble family. Marriage is still a long way off.”

“Where’s the family from?”

“Europe, even though I’m Japanese.”

My blonde hair fluttered as I spoke. I appreciated my looks and beauty, but it still bothered me how I felt like I could never fully be a “Japanese person.” But even if I received a perfect education and married into a European family, I would still be different from birth...or rather, people would treat me differently.

“I see. But I don’t want to give you up, Runa.”

Ba-dump. My heart made a loud noise at Eiichi-kun’s casual comment. I pretended not to notice and rose from the table. The cake and tea were already tucked away in my stomach.

“We should get going. I’ll escort you to the station.”

“Yeah, sure. Why don’t we walk there since we’re here?”

Eiichi-kun held his hand out, and I took it like it was a natural thing. Then the two of us started to laugh.

“You always do things like this so calmly. *That’s* why I forget we’re elementary schoolers!”

“Oh? European nobles wouldn’t laugh at this. I would, though.”

It only took a few minutes to get to the station, but I knew they were going to be minutes I would never forget. They were memories that were never in the game, just for Eiichi-kun and me.

As we said goodbye, Ichijou Erika handed Eiichi-kun a bag. I heard her whispering to him.

“These are cookies made by Lady Runa. Enjoy them later, if you please.”

I ended up scolding her on the way home after Eiichi-kun left.

“Hey, weren’t those the cookies you and Aki-san made, not mine?”

“Oh dear. Then you’ll just have to practice your baking to be sure you’re ready for the next time you give Teia-sama snacks.”

This girl sure knows what she’s doing.

But, thanks to her, I made sure to add baking to my schedule during my Karuizawa vacation.

Unfortunately, my cookies still tasted worse than the ones Eiichi-kun went home with.

**Adult adoption, sometimes used by families without a male heir in order to*

carry on the family line and name.

Glossary and notes

Rentier state: A nation that relies on revenue from natural resources on their land. This includes oil-producing countries in the Middle East.

NBC weapons: An acronym for nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

The CIA never getting anything right: The CIA has been involved in South Vietnam ever since its founding. After its transformation into a dictatorship and the suppression of the citizens, they even conducted a coup d'état within the South Vietnamese government. The country never stabilized until the Fall of Saigon.

Brilliant armchair theory: The concept of the “Rumsfeld Doctrine” was “lightweight, fast, and new.”

Iranian Revolution: Monarchies around the gulf feared an export of the Iranian Revolution, and the Islamic state of Iran had made advancements in women’s progress compared to other gulf nations. Iraq was one of the most modern states in the gulf, and the most Westernized.



Chapter 12: An Unappealing Banquet

SAUDI ARABIA'S mining railway. The company that began construction between Dammam and Hafar al-Batin also built a branch line connecting it to King Khalid Military City. The Saudi Arabian government owned 51 percent of this corporation while Akamatsu Corporation held the other 49 percent and also managed and controlled the company's operations.

The fate of this railway changed dramatically on September 11th, 2001. America screamed for revenge after the planes hit the Twin Towers, which was why they entered Iraq in the end. It was only natural that the US would come to turn their attention to this railway.

"The US military is interested in buying Akamatsu Corporation's stock holding."

The Bahrain distribution base was sold to an American-controlled PMC, but the US military didn't even try to hide their identity in this case.

The route still under construction connected Dammam Port to King Khalid Military City, where American troops were stationed. The border with Iraq was a few dozen kilometers to the north. The US army, who were beasts when it came to logistics, would never let a railway like that get away from them.

The Saudi Arabian government had purchased the shares and, fearing damages, they'd supposedly come to an agreement after discussions with the US military.

When he heard this report from his subordinate, Okazaki Yuuichi, the executive in charge, gave his surprised consent.

"Continue the discussions. I'll tell Lady Runa about it."

That young lady is made of different stuff than I am...

He shuddered, but he'd also learned that she'd nearly broken down, unable to take the reality of war. Okazaki was proud to work for someone who could

predict the future so cleverly while also retaining human empathy. He looked forward to whatever she would show him and tell him to create next. But Okazaki didn't realize how many more cigarettes he'd started to consume over his worry about the young lady's fragile health.

"Boss, our PMC CEO has come to visit. He's waiting in the reception room."

"Got it. I'll be right there."

The Gulf Hero, the PMC CEO who usually worked in America, had come all the way to Tokyo.

The reason for this visit wasn't mentioned, but at a time like this, Okazaki knew it could only be about the Saudi Arabia mining railway.

"Mr. Okazaki, how is our boss doing?"

"She's upset, but she's not backing down. Our boss seems to like her victories to be assured before the fight even breaks out."

"Good. I'm going to go check in on her later, and I'd appreciate it if you joined me."

"Sure thing."

That was all they said before the CEO got down to the main topic. As expected, he wanted to discuss the mining railway.

"Think of my presence here as an unofficial offer from the US military. It's about the mining railway in Saudi Arabia. I heard they approached you about buying it?"

"We'll probably sell it. Does the unofficial offer mean they want to survey it before they buy it?"

"Exactly. The Department of Defense wants the internal documents to prepare for the upcoming war."

In response, Okazaki placed an envelope containing the documents on the table.

He heard an indescribable mixture of fear and concern in the CEO's voice.

"Lady Runa urged the railway to be built as fast as possible, so progress is at

80 percent. To be frank, it's essentially complete, although the land preparation around the metropolitan area of Dammam Port has taken longer than anticipated."

The CEO sounded astonished as he looked over the internal documents.

"Mr. Okazaki, if I remember correctly, this project was finalized in..."

"February of 2000. That's how far we've progressed since then. Actually, maybe I should say we've been compelled to have it finished by the start of the war."

Okazaki lit a cigarette. He was going to need nicotine to get through the next part.

"There's more to this story. This railway is planned to go only to northern Saudi Arabia, but Lady Runa's personal strategy is to extend it to Amman, the capital of Jordan, then all the way to Aqaba, where there's a port to the Red Sea. This is the answer to what some of the higher-ups in Washington are whispering about—the 'Baghdad departure, Jerusalem arrival'."

The unrest in the Near and Middle East involving Israel and the conflict in the Gulf surrounding Iran and Iraq had converged and become more complicated.

The hardliners in Washington wanted to clean up Iraq and move right on to the Near and Middle East crisis. It was an uncompromising opinion.

But the young lady's own proposal was the perfect solution to this. If the United States managed to obtain this railway and complete her plan, it wouldn't just change the distribution of goods in the Near and Middle East—the railway would allow the US troops to progress with frightening ease.

If the US intervened in Jordan and their continued efforts were supported, it would put pressure on Syria in their disputes with Israel while facilitating vigilance toward the undermanned area of western Iraq.

"Indeed, Lady Runa has predicted the future of Iraq. Be sure to reflect that in the final sales price as well."

"...Mr. Okazaki, this may not be for someone in my position to say, but is that boss of ours really all right?"

The CEO had concern in his voice. It made Okazaki jam the cigarette he'd been smoking into the ashtray.

There was considerable depth in the man's tone.

"She's not well. She nearly broke down. I want to see my lady change the future, but not at the cost of her health."

"We need to be grateful that this country's prime minister brought the boss back down to earth and scolded her. But at the same time, we need to shoulder the responsibility for the future, so that she doesn't fall apart."

Okazaki smiled awkwardly at the former soldier's stern way of assessing the situation. He stood up and gave his instructions to the CEO.

"You should say that to my lady in person. I'm too embarrassed to tell her myself."

The next day, Akamatsu Corporation sold its shares in the Saudi Arabian mining railway to the United States.

The sale price and process were kept hidden under the veil of military secrecy.

After checking in on the young lady, Okazaki Yuuichi met with the CEO of Keika Holdings, Ichijou Susumu, for lunch in a private room in the Keika Hotel. The two men had a stiff, uninteresting meal together.

"I thought you hated me, Ichijou-san."

"I do. You led Lady Runa down a dangerous road. But in the business world, you can't just refuse to meet someone because you hate them. It's not possible."

They sat in a fancy Japanese-style room, about six tatami mats large, with the finest foods set out on a tray table.

The lack of any alcohol was a clear representation of their relationship.

"Before the Diet removes diplomatic immunity for nobles, Tachibana-san is likely to step down as president of Keika Railway. I also plan on using Keika

Holdings' public listing as the time to go out on top. I'll take a step back and become a chairman with no right to represent.

"I don't know if it will be next year or the one after that, but this is set in stone. Toudou-san will stay on with you, but the internal consolidation will be something to keep a constant eye on."

Ichijou spoke matter-of-factly with a bit of fatigue on his face. They'd avoided a major political blow, but it had taken a lot of hard work to make sure the Keika Group came out unscathed. Savoring the soba in his bowl, Ichijou continued.

"You're probably going to become part of the fourth generation working for Lady Runa. Aside from your personality, Tachibana-san, Toudou-san, and I all acknowledge your talents and loyalty to Lady Runa. That's why I felt like I needed to meet you and remind you of that."

"...You intend to make Angela-san the next CEO of Keika Holdings, don't you?"

"That quick brain of yours is one of the reasons why Tachibana-san and I can never cut you loose."

Company structure required rejuvenations above all else. Tachibana was already getting old, Toudou had been forced to the top with repeated large-scale mergers, and now Ichijou, who'd reached the heights at a young age, was stepping back. It was time to open things up for a successor.

The second generation was, as Okazaki remarked, represented by Angela Sullivan. It also included Karin Viola, whom he didn't mention. These names were a frank reminder that the expanded Keika Group—Keikain Runa herself—was a one-woman shop.

"Miss Sullivan will probably become the CEO of Keika Holdings after being promoted to CEO of Keika Securities. The Moonlight Fund is under heavy surveillance by the United States right now, so it will be hard for you to get up to no good. Be sure you remember that."

"Right now, I don't want to provoke my lady any more than I already have."

Okazaki sipped his clam soup to distract from the fact that his hands were shaking as they grasped the bowl.

Ichijou was glaring at him silently and angrily enough to make him tremble.

It was true that he'd gone to Angela and asked her to "let me get a punch in too," but a punch could also be carried out with words.

"Miss Sullivan helped me realize that when Lady Runa plans to do something, she doesn't think of herself at all."

"Well, if you can predict the future, you can make profit however you want."

"Still, she got rid of the bad debts belonging to financial institutions, which built the foundation of the Keika Group. Hundreds of billions of yen disappeared like nothing. Are you brave enough to turn so much money into nothing too?"

Ichijou had been directly involved in that process. He still remembered how the craze of emotions had left him numb. Angela, an outsider, had finally led him to that realization, and he couldn't hide the bitter smile on his face. He picked up the sea bream sashimi as he reflected on those times.

"It was the same for the Keika Electronics Union last fall. The company was just a bonus that came with Lady Runa's true goal of revitalizing and restructuring Japan's computer industry."

"Indeed. She told me about it during the massive turnover. That was when I encouraged her, saying that even if she lost, she would still leave something behind, just like Suzuki Shoten."

"Still, how many people could truly make such a gamble? She's still just a sixth grader in elementary school..."

With one eye on the piping-hot tempura, Ichijou let out a sigh. Deep-fried foods weren't ideal at the age where you had to watch your weight.

Pointing his chopsticks like his words, Ichijou next brought up Angela and the US intelligence agency she once worked for.

"Our Lady Runa doesn't start out thinking about her personal benefit. She clearly didn't care if she got the short end of the stick. That was probably why she was so weakened when she had to argue not just over money, but over life itself, which we can only experience once. I'm very glad she finally opened her

eyes at that point."

Ichijou had been the Tokyo branch director of Far Eastern Bank before he met the young lady. After the bubble burst, he'd experienced the carnage of having no way to raise funds and being hounded for repayment by lenders.

It was true that money weighed more heavily than life, but with life came many chances to earn money. Losing your one life was the end of it all.

After witnessing so many borrowers offer up their lives as repayment, it was impossible not to understand the danger the girl was in.

"Like you, Lady Runa is a gambler deep down. However, she's willing to put her life on the line to get a good rate. The two of you are a good match."

"...I can't really deny that. But what exactly do you want me to do, Ichijou-san?"

Okazaki asked for confirmation as he ate his food. He'd thought this meeting was purely intended to serve as a warning, but Ichijou plainly answered this question.

"Look for replacements for Miss Angela and Miss Karin. Japanese people would be preferable, if possible. At the very least, Tachibana-san, Toudou-san, and I all intend to remove you from the Moonlight Fund."

"...Is that to prevent people from saying I was hired away by foreign capital?"

"There's something else: the Iwazaki zaibatsu."

The disinterested tone of Ichijou's voice only gave the words more impact. The Keika Group, with its constant expansions, had always been a one-woman shop run by Keikain Runa. This meant the group could no longer function if she stopped working, which was a fatal flaw.

The current reorganization had been designed to improve that situation, but by pressuring Prime Minister Koizumi with the rapidly expanding organization, the Iwazaki zaibatsu had started to make moves again.

"I thought they stopped making moves after the head of the family married a member of the Iwazaki zaibatsu?"

"You hear about this sort of thing all the time. One faction connects with

them, only to have another faction turn hostile.

“Involvement in Iraq, in particular, is a tricky political issue. There are many things happening behind the scenes, so you need to be careful.”

“Is this about ‘the traitor who sold their country to America’? Are they really prepared to go up against the US again?”

Half a century had already passed since the Pacific War, and while the country struggled to dispose of bad debts, they still had enough national power left to compete with the US. That was why some ultranationalists were raising such a fuss.

“Weren’t the bad debts from the late 90s just an American conspiracy?”

“Can’t we become fully independent ourselves, instead of just following in the footsteps of America’s hegemony?”

“If this country picked a fight with the US on September 11th, didn’t they earn the status of a superpower?”

The ultranationalists criticized the Keika Group as a “sellout company,” seeing Keikain Runa as the enemy because of her birth and blonde hair.

“But why would the ultranationalists go for Iwazaki? Wouldn’t the Futaki or Yodoyabashi zaibatsu be fine too?”

Ichijou could only answer Okazaki’s question with what he’d heard from Tachibana. Ichijou didn’t understand it either.

“Iwazaki is the only zaibatsu that started in the Meiji Restoration and has walked the same path as this country. ‘Iwazaki exists alongside this nation. That’s why the Keika Group needs to merge with the Iwazaki zaibatsu and form the foundation of a Heisei Restoration.’ I don’t understand the logic myself.”

Okazaki set his chopsticks down, muttering under his breath, but loudly enough for his words and disdain to be audible to Ichijou.

“There’s a puppet master behind this whole plan.”

“You’re right, there’s a puppet master. Who do you think it is?”

Ichijou took a bite of his food, his face turning no paler. The food was

delicious, but the conversation was taking an unpleasant turn, and he was reaching the point where he couldn't hide it on his face anymore.

"Who?"

"The 'Ministries.'"

"The Ministries?"

Okazaki asked for clarification, but Ichijou simply continued.

"You and Lady Runa prepared for Iraq, but the lady was driven away because of the danger. That much was fine. But the true problem is that the war in Iraq is unavoidable. So, who is going to carry out the preparations that you two started?"

Keika Runa had arranged many things for the war in Iraq, such as the mining railway in Saudi Arabia. Her preparations were essentially perfect.

Okazaki had been the man in charge of creating the network, specifically the funds and military power, under Keikain Runa at the very top. But now that the girl had been forced out, he was powerless to make any further moves.

"It involves not only our country's Ministries of Foreign and Military Affairs, but even the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. The United States is being even more of an open book. The Department of Defense and State Department representatives who visited you are starting a terrible mudslinging contest using Lady Runa's plan."

Prime Minister Koizumi hadn't stolen Keikain Runa's plan intending to take direct control over it. Instead, he wanted to leave it in the hands of others as much as he could. That was why government departments in both countries had erupted into squabbles.

"Still, the ultranationalists are going to team up with America? It should be the exact opposite."

Okazaki downed his glass of cold water to stop himself from feeling sick. Ichijou drank his water too, perhaps because his throat had dried out, and then answered him.

"This is a loyalty test for them. 'Are you with us or against us?' The prime

minister and president are friends, and Lady Runa's refusal to turn anti-American is bringing that to the surface. Even if they're pressed, they can now use the enlarged Keika Group to crush the ultranationalists."

One could look at Angela and Karin's situations from the same perspective. The same went for the position of Okazaki, who opposed them.

"Once Tachibana-san and I leave, Miss Angela and Miss Karin will lead the Keika Group. At the earliest, you'll probably take it on two generations after that. We're talking three to five years from now.

"If the two of them stay in power, you'll have to get your personnel from somewhere else. You'll most likely have to bring in people from the Iwazaki zaibatsu now that they're a relative of ours.

"At that point, the Keika Group will become a hodgepodge colony for the Iwazaki zaibatsu, with no one remaining who was there from the start. When the son of the Keikain family stands at the top of Keika-Iwazaki Pharma, that whole situation will be disputed, and Lady Runa will still be a minor."

Ichijou had carried out a magnificent game of musical chairs, headhunting former Ministry of Finance officials and local bank, city bank, insurance, and securities workers, but now he'd been forced to choose Angela for his successor. His face was colored with resignation.

The co-head maid who was always at Lady Runa's side, Katsura Naomi, had a son named Katsura Naoyuki who worked in the private bank division as a senior assistant, in charge of managing the Moonlight Fund's accounts. But if he was to be pushed up further into Keika Holdings, it was about time for him to move to a different job, and they would need to look for his successor as well.

Okazaki took a piece of boiled taro before asking for confirmation.

"But why me?"

"You're the only one. You're a manager with the right skills and you've sworn allegiance to Lady Runa. Karin and Angela will probably scout from foreign countries when it's time to pick their associates. Those people's loyalty will lie with Angela and Karin, not Lady Runa. The entire Keika Group could be taken over."

“The same goes for Iwazaki zaibatsu members sent in through the Keikain family. They’ll probably be loyal to either the Keikain family or the Iwazaki zaibatsu. You’re the only one who can plan a recovery from all this and recruit new personnel.

“Until Toudou-san can gather powerful elites from Karafuto and assign them to Lady Runa, we can’t let America do what it pleases with the Moonlight Fund. Miss Angela wants to get you away from Lady Runa. If you don’t act, there’s a chance you’ll be defeated. That’s why I had you come here today.”

In other words, Karin, Angela, and the incoming members of the Iwazaki zaibatsu would have a monopoly on the company. This meeting was meant to fine-tune the faction of those who swore their loyalty to the young lady by ensuring that they held the important Japanese posts. Ichijou’s words contained a mixture of resignation and pride, creating a weight that was difficult to describe.

“The Keika Group has grown far too big, but Lady Runa still has a few years until she can truly make her debut in this world. When that happens, I don’t want it to be in a future where her house of cards has collapsed and nothing remains for her.”

Neither man reached out for the fruit that had been served for dessert. Okazaki was too busy listening to Ichijou speak.

As the gambler closest to the young lady, he was the only person who could arrive at the same conclusions as her. This was another reason why Ichijou and Tachibana couldn’t get rid of him.

Lady Runa built the entire Keika Group while taking it for granted that she was going to lose everything...

“Tachibana-san once told me why Lady Runa acts the way she does. She has many qualifications, like bookkeeping, secretarial skills, and English proficiency, and now she’s supposedly aiming for an early college graduation. She clearly believes the Keika Group may collapse and is preparing for it to happen. However, Tachibana-san and I refuse to let her grow up only to have nothing left!”

Ichijou raised his voice in an unmistakable display of his true emotions.

Okazaki asked the waitress to bring them a beer and then poured the only beer at the table into Ichijou's glass.

"What's this? You really love Lady Runa too, don't you, Ichijou-san?"

Ichijou poured some of the beer into Okazaki's glass as well. Then he responded.

"Of course I do. I'm the second guy she scouted."

Recalling that the first was Tachibana and third was Toudou, Okazaki held his glass against Ichijou's before downing it.

"Oh, Ichijou-san, I heard the Wall Street folks are up to something. Angela is supposedly involved in it too, so you should look into it. I'm a trading company man at heart, so I don't know anything about financial engineering."

"I'm only a third-rate banker who was promoted to a second regional bank myself, but that makes me curious. I'll see what I can find out. What are they supposedly plotting?"

With their conversation over and the side show beginning, the two men began to discuss information that would later rock Keikain Runa's world, though they didn't know it. Okazaki was the one to say the words.

"Apparently, there are these things called subprime loans..."



Glossary and notes

Senior assistant: This would be a staff position as opposed to a line one. There's no post, but it's a title given to someone simply for the sake of giving them one. At the head office, this title would roughly be the same as "section chief."

Cast of Characters

Keikain Dukedom

Keikain Kiyomaro: Current head of the Dukedom

Keikain Nakamaro: Heir to the Dukedom

Watabe Shigema: Driver and violinist

Sone Mitsukane: Driver

Akanezawa Saburou: Driver

Tamiya Makoto: Guard

Michihara Naomi: Guard

Tachibana Yuka: Apprentice maid. Tachibana Ryuji's granddaughter

Ichijou Erika: Apprentice maid. Ichijou Susumu's daughter

Anisha Egorova: Maid. Former KGB

Kitagumo Ryouko: Maid. Former Northern Japan government spy

Eva Charon: Maid. Transferred from CIA

Nagamori Kaori: Maid. Concierge at Keika Hotel

Watsuji Takamichi: Chef. Head chef at Keika Hotel

Iwazaki Zaibatsu

Iwazaki Yasuhiro: President of Imperial Iwazaki Bank. Asagiri Sakurako's grandfather

Asagiri Sakurako: Keikain Nakamaro's fiancée. Asagiri Kaoru's older sister

Other related parties

Ishikawa Nobumitsu: Photographer

Keikain Runa's school friends

Amane Mio: One year younger than Runa and like a little sister to her

Katsuki Shiori: From a branch family of the Keikains. Daughter of the Katsuki viscount

Machiyo Sanae: Daughter of the Machiyo count. Asagiri Kaoru's friend

Kurimori Shizuka: From a local zaibatsu. Daughter of the Kurimori family. Main bank is Keika Bank

Takahashi Akiko: Her father, the director-general of the prefectural police, knew Tachibana. Practices kendo

Afterword

THANK YOU very much for purchasing this book. I'm Tofuro Futsukaichi, the author of this work.

First off, please allow me to apologize for this book's delay. The current state of things and various other circumstances resulted in this late release. I'm truly sorry about this.

During this time, my series was entered into Takarajima Inc.'s "Kono Raito Noberu Ga Sugoi! 2022" contest and won 8th place in the tankobon/novelization category. It was also entered in "Tsugi Kuru Raito Noberu Taishou 2021" where it won 7th place overall, 5th place in "web original tankobon," and 4th place in the male readers' vote.

I truly appreciate all of your support from the bottom of my heart. It's why I was able to get this book out into the world.

This book takes place from the winter of 2001 to the spring of 2002. This is around the time when neoliberalism, which is currently a hot political topic in 2021, began to emerge. It appears that people are beginning to rethink neoliberalism, but back then, the people accepted it with wild enthusiasm when it was presented by the government.

What, exactly, were the Koizumi theater politics?

As the past begins to turn into history now, I feel sure that it had some value, and as someone who lived through that era, I couldn't write about the theater politics negatively in the end. The feeling of hopelessness in this country was simply too strong in the late 90s, and it all stemmed from the disposal of bad debts.

While writing this story, I researched documents and news stories from this time, and I found myself forced to acknowledge the impressive politician known as Koizumi Junichirou. The Koizumi administration had two undeniable

achievements. First, they brought the disposal of bad debts to an end. Second, they built up international relations, with the Japanese-American relationship as the nucleus. These are achievements that remain even today.

Of course, the Koizumi administration had its faults too—weak members, abandoning local regions, and a sycophantic diplomacy with America—but what I want to emphasize is how the people of that time chose those things. All of us must carry the past on our backs, merits and wrongdoings alike.

While I'm writing this, I may as well share some stories about my work on this book.

As an author from *Narou*, I belong to a heretical group of people who love stories where the protagonist is defeated. I refer to it as heretical because the readers refuse to accept stories where the main character gets defeated, and I still remember the many criticisms I received over the main part of this volume where Keikain Runa experiences defeat.

Many *Narou* stories follow a template where the main character begins in their childhood and builds up a series of advantages. It's something you see often in adventure stories, such as the *isekai* genre. However, in this story set in the modern era, the main character was defeated. That's because she had a *reason* to be defeated.

“Even if the child in question wanted it, would you really make a child still in elementary school sign an order for murder?”

The answer is simple and something no one can deny. It also includes the forgiving nature of modern society. It's the kindness of the adults who don't allow that child to make such a choice, and also their responsibility as the adults who hold the current era on their shoulders.

There's no such thing as a child who hasn't been scolded by an adult. In short, that's what this volume is about.

2022 was a year that will be remembered in history.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. The Gulf War broke out in 1991. 1995 brought the Great Hanshin Earthquake. In 1997, we saw the consecutive collapse of Sanyo Securities, Hokkaido Takushoku Bank, and Yamaichi Securities Co. 2001 was the year of the simultaneous terrorist attacks in America. 2008 brought about the global financial crisis. 2011 was the Tohoku Earthquake. Finally, we have the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and this year we've seen the outbreak of a war between Russia and Ukraine.

It's sometimes hard to believe that all these events happened within a mere 33 years, but history itself is a cruel thing. The period between World War I, which started in 1914, and World War II, which ended in 1945, was only 31 years long.

That's enough time for a child to become an adult, just as it is for an adult to become elderly. Once you've lived long enough, the depressing knowledge of the weight of reality makes it difficult to smile proudly. I don't know if revealing my own experiences would put them in that same turmoil, but when I look back on those times now, I'm speechless at their severity.

That's why I'm intentionally refraining from discussing the rights and wrongs of current times. Instead, I want you to please reflect on this year sometime later, first when it's become the past, and then when it becomes history.

I reflected on the past and history of my own life experiences when I wrote this story. I can't help but pray that you readers will experience feelings of your own when you take it in.

Finally, I would like to use this space to convey my thanks.

Thank you to *Shousetsuka ni Narou* ("Let's Be Novelists")-sama, the place where I've been telling the tale of Keikain Runa. I really did become a novelist too. Thank you to my editor at Overlap Novels who approached me about making a book version, and to KEI-san, who drew such lovely illustrations. I owe you both so much. I also offer my heartfelt thanks to everyone who assisted me in the novelization of this volume. Finally, thank you from the bottom of my heart to every reader who purchased this book. You have my sincerest

gratitude.

With that, I pray we meet again in the next volume.



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