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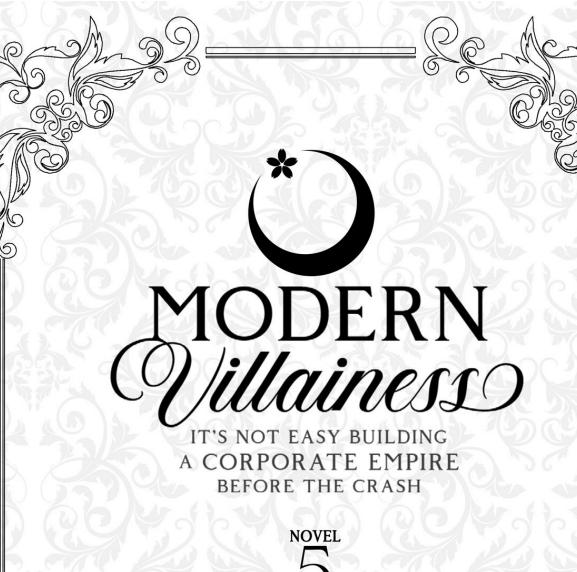
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Seven Seas Entertainment

MODERN VILLAINESS: IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING A CORPORATE EMPIRE BEFORE THE CRASH VOL. 5

Gendai Shakai de Otome Game no Akuyaku Reijou wo Suru no wa Chotto Taihen Vol. 5 ©2024 Tofuro Futsukaichi

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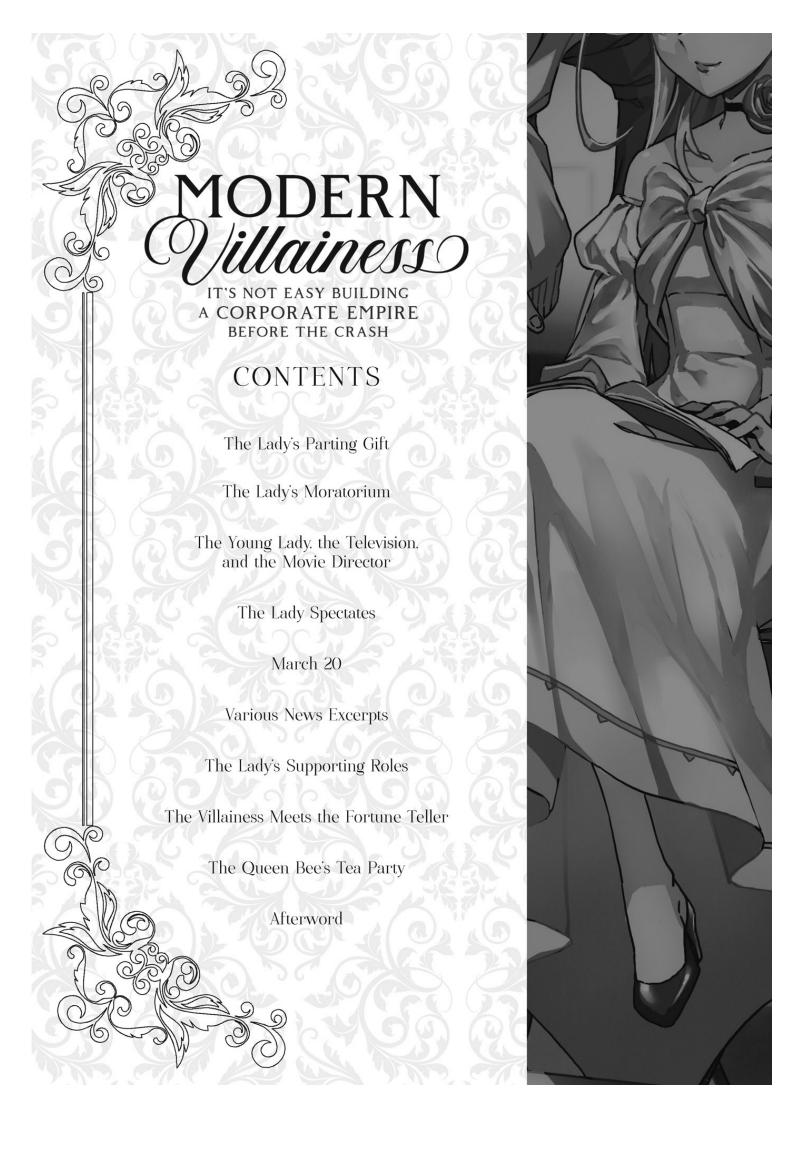
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President and chief executive officer of Keika Corp.

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

KAIHOUIN HOTARU

Young employee of Keika Holdings. Gets on well with the young lady.



Keikain Runa's secretary. A former CIA agent.



A politician in the House of Representatives for the Fellowship of Constitutional Government. Current Prime Minister.



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



TAKANASHI MIZUHO

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

TEIA SHUUICHI

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 communal 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.





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

CAST OF CHARACTERS

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



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



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



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



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



CEO of Keika Holdings. Has a daughter named Erika.



Chapter 1:

The Lady's Parting Gift

PEOPLE ARE FOOLS. Their inherent foolishness makes them impossible to stop once they set foot down a path. This is the story of one prime example.

"That's why now is the time to place all her rights under the main family's control!"

"Exactly. She's been stopped by both the Japanese and American governments now. How can you object to taking her rights away?"

Tachibana Ryuuji was being attacked in a room in Shirokane, Tokyo—the main Keikain family's neighborhood. His so-called attackers were distant relatives and branch families of the Keikains making up the backbone of the Keikain Dukedom.

Tachibana stared them down with a harsh gaze as if he saw into their hearts. He was sitting next to Duke Keikain Kiyomaro, who had Keikain Nakamaro on his other side. Although Tachibana glared at the two men, neither moved. The situation was turning into Keikain Runa's trial in absentia.

As a noble family, the Keikain Dukedom naturally had many branches and vassal families in addition to the main lineage. The bloodline went from Keikain Hikomaro to Kiyomaro and then Nakamaro, whose children would one day take it over. Keikain Runa, however, had recently destroyed the power balance established through the family hierarchy. The looming removal of nobles' special privileges was also a source of unease among those close to the Keikains.

Some had expressed the wish to have Keikain Runa marry someone from the inside, but those desires ceased when the girl was adopted into the main family.

The main lineage's Kiyomaro and Nakamaro had both married women

connected to the Iwazaki zaibatsu, meaning the Iwazakis would likely treat them as family in future. Some had even tentatively brought up being absorbed by the Iwazaki zaibatsu entirely, though those voices had grown quiet. The main family was shifting away from managing their businesses and focusing on running their syndicate instead, so they sought to separate ownership from management. They also clarified that they wouldn't lay a hand on Runa's stake in any business.

The group gathered around both sides of the main family, directing such biting words at Tachibana, was a branch of the Keikains—the Kitayama clan. They were descended from Keikain Hikomaro, an illegitimate son from a certain dukedom that granted him his family line. That line then split off into one clan formed upon succeeding the Keikain family, and another clan consisting of anyone who could be useful after the original dukedom's postwar downfall. Their name came from Kitayama-dono, who was also the original dukedom's namesake. The clan later obtained many noble titles, the highest of all being an earldom. They'd made their living with the help of their diplomatic immunity from arrests, but now that nobles' special rights were on the verge of being stripped, many of those relatives were attempting to survive by contributing culturally to the Choufuu Council—the Keika Group's syndicate. Though there were few Kitayamas, the clan possessed the right to Keikain family inheritances, which made the main family wary of them. However, there was no way to purge the Kitayamas, so the relationship hung in a delicate balance.

"I'd like to ask you all something. Say you stripped her of her rights. How would you manage them? And how would you inform her ladyship of your intentions?"

In the shadows of the Showa era, Tachibana Ryuuji had worked as the previous Keikain duke's right-hand man. This trial in absentia was a complete farce to him. But when Keikain Kiyomaro insisted that this could enable the Keikain Dukedom's inner circle to blow off steam, Tachibana had agreed to attend.

Now, his deep tone silenced these critics. "The main family couldn't manage everything Runa built."

Keikain Runa hadn't been informed of this trial in absentia, but despite being a mere elementary school student, she'd amassed a fortune in no time through her frightening ability to manage money. She'd created Keika Holdings, Keika Railway, Keika Corp, and Keika Electronics Union—all prominent companies within Japan. She was an extraordinary child.

Keikain Nakamaro spoke next, sounding as if his words were the natural conclusion. "We're able to appoint everyone here independent directors, but that's all we can do publicly right now. I hear that even Runa's struggling to handle those four companies' longtime employees. If they won't listen to her, do you really think they'd listen to us?"

Nakamaro was right. Runa might've acquired the companies and become their legal owner, but the loyalty of those who ran those companies couldn't be purchased.

Keika Holdings, a mishmash of several financial institutions, was supported by the Ministry of Finance. However, the Ministry's failures had intensified internal disputes within the company, which had just led Nakamaro himself to resign as an independent director.

Tachibana Ryuuji, who'd helmed Keika Railway, had been implicated in a scandal that brought Diet member Katou down from his seat. He'd avoided arrest thanks to diplomatic immunity, but he'd lost his power and now had West Japan Imperial Railway and East Japan Imperial Railway chasing after his position as president. Keika Electronics Union had been unable to avoid the influence of Teikoku Telephone Company, a telecommunications giant, and everyone knew that the acquisition spanning Japan and America had resulted in concerns over internal management. The formation of Keika Corp would be completed soon, and as a merger of general trading companies with massive amounts of clients, management mishaps were possible however the process was handled.

"Shouldn't we just leave it all for Iwazaki to handle?"

Hearing that, everyone in the room stiffened. The man who'd spoken, who was seated next to the Kitayamas, was a member of the Iwazaki branch of the Keikains. The main Keikain family had joined with the Iwazaki zaibatsu, and multiple family lines had been restored by adopting Iwazaki family members. However, many Iwazakis were displeased by their treatment—like they were illegitimate children—which had prompted the current suggestion. The Iwazaki zaibatsu's main family still only held the rank of baron, while the other families held higher titles like viscount or earl. Keikain Hikomaro had exploited their complex over that to win their loyalty, but while he'd been successful in gaining that, people here also sought a return to the Iwazaki zaibatsu through a change in leadership, motioning for Kiyomaro's wife to be chosen from the Iwazaki zaibatsu. Their actions had become more obvious after the bubble burst, when they tried to hand the Keika Group to the Iwazaki zaibatsu as a present under the pretext of "saving the Keika Group." When they spoke at this meeting, their intentions were easy to read.

The Iwazaki zaibatsu, a massive zaibatsu that represented Japan, held deep ties to the Keikains. The current Keikain family head, Kiyomaro, was married to Iwazaki Ruriko, who came from a branch family of the Iwazaki zaibatsu. Keikain Nakamaro had recently married Asagiri Sakurako, whose maternal grandfather was Iwazaki Yashirou, president of Imperial Iwazaki Bank. If the Keika Group truly offered to sell themselves off entirely, the Iwazaki zaibatsu would definitely be eager to buy them. That was the long history leading up to the suggestion the man had made to the room.

"I'd be lying if I said I never considered putting Iwazaki in charge of everything," Tachibana Ryuuji responded calmly.

Keikain Kiyomaro and Nakamaro hadn't been the only ones to lay groundwork for this spectacle of a meeting; the branch families and relatives had done so themselves. Thus, everything said at the meeting was considered to be on the formal record for all intents and purposes.

"However, there are a few problems with that solution. The first is the state of the bank itself. My lady offered her aid to Imperial Iwazaki Bank and allowed them to avoid losses before General Energy Online went under. At the very least, I've been told privately that they have no intention of taking over Keika Holdings."

Keikain Nakamaro backed Tachibana up. "That's true. I heard it from Sakurako." It was obvious that these two were, at a minimum, on the same page.

"If Iwazaki Corporation doesn't take over Keika Holdings, it could take charge of Keika Corp, and the Iwazaki Heavy Industries Ltd. affiliate Iwazaki Electric could take over Keika Electronics Union. That would probably cause disputes between Iwazaki's three main companies, though. Asking for help and stirring up an argument within the Iwazaki zaibatsu wouldn't do anyone any good."

Once Keikain Kiyomaro saw that no one else would follow Keikain Nakamaro, he spoke. "The ambassador came to thank me personally at the recent U.S. banquet. The Americans scolded her too, but they apparently don't want to take any power out of her hands."

The United States of America was a global superpower. Keikain Kiyomaro's words, which implied a sense of justice along with material benefits, referred to Runa's preparations for the Iraq War. They would have her step away from that matter, unwilling to let her be responsible for bloodshed. The Americans had selfishly said that they would still gladly make use of Runa's groundwork, with an undeniable hint that they would look to her for help if the unthinkable happened and the war went poorly for them. This coordination between countries was partly the result of Keikain Runa seeking out Angela Sullivan and Karin Viola to help her within the United States.

"Still, this is no longer something we can control on our own. At some point, we'll have to separate ownership from management," said a member of the Myoujou clan of the Keikains sitting near Tachibana.

As an emerging noble family, the Keikains had allowed other families to use their surname to achieve prosperity. They'd also used the name to incorporate other families into their own via relationships. All these people, including closely associated families and their successive generations, were gathered here; Tachibana was one of them. The name "Myoujou" came from the Buddhist name of Fujiwara no Sadaie. The title of his work *Gekanshu* contained a secret distaste for the *jigenin* courtiers. The Keikain family was generally treated like *shizoku*. Once that class was gone, however, noble families attached to the Keikains—as well as convenient military figures, Diet members, and bureaucrats—could take their surname and add prestige to their own families. That history made some families hesitate to use the name "Keikain" alone, so some took the derivative name "Katsura" or included a "Kei" in their surnames. Those were the ones who truly influenced the Keikains, and their loyalty to the main family meant Keikain Runa's rise to power concerned them.

"She's a mere child. We adults should do as we please and ignore the inclinations of the young lady from Sakata."

Those biting words echoed louder than expected, drawing stern looks from Tachibana, Kiyomaro, and Nakamaro. In calling Runa "the young lady from Sakata," although she'd been born and raised in Tokyo and adopted into the main family, he was disparagingly referencing her father, Keikain Otsumaro. He had built the former Far Eastern Group, which Runa had inherited, in Sakata.

Keikain Runa was now gathering personnel for the former Far Eastern Group, but since the Keikains were an emerging family, they had few families of retainers serving them. Tachibana Ryuuji, Runa's butler, belonged to one such family, as did Ichijou Susumu, Katsura Naoyuki, and Tokitou Aki. Those families were there to serve the Keikains, so they were quite low within the hierarchy of the Keikain Dukedom.

"We've grown too large. We can't even voice our true intentions anymore."

Keikain Nakamaro muttered this as if thinking back on something, making everyone in the room look away from him. The attendees were all linked to the

dukedom, and once they realized they'd been mocked for seeking the power that came from the family instead of prioritizing the bond of blood between them, the awkward looks on their faces proved they had at least *some* sense of shame.

"That's exactly why I wanted to call this meeting. We must decide what to do before we tell her."

"I see. In that case, I want to hear from Tachibana-kun. What have you landed on?"

Keikain Nakamaro had been the first to speak, but no one in the room dared interrupt the subsequent question from the current duke himself. Their plan for Keikain Runa would depend on Tachibana's words.

He took a deep breath before recommending a strategy. "We will temporarily manage my lady as a stopgap measure until she reaches adulthood. At that time, we'll take on independent directors from the Iwazaki zaibatsu to keep her in check. How does that sound?"

It was a strategy to strengthen the relationship between the Iwazaki zaibatsu and Keikain family. The Keika Group would resolve its lack of personnel by bringing on Iwazaki zaibatsu members without ever letting them further into the group's core than the role of independent director. Many people in the room *did* desire a total unification of the Keikain family and the Iwazaki zaibatsu, since they were already growing closer.

"If anyone here wishes to be involved in managing the Keika Group, please make yourself known. I promise to convince my lady and place you in the proper position," Tachibana said.

Some attendees raised their hands in response. No one in the Kitayama clan tried for the role, since they had neither the desire nor the skills to become independent directors. Still, many members of the Iwazaki clan lifted their hands, seeking a merger of the Keikain family and their own zaibatsu. The Myoujou clan expressed a desire to manage and observe, which made

Tachibana bow his head.

He was relieved to see his prediction had been right. If he had people inside both the Iwazaki zaibatsu and the Keikain family willing to keep an eye on things, it was less likely that forces within the Keikain family would force the young lady out of power.

Tachibana hoped the people who'd raised their hands would display the proper skills for their positions, but he didn't actually have very high expectations for their talents.

"Very well," said Keikain Kiyomaro. "As head of the Keikain Dukedom, I'll continue to leave the responsibility for Runa to Tachibana-kun."

Tachibana and everyone else bowed in response to his decision.

The true nature of nobles, or rather of long-established Japanese families, survived even in these modern times. It was on full display as the trial in absentia ended.



"Are you happy with the way things turned out, Tachibana-kun?"

"Everything in this world requires a bit of compromise."

After the meeting, Keikain Nakamaro and Tachibana Ryuuji joined Keikain Kiyomaro in his office. When he heard Tachibana's answer, the duke couldn't help but offer a pained smile.

Tachibana worried about Keikain Runa's wellbeing too. He'd handled his concerns by treading straight into gray areas of the Showa era without hesitation; his modus operandi was truly that of a fixer conducting shady business.

Kiyomaro understood Runa's personality enough to know that these conversations would enrage her. He was also aware that his old methods wouldn't fly in the Heisei era, which was why he'd sent Tachibana to work under Runa as if banishing him. Of course, at that time, they'd had no way of knowing that Runa's wealth would exceed the main family's.

"Could you explain why we had to go through that farce just to get everyone on the same page?" Nakamaro's voice sounded deeper than normal now. After the farce, the true topic of discussion was beginning.

Tachibana made the two men coffee like a proper butler before presenting them with a sheet of paper. It described the results of an American investigation into Keikain Runa and factors affecting her life. Furthermore, its findings were very different than what Nakamaro expected.

"I see... So the ghost of antiquity has been trying to possess Runa."

This "ghost of antiquity" Nakamaro spoke of so maliciously was none other than a political movement within the country. That group was calling for revenge over the loss of the Pacific War, had indirectly caused the Second February 26 Incident, aimed to rid Japan of diplomacy that merely followed in America's footsteps, and aspired to interfere with the still-unstable nation of Russia as believers in Halford Mackinder's "land power" theory.

They took advantage of the confusion after the Cold War and restored Japan's former territory of Southern Karafuto, but they went too far when they used that momentum to destroy the Russian territory of Northern Karafuto and turn it into land for the People's Democratic Republic of Northern Japan. This diplomatic struggle between Japan and Russia, known as the Northern Karafuto Problem, was a hot-button issue for a long time.

Amid Russia's political instability, Keikain Runa was being turned into an icon due to her blood—that of the former Russian imperial family, the Romanovs. She was the ultimate trump card for Russia, and after her defeat against the Koizumi administration, Russian forces tried to reach out to her. Runa was merely an object of admiration for the masses at this point, but Governor Iwasawa and former Policy Research Council Chair Tsurui had aligned with this group, who were now trying to win over factions being iced out by Koizumi's administration, as well as forces within Russia. If they managed to make Runa the face of their cause, it would surely result in a disaster that no one dared think about for too long.

"They're trying to lift Runa up as a symbol of their country..." Nakamaro heaved a deep sigh. Runa was an object of admiration and hope for the Russian people, but there was no denying her symbolic value to Japan's citizens as well.

"Runa is a much larger figure than she knows," said Kiyomaro. "People will definitely come to destroy her, just as you worry about."

"I understand. That's why I promise to protect my lady. The first thing we'll have to do is keep this information hidden. If she learns of this, she won't be able to act of her own free will anymore."

Tachibana's response was resolute, but he already had two worries about keeping the information secret. His first fear was that, if Runa caught wind of this, she'd take matters into her own hands. His second was that her actions would affect other people; she had to be kept in the dark to prevent that.

Nakamaro looked at the ceiling sadly. "So, the U.S. is definitely going to attack

Iraq?"

"Correct. The Koizumi administration was suppressing my lady because she was already trying to involve herself in the Iraq War. They and the U.S. have removed her now, but they're speeding up their preparations for the war and using my lady's setup in the Middle East fully to ensure their military strength is at its peak."

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 had harmed the prestige of the hegemonic United States. They'd invaded Afghanistan for revenge and driven the armed insurgents there to destruction, but that alone didn't restore their stature. The United States sought even more blood and military power, and their prospective target this time was Iraq—the country they'd failed to bring down during the Gulf War.

Setting up Russia to adopt Runa as its figurehead would further hurt the United States' prestige before it invaded Iraq. It would also improve Japan's diplomatic standing.

"I understand that much. Do you have any idea who's pulling the strings behind all this?" asked Nakamaro.

In response, Tachibana nodded and retrieved a paper bill from his wallet. It was a new type of currency unveiled to the world in 2002. The euro—the embodiment of hope for Europe.

European countries like France and Germany were distancing themselves from the United States, which was leading the invasion of Iraq. Part of their rationale was to minimize damage to their own countries, but that came with the benefit of showing the world that they were different from the U.S., making it look as though Europe itself was challenging the current American-centric world.

With the end of the Cold War, Europe had unified. The hegemonic United States was shaken, but responded with the invasion of Iraq. An asymmetric war broke out when terrorism suddenly became widespread. Keikain Runa had lived

through that sequence of global events. She was aware of all of it, and was prepared to plunge into those raging currents, but the adults stopping her now had to take the responsibility in her stead—both for the world and for history itself.

"Indeed," said Tachibana. "We'll have to deal with this ourselves."

Hearing Tachibana's words, Kiyomaro smiled with satisfaction and handed the butler his empty coffee cup. "It's in your hands. I've done all I can."

"Of course."

That ended the Keikain Dukedom's secret meeting. But for Tachibana, the feared fixer known as the "Hungry Wolf of the Far East," the job was only just beginning.

Keika Railway's temporary headquarters were in a building near Akihabara Station, since the organization was focusing its attention on the Shin-Tokiwa Railway still being constructed. However, people both within and outside of the company assumed that the headquarters would move to Shinjuku at some point, in light of the Shinkansen line being built. Keika Railway had invested two trillion yen in the line.

Tachibana Ryuuji, Keika Railway's president, needed to find a successor as soon as possible so he could move to a chairman position without the right of representation. His eventual choice was a man named Mikihara Kazuaki, a former executive at East Japan Imperial Railway and current general director of operations at Keika Railway.

"Please make yourself comfortable."

The secretary opened the door for Mikihara Kazuaki to enter the president's office. Tachibana Ryuuji shook the quiet-looking man's hand.

Mikihara Kazuaki was known as the "line master" due to his work making diagrams on which railway timetables were based. That was why Tachibana had

scouted him; he knew that the metropolitan East Japan Imperial Railway trains always ran according to schedule thanks to the hard behind-the-scenes work of people like Mikihara.

"This doesn't seem like it'll be a pleasant chat." Mikihara Kazuaki seemed to sense that through Tachibana's firm grasp during their handshake.

Tachibana smiled awkwardly. Mikihara was right—this wasn't going to be pleasant for him. "I'm sure you're aware of the scandal surrounding me now. I've decided to take responsibility and give up my seat. Mikihara-san, you'll hold this office next."

Keika Railway was currently struggling from a chronic lack of personnel. That had started when Runa, who knew nothing about the situation, rescued railway companies while eliminating bad debts. It grew from the Shikoku and Shinjuku Shinkansens and spread to Shin-Tokiwa Railway Company and KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co., getting bigger and bigger until Keika Railway struggled to keep up.

"I thought the Shinkansen meant you'd choose a temporary executive from West Japan Imperial Railway."

"That'll probably be the person who takes the role after you."

Now, it was Mikihara's turn to smile awkwardly. A quiet but intense battle between the East Japan and West Japan Imperial Railways had been going on over that very office.

Sighing, Mikihara guessed why he'd been victorious. "Was it the Shinjuku Shinkansen?"

"It was. Keika Railway alone invested two trillion in construction fees, and the massive Shinjuku Geofront centered around Shinjuku Station's underground platforms is being promoted as a national project. If it ends up gridlocked now..."

"Ah, I see."

Unfortunately, even extremely costly railway projects had political

implications. Knowing this, Mikihara now understood why he'd been selected. In placing him in a role of responsibility for Keika's involvement in this large venture, they wanted support and political power for East Japan Imperial Railway. Suspects had been arrested for an apparent terrorist plot against the Shinjuku Geofront, and if their plot had succeeded, who knew what political repercussions might've occurred.

Under his title of "line master," Mikihara acted like a mere worker, but he was perfectly capable of politicking if promoted to an executive role. Tachibana had realized that and selected him.

"Very well, I'll take this job, but remember that I'm nothing more than the person in charge of the worksite. Please handle the political dealings yourself."

"I understand. I'm no politician either. Do you have any requests in terms of your new position? I'll do what I can to assist you." Tachibana's smile was superficial.

Mikihara Kazuaki saw the true sentiments in his eyes and sighed quietly. "Let me think. Since you're offering, I'd like to request a promotion for someone I have in mind."

"Pardon me, Mr. President," said the president's secretary. "I'm here with Nagamori Kaori-sama, the Keika Hotel concierge."

"Thank you. Please make yourself comfortable."

"Very well."

The secretary left them cups of tea and departed, leaving only Keika Railway President Tachibana Ryuuji, General Manager of Operations Mikihara Kazuaki, and Nagamori Kaori in the room. None picked up their teacup.

Mikihara spoke first. "I called you here today because President Tachibana will soon step down to a chairman role without representation rights. It hasn't been announced, but I'll be his replacement. As my first appointment, I want to

make you a Keika Hotel executive as well as a Keika Railway Holdings concierge. That will improve service throughout the company."

Nagamori stole a glance at Tachibana when she heard this. His silence seemed to indicate his approval. She, a mere concierge from a subsidiary company, was not just about to become an executive but also receive a role at the parent company. It was a very surprising revelation. Of course, she knew there had to be more to the story.

"General Manager Mikihara, may I ask your rationale?"

"The official story is that the Keika Group is reorganizing to eliminate redundancy issues in the maid department."

The Keika Group had spent years expanding as much as they could, and friction had developed due to overlap in the maid department. First were the maids employed by the Keikain family. Some worked for the main lineage, while others, like Tokitou Aki, Katsura Naomi, Tachibana Yuka, Ichijou Erika, and Keikain Runa's head maid, Saitou Keiko, worked for Runa. In another age, those maids would've been the young lady's direct retainers.

The bodyguard maids who protected their mistress belonged to Kitakaba Security and would likely become a group of her "associates" once she graduated to junior high. Kitakaba Security would be a subsidiary of the soon-to-be-formed Keika Corp.

Additionally, Keika Corp would contain a maid dispatch company called Keika Maid Services. Keika Hotel had maids in their concierge department, and Kudanshita Keika Tower was even home to a maid café called Vesuna.

"If I've been doing a good job, shouldn't I stay in my current position?"

"We don't know whether it'll continue to be smooth sailing, but it looks like we're left with no choice," replied Mikihara.

He placed a business magazine on the table. It contained a special report entitled *The Bloated Keika Group*.

"Maybe we could ignore this, but we don't want them digging into our business if we can avoid it. We don't have anything worth submitting to the mass media as a distraction, either. That's why I feel we need to find a way to put things in order."

Mikihara's logical response demanded a prompt answer from Nagamori. She worked a customer service job, and no good concierge could get the job done without being a good listener. Tachibana watched their exchange carefully.

"All right," said Nagamori. "Then what's the real reason?"

"That would be office politics."

They both failed to repress sad chuckles. Choosing a concierge of all people, and calling her to the office for an unofficial announcement, was office politics. In the end, this was the exact kind of "bloat" the business magazine on the table referred to.

"I'm not originally from the Keika Group, as you know," Mikihara added. "A lot of people dislike me because of that. I've chosen you as my pawn to help smooth things over."

"You're very blunt, aren't you?"

"Honesty begets honesty. There's no reason to make enemies of each other over this, is there?"

After a moment, Mikihara spoke again. His eyes turned to the Keika Group's moon-and-cherry-blossom crest, which hung on the wall behind Tachibana.

"Take a look at that company badge. My lady first gave the moon-and-cherry-blossom crest to Keika Hotels, which has been around since the beginning of my lady's Keika Group. It's older than any of the companies except Keika Holdings, which used to be the territory of the Ministry of Finance. It feels like home, in a way. Now that the railway, Teisei Department Stores, and hotels are uniting under the Keika Railway Holdings banner, the hotels need attention to come out on top of the power struggle going on."

The "lady," Keikain Runa, held the Moonlight Fund as the core of her businesses, but the organization hadn't been formed with the purpose of shielding her from harm. It was also earmarked to become a subsidiary of Keika Corp after the Keika Group reorganized. Japanese companies generally claimed dominance not due to profits or contributions, but age and founding date. The Keika Group had expanded rapidly, and the people on the inside were more outspoken now. On top of that, Keika Hotels owned Runa's home, Kudanshita Keika Tower, and their maids interacted with her daily. Nagamori was in a perfect position to influence those maids.

"Sadly, the railway division isn't a monolith either. I'll also want covert help from the hotel side if the railroads, hotels, and department stores end up in a three-way gridlock."

"You don't hesitate to talk about internal issues, do you?"

"Well, we're a railroad company, after all. The railroads are so intrinsically linked to politics that we have phrases like 'drawing iron for your own field.' I arrived from East Japan Imperial Railway, but the next president will have to come from West Japan Imperial Railway. So, as the current president, I want a constant grasp on the young lady's next moves. You'll provide me with that."

Runa had invested a large amount into East Japan Imperial Railway for Shin-Tokiwa Railway and the Shinjuku Shinkansen. But not only had she made similar investments into West Japan Imperial Railway for the Shikoku Shinkansen, Shin-Osaka Station platforms, and the Naniwasuji Railway, she was investing in Tokai Imperial Railway, specifically in the Nagoya area. In other words, the young lady's decisions led to hundreds of billions, or even trillions, of yen moving. The maids watched her go through that decision-making process, and Nagamori had a direct link to the maids. She could still serve that purpose even after being promoted to an executive position.

"I understand. I have no intention of refusing." Having accepted, Nagamori decided to tease Mikihara a little. She knew the young lady was complaining about something already. "But don't forget that I pick up the young lady's ideas

as well. For example, she's been complaining that it's hard to leave Kudanshita Station on special trains."

Mikihara, the "line master," answered by looking away with an embarrassed smile. Tachibana guessed that what Nagamori mentioned was currently physically impossible, and that Mikihara might therefore throw money into constructing an east-west subway line at the station. However, he didn't interrupt the conversation between the two.

Keika Hotel Shinjuku had been Keika Hotels' flagship location before the Kudanshita Keika Tower hotel was finished. That meant the building was full of special rooms for distinguished guests, and was staffed by the most reliable employees.

Nagamori Kaori, incoming Keika Railway president Mikihara Kazuaki's new hire, was guiding Governor Iwasawa Makoto through the hotel. When they reached a specific room, the governor shook hands with Tachibana Ryuuji.

"If you've called me here, Tachibana-san, I gather this isn't going to be a good conversation."

Although Iwasawa was cracking a joke, he was the governor of the Shinjuku Shinkansen, while Tachibana had once been president of Keika Railway, a group promoting that same Shinkansen. As representatives of Keikain Runa herself, they'd worked together on the project, handling the monstrously huge two-trillion-yen arrangement. At least, that had been their relationship until now.

Nagamori left the two men some tea and bowed before leaving the room.

Once he saw she was gone, Tachibana Ryuuji spoke. "Let me get straight to the point. You have friends trying to trick my lady into taking a stance against the United States."

"Yes, that's probably their plan." Governor Iwasawa's words were full of resignation.

Looking at him, Tachibana moved straight to his next question with the pointedness of a knife. "And you're not involved with that in any way?"

"I'm not senile enough to betray the young lady who made me governor and advanced the huge Shinjuku Shinkansen project. If she picked a fight with the prime minister or the United States, though, I'd happily run to her aid."

On the inside, Tachibana was very relieved to hear this. He hadn't been sure whether this man was Runa's genuine ally or feared becoming her enemy. Just that many monsters lurked in politics.

"Good. I wanted to call you here to stop their recklessness before they can do anything."

"I'm not sure I can help with that. I have no way to stop them right now. They've been riled up since Prime Minister Koizumi's loss, and even you've been busy subcontracting for the U.S., Tachibana-san. I'm not saying I'll antagonize the Americans, but I can try to improve our relationship enough that we speak freely to each other, just like we're doing now, right?"

Tachibana winced—the governor had gone for a sore spot, and he was entirely right. Ever since the Second World War—no, from their perspective, since its defeat in the Pacific War—this country had obeyed America's demands, going on to shed blood in mainland Asia and Vietnam, as well as during the Gulf War.

Japan had obtained economic prosperity in return, but nearly half a century had passed since the conflict, and now a new war on terrorism had begun. The country had reached the point of seeking its own independent system of values. That was exactly why Governor Iwasawa wanted a position in which he could oppose Prime Minister Koizumi and the United States. If Runa hadn't been at the heart of that movement, Governor Iwasawa surely would've picked a fight with the Prime Minister long ago.

"But they're already making moves. Things are bad because they're panicked over Prime Minister Koizumi suppressing my lady."

"Right. So is the U.S. really going after Iraq after all?" Governor Iwasawa made no attempt to hide the distaste in his words. Not only was he angry that Runa had been turned into an icon for American propaganda, he also realized the implication that the United States was starting a war in Iraq purely to take revenge for 9/11—not for any moral or just cause.

Tachibana Ryuuji shared his next steps calmly. "I'll start by removing the politicians who'll most likely get in my lady's way. You used to be on that list, of course."

"I don't mind. I'm not cold enough to stop you from removing anyone trying to use her for their own gain. But why did you take my name off?"

Tachibana could only smile grimly at Governor Iwasawa's question. "It was clear as day that you supported her. My lady might've gotten angry if you made the list of people to remove. We have no interest in sabotaging her."

"That's the story, then... Right. If she were an adult... No, if she were a *boy*, I'd gladly have made life hell for the prime minister." Governor Iwasawa was still lamenting when a knock sounded at the door.

Nagamori Kaori entered the room. "Pardon me, but the governor's secretary has informed me that if he doesn't leave at once, he'll be late for his next engagement."

"Tell her to cancel it. You knew this would happen when you called me here, didn't you, Tachibana-san? That's just the kind of guy you are."

"You think too highly of me."

Governor Iwasawa's next engagement was a gathering hosted by a major newspaper company—a party with the very people he'd been discussing with Tachibana.

Meanwhile Runa, who knew nothing about any of this, had been in a moratorium in the form of a normal school life.

Glossary and Notes

Separation of ownership and management: The state of affairs at a company not run by its stockholders. Considered standard for most corporations.

Shizoku: The samurai class during the Edo period. This class faded out during the Meiji period when daimyo families became nobility and class equality was promoted.

Independent director: A board member brought in from outside an organization. They started to be brought in around this era to monitor administrative aspects of a business because they had no stake in the company itself.

Fixer: Someone in politics or another area who carries out decision-making via informal channels. A person who pulls strings behind the scenes.

"Drawing iron for your own field": The original Japanese saying (similar to "feathering your own nest") is "drawing water for your own field." Historically, railways were crucial to regional development, so routes were often decided via politicking.

Concierge: A hotel employee who helps guests with any requests or information they wish. The presence of a concierge can determine whether an establishment is considered a luxury hotel.

Chapter 2:

The Lady's Moratorium

T WAS SEPTEMBER 1ST. A giant merger of Japanese and American computer companies had resulted in the birth of a new organization—Keika Electronics Union. Bigwigs from the political and business worlds gathered at Kudanshita Keika Tower to celebrate the occasion.

"Keika's sure become a mover and shaker in lots of fields. They built all this in only a few years."

"All they did was suck up to whoever was in office at the time."

"I thought she might go belly-up, given that Koizumi's administration couldn't stand her. Looks like she's doing better than ever, though."

"Who knows? In this world, it takes time to tell who's a winner and who's a loser."

Listening to the party guests' voices made me understand something: others saw the way politicians had their eyes on me as a drawback. Still, the fortune I'd built was very real. These guests probably felt obliged to attend this event for that reason alone.

"Shiyo Electric Co., Furukawa Telecoms, and now Portercon? I hear Portercon's sales are coming out of that slump. People think they'll post good financial results."

"Keika Holdings, Keika Railway, and Keika Corp soon... Will they get even bigger? Or are they—"

"My lady."

I jumped at the voice and turned around to see Tachibana Yuka, my maid, looking me in the eye. I was standing in a workers' passageway that curved around the banquet hall. It was constructed to let employees stay out of the

guests' way, making it the perfect place to eavesdrop on their gossip.

"Don't scare me like that," I said.

"You shouldn't be here. It's not ladylike."

Ignoring my objections, Tachibana Yuka led me by the hand to my private room. The name "Keika Group" was behind this new company, but any guest at this party would know that I was the one responsible for it. Still, my adoptive father Keikain Kiyomaro went around greeting guests for optics. My role was to stay quiet and smile as if I were the company mascot.

"You simply aren't qualified. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

Prime Minister Koizumi's words to me had been undeniably true. I'd accomplished so much, but there was still no place for me.

Well, maybe if I hadn't fainted when I saw those terrorist attacks...

I thought that sometimes, but it was too late for regrets now. Mulling over those concerns, I dug into the meal prepared for me.

"We're all so relieved to see your appetite has returned."

Yuka was referring to what had happened two or three months ago. I was half appreciative to hear that she was still looking out for me and half annoyed at the same time.

I drank my grape juice and, looking away from her, tried to sound profound: "People die when they don't eat, you see..."

"Exactly," Yuka replied. "But you couldn't even do that until recently, my lady."

I didn't know how to respond, so I ignored her and ate my pudding.

"Thank you very much for attending today's ceremony. This company was formed through the union of American and Japanese computer businesses, and our promise to you is to lead both countries into the future!"

CEO Karin Viola, tonight's star, greeted guests confidently. Getting off on the right foot was vital for ceremonies like these, so she'd made sure to come prepared.

"We'll be reviewing bold new enterprises, and we anticipate an increase in profits from turning those exceptional companies into subsidiaries! You have my word that it will increase the company's value as well!"

It was important to play up those angles. While CEO Karin didn't give the companies' specific names, everyone here knew that those companies had restructured during their summer sale, which reduced the cost of logistics and consequently led to lower product prices. They also knew we'd acquired TIG Backup Systems, which was reaping high profits. There was no question that our first year would be a success.

"The transition into the twenty-first century has been extremely difficult for the world, but Keika Electronics Union vows to overcome that turbulence and become a pioneering force in the future!"

I watched as CEO Karin took in the thunderous applause, irritated that all I could do was clap too, unable to stand onstage with her.

"Now tell me how things are actually looking."

"Lip service aside, we'll be fighting a war of attrition for a while."

After the party, Karin had come to my room. Once I'd asked her that honest question, she replied with the truth she hadn't been able to say around the guests.

"Portercon still needs revamping. We went and bought shares during the summer-sale price reduction, which meant walking away with smaller profits. Logistics is about eliminating waste through consolidation, but it takes a while to unify a production base. And we need to keep injecting funds into R&D regulation and new products."

In other words, we'd made a big show of our debut, but Keika Electronics Union was really staying afloat thanks to Shiyo Electric Co.'s high profits. Furukawa Telecoms was making money, but their sales were slowly going downhill, and a restructuring was inevitable now. Portercon would need more than restructuring to emerge victorious in the competitive North American market, so the idea was another acquisition.

"If you can be patient three more years, my lady, I'll be sure to make it successful!" Karin pounded her chest confidently.

The gesture made me laugh. "Very well. I'll be patient if you promise to get results. I'm ordering you to take over the world with cell phones. Understood?" I took out my PHS with a triumphant grin.

Karin smiled when she saw me. "I accept the order. I think I'll borrow that pose of yours too. 'Take over the world with a cell phone even a young lady can use!' Don't you think that'd make a nice banner slogan?"

The world had yet to learn that the customer supremacy that banner encapsulated would allow companies to avoid stooping to stock price supremacy and technological supremacy...but I was getting ahead of myself.

"Anyway, how are you feeling physically, my lady?"

I smiled awkwardly at the concern in her voice. Lots of people had been worrying about me. I perked up to show that I was feeling healthy. "I'm quite all right. I'm just taking a short break from playing grown-up. My new school semester starts today, so I'm going to act like a student for a while."

Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's student council connected the school's many grades. When it came to major tasks, the junior high or high school students usually did enough work for us elementary school students to get by without struggling. Still, that didn't mean there was nothing left for us to do on the student council. We sometimes dealt with the kinds of tasks that would normally be beyond students.

"A donation request, eh...?"

That was what we were discussing. Such requests were shady. Naturally, this school was for the children of nobles and the wealthy—anyone of the privileged class. Donations like these were inextricable from a family's position in the school's class system.

While this country had retained its privileged class, it was still a free nation operating under capitalism. It measured everyone's worth through money, which meant that cash was a great way of getting out of trouble.

"Can't I just make the whole donation?"

Taking my joke seriously, Eiichi-kun told me to reconsider. "I'm begging you not to. Next year's student council will suffer for it."

How rude.

Yuujirou-kun pretended not to understand why I was irritated. "Keikain-san, I'm sure you *could* cover it yourself. But it'll mean more if *all* of us are responsible for this donation instead of just you." He guided us away from the topic. "School spirit and the feelings of camaraderie that come from it form this country's upper classes, after all."

"Then wouldn't it be better for me, someone who rose to the top from obscurity, to make a big show of donating my money?"

"You wouldn't want the school to decline if you did, right, Keikain?" asked Mitsuya-kun.

"I guess not." His words reminded me of a story. For some reason, I brought it up. "Didn't your father attend this school too, Mitsuya-kun?"

"Well, most bureaucrats come from imperial law schools. Everyone splits into factions based on which high school they went to, and Imperial Gakushuukan Academy has a big faction in Kasumigaseki. Dad actually complains that whenever they meet up, all they do is get drunk and sing the school song."

I see. So that's why we solicit donations from people in different fields. The act

of donating forged connections to others, so the country's upper classes circulated their money that way. That would end once the bubble burst, though.

"So what're we supposed to do?" Eiichi-kun asked.

As I responded, I read from the documents passed to me. This was a job that called for something big. "Give the school a face. We can ask Imperial Gakushuukan Academy to put a photo and text for our donation request in the brochure they send alumni."

The school photographer took the picture, while others split up the work of writing the text. We started talking about the details of that portion.

"What do we write?"

"Can't we just say 'please donate to us'?"

"Try to make it sound a little nicer, Keikain-san."

"'Just as we inherited traditions from our seniors, we must now pass them on to the next generation,' and stuff like that..."

"I see. We'll dress it up and make it sound businesslike."

Mitsuya-kun filled the manuscript with a bunch of meaningless, bureaucratic-sounding words. That was when I noticed a handwritten message under the documents. It seemed to be from Lydia-senpai, who'd brought us the papers. She was well known throughout the junior high as a class committee leader. While she told us she'd only stopped by to check in on us, she was apparently clever enough to use that as an excuse to leave a message.

"'P.S.: We're hoping the donations we receive will reach the target amount.' I see..."

To my dismay, she'd gone and listed a quota. It was a show of trust, basically saying, "You can do this much, can't you?" Still, it was also a threat: "If you can't do it, we'll have to see where the blame for that lies." Her behavior, so reminiscent of the eastern bureaucrats who had to be on constant guard

against threats if they wanted to survive, was amusing. Although I could ignore Lydia-senpai's message, it was important guidance, since it came from a junior high student. And personally, I loved that twisted *tsundere* personality of hers.

"Of course we can do it!" I declared. "But it'll be a pain. Can't I just pay it myself?"

As I whined, Eiichi-kun calmed me down. "Give up on that, Runa. Why don't you drink some nice grape juice or something?" He practically comforted me as you would a cranky cat, but I didn't mind much.

"Let's accept this as sage advice to bow to the guardians who attend school events. Here, have your grape juice."

"Take a piece of cheesecake. 'The boughs that bear most hang lowest.' I've found out that learning to humble yourself is good experience—at least, since I started running a company with these guys."

Of course, I had nothing else to say to that either, so I started wolfing down the cheesecake. "What do you take me for...?" I sipped the grape juice too.

We agreed to take a photograph and write some text asking for donations. Later, we ended up bowing to representatives of every faction, and receiving enough donations to meet Lydia's quota.

When we went to tell her we'd reached the quota, Lydia-senpai said to us, "You four are an extraordinary Quartet, the likes of which we haven't seen in recent years. You'll definitely make history in this country, if not the entire world."

It was both praise and a warning that people would eventually want to use us for their own gain. In the end, I was a bit sad that Lydia-senpai had never given that compliment in the game.

Organizations existed for the purpose of spending money. Looking at the student council through that lens made certain things clear.

"I see. So that's why the elementary school budget is so low."

Mitsuya-kun, the treasurer, gazed at the budget drafts. The Imperial Gakushuukan Academy student council consisted of elementary school, junior high, and high school divisions that worked together. The high school student council division fine-tuned most of the budgets; once the junior high students approved them, the elementary school students distributed them. That was why older students teased lower grades by calling them "sub-subcontractors."

Yuujirou-kun looked over the proposed budget Mitsuya-kun had handed him. "Well, the bottom line is that we don't have projects that eat into the student council budget. But I am impressed with how well they keep things running."

A supreme authority known as the Student Council Unification Committee presided over the student council leadership. Its members from the high school, junior high, and elementary school divisions were still connected to their own respective committees, allowing them to maintain strong autonomy.

"The budget mostly goes toward school events and different clubs. There aren't any scholarship students in the elementary grades, and not many club events either."

When the proposal came my way, I glanced at it before passing it to Eiichikun. Club expenses made up most of the budget. If a club participated in a tournament, they would need donations to put toward their travel spending. Scholarship students made big contributions to academic and sports clubs in junior high, but in a way, it was natural that they'd come up against the elementary school nobility and upper class. Many committees were controlled by the upper class, but the PE and culture committees—which managed club activities—mostly consisted of scholarship students. Those group breakdowns resulted in clashes.

"But club budgets have been slowly increasing since last year." Eiichi-kun sounded confused as he placed the budget proposal on the desk.

I didn't waste any time enlightening him. "Sorry. That's my fault."

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"Ah..."

"Ah..."
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A certain *idiot* had accidentally qualified for a national tournament, skipping over the regional tournaments, in a sport that was little more to her than a hobby. That had led to a bump in the elementary school's club activity budget. The competitor's name was Keikain Runa.

I just wished they'd stop calling me the "Comet of the Track and Field Club." Obviously, I was in the wrong for being so flattered by it and getting carried away.

"So these are expenses for your fans to travel to tournaments? If you're there, Keikain-san, the media's sure to show up. That might make for good PR." Yuujirou-kun looked at the ceiling.

The cheer squad would have to attend a national tournament, and banners would be made. If I performed well enough, the elementary school broadcasting committee would interview me, and the school newspaper would put it on the front page.

I was well known at this point for my singing. I'd heard that the broadcasting committee already had it in their heads that they'd come interview me if they ran out of material.

"But that means once Keikain graduates and enters junior high, she'll take those funds with her." Mitsuya-kun sounded like he was teasing Yuujirou-kun.

Someone who could provide media fodder was very valuable. That was why the school brought in scholarship students—publicizing those students reinforced its reason for existence.

At that point, Eiichi-kun summed up the conversation. "In junior high, Runa will have even more eyes on her. I'm sure that'll come with more funding in the budget. I bet all the junior high clubs are itching to win her over."

While the three boys spoke, I scratched my head and faked an innocent smile. I was just grateful that I had a seat on the student council leadership team. Shisuka Lydia, my senpai, had been treated similarly before me. However, she'd stayed in the class committee ever since elementary school, and she'd brought a lot of resources under her control; that was the case even now that she was in junior high. I suspected that Lydia-senpai was taking what would've been my path in the game.

"Well, I'm going my own route."

Though I was driven to speak confidently in my present situation, the truth was that I had no real plan for the future. If my life went the way it had in the game, I was sure to be ruined, so I'd been focusing on how to survive instead. In all honesty, I didn't feel like I could live any other way at this point.

"All right, already. Let's get the job done! I'll take the budget proposal to the junior high student council once it has all your seals of approval!"

The three boys stamped the documents. Once I'd done the same as student council vice president, the budget was approved.

The four of us delivered the budget to the junior high division. On the way back, we passed some junior high students. It was strange—they were so close to us in age, but to me, they looked like adults.

"We'll be wearing those uniforms next year," said Eiichi-kun.

Yuujirou-kun responded to him first. "And that'll make younger students look up to us. I wonder if we're worth admiring already, now that we're in our senior year of elementary school."

Mitsuya-kun's retort was characteristic of him. "I think so. Actually, maybe not the three of *us*, but people definitely try to take a page out of Keikain's book."

"Is that so? They try to take a page out of my book? What can I say to that?" I turned around and smiled at the three of them.

I truly loved these exchanges we all shared.

The Imperial Gakushuukan Academy had no real collective student council meetings. The councils couldn't work together, as grade-level committees could maintain the privileged class's status in the council by pushing things through with a majority vote. That was why class committee members carried out decisions within their own student councils. The student council and class committee members were from the lowest to highest grades in the academy, which provided them with continuity and validity. I was impressed by all that—I knew that the massive autonomous student councils in video games and manga must require specifics like these to function.

I was lazing around at my desk during a break between classes when my friends Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan came up to me.

"Do you have a moment, Keikain-san?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"You know the flower beds that mark the border with the junior high side of campus? We want permission to use the empty ones."

Flower beds? I cocked my head and told them who the school let cultivate those. "I think they're the responsibility of the elementary beautification committee."

"I thought so too, so I went and talked to them. They said the junior high committee is in charge of them."

"Ah, okay. I understand."

In that case, Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan would have to submit a petition to the junior high beautification committee. The committee would probably approve it, but it took a lot of effort to prepare the paperwork to submit to the older boys and girls in junior high. It could also be scary. Asuka-chan wanted me to get jurisdiction switched to the elementary school beautification committee

so she could petition them instead.

"Should I request management of the flower beds be transferred?" I asked.

"Yes, please. I'll submit my petition to the class committee, then once that's done, I'll go back to the beautification committee for permission again."

Meetings in Japan were generally where things came to a close. Preparations made in advance, usually through behind-the-scenes maneuvers, determined a meeting's outcome. Between me, the vice president of the elementary school student council division, and Asuka-chan, a class committee member, this topic would basically be settled at the elementary school level.

"What do you want to use the flower beds for?" The flower beds were visible from our classroom, so I walked to the window and peered out. They looked like a wasteland surrounded with stones.

Hotaru-chan, who sat by the window, whispered into Asuka-chan's ear.

Asuka-chan translated for me. "It's sad that they're empty. We thought flowers out there might be fun." Adding color to the passing seasons was a good idea, since we'd spend so much time in that classroom.

It was common in Japanese politics for people to lay the groundwork for action behind the scenes, only to run into problems after a job was done. Imperial Gakushuukan Academy student councils were nothing if not a model for the political world, complete with the exact same flaws. We would end up clutching our heads in despair over that.

"What?! The junior high student council rejected my request to transfer the flower beds' cultivation?!" I stared in pure shock at the documents that had been returned to me.

Eiichi-kun held those documents in one hand. He explained the reasoning to me with a bitter, displeased smile. "They said that it's under junior high control, and there isn't enough reason to transfer it to you." Yuujirou-kun spoke next, getting to the heart of their refusal. There was a big difference between people who did and didn't understand these kinds of tactics. Yuujirou-kun had definitely learned things like this from his father, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. "I looked into it out of curiosity and found there are twenty unused flower beds separating the junior high and elementary areas. They're nothing more than a mess of dirt with stones placed around them, so you could say they're not anything close to 'flower beds' at all."

Mitsuya-kun gazed at the junior high's financial report and managed to find an ulterior motive. I didn't want to say it aloud, but I was sure he must've learned how to do that from his own father, a Ministry of Finance official. "The contractors who manage the junior high flower beds supposedly have a close relationship with the junior high beautification committee. The committee pays them a lot for their work, and they also give out management fees as individual payments, not one lump sum."

You could call that a "close relationship," but "collusion" would be more accurate. Now we'd identified their trick.

"Ah. So they're inflating the budget with the flower beds next to our area, since we're none the wiser to it," said Eiichi-kun.

"Exactly, Teia. Transferring control to us would expose their trick." Mitsuyakun had reached the same conclusion.

At that moment, a memory returned to me. There had been an incident in the game when the student council and beautification committee were nasty to the heroine for trying to gather people and revitalize the barren flower beds. I'd only been a first year in high school at that time, but as villainess, I'd worked behind the scenes to cause trouble for her.

The beautification committee was in charge of managing the school gardens, along with school cleaning and selecting contractors. If I connected with those contractors, I could have them hand garbage over to me—a legal way of going through it for information. Oddly, I could sense what the game version of me

"Hm? What's up, Runa?"

"Oh, nothing... Well, I just have no idea what I'm going to tell Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan."

"Huh? Aren't you legally allowed to go beat the junior high schoolers u—" Eiichi-kun suddenly closed his mouth. It almost surely wasn't because I shot him a big smile; still, that was one possibility.

"Eiichi-kun, don't you just love the phrase 'There is safety in silence'?"

All three boys nodded for some reason.

They were certainly being rude, so I made sure to set the record straight. "I can beat them up illegally so long as I don't get caught."

"You really are a Keikain, aren't you...?" Eiichi-kun seemed half impressed, half resigned.

I pretended I hadn't heard him say that. When faced with problems like these, it was important to visualize a solution. I went to the whiteboard and wrote Recover the rights to the flower beds from the junior high students.

Eiichi-kun made a correction. "That's not right, Runa. The goal is to be able to use the flower beds."

"If that's all, couldn't we just submit a petition to the junior high beautification committee?" I suggested.

"Right. We just need to get through that part ourselves. That's what the student council's for, after all." Eiichi-kun agreed, nodding calmly.

It was a good solution. The elementary school student council would handle the application to the junior high beautification committee on our behalf, and that would be the end of it. That seemed to me like the quickest solution, so I wrote it down on the whiteboard. objective: use the flower beds << petition junior high beautification committee << elementary school student council acts as proxy.

"I see. Now it's obvious what we do next," Mitsuya-kun said.

At that point, Yuujirou-kun looked worried. He had no choice but to share the conclusion he'd worked out. "Will the junior high beautification committee really give us the okay that easily? Won't they just wheelspin, since they'll know we'll find out about the inflated budget?"

"It would be better if they did wheelspin, Izumikawa." Mitsuya-kun smiled.

As much as I wanted to tell him the sinister smile suited him, I kept my mouth shut. "If they say we can use the flower beds, we don't have to do anything else. But they can't use 'there *are* no flower beds' to justify rejecting us, so they'll just need to make up something that sounds better. Then the elementary school student council can ask the junior high beautification committee to explain their reasoning."

Mitsuya-kun got that far and sighed. He was describing an all-out war pitting the elementary school student council against the junior high beautification committee and student council. The downside of a combined school like ours was that we all spent many years together. Cultivating these simple flower beds would mean picking a fight with junior high graduates as well.

"It's a war on all fronts," Eiichi-kun concluded.

"Sure is," Mitsuya-kun agreed.

Of course, a group like ours had also thought of a backup plan.

"So, how could we avoid that?"

"It's simple. The answer is Keikain." Mitsuya-kun turned to me. "You just need to set up new flower beds." I cocked my head in confusion, so he explained his reasoning, quickly making me aware of my blind spot. "That land belongs to the elementary school, doesn't it?"

Yuujirou-kun nodded. Before our meeting, we'd gone to the administrative

office to look at the elementary school area's official boundaries. People laugh off bureaucracy, saying it's a race to hand off work to someone else, but it's easier to think of it as *tsume shogi* if you can keep making progress. If you can't escape by handing a problem off, it's important to see how many pieces you still have on the board.

"The elementary school's territory falls under the jurisdiction of their student council branch. We'll make the elementary school beautification committee petition us, the student council, for approval. That will put an end to this issue."

In the end, this was all about who was in charge of the flower beds. More flower beds had been installed to pad the budget, but the junior high beautification committee was unable to take care of them, so they were nothing more than bare dirt. If the flower beds were in an area managed by the elementary school and under the responsibility of our student council, the junior high schoolers wouldn't be able to complain, however we used them.

"Still, they'll resent us for doing all that. What then?"

Eiichi-kun sounded amused. However things shook out, we planned to take responsibility.

Now the fun part—what to do about it—was coming up.

"We'll use the excuse that we haven't done anything wrong. Izumikawa, don't you have to grow plants for your science homework? Go to the science teacher and tell him you're going to use the flower beds for that project. Teia, use Izumikawa's project as an excuse to borrow planters and soil from the biology department. We'll grow flowers as part of that class assignment. Of course, it'll be best if they're somewhere people can see them."

That was the ace up our sleeve—this would all be under the guise of a class project. It was a perfectly legitimate, moral way to use the flower beds, so it could stand up against the junior high schoolers' shady business.

"Why planters? Can't we just use the flower beds that were already dug?"

Mitsuya-kun looked away when Eiichi-kun asked him that. I see. He's thought very far ahead.

"Because we can move them that way, of course. The junior high schoolers can't stop us from working on a class project someplace 'empty.' Even if they try, we'll just move the flowers somewhere else. Then they can't complain anymore. They're the ones with something to lose if their little scheme gets discovered."

Now we had a plan for how to handle the junior high schoolers. The only thing left was to wait for them to react.

Still, I'd come up with something else just to be safe. "All right. Then I'll work on a backup plan to be sure the junior high schoolers can't cause trouble."

"Don't be too extreme now."

I knew Eiichi-kun spoke for all three boys. Knowing how they thought of me was a bit disheartening. I decided that my "not too extreme" backup plan would be to write a letter.

"I really welcome this sort of thing, Keikain-san."

"Of course. I hear about your accomplishments in junior high too, Lydiasenpai."

Lydia-senpai and I stood on opposite sides of a little-used bookshelf in the academy's main library. We were pretending to read, but our real goal was to talk in secret. I'd heard that these sorts of exchanges were normal for the upper classes of Karafuto, since it had been a society of secret work behind the scenes. I'd be lying if I said I didn't like feeling as though I was in a secret-agent movie, though.

The others and I could expose the corruption around the flower beds, but we'd still have no systematic way to interfere with the junior high schoolers. However, Lydia-senpai, a member of the junior high class committee, would be

a fearsome political weapon once she revealed the scandal. Lydia-senpai belonged to an emerging faction from Karafuto, so she climbed an uphill battle in life. I knew she'd use the information I gave her for mutually assured destruction. She wasn't going to hold back. Of course, this situation would obviously blow up in our faces if the junior high student council or beautification committee said something, and it came back to us through senpai.

"Are you sure about this? I thought everything ended up working out."

We were speaking Russian just to be safe. We avoided using any incriminating words too—this was serious business. I'd studied Russian, so I wasn't struggling in the conversation, and Lydia-senpai was smart enough to understand my situation. She knew very well that this wouldn't go further than the class committee if she was on her own.

The junior high beautification committee ended up approving the elementary school student council's first application. As was common to bureaucracy, you almost wondered what the point of the turmoil was in the first place. That said, we couldn't forget that we'd applied under the pretext of setting out planters for a science class project so they wouldn't have an excuse to find fault with us. My conversation with Lydia-senpai was another form of insurance.

"Yes, it's all right. I'm sure you know that the more freely you act, the easier things get for me as your junior."

I was no different from her, in all likelihood. I'd do the work on my own, end up going nowhere, and even though I wanted to stay with the other three, we'd wind up separating in the end. If I wanted to accomplish something, I needed everyone, not just my own willpower. It was the first time I'd recognized that since being born into this world.

"You're a smart girl, aren't you? You get the seat in front of the portrait."

This was a joke in socialist countries. Behind the seat of the party's secretarygeneral would be a portrait either of themselves or of the hero who founded the country; taking that seat demonstrated that one was rising to power.

We were basically muttering under our breath as we faced the bookshelf, pretending to read.

"You won't expose them, will you?"

"No."

"You'll both be in trouble if it comes out. That's your weapon, right? I really hate that side of you, Keikain-san."

"And I love the side of you that doesn't hold back when you talk to me, Lydiasenpai."

"...Thank you."

I heard her close her book before her footsteps grew distant.

I shut my own book and headed back to my classroom. I happened to run into Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan, who were tending the planters in the flower beds.

"Hey, Runa-chan! Look at these flowers! They're so pretty!"

Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan were growing perennials that were easy to tend and came in many hues. Dressed in tracksuits, they gleefully showed me their flowers.

"They're all the same kind, so we picked lots of different colors."

The pleasant scent of the geraniums she held out tickled my nose.

The Quartet, Asuka-chan, Hotaru-chan, and others tended the planters until all their flowers were in full bloom, filling the classroom with their sweet fragrance.

The elementary school's student council room was relatively large and built to exude power.

However, the elementary student council itself couldn't really do that much. Student councils and class committees continued into junior high and high school, which meant the elementary school student council's "subsubcontractors" label was actually quite accurate.

"We tried, but it didn't change much."

Eiichi-kun's words said it all. Of course, the Quartet members had improved and optimized some things, which was an achievement to be proud of. But those improvements had been the fruits of our individual skills—hardly a reformation of the system. Thus, the entire Quartet knew things would go back to normal when next year's student council was elected.

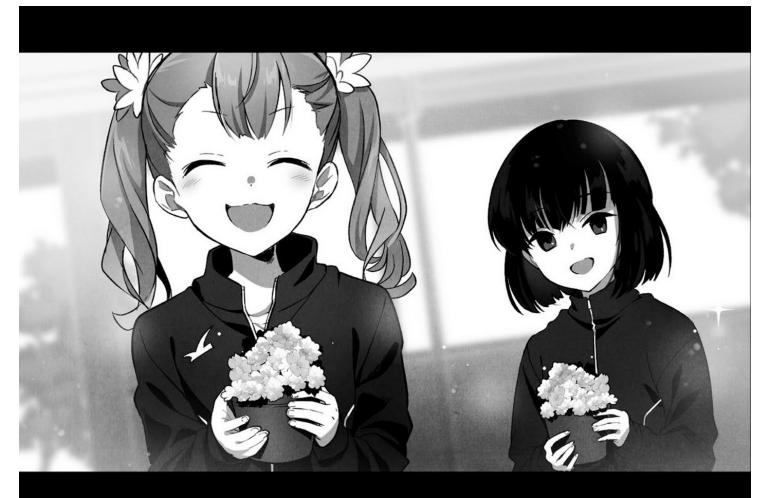
"That's politics for you. Dad always complains that you have to keep getting elected before you can get anything done." Yuujirou-kun had a stiff smile on his face.

Mitsuya-kun spoke after him. "It's not a bad system if you're at the bottom of the ladder. The problem is that we won't be able to put our experience to use for three more years."

We would move up to junior high next year, and getting elected in your first year was quite difficult. It wasn't strictly *impossible*, but you'd make enemies of the older students you'd skipped ahead of. Politics was basically a game of gathering new allies and decreasing your enemies.

"Do we even *need* to be on the student council?" Eiichi-kun got to the root of the problem, but might've shown too much foresight.

I couldn't let that go unanswered. "Well, that way, if we want to complain about something, we won't have to go to older boys and girls for help."





"...Runa, that doesn't sound like a plus to me."

"We'll be like adult managers pushing around other adults in their company. Being just a year older than someone puts a big wall between you. But you don't understand that feeling, do you?"

"Sometimes you talk like you've already seen these things with your own eyes, Keikain."

"Hmm, is that so? I may be a young lady, but I try my best to empathize with other people."

"It's just like you to call yourself a young lady after all that, Keikain-san."

We were busy working as we chatted. Eiichi-kun read documents over, then stamped them, while Yuujirou-kun—the secretary—recorded our dealings. Mitsuya-kun, the treasurer, was using accounting software on his giant laptop to look over budget distribution and expenditures. I was handling appeals and appointments for students who came to us, scribbling dates onto our calendar on the wall. It went without saying that I had to fill out two months' worth of schedule entries.

"I see. There's a reason administrations change so quickly these days. So more and more people can serve in a ministerial role. If the system is stable, and the bureaucrats running things are good people, it shouldn't be an issue," said Eiichi-kun, who'd finished stamping his approved documents.

The political world was in disarray. Eiichi-kun was alluding to the fact that the country's bureaucrats and political framework had enabled it to survive, despite the drastic move of changing prime ministers once a year.

Of course, the country wasn't surviving well at all, and Mitsuya-kun followed up with another observation. "Politicians forced responsibility onto bureaucrats, which gave us a system where bureaucrats had more power. They're even starting to turn corrupt. 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely...' Yeah, that's a clever saying."

"A zaibatsu would normally fix that by sending both sides money and personnel, but they're not in a good enough state after the bubble burst. The system needs fixing, but no one wants to do all that work, so we're stuck in this situation now."

Hearing Yuujirou-kun's criticism, I realized the conversation's punchline: how it applied to our current student council. "So, we should at least make a maintenance manual for our underclassmen. If everything crashes and people are yelling at them—like what happened to a certain bank—they won't have a backup like us, right?"

They laughed dryly at my joke. The bank responsible for providing a heavy profit to our company was supposed to develop an easier system once Keika Electronics Union withdrew theirs, but they'd gotten too greedy, demanding a cutting-edge system that ended up drawing massive criticism while still in the planning stages. I didn't love how they abandoned ship because of the criticism, but it was someone else's problem now, so I would do nothing but pray for them from a safe distance.

"Where would we start on this manual?"

"We'd teach them about cash flow first. This spreadsheet program makes everything easy to view. It should be simple to understand, as long as they can use a computer."

"What if the underclassmen can't use a computer, Mitsuya-kun?"

"They better put the work in to learn, I guess. The kings of the hill who'll get to sit in these chairs will probably want to be major players in Japan when they grow up. They've got to learn the necessary skills first."

"What does the current king of the hill think...?"

"You're asking me, Runa? Speaking for the elementary school student council, I'd require all class committees to use computers. I have faith that the junior high and high schoolers would understand why."

Eiichi-kun's face said that he didn't actually have faith at all. Our case was special; frankly, we could easily throw all the responsibilities on our attendants, who would join us here at the academy once we were in junior high. From that perspective, it made sense that our student council room was so big. Organizations didn't function without using other people. After all, everyone who came here would use others in one way or another.

"I think my manual would show them how to record their proceedings. Tape recorders are very convenient, so they should budget for one," Yuujirou-kun said calmly, tapping his personal tape recorder and microphone.

It was almost easy to forget that since we were still elementary school students, conversations were liable to derail during meetings. Yuujirou-kun used his tape recorder as a weapon against these distractions, creating evidence of what we did and didn't say so that meetings ended without confusion. He always had one machine recording us and another to rewind the tape on the spot. It was probably really beneficial that we were less chatty and distracted.

"Okay, I'll suggest they buy whiteboard calendars that show years, not weeks. I saw it that way in the Fellowship of Constitutional Government office, and I noticed right away how convenient it was!"

A wall calendar allowed anyone to learn the owner's schedule instantly. It was most exceptional. I'd considered using computer scheduling software at first, but I came to learn that making something visible for so long was a unique strength of analog calendars. I remembered Ichijou saying the same thing.

"Wait... What am I supposed to do?" Eiichi-kun asked.

The three of us instantly sprang into motion in response. Mitsuya-kun wrote up a budget for a tape recorder, microphone, laptop, and a few whiteboard calendars. Then he sent it to Yuujirou-kun, who drew up documents for approval. The three of us stamped our seals on the documents, and I presented them to Eiichi-kun.

"Isn't it obvious? Stamp the papers, please!"

There was a knock at the door, and Amane Mio-chan came in. I knew she wasn't here to hang out, since she was carrying a stack of documents.

"Pardon me. Runa-oneesama, I have a request as a class committee member... Oh, are you in the middle of something?"

Eiichi-kun smiled awkwardly, holding the approval request he'd stamped.

I grinned, explaining to her, "We were working on a little present for your generation, Mio-chan."

My circumstances sometimes put me in contact with things that weren't human. I wasn't aware of it at first, but that had changed. Allow me to tell you a story—this story—about gods.

"My lady, the usual letters of thanks have arrived. Many are from churches."

"Leave them there so I can read them, Naomi-san."

I, Keikain Runa, was on the record as Japanese by birth. However, I was also three-quarters Slavic and had therefore been approached by the Orthodox Church. I felt wealthy people were duty-bound to donate some of their money to certain causes. I'd put Tachibana in charge of my donations, but he'd made an uncharacteristic mistake. He'd donated to the Orthodox Church closest to me—one within Tokyo.

While the Orthodox Church had gained many followers since the annexing of Karafuto, they'd failed to unify within the country. I'd started meeting more Russians from Karafuto since I built a political and economic foundation in Hokkaido, which was why the church started reaching out to me. As a result, Tachibana and I had to come up with a very Japanese style of compromise. We started donating to Orthodox churches in Tokyo and Karafuto. They weren't pleased about this, though.

"Religion consists of reckless belief, so you have to walk on eggshells if

complications arise," I muttered, looking at three letters. They were letters of thanks for donations inviting me to join the faith and even requesting I come to the churches and take in God's teachings.

The pressure of the Russian Revolution and the later Cold War had caused the Japanese government to demand the Tokyo Orthodox Church step back from its relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church, leading to their separation. After the annexing of Karafuto, the local Karafuto Orthodox Church and the Tokyo Orthodox Church, which had come to represent the country, entered into a power struggle with each other.

What mattered to a church in times like these was whether they had a public face. That was why churches publicized it when celebrities or prominent figures converted to their faith, making themselves known throughout society and legitimizing themselves as institutions. I'd become a target of both the Karafuto Orthodox Church, which had an overwhelming number of members, and the Tokyo Orthodox Church, which had been building a base in this country for many years. Once they learned that I was extremely wealthy, a different church began targeting me, this time because of my bloodline—the Russian Orthodox Church. My connection to the Romanov family became widely known after I supported Russia in its debt crisis. Between that and the political turmoil in that country at the time, I ended up becoming the subject of a public frenzy.

"Let myself get dragged into a specific faith? At this point, no matter which church I joined, I'd start a fight."

My body notwithstanding, my soul was probably pure Japanese, which made me feel like there was nothing more to say. The bursting of the bubble had caused social unrest and apocalyptic ideology for the past few years that had led to an unprecedented increase in new religions throughout Japan. They all saw me as a great potential face to put on their ideology, so I'd been receiving invitations privately and publicly for a while now. I could only smirk, impressed by the number of gods in this world.

"I'm stepping out for a bit. Get things ready for my return."

"Where are you going, my lady?"

"My usual spot. Call Ishikawa-sensei, the photographer, will you? Although I'm not really eager to see him."

Despite everything, I felt myself seeking a god. This country was full of gods. That meant you were free to choose which one you pleased; each had their own pros and cons. As I approached the end of elementary school, it was almost time to make that decision for myself. That was how I chose to view it, at least.

"Okay. For this one, look natural."

"Your directions are pretty tough, Sensei."

Smiling awkwardly inside the church, I heard the click of the shutter. The photograph was of me inside Kudanshita Keika Hotel's wedding chapel. The church sold itself as a backdrop for Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox ceremonies. The respective churches were asking us to let their clergymen deliver services there, but I chose to reject that. Many Japanese people, including me, saw chapels as a place for ceremonies, not spaces to find God.

When Ishikawa Nobumitsu-sensei heard what I wanted to do before I left, he asked me to come as I was and let him shoot a photo while I was here.

"Have you ever believed in a god, Ishikawa-sensei?"

"I have. My god is on the other side of this lens. When I capture a moment from that world, I see it as a god. Gods are both good and bad, but you're a goddess to me."

His tone was friendly, but as a photographer who captured moments in society, he'd probably witnessed crimes and accidents through his camera. It was common for artists to believe in a god or, more accurately, find that a divinity existed in their creations. To Ishikawa-sensei, I probably did symbolize something like that.

"Then is it wrong for a goddess to go hang out on another god's property?"

"Even gods goof off together. This country has eight million of them, after all."

The summer heat still lingered at Meiji Shrine. As we strolled through the lush outer garden, I leaned in front of Ishikawa-sensei's lens. Getting out and walking was a good way to lift my spirits.

"Oh, is that guy photographing someone famous?"

"She even has maids following her. Maybe she's a foreign tourist."

The onlookers didn't recognize me despite my many television appearances. Maybe they felt that things they saw on TV had no connection to real life. I clapped and bowed, then left the shrine.

"TV is strange, isn't it? It brings the world so close to you, but it doesn't feel real at all. What's so different about TV and photographs?"

We were driving down the somewhat-congested Shuto Expressway. When I asked that question, my eyes fixed on each city skyscraper that came into view, Ishikawa-sensei had an answer for me—though he never once took his camera off me.

"Who knows? I don't know where this quote came from, but someone once called TV 'a god that does nothing.' I thought that was smart."

We arrived at Kawasaki Daishi. When I got out of the car, I caught the faint scent of incense in the air. It was a smell I didn't mind at all.

"By the way, did you start coming here because of Shikoku?"

"That's right...or, to be completely honest, because of the udon."

"That doesn't surprise me. But that's a form of faith too."

I lit a stick of incense at the offering place, then put my hands together in the main hall to pray. I had to appreciate Ishikawa-sensei's kindness in keeping his distance from me just then.

"Are you asking for something?"

"No. I'm a goddess, after all. I guess I'm saying 'pardon the intrusion,' if anything."

He laughed when he heard me say that. Once we got to the souvenir shop, he explained what had been so funny, still keeping his camera on me while I browsed. "When most people pray to gods or Buddha, they ask to be saved or to have their sins forgiven. You sure don't hear 'pardon the intrusion' much."

His words fell heavily into my heart. Ah. So that's why those with power hold on to religion? Because they're aware of their own sins? As I pondered the fact that I might end up clinging to a god someday too, Ishikawa-sensei suddenly tousled my hair. He watched my protests through his lens.

"That's why I want you to stay like you are now, got it? Even if you lose your way, I'll take lots of pictures of who you used to be so that you can make it back home, my goddess."

Ishikawa-sensei's photographs were later published in a weekly magazine and got a huge response, but I just kept quiet when my classmates asked about them. I was shocked to see what my face actually looked like in the photos.

The kendo swords crossed—and mine landed first.

"Head strike! One point!"

With the cheers from the gallery in the background, I bowed and sat down. These were the individual finals for the elementary school division of a regional kendo tournament. I'd made my way to this round without any trouble. I stood up and bowed to someone I knew.

"Time for the finals! Keikain Runa of Imperial Gakushuukan Academy is up against Takahashi Akiko of Imperial Gakushuukan Academy. Step forward!"

This was the way it all started.

"You do kendo, Akiko-san?"

My friends had been chatting during lunch when Asagiri Kaoru-san brought the topic up.

Akiko-san, eating her udon, replied bashfully. "Ah ha ha! My parents are involved with a dojo, so I just go there sometimes. Where did you hear about that?"

"My father's competing in the next regional tournament as a special guest. He does kendo, and his friend said he wanted to 'finally show his dojo's trump card off to the world."

Many nobles were invited to tournaments like those because they belonged to the privileged class. The police and self-defense forces utilized martial arts like kendo, judo, and karate; it sort of made sense that Akiko-san, the daughter of the prefectural chief of police, would practice kendo because of that. What was strange was that I remembered her being a go-home club member.

"Wait. I thought you weren't in any clubs, Akiko-san."

"I'm not. I don't belong to the kendo club because I already go to the dojo."

Imperial Gakushuukan Academy only allowed students to join martial arts clubs starting in the fifth year of elementary school. They didn't want anyone younger getting hurt, and even at that point, school clubs only taught the basics.

Something clicked in my mind, so I asked her about it. "When did you start practicing, Akiko-san?"

She put down her chopsticks, touched her cheek, and answered in a carefree tone—not realizing what she was actually communicating. "When I was in kindergarten, the dojo master gave me a bamboo sword as a present. I think that's when I started."

The tournament participants weren't just individual competitors from schools; people endorsed by a dojo could also take spots. It was a way for dojos

to put their name out there in a big tournament. My kendo club had entered the tournament in both individual and group competitions. In other words...

"I guess I'll be seeing you when we battle, Runa-san," Akiko-san said.

To continue doing something was to gain power. Kitagumo Ryouko-san, my kendo master, told me that gaining experience over time caused some people to develop gradually and others to blossom all at once.

"Some people blossom slowly, improving with each swing of their sword.

They struggle to swing it a hundred times at first, but gradually they get to a hundred and ten or a hundred and twenty, until they can swing their sword two hundred times without any difficulty."

While she explained that, I swung my sword over and over again. My cheatlike physical skills meant I could do that without losing my breath, but it would probably be indecorous to mention that to her.

"It's hard to explain the people who blossom out of nowhere, because that's case by case. But it's like their field of vision suddenly expands, and they become capable of things they couldn't do before..."

"Has that ever happened to you, Ryouko-san?"

"It has. For example..."

Suddenly, I felt a chill. I stopped my practice swings and leaped backward. Ryouko-san hadn't moved at all, but somehow I was breathing raggedly, my forehead damp with sweat.

"Like that," she said. "That wasn't the kind of thing I could learn *gradually* through enough training. But when you could tell I was ready to kill, my lady, you reacted surprisingly well."

At her praise, I could only force a half smile onto my face. Going back to my practice swings, I asked her for advice on the tournament. "Do you think I can beat Akiko-san?"

"If she's been training since kindergarten, then she's spent six years at a dojo.

We should probably assume most of her moves can defeat you. There's something more important than that, though." Standing up straight, Ryoukosan asked me, "Which of you is taller?"

"I think she's a few inches taller than me. She's toward the back of her class. Why do you ask?"

"Physique is a bit more important than technique or experience. The aim of kendo is to land your sword on three parts of the opponent's body."

"The head, torso, and forearms, right?"

Kendo was a martial art that assumed you would be hit. Using metal blades involved locking swords, but kendo was special in that you could defeat your opponent with a bamboo blade by striking even a second faster.

"This isn't the most precise measurement, but you should think of your taller opponent as having a sword that's a few inches longer than yours. That'll be a very big handicap."

Points were awarded to the competitor who struck first, so those few inches were severe indeed. Of course, it wasn't as if there were no countermeasures to take, but I'd have to remember that I was starting at a disadvantage.

"You can overcome the height difference once you're above a certain skill level. You lure in the opponent, then counterattack by striking their forearm. That's the easiest way to win, but your opponent will watch for it. You have enough speed and stamina that you got the attention of the track-and-field club, so why don't we use those to come up with a plan of action? I'll hire people to record your friend's kendo practice, my lady."

Sports competitions were political events for socialist countries to showcase their citizens. They were also opportunities to make use of science and information. As I listened to Ryouko-san explain a strategy to use against Akikosan, I couldn't help but cringe slightly, realizing I'd strayed completely from the path of kendo.

As I thought back to that discussion, I kneeled on the floor mat. I wrapped my blonde hair in a towel and covered my face with a protective mask. After checking to be sure my chest pad was on straight, I glared at Akiko-san, my opponent.

It surprised me just how clearly I heard the voices from the spectators' seats.

"Who do you think's going to win?" Eiichi-kun asked Yuujirou-kun, a fellow kendo club member seated next to him.

Instead of answering, Yuujirou-kun began telling a story about me from the school dojo. "I've heard some stories from Keikain-san that seem to go against the principles of kendo. But what do you think kendo really is in the first place?"

"It literally means 'path of the sword,' right?" Mitsuya-kun interjected.

"Exactly," Yuujirou-kun answered. "It's a path to follow. You try to find a way of living through the sword. The idea originated in Asian philosophy, but I think that's a good interpretation, even with all the changes since its creation. You can really see the heart of that 'path' when opponents bow at the start and again when it's all over."

"How is that relevant at all, Izumikawa?"

Still listening to the boys' conversation, I turned to look at the people with cameras. The mass media was eager to report on someone as famous as me taking part in a kendo tournament. Entertainment journalists and local reporters pointed their cameras at me; the multiple cameras were there to transform me into a digital image.

A few of my personal maids were holding up cameras too. They probably wanted to record this event, but I felt like they didn't need so many cameras for that.

"Keikain-san studies Eastern kendo, which is more like a sport. It was a way to build national prestige and create a battlefield against the West without using weapons. In other words, Eastern kendo encapsulates the modern issue in martial arts. All that matters is getting a win." Yuujirou-kun paused for a moment. "Keikain-san always practices footwork in the dojo, but she doesn't aim for the center of the ring. She practices running to one of the four corners. When I asked her how come, she said she was working on 'scoring a point and then running away until the time is up.' I still remember the look on our dojo advisor's face. Not quite pure anger, but not utter astonishment either."

The Eastern side had gone as far as resorting to doping in this area, but of course the Western side put up a fight too through means such as scientific analysis. In other words, the sword in my hands expressed Eastern kendo's focus on victory.

"Hang on, Yuujirou. Keikain has always won her matches by two points."

"That just means she's been up against opponents she didn't need to try hard to beat. Her true kendo style focuses entirely on running away. Of course, since kendo values manners so highly, they won't allow a disgraceful match. But when Keikain-san falls back, she manages to make it look graceful. Her putting on such a captivating performance sure makes it hard for everyone."

"...The more I listen to you, the more critical you sound of her style," Mitsuyakun said.

Yuujirou-kun couldn't deny his statement. "I guess so. I think most kendo practitioners would hate her style if they found out about it, since it's such a waste."

I can hear all this... How am I supposed to act normal the next time I see you guys...?

The next discussion I heard was between Asuka-chan and Kaoru-san. I was glad to have Kaoru-san there for support, although she didn't sound like she had much of a grasp on the rules.

"I know Keikain-san's good at this, but what about Takahashi-san?"

"I don't know, but she made it all the way to the finals, so she must be good."

The next voice belonged to Machiyoi Sanae-san. She was in the school choir, and could identify strengths by comparing them to her field of expertise. "They both have very strong voices. They must be well-trained."

Vocal volume came from the stomach, not the throat. Sanae-san knew how much training someone needed to reach a loud volume at will.

"Takahashi-san isn't just strong." That sounded like Katsuki Shiori-san. She was from a Keikain branch family and had a relatively good idea of what my maids had been doing. For the people around her to accept her reasoning, she had to finish her thought. "I heard that Keikain-san's maids took photos of the matches and practice sessions of everyone participating in this tournament. They even shot videos. But Takahashi-san was the only person they found coming up with personalized plans against her opponents."

"Runa-chan's always so childish..."

Sitting next to Asuka-chan, Hotaru-chan nodded her head. They knew that I used science, money, and power, and Hotaru-chan had learned about my dark history during a game of hide-and-seek. She reacted now with nothing more than a wry smile, but the rest were probably shocked by what they were hearing—especially after the boys' contributions to the discussion.

"Just how much work did Keikain-san put into this match...?" Kurimori Shizuka remarked.

"The maids are fired up and say they won't let her be defeated. She's the treasure of the Keikain family, after all." Shiori-san responded casually, but her voice was cold and empty. Shiori-san had actually joined the maids and gone to Akiko-san's dojo, since they were friends, and asked to photograph her training session.

Akiko-san had just laughed and given her permission. "But I don't think a picture will tell you much. If you want to see everything I can do, you'll have to be there at the match."

"Time for the finals! Keikain Runa is up against Takahashi Akiko, both of Imperial Gakushuukan Academy. Step forward!"

When the referee called us, I stood up, bowed, and entered the ring. The battle had already begun. Akiko-san and I bowed to each other.

"Begin!"

We crossed swords the second we heard the referee's voice. Akiko-san was faster on the first strike. She raised her bamboo sword and aimed for my face, which I guarded with my own sword once I saw that I couldn't strike her arm. Our swords met, and we traded places.

That blow was so heavy. Her single strike showed me what a difference in power we had, but that didn't mean I was out of options.

We both cried out and went in for the second hit. Akiko-san aimed for my face again.

In that case, I'll go for the torso...!

A chill shot down my spine, so I stepped forward to let her strike my mask. The point wouldn't count unless the correct part of her sword hit it. Charging at Akiko-san caused her to strike my mask with her sword hilt. I'd avoided having the point scored on me, but the uncounted blow still hurt, despite the protective mask.

I sensed that Akiko-san was smiling under her mask.

To aim for the torso, you had to lower your sword, but that left your face unprotected. The opposite was true too—the torso became unguarded if you aimed for your opponent's face. However, the hit I'd just taken from Akikosan's sword was definitely faster than what I'd seen in the videos of her. *Did she use my strategies against me? No, she must just perform much better in*

matches than in practice.

While I waited for an opportunity, I considered my next move. Kendo, like most martial arts, was really a matter of finding the right moment to strike during battle. And it was at times like these that Akiko-san's few inches of extra height made a difference. I sidestepped her next hit; when I had nowhere else to go, I ran out of the ring.

"Out of bounds! Back to your position!"

It had clearly disadvantaged me, but my only choice had been to flee. Now we'd head back to the center of the ring for another chance at victory.

Planning to strike Akiko-san's forearm, I lowered my body slightly to reach her as fast as possible, then waited for the referee's voice.

"Begin!"

I charged forward right away, but my sword missed her arm and cut through the air.

She jumped back?!

At this point in the match, I'd only revealed my step distance and how far I could move on foot. On the other hand, Akiko-san had managed to predict my movements after we'd crossed swords only once. After she jumped back with perfect timing, I stood there before her, my sword still pointed at the ground.

"Head!"

Akiko-san scored her first point. The pain of the hit to my head forced me to try to keep my cool. She'd backed me into a corner, but if I couldn't catch my breath now, I'd lose. I took deep breaths and focused all my attention on Akikosan.

She didn't seem to be getting carried away now that she'd scored a point. I knew she was absolutely determined to land another hit and finish me off.

"Second point! Begin!"

We locked swords, pushing against each other until she'd overpowered me. Our height difference naturally came with a mismatch in weight too. A lower body weight usually appealed to a woman, but it put me at a disadvantage in this situation.

Akiko-san pushed me back, then chased me down with her sword. I quickly dodged her and put distance between us.

The crowd cheered wildly, but the loudest sound inside my mask was my own breathing. Once I'd backed away, Akiko-san didn't pursue me. We both returned to the center and waited for the right moment again.

I aimed for her forearm a second time. She was able to predict how I moved on my feet and took up space, so she probably thought I wouldn't try the same thing twice. Jumping forward suddenly, I aimed for her arm, but she escaped just in time.

Next, I used my momentum to lock swords with her, this time exerting enough force to push her back. I stepped forward and brought my sword down.

"Arm!"

I'd managed to recover a point. Aiming for someone's arm as they stepped back was hard, but I'd been secretly practicing such a move, predicting that I could land a counterattack if I used my feet. I was relieved I'd gotten to use this move in the tournament, but then I shook my head to focus on the match again.

We each had one point. The third point was waiting for us. Akiko-san stood at the ready, calm and composed as ever. I prepared myself too and waited for the referee's voice.

"Third point! Begin!"

Once the match ended, I bowed to Akiko-san and stepped out of the ring. All the cameras were pointed at me. Reporters held microphones out to me before I even processed whom I was looking at, swarming me with introductions and

questions. They came from weekly magazines owned by major publishing houses.

"I'm from *Imperial Arts*. Keikain Runa-san, congratulations on taking second place in the finals."

"Thank you. However, the judge decided that I lost. As the loser, I feel that I shouldn't be speaking."

"That wouldn't help our story at all," the reporter objected, then continued, "You've recently become a model, opera singer, and TV star. You have status as a daughter of the Keikain Dukedom and possess the fortune of the Keika Group. On top of that, you won a regional track-and-field tournament, you've obtained many qualifications, and now you're eyeing the equivalent of a college degree. You're a Cleopatra of the Heisei era. Is this Takahashi Akiko-san who defeated you a friend of yours?"

This era's mass media were very powerful, which was why Tachibana couldn't get rid of them. Media were stronger than their own sponsors these days, so we didn't want to make enemies out of them, especially with the current administration watching us like a hawk. Taking a breather, and gaining massmarket appeal by way of flattery, was a necessary evil.

Of course, the journalists didn't want to miss out on a good story either, so they'd bartered with Tachibana and formed a sort of private club. These videos, photographs, and interviews would simultaneously reach other media outlets.

"I lost because of a difference in swords. It's hard to do things I'm not used to."

"A difference in swords?"

The reporter cocked his head. Meanwhile, I removed my mask, took off the towel, and revealed my blonde hair. I'd given them a great photo op. All that remained was to make a random statement and hope they'd accept it.

"Right. I started practicing with a sword for self-defense, so my priority is just

to survive. My opponent, Takahashi-san, uses her sword for martial arts and trains strictly to win. As soon as it went to the judges, I knew I'd lost."

"I see. Rumors are flying around about your future plans, but have you thought about walking the path of the sword?"

"Who knows? First and foremost, I'll continue my compulsory education at Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's junior high."

Anisha, my maid, stepped forward then and signaled that the interview was over. The reporters stepped away obediently. I wondered whether I would end up in entertainment section articles, considering that I'd lost.

"Keikain-san."

I turned around and saw Takahashi-san behind me with a big smile on her face.

"Let's compete again sometime."

"Really? I don't want to. I'll just lose."

Surely no one could blame me for laughing at the funny look on her face.

It turned out that a picture of me was taken at that exact moment. It later appeared in the entertainment section alongside an article titled *Young Lady Turns Down Rematch after Championship Defeat*.

It was 10:55 p.m. *Cookies, check. Grape juice, check. Computer, on. Wait a minute for it to boot up, then connect to the internet.* Kudanshita Keika Tower contained the headquarters of the Moonlight Fund, so it had a top-of-the-line communications network. Going online with a computer this way would've been an unthinkable luxury in the past, but I'd secured a high-end computer from Keika Electronics Union with a state-of-the-art CPU and lots of memory. Now, I was finally about to play the game that I—

"Connection to server canceled."

u n

My internet and computer were top-notch. This had happened because the server I wanted to access was overloaded.

It had started over a cup of tea at Avanti.

"An online game?" Mitsuya-kun, who knew the most about computers, asked for more details.

"Yes. It's a game that connects you to others through your computer. Those are popular in America, and now they're spreading throughout Asia too. Game developers are running a few trials, and even we get emails asking if we'd like to be involved."

TIG Backup Systems used the time difference between Japan and America to handle system maintenance and backup work even in the middle of the night in Japan. Their highly praised system development wasn't necessarily limited to applications during Honami Bank's crisis, and the company was looking to bring in more income sources from other corporations. There'd been a push inside Keika Group to put TIG Backup Systems in charge of their data management as well. As a sign of the changing times, TIG Backup Systems even received offers from businesses overseas through electronic mail.

"Why us, though?" Eiichi-kun asked.

I was the one who answered him. He knew some of the facts already, so it was easy to lay out the situation. "Have you forgotten? Keika Electronics Union is one of the biggest internet companies in the country. There're already people on the inside who want to expand the business even further and provide gaming content. That's why we wanted a full-package contract with the foreign game developers, but they don't seem interested in that, so they skipped all the other levels and came to us."

Japanese electronics manufacturers had been branching out, going through

affiliates and signing multiple contracts simultaneously. Foreign manufacturers, who were strict about costs, were good at searching for the cheapest option, entering a contract with them, and managing them. The internet we'd just been discussing had added a lot of power to that process.

"Well, Keika Electronics Union wants to add more to their current computers too. A survey of Akihabara computer shops found that a lot of people are buying their first computers just to play this game."

Yuujirou-kun placed documents about this game from one such shop on the table. Seeing the cute pixel art characters battling, I felt that this would take off with Japanese people, unlike other American online games. One picture really struck me.

"Oh, wow. She's adorable." It was a female character dressed as a priest, wearing rabbit ears, and punching an enemy. There could only be one answer now. "Let's give the game a shot. I can reply to the company once I try it, right?"

Online games involved gathering materials so that you could obtain items you needed. The rabbit ears that had stolen my heart seemed to be a prized item in the game, so I ended up searching for the materials with a group of other players. It was a bit surreal to watch the strangers on my screen hunt enemy after enemy until they got the drop they were looking for.

"Still no luck..."

My character got tired during this process, so I sat down to recover my stamina while passing players cast restoration spells on me. The high-ranking players seemed to understand what I was searching for—after all, they had rabbit ears on their heads.

Thank you√.

You've got this √! the player onscreen responded to my message.

So many people must've gotten hooked on this form of communication so unique to online games. Not that I wanted to talk about how that world would

evolve in the future.

"Time for bed, my lady."

"Aki-san?! When did you come in?!"

I was totally engrossed in the game, and I'd jumped when I heard Aki-san's voice from behind me. I hadn't even realized that it was almost one in the morning.

"I'm glad you've found something you're passionate about, but Keiko-san will scold you if you go to such extremes."

Those words had an instant effect on me. I'd gotten many lectures for staying up late at night to finish books, and parents understood video games even less than books. I could only imagine how many children had been traumatized by their parents hitting the power button on their computer.

"All right, I'll stop for tonight. But I'm coming back for you, rabbit ears, so wait for me there!"

I'm going to bed \$!

wave

wave

wave

At this point in history, online games were still harmonious places.

"Why do the servers have to be down now?!"

The game was still in its beta phase, so things like this were bound to happen. I ended up buying my rabbit ears from a player's store. Nothing came of the business side of things. We couldn't escape the suspicion that they would insist on separate contracts for different sales formats, rather than a bundled package. I'd better discuss physical sales with CEO Karin.

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"....."

Blip blip...blip blip...blip blip...

Blip blip...blip blip...blip blip...

Click!

"Aaaaaaaaaah! What're you...? Oh...Keiko-san?"

"Do you know what time it is, my lady?"
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Those memories now felt like they'd happened an eternity ago. Video games had developed into their so-called third generation. With winners and losers emerging, I was working up a scheme to do a bit of shopping. My goal was to acquire a video game company.

"Are you going to buy this company?" Okazaki's eyes were wide as saucers.

I ignored him. The industry's first-, second-, and third-largest companies were very obvious at this point, and everything below third place was merging, retreating, or exiting entirely. One such game developer, Zugagaga Entertainment, currently had a dilemma.

They'd fought a long battle in the war of game consoles, but their funds finally ran dry and they were now leaving the hardware industry. They were reorganizing their management, but their corporate backers faced an impairment loss over the shares they held. We'd gotten various offers from the company as well.

"More importantly, why'd you bring me here with you?"

Okazaki and I were on the hunt in Akihabara. Of course, I had not only my bodyguard maids with me, but also Michihara Naomi-san, a male guard. Akihabara was just what I'd expected. The *moe* industry was taking over the town little by little.

"Angela said I can't go outside in this town."

"Ah, right. She's extremely careful when it comes to your safety."

As we walked around the center of Akihabara, I ignored the voices I overheard.

"Hey, look at her!"

"Is that Keikain Runa-tan?"

"No way! I've never seen her in real life!"

"Her maids are pretty impressive too."

The price of the purchase Okazaki and I were discussing was fifty billion yen.

"It takes a lot of courage for a girl to go to an arcade alone."

With that, we strolled into the arcade. I clutched my hundred-yen coins and headed to the shooting game corner.

"Sure, I see why girls would have a hard time in here alone."

Inside the arcade, where smoking seemed perfectly allowed, everything from coin-pusher games to one-on-one fighting games had deteriorated over time. Of course, there was a place in the back for strip mahjong where players' yen was probably being taken by one merciless *tenhou* after another. I was playing a famous shooting game that came out in 1996. I was very glad that my cheat body now allowed me to make it through the levels without being shot down.

Okazaki was smoking too, and casting occasional glances at the strip mahjong game—it was his male nature.

"It wouldn't be a bad purchase, but there'd be no clear path to success either. I want to figure out how to pin down... Kyaaaaaah!"

Ka-boom!

How could the game be so hard? I was supposed to have a cheat body, but even I couldn't beat this thing?! I'd replayed it over and over and still hadn't pulled through.

"Aaaaaagh! Why can't I beat this part?!"

"Ex-excuse me!"

An otaku watching from afar called out to me. My maids and Michihara-san didn't hide that they went on alert, but the otaku had been looking at the game, not me. He even gave me a hint.

"Are you familiar with 'rank control'?"

So that's the trick to this game...?

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Reload!

"How much will you give a company in the red, then?"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Reload!

"I'll step back if two hundred billion yen goes to waste, of course! Hey, you're good at this!"

"Natural resources always lie in the most dangerous places, after all. I don't shoot, but I do practice. Still, I'm sure you at least have a plan?"

Okazaki and I were conducting a conversation not quite suitable to the gunfighting game we were enjoying together. The game's story involved military satellites being mixed in among communications satellites... *Ah.*

"To change the subject, didn't you say that Russia's GLONASS is broke? Should I buy it?"

"This game reminded you of that, huh? If it were me, I'd take the money that would disappear into the game company and use it on that instead."

That would *really* make me look like a final boss, howling with laughter at a rocket launch site. Okazaki would be a miniboss in that scenario.

"How much is it?"

"It's a state project, so you could subsidize it for two hundred billion. Let's work it into the Moonlight Fund. The internet and network infrastructure will definitely keep blowing up; if we get infrastructure out of it, it'll be a cheap

investment."

That was how we finalized a business deal involving hundreds of billions of yen. I worried that it was a bad idea, but after that the topic switched back to the game company.

"I'll manage them out of my own pocket for a while," I declared.

"You sure have lots of pocket change. Is there anything you're worried about?"

"I'm not worried about buying the company, but the way our system works right now, I'll be dumping it on Karin."

"Ah. Things have been rough on my side too."

We'd be making another purchase while the Keika Group was in the middle of reorganizing, and I hesitated to give Karin a company that might be in the red while she was studying American options and concentration. This was an evil scheme between Okazaki and me.

"Oh well. I guess I'll have to fix them on my own for a while."

After that, I bought Zugagaga Entertainment's stock. Supposedly, when Angela and Karin heard the company's personnel were mistakenly cheering "Yay, we can get into hardware again!" they went right over to Zugagaga's headquarters to set them straight.

But that was just a rumor. Who could say if it really happened?

"What kind of music do you listen to, Keikain-san?"

Machiyoi Sanae-san raised that topic while we chatted during our lunch break. Imperial Gakushuukan Academy had a broadcasting committee that played music over the speakers during breaks. Being from the privileged class didn't mean we didn't notice trends, and music was one arena in which trends had a huge influence. J-pop was still thriving at this point too.

"I listen to classical music, but I check out new hits too." I sang a few, and as luck would have it, one of the songs came on over the speakers. When I first heard that song, I'd instantly loved its unique rhythm and the singer's earnest voice.

The other girls started to list their favorite songs.

Asuka-chan commented on another song playing over the speakers. "I bought an album by her—the Heisei era's top songstress. It's really good! I'm excited to start junior high and sing her hits at karaoke."

Hotaru-chan nodded eagerly at Asuka-chan's remarks. They'd told me the two of them listened to different singers, but exchanged CDs with each other. The broadcasting committee also took anonymous song requests, which Hotaru-chan submitted regularly.

Quiet Hotaru-chan's chosen song was unexpectedly catchy, which surprised me a bit.

"It feels strange to think that we're almost junior high schoolers."

"We must set a good example as ladies for the elementary students under us."

Asuka-chan had tried to give the proper response for a prize pupil, but Kaorusan knew what she was actually thinking.

"Uh-huh. How do you really feel?"

"I can't wait to go more places, like karaoke!" It was just like Asuka-chan to let her true thoughts slip out in the end.

"I guess I just like the music my parents listen to," Kurimori Shizuka-san remarked. "My family often listens to the same songs."

"That's what we do too," Takahashi Akiko-san replied.

It wasn't uncommon for parents to pass on a love of musicians who'd been active for years to their children, who'd then struggle to join conversations about modern artists, like the discussion we were in the middle of. Other kids

became fans of older songs by listening to their parents' tapes and records.

"You listen to lots of older songs, don't you, Keikain-san? I took a look at your CDs when we went over to your place," Machiyoi Sanae-san remarked.

I smiled awkwardly. "Are they that old? Aki-san likes songs that were popular when she was our age."

I felt like my favorite songs came from the bubble period. As we talked, a quaint, tender song started playing over the speakers. Our group and everyone around us broke into smiles. It was hard to dislike the broadcasting committee when they played things like this.

"You're next, Kaoru-san. C'mon, tell us!" Asuka-chan pressed Asagiri Kaoru-san for her favorite song.

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"Well, let's see..."
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The song she chose had been played often during the soccer World Cup. She explained that the World Cup had turned her into a bit of a soccer fan, and she'd gotten hooked on the tune after hearing it so many times. That left Katsuki Shiori-san as the last person to share a song with us.

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"How about this one?"
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Surprisingly, she'd chosen a rock song. We secretly thought it was a bit cute how she blushed and got embarrassed because we all stared at her. She told us she'd even bought the artist's posters and merchandise.

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"Let's all go to karaoke together once we're in junior high!"
"Sounds fun."
"I love it!"
"Agreed."
"Of course."
"As long as no one gets mad at us."
"I'm looking forward to it."
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Nod nod.

The next song that came on as we spoke was an ethereal tune that made me think of the summertime. *Ah, I know this one.*

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"I really like this song's vibe."
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As I sat there silently with a smile plastered on my face, Hotaru-chan watched me. Please don't goggle at me with those innocent eyes. I'm powerless against that look!

"I bet you could sing this song, couldn't you, Keikain-san? I could never hit all those high notes."

Machiyoi Sanae-san had asked that simply because it was a good song, but my smile faltered as sweat formed on my cheeks. I knew the song because it was extremely popular in Akihabara, where my maids were based. In fact, Angela had been enraged by the way some of the overgrown regulars to our maid café were blatantly conspiring to get me to sing this song. They were only operating out of good will and affection, and unfortunately, that was what made them so wicked.

"I guess...I might be able to."

Well, it wasn't like I didn't know. After all, those grown-up friends would later call that song the "new national anthem." It originally came from a game that people under eighteen weren't allowed to play. After the broadcasting committee went and asked about it, they realized they'd been playing a tape of personal songs, accidentally broadcasting it to the elementary school.

[&]quot;Me too."

[&]quot;But I've never heard it on TV or anything."

[&]quot;Her high notes are so beautiful."

[&]quot;I love the piano too. What's this one called?"

[&]quot;Why don't we go ask the broadcasting council later?"

Fortunately, adults who didn't know where the song came from wouldn't scold them about it, and those who knew kept their mouths shut. Thus, a potentially major incident was swept under the rug.

"What do I think of Prime Minister Koizumi? Well, I'm aware that the prime minister has been taking shots at you."

"Right. I don't want you to get the wrong idea, so let me say that I have no desire to fight the prime minister. I'm trying to find a point of compromise between us, but right now, I can't figure out what's going on in his head at all," I said lightly.

Professor Kanbe smiled bitterly at my quip. Holding a cup of coffee prepared by Ichijou Erika, he cast his gaze to the side. Ever since I started taking his seminars, I'd noticed that was his habit when he thought something over. "Indeed. It would be dreadful to see this country's two greatest geniuses tear each other down. Let me offer you some advice, since I'm an adult." He smiled when he saw me pout at the end of that sentence. After all, my young age was a point of contention in this conflict. "Tell me, what rights and obligations do you think comprise Japan's shared fantasy of community?"

I cocked my head.

The professor began to write nostalgic phrases from history on the whiteboard. Once he'd seen my reaction, he read one out. "Favors and services.' The country hasn't changed in that regard, even after so many years. Now, with those words in mind, let's define just what you're doing."

Apparently enjoying himself, Professor Kanbe wrote something down with a red marker. The words pierced me like blades straight to the heart.

Amused, he continued his explanation. "Forcing your services.' Exactly. It'll be easier to explain this by discussing the Muromachi shogunate, rather than the Edo shogunate. The child of the Keikains—a powerful military-governor-turned-daimyo family who enjoy the protection of multiple countries—is forcing the

shogunate to purchase her services before she even comes of age. Don't you think the bakufu and shogun would be amused?"

"So, am I Hosokawa? Yamana? Ouchi?" I was interested now.

Professor Kanbe thought for a moment before revealing the daimyo family's name. In a way, it was simply the natural comparison. "There can only be one answer, can't there? You're the Hosokawa family who controlled the bakufu and surpassed even the shogun. That's the problem: the discord between you and the prime minister has historical echoes. That said, I'm comparing you to Hosokawa Masamoto, of course."

"Are you saying I should start another Meio Incident, Professor?"

Despite the conversation's unpleasant turn, Professor Kanbe kept the smile on his face. I suddenly realized that if I could've met someone like him in my past life and listened to what he had to say, I probably wouldn't have met the end that I had.



"If you wanted to stage a coup, you should've done it in spring of 2002. Both parties now lack strong candidates for prime minister. You don't have any pieces you can use as pawns. I don't know whether it was intentional, but the prime minister has eliminated any potential puppet who could stand center stage in your place while you're still a minor. That's part of how we got here."

Ichijou Erika, who'd been silent, spoke up next. One of her virtues was that she could naturally insert herself into conversations like these. Of course, you could also call that an inability to read the room. "Excuse me, but my lady is close to Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. Can't she use him?"

"He's already taken the prime minister's seat, Ichijou-kun. He's at the very top. Making him work for you would be a total declaration of war against the prime minister. The young lady here doesn't want that; if she did, she would've taken action this past spring."

"Just what exactly do you think of me, Professor?" I objected to Professor Kanbe's assertive tone. He really made me sound like a villainess... *Ah, wait. That's exactly what I am.*

"A mere child would never get involved in the Iraq situation."

"Huh?"

Ichijou Erika looked at me in surprise. I erased the expression from my face. I was glad I'd started speaking to this man. He understood me so well but kept what he knew to himself.

"You know about that...?" My voice came out deep as I asked for confirmation. This was the second key to my battle against Prime Minister Koizumi.

Professor Kanbe set his empty coffee cup on the table, looked away from me, and spoke quietly. "I'm no Keynes, but America's preparations for war have certainly helped ease the pain of the IT bubble bursting. Minister Takenaga and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa were completely shocked that you predicted

the war in Iraq and prepared your investments accordingly. I can't blame the prime minister and president for stopping you from staining your hands with blood." He smiled after that explanation. At this point, we were back to the original topic. "In short, the trouble between you and the prime minister comes down to this: 'Should one approve of a child who hasn't even come of age holding up the enemy's head on the battlefield?'"

"So it would've been fine if she came of age first...?" I wasn't sure if Ichijou Erika's response was a joke or not.

Professor Kanbe suddenly clapped his hands loudly, startling her. She'd apparently stumbled upon the right answer. "Exactly! That's the root of the entire issue! Keikain-kun, everything would be solved if you came of age and became an adult."

The professor stood up and gazed out the window. A number of students occupied the campus visible outside. I remembered that half weren't legal adults yet.

"This country's laws say that citizens become adults at age twenty. The question is whether to let you be a special case. On top of that, this is taking place against the backdrop of a war that'd involve you in taking lives. Outside the context of war, taking a life is a crime. In other words, there's also the issue of whether you'd be tried as an adult for such crimes."

"If worse came to worst, I could use my special privileges as a noble to... Ah!" I stopped.

Prime Minister Koizumi was already preparing for that. He'd vowed to strip nobles of special rights, and he was cutting into the Privy Council and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Even if I was a legal adult, I probably couldn't use my special right of diplomatic immunity.

Seeing that I'd figured it out, Professor Kanbe smiled and nodded. "The prime minister isn't bullying you. If you're going to insist on special rights, then you have to shoulder that responsibility. If you want to be seen as an adult, you

must act like an adult. That's what he's saying."

"Be seen as an adult." Prime Minister Koizumi had left one path open to that end. Ah, that man truly is a political genius.

"Drive your father and brother into retirement and inherit the dukedom yourself. Once you have the dukedom, take control of the Privy Council if you want to stand on equal footing with the prime minister. Be the one to bury the people you love. If you do all that, I think the prime minister will be willing to listen to you."

"I was wondering something," Ichijou Erika remarked. "Couldn't you team up with the opposition party to defeat the prime minister?"

I grimaced at her inability to read the room. The opposition had, in fact, reorganized last winter to form the Democratic Allied Fellowship or DAF. The mass media went wild and poured salt in the wound, asking if the opposition had become strong enough to take the prime minister's seat.

Just like the allied opposition's past administration, the DAF could possibly stir up factions within the ruling party in order to fracture them and steal the seat. But I had no intention of joining up with them, since I knew the opposition well from my past life. I realized that they were unusable. Still, I was interested in Professor Kanbe's opinion. His answer satisfied me.

"Well, it wouldn't be impossible for Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's faction to team up with the opposition, but I wouldn't recommend that. Just as the ruling party has their triangle of 'politicians, bureaucrats, and financiers,' the opposition possesses a triangle of their own. It's not one that matches up with the ruling party's at all."

"What's their triangle?" Ichijou Erika asked.

When she did, Professor Kanbe drew a triangle on the whiteboard and filled it with words. He spoke them aloud, almost like they were a curse. "'Politicians, mass media, and agitators.' Those are their three. The opposition's political process is to stir up agitators, spread an issue through mass media, and then

have politicians present it as a problem, forcing the ruling party to come up with a solution in order to get things done. This all came to be..."

The professor tapped the box sitting inside the seminar room with us. This box that showed visual broadcasts of the present era was called a "television."

"...thanks to television. In other words, the opposition's real job isn't governing, or even working toward their own gain. I'd describe them as actors and the Diet as their stage."

That reminded me that Professor Kanbe sometimes made TV appearances as a commentator. He clearly understood that he was one of the agitators within the triangle, which was why he could express such severe opinions. Only those people out of harm's way could be objective and avoid bearing responsibility.

"Not all opposition members are like that. The ruling party recklessly accepted a bipartisan bill in the financial Diet session of 1998. I even remember current opposition politicians being involved in the opposition alliance administration and the three-party coalition administration afterward." I was intentionally leading Professor Kanbe to a certain place.

He followed me well. "That was very unpopular with their voters. Politics is really the art of compromise, but compromise isn't entertaining. The more entertaining option plays better on TV, doesn't it?"

Content called "politics" played frequently on those boxes, causing the public to consume it as if it was fiction. They'd have to wait roughly a decade for that content to affect them in real life, but they were probably happy with that for their own reasons.

Smiling, I asked Professor Kanbe a teasing question. "Aren't the ruling party's politicians putting on the exact same kind of performance?"

The professor understood my question. He also knew that I wanted to ask exactly what he thought of the man in question, so he gave him the ultimate praise. "Prime Minister Koizumi. Just as you say, he's currently the greatest 'actor' of our generation."

I agreed with Kanbe's description. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa had once described the prime minister similarly. *He's a true faction-based politician*. Prime Minister Koizumi had been blessed with multiple gifts, and because he was a top-class talent, Koizumi's "actor" persona always appeared on television. The people were enthralled with the drama he starred in.

"The prime minister's basic policies are pretty simple. Focus on cities, reduce public funding, and align closely with America. Do you know what these are?"

"The exact opposite policies of his longtime enemies, the Hashizume faction: distribute money to rural areas, increase public funding, and align closely with continental Asia. The drama of factional disputes within parties hides those policies, though."

"Exactly. Keikain-kun, those are the same policies you've adopted."

The Keika Group had started with Sakata in Yamagata, then built a support base in Hokkaido to handle the financial crisis. Now we influenced regional economies through things like railway businesses, department stores, and supermarkets. We had no choice but to send money to distant regions and try to increase our earnings if we wanted to survive and even grow.

My hand went up to touch my blonde hair. The continental state of Russia had followed me since my birth, whether I wanted it or not. Japan followed its alliance with the United States as a fundamental policy, and I could never escape the curse of the continent either.

I now realized that my political position was very similar to the Hashizume faction's. It made perfect sense that I'd gotten along with former prime minister Fuchigami.

"The people are—no, *television* is—waiting for a showdown between you and the prime minister. Whoever wins, the public will just consume you as a form of entertainment, like a TV show starting when another one ends. What do you say? If you've made your decision, the prime minister will gladly join you for a dance within the fiction of television."

"You're telling me to abandon my father and brother, all for that fiction? I'll have to refuse."

Professor Kanbe nodded, satisfied with my instant reply. He probably would've done the same if I agreed to the offer. "Good. Power is a solitary thing. Or, rather, you can't make use of power unless you're solitary. The dance is an offer from the highest power in this country, the prime minister, so you need the right qualifications to join him. To take on that power, you'll have to abandon not just your family, but also your friends and partners, or else you'll stumble and embarrass yourself when you try to dance."

"Embarrassing yourself isn't the worst thing that can happen. If someone laughs at you, you can only endure it if you're alone."

Professor Kanbe had a serious look on his face as he offered his next piece of advice. "Keikain-kun, you should think more about your own well-being. Let me be blunt. Your goal should be to find your own happiness, not this country's." It was hard to respond at times like these, when adults spoke to me with such mature expressions.

His words and face were so earnest that I didn't know what to say. I'd truly met some wonderful people, but I knew that I was constantly betraying them.

"This country is a democracy, which means we citizens all share the nation's responsibilities. A single genius isn't enough to save us," Professor Kanbe added.

Ichijou Erika, who was listening nearby, was dumbfounded. I stared at her teasingly. Professor Kanbe's advice was nothing but earnest. After all, I was betraying tenets he'd dedicated his life to.

"That doesn't sound like advice from someone who dedicated their life to studying genius, Professor."

"But it is. Two genius actors have emerged in the same era, but there's only one stage. That's exactly what I'm getting at. Keikain-kun, you've debuted too early. I'm certain we'll see you perform in the starring role someday. Are you

still ready to step up onto this stage?"

"I'm not going to do that. I think you've forgotten, Professor, but I'm still in elementary school."

Professor Kanbe and Ichijou Erika both laughed at my answer. Our conversation that day ended there.

"How unusual to see you here and not in Kudanshita, Runa."

That night, I visited the Keikain family manor and met Kiyomaro-tousama, who seemed happy to see me for the first time in a while. I told him about the conversation I'd had with the professor.

"I spoke with Professor Kanbe earlier. He said that if I want to go up against Prime Minister Koizumi, I should abandon you and Oniisama to inherit the dukedom myself. I turned him down, though."

"Runa, have you finally had enough...?"

Instead of shock or anger, my bombshell of a statement brought only relief to Kiyomaro-tousama's face. When I saw that, I realized everyone really had thought I'd wage an all-out battle against the prime minister over Iraq.

With that in mind, I gave my most genuine answer. "I haven't had enough, but I don't want to go against the times."

This era was choosing Prime Minister Koizumi, not me. That was the one thing I could say with total confidence.

I'd been told not to interfere with the adults-only game known as "war," but that didn't mean I had to just sit quietly elsewhere. In part as an apology for the American IT bubble bursting recently, I supported the Republican Party in the midterm elections. As a result, the Republicans were on the verge of a historic victory.

"...What we know right now is that the Republicans will maintain their majority in the House and win the majority in the Senate. Estimates show that the gubernatorial races will put Republicans in office in about thirty states total..."

Hopefully this would be enough to make up for the pain the United States had experienced. The president's party was at a strong disadvantage during midterm races, and after the bubble burst, the economic outlook was by no means good. Still, I'd bet all my chips on the Republican Party and was walking away with a big profit. That was why I ended up getting a certain phone call.

"Congratulations on your party's midterm victory, Mr. President. I'm wishing you all the best from here in Tokyo."

"Thank you, Your Little Majesty. How are you feeling lately? I heard you've been sick."

"...Thankfully, one recovers from trauma over time. That must've been my punishment for trying to step into the adult world."

"Prime Minister Koizumi isn't a bad guy. You just couldn't handle such a big burden. To be honest, you aren't old enough for that yet." When the president used that tone, he was always speaking in good faith.

I was grateful for his kindness, though his sympathy was also a heavy weight. "I was thinking about death like some vague concept. What I couldn't handle was the fact that my actions would kill hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people. Mr. President, how can you shoulder the weight of that burden?"

"Well, that's exactly why I repent to God. I'm the president of the United States. I'm not only a guardian of world order; I have a duty to protect the American people too. Let me take on your burdens myself, Your Little Majesty. I know that you helped save people here in the States."

You couldn't discount the terrorist attacks as a reason the Republicans swept the midterms. The president had exhibited his leadership skills in response to those attacks, and was now campaigning for the invasion of Iraq. I'd become something of a poster girl for that effort.

The report on the terrorist attacks submitted to Congress before the midterm elections had linked Iraq to terrorism in a different way than in my past life. Instead of its *possession* of weapons of mass destruction, it was now the nation's *intention* to gain such weapons that was the crux of the issue. It was true that Iraq had tried to obtain nuclear weapons from the former Soviet Union after the Gulf War. When they failed to acquire them, their next objective had been to gain nuclear materials and detonators to build their bombs.

The Denver train hijacking and failed terrorist attack in Tokyo had been carried out to that end, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks were supposed to distract from that true goal. That was the bottom line of the president's campaign. Although the timing was a bit off, they claimed that the terrorists involved in the diversionary attacks had gotten desperate when they failed to secure their real goal, a nuclear weapon.

I was involved in this campaign. I'd provided Japan and the U.S. with information I'd gained about terrorism, and I'd been presented as someone who'd prevented nuclear terrorism. On top of that, the picture of me fainting when the terrorist violence occurred depicted me as the heroine of the tragedy. The adults wouldn't let me be stained with blood; it seemed they'd chosen to treat me like a beautiful doll instead. Perhaps it was a dirty form of international politics, or perhaps those adults were suffering pangs of guilt.

"I'm grateful to you. Without your intel, a nuclear weapon could've torn the United States apart. That's all the more reason I don't want blood to stain your dress."

The president was saying things I'd heard many times lately. At first, I'd thought I was being ostracized because I was a child, but after hearing everyone repeat the same things, I realized I wasn't being ostracized; they were showing me kindness.

Proving that, they'd chipped away at my power while leaving my assets and my status as a symbol untouched.

"A lot of my people have said that to me."

"That's just how adults are. Children see all the potential of the future, so we want to give them good, beautiful possibilities. If you show children a wicked future, you've failed as an adult." The president was still being sincere. It wasn't as if I didn't understand his intentions. "Your Little Majesty, when I occupy the chair I'm sitting in as I call you, I'm prepared to sacrifice hundreds, thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of lives from other countries if it means saving a single American. Despite your nickname, you're not in charge of a country. If that changes someday, remember what I'm saying to you. I'm talking about the difference between a company and a nation."

His words made me certain of two things. First, he was considering a massacre as the lesser evil for the good of the United States. But also, if the world sought it of me, I'd be allowed to rule a country.

If countries' rulers must protect their citizens at all costs, like the president says, why did I die in my past life? Unable to come up with an answer, I had no choice but to tell the president, "Thank you, Mr. President. I appreciate you looking out for me. I hope I understand that before I grow up."

The game had only shown the life of the villainess—me—until she was eighteen years old. For the first time, I had to think about my own future.

What kind of adult was I going to become?

And, before that, would I become an adult at all?

Glossary and Notes

Stock price supremacy: The doctrine that stock price determines company value, and that management policies should focus on raising that price. A

modern mainstream method is to raise stock price by initiating a stock buyback.

Technological supremacy: The doctrine that exceptional technology determines a company's value. Many Japanese companies used to think this way. This philosophy declined when customers were unable to keep up with increasingly sophisticated products.

Customer supremacy: The doctrine that delivering what customers want largely determines a company's value. Design management has reassessed this way of thinking in recent years.

"A god that does nothing": From a quote voiced by the character Arakawa Shigeki in *Patlabor 2: The Movie*. The conversation between his voice actor, Takenaka Naoto-san, and Obayashi Ryusuke-san, who plays Gotou-san, is extremely somber.

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely": Written by John Acton, a British historian. The full quote is "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The American online game: UO, aka Ultima Online.

The online game Runa played: *RO*, aka *Ragnarok Online*. Runa is an Acolyte, of course. I think of bunny-ear priests as synonymous with *RO*.

Akihabara maid culture: This really picked up in the early 2000s.

The shooting game: Battle Garegga. You won't get anywhere in that game if you don't get the concept of rank control. The game had many fans and was available at game centers throughout the nation.

The gunfighting game: *Time Crisis*. The plot of *Time Crisis 2* revolved around satellites.

GLONASS: The Russian version of GPS. The project was delayed due to Russia's financial crisis and wasn't even usable in 2001.

The song Runa chose: "Wadatsumi no Ki" by Hajime Chitose.

The song Asuka chose: "M" by Hamasaki Ayumi.

The song Hotaru chose: "Traveling" by Utada Hikaru.

The song Kurimori Shizuka chose: "Kira Kira" by Oda Kazumasa.

The song Takahashi Akiko chose: "Shiroi Koibitotachi" by Southern All Stars.

The quaint and tender song: "Ai no Uta *Pikmin no Theme*" by Strawberry Flower.

Artists whose CDs Runa had in her room: Hiramatsu Eri, Matsutoya Yumi, Kumagai Sachiko.

The song Kaoru chose: "Mugen" by Porno Graffitti.

The song Katsuki Shiori chose: "Ultra Soul" by B'z.

The song at the end: "Tori no Uta" by Lia.

Chapter 3:

The Young Lady, the Television, and the Movie Director

KEEP SAYING IT—I want them to let me use her in a movie! How dare those sponsors tell me no?!"

The world was full of movie directors. A particularly famous one was drinking and rambling to a friend of his, an idol scout.

"I know! I totally get how you feel!" the idol scout replied. "I'm the one who tried desperately to make her a star!"

"Who cares that she's some girl from a zaibatsu?! She's so much more than that!"

This director, who'd received lots of praise from abroad, always managed to overcome criticism and gossip when he released a new movie. He'd discovered the girl when he watched a rerun of an *Imperial Bodyguards* TV special. *Imperial Bodyguards* was a popular show that had aired three seasons and was famous for its secret feud with its TV station after rejecting a move to prime time.

"Everyone's got tunnel vision over her looks and singing voice, but those are just the start of things! The girl is a natural-born actress."

There were fewer food stalls in the city these days, but the two men were drinking and rambling inside one on the outskirts of town. No one would care if they overheard such drunken rants—nor was there anyone around to overhear in the first place.

"Actress? Well, I'm sure she can do it. She was in a TV drama already."

"Not TV acting! Don't you see what makes her so incredible? I wonder just how many people have noticed her talents already."

The director gulped his cheap booze down before speaking. He was one such person, and he was considered a genius within the movie industry to boot. In a

way, it was only natural that he would perceive the girl's talent.

"But she's a young lady. In other words, she's constantly starring in the role of 'noblewoman.' I'm sure she's talented, and I'm sure she's worked hard—and I don't know whether she's eleven or twelve now—but she's spent her life acting without ever once breaking character. She already sees this world as a stage. That's how she stole my heart. Her acting can charm the entire world."

The director was upset because he'd discovered that a female talent selected by a sponsor was a poor actress. After he scolded the talent, she withdrew from his movie and complained to the sponsor, which turned things into a big dispute.

Now the director had come to drink with his friend, the idol scout. The idol scout loved the director's movies too, so he wanted to help things blow over. That desire had led them to their third drinking venue of the night.

"Still, she's just completely sheltered by the Keika Group," the idol scout pointed out. "And I've even heard rumors that she influences the most important people in politics and business."

"So what?! That's got nothing to do with my movies!" The director slammed his cup onto the table. He was the same kind of person as the photographer, which explained why the words that came out of their mouths were so similar. "She's a *monster*. She won't resemble anyone else, nor will anyone influence her. It's my duty—the movie industry's duty—to preserve her on the silver screen!"

The director knew this business well. People couldn't stay prodigies for long. But prodigies projected on a movie screen were frozen in time, their talents lasting for eternity.

"You can get in touch with her, right? Find a way to drag her out here to me!"

"Don't be stupid. You sound crazy. She may have been friendly when I approached her, but being in a movie would delay her schedule for months. You really think the Keika Group would let that happen?"

Money wouldn't tempt her. She had more than enough of that already. She wouldn't agree in order to climb the social ladder either, as she already had connections protecting her. There would only be one way to bring her into a film.

"Weren't they talking about making an Imperial Bodyguards movie?"

"Yeah. They were thinking of going all-out once season three wrapped up. That's still in the planning phase, though."

Imperial Bodyguards was a popular show that had the backing of the Keika Group. The movie director had received offers to work on projects and collaborations here and there, but he always hated those sorts of things.

"That's fine," he declared. "Find a way to make me the director of the film."

"Have you lost your mind...?!"

"I won't be able to film her otherwise!" He gulped down more booze before shouting his truest feelings. "What I'd hate more than anything would be someone worse than me having the chance to film her. That would defile her. Maybe history would approve of leaving something like that behind for her and future generations, but I sure as hell wouldn't!"

Later, the famous director who'd taken home foreign awards would send shockwaves through the industry when he announced his desire to helm an upcoming *Imperial Bodyguards* movie. He was elated when the young lady he requested to star in the film successfully performed in outlandish gunplay scenes. He also rewrote the entire script just before shooting started. He made lots of trouble for everyone, but the finished movie would become a massive hit around the world, becoming a historic work of Japanese cinema.

Back then, the girl had no idea that the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress would have her name on it someday.

That was the story of how Shirosaki Kouji, the brilliant movie director, came to meet the brilliant actress Keikain Runa.

"Can the young lady pull this off?! Or will she be too scared her underwear will show?!"

Crash! Boooooooom!

The young lady in a dress crashed through the window and went flying through the air, just narrowly avoiding the explosion behind her. She kept a grin on her face all the way to the safety net she landed in. Her foreign secretary, maids, and butler looked at Director Shirosaki with a murderous rage, but he laughed and paid them no mind. The idol scout, on the other hand, stared at the ceiling speechlessly. He was stunned by both the girl's stunt, and by how carried away the director was getting.

That girl had agreed to star in the project a few months earlier. Once they met, Director Shirosaki had said to her, "Sorry, my lady. The script isn't finished yet, so I want to shoot all your scenes first. You don't mind, do you?"

He was lying to the young lady, who didn't understand the situation. Naturally, when the scriptwriter heard about this later, he was enraged.

"Oh? My role isn't to just sing and be protected?" the young lady had responded.

At first, her appearance in the movie had been planned as nothing more than a cameo. That was what she'd signed off on. The director had no intention of sticking to that plan, though.

"Those scenes aren't ready yet, but I'm not vain enough to make you wait for my movie's script, my lady. I just want to film the scenes you're interested in first, and we'll work them into the story as needed. Please go ahead and request whatever scenes you'd like. I'll do my best to comply with your wishes."

The director, of course, intended to reconstruct the story using those scenes. He planned to resort to CG if necessary if he felt there were still gaps in the plot. It was a display of his flawed character. The only person crazier than him

was the young lady—unfazed when the director offered to film whatever scenes she liked.

"Is that so? I learned a trick recently, actually. Could you film it for me?"

Her maids' heads sank into their hands; they knew what was coming next. At that moment, the young lady placed an airsoft gun into Director Shirosaki's hands.

"Would you mind shooting me with that, Director?"

"Like this?"



He pulled the trigger. The pellet he fired was immediately struck by a different pellet—the young lady had pulled out her own airsoft gun and shot back. Her quick draw and gracefulness convinced Director Shirosaki that his movie would be a success.

That's right, my lady. In movies, monsters can act like monsters. Use this project to show me just how big a monster you really are.

"But isn't the *Imperial Bodyguards* series about people who need protection?" the young lady asked. "You can't change that, can you?"

"They'll write this movie to make the audience want to see more of your character. She spends her life sheltered by her bodyguards in a world teeming with evil. When she can't sit and bear it any longer, she tries to achieve whatever justice she's capable of."

"Sounds like a dark heroine. I can really make that character come to life!"

"Still, I can't believe you're able to deflect bullets with a blade too, not just a gun..."

"That idol scout there taught me how. I should be able to hit a single nine-millimeter bullet. My maids scolded me when I tried, though..."

"Don't worry about that. This is just a movie, so you can do as much as you want without holding back. We'll make it all look good with CG."

"Japanese movies don't have any good gunfights these days!"

"I know what you mean, but regulations make it a headache. Using real guns and explosions does look much better than CG, but we can't do things like that over here."

"Very well. In that case, let's film in Hollywood. I'll handle the bills!" "Huh...?"

"Miss Angela, we know you're good at your job. I'm pleased that you've

taught the young lady about the dangers of violence. But I don't remember ever telling you to turn her into a comic book heroine."

"Exactly! Thank you so much, Chief! Next time, we'll try doing wire fu!"
"....."

"Please say something, Head of Foreign Leadership Analysis..."

"Over budget?! I haven't even spent a billion yen yet! I'll pay you with my pocket change, so please bring us lots of explosives! I want to blow up a building next!"

Eye-catching gun action, thrilling car chases, fight scenes like an action star's, and vocal performances by the songstress. The young lady brought every last idea she could come up with to life, and each and every scene captivated the director and crew through the screen. Keika Group personnel always glared at Shirosaki like they wanted to kill him, but he merely chuckled at the sight.

"Know why they never stopped this shoot?"

It was their last day filming the young lady's scenes. Ishikawa Nobumitsu, the photographer, tagged along with Director Shirosaki and the idol scout at the wrap party. Shirosaki was the one who asked him that question. The photographer had told him that shooting the movie poster was one of the best jobs he'd ever worked, although they would soon discover that the posters in question were being stolen around the country.

"It's simple. At the end of the day, none of them really knew her. That's why they couldn't stop it." The photographer made that sound like the easiest conclusion in the world to reach.

The director laughed and drank from his glass of liquor. Having both been so charmed by Keikain Runa, he and the photographer were becoming fast friends. In that moment, the alcohol they shared tasted sweeter than ever before.

"Her personal secretary let it slip that 'My lady puts too much of herself into everything she does.' In other words, this movie was an opportunity for her to

turn into a full-on monster. It's funny."

The three thought back to the scenes Runa had filmed. Through a camera lens, they'd all watched her grin like an innocent child. She was clearly enjoying herself, which was why no one from the Keika Group had pulled the rug out from under the movie.

"Wait a minute. You make it sound like she'll never be a 'monster' again." The idol scout looked troubled. He'd reportedly been glued to a bottle of stomach pain medicine throughout the movie shoot. Even now, his hands reached to clutch his stomach.

Director Shirosaki smiled and gulped more booze. "Exactly. Actually, if I'd just ignored her, she could've turned into much more than a monster. Maybe even a dictator. But she showed me the extent of her monstrousness. Monsters are monsters because their true nature is unknown, first and foremost. People will eventually get a handle on her mysterious nature and counter it. Then it'll fade into this era of history."

Director Shirosaki clenched his fist. He was speaking the absolute truth from the bottom of his heart; after all, he'd once been a monster just like her.

"Do you get it now?" he shouted. "I took her, I took this era, and I sealed them into the silver screen!"

This conversation took place before the legendary movie was released. Of course, the Keika Group banned Director Shirosaki from claiming compensation for the awards it swept, both foreign and domestic, but the young lady ended up inviting him to work on TV specials and movies she took part in. In the face of opposition from those around her, she had this to say:

"After all, no one in the world can film me better than he can."

"She's here!"

The conference room door opened. Now face-to-face with Keikain Runa, the

producers and directors going over their next project bowed to the young lady. The suit-clad man in front of the producers was the head of programming.

"Thank you for coming, my lady. We're honored to have you appear on such a late-night show!"

"It's no trouble. This is a tie-in for the Imperial Bodyguards movie, after all."

The girl had come to the station that aired the *Imperial Bodyguards* series. This new show was typical late-night television, with comedians engaging in whatever lighthearted antics they pleased. As Keikain Runa said, she was appearing on the program to promote her movie.

"For this episode, we're thinking of having a leisurely party aboard a ship at night."

The location would be a nighttime voyage on Tokyo Bay aboard one of her cruise ships. Of course, her safety had been prioritized for this special.

"The Keika Hotel Group owns the *Agate* cruise ship, which we'll sail through Tokyo Bay. Our program's stars will provide commentary on the trip as they enjoy the ship's offerings, with dinner prepared by Watsuji Takamichi-shi, the famed head chef of the Shinjuku Keika Hotel. Watabe Shigema-shi will also entertain guests with a violin solo. Now, my lady, we hoped you could step in for the finale and sing us a song..."

The Keika Group had already approved that much, so objections on either side were unlikely.

"Thank you for setting so much up for me. I'm merely an elementary school student, and you've done a lot of work. I'll leave the rest to the professionals."

Keikain Runa bowed before the meeting concluded. She didn't want to be anything more than a guest in this setting. Once the attendees left the room after the meeting, the head of programming finally broke his prolonged silence.

"May I speak to you briefly, my lady?"

The girl and the head of programming had been engaged in a long-lasting

battle recently. Now that she was finally at the station, he wouldn't let this chance get away.

"I assume it's about the time slot? Keep this short, please."

"I'll get right to the point, then. Please let us air *Imperial Bodyguards* in prime time."

The programming department decided which shows to play daily on the station. That department was the backbone of every TV station. They finalized not only the shows aired, but their time slots as well. Thus, the programming department was eager to move *Imperial Bodyquards* to prime time.

"I refuse, as I believe I have many times now."

Imperial Bodyguards had become a crown jewel of the station's late-night programming, bringing 10 percent higher viewership than average despite its time slot. The juggernaut of a show's early evening reruns even did 20 percent better than average. The girl could refuse this plea because the Keika team was responsible for the program's budget and starring actors. If the program were forcibly moved to prime time, after all, there was a risk that it might not be able to continue. The American television market was particularly brutal when it came to making moves like that. They would drag out a show until viewership plummeted, mercilessly swapping out lead and supporting characters alike if they had to. Such moves often led to inconsistent storylines on the show too.

"If we move *Imperial Bodyguards* to prime time, I believe I can guarantee a 25 percent bump in views. Please let me center our programming around this show!"

"But at that point, you'd need more than one company to sponsor it, right? Production itself would have to change too."

The biggest downside of moving a show to prime time was the steep increase in responsibilities. First, the major advertising firms that controlled prime-time commercials would start to interfere. The Keika Group had been paying for all of *Imperial Bodyguards'* commercials, allowing them to advertise themselves. If

the show moved to prime time, however, they would lose that freedom. It was also customary to avoid using actors who starred in competing programs in the same time slot, and to refrain from advertising one's own company during those times.

"Director, would you like to know what I hate most about your suggestion?" He stiffened at Keikain Runa's monotonous tone; she grinned at him.

"You don't just want *Imperial Bodyguards*," she continued. "You want me too, isn't that right?"

Imperial Bodyguards was one of the few programs that occasionally featured Keikain Runa as a main guest. The TV station and advertising companies' schemes came into full view as they tried to drag her completely into the television industry. Television was truly in its golden age, and industry professionals felt that no one should be able to resist it.

"I'm only in elementary school, after all. Wouldn't you say that a student has a duty to study?"

"Of course..."

Keikain Runa looked at the still-frozen head of programming and decided she couldn't leave things like this. She decided to give him a present.

"Ah, that reminds me." She made sure her voice sounded childlike, although she was moving to a topic that no elementary schooler would normally discuss. "I heard that a few Keika Group companies wish to sponsor your late-night programming. A child overhearing that might not lead to anything. Still, it might be worth confirming with them."

The point of late-night programming was usually to find new talents; that caused most shows to go into the red. Offering sponsorship during the time slot was the same as offering money. The head of programming simply bowed his head in gratitude while the girl left the station without even taking another look at him.

Who is the most important person at a TV station, you ask? It isn't the president. The answer is that it's whoever is credited with the station's viewership.

"The young lady turned you down again? Poor guy."

"It's partly the advertisers' decision too, so she has no choice but to say no."

The director of production was teasing the head of programming during a meeting about changes to programs. The director of production, as his title indicated, headed the department that created television shows. They sometimes outsourced the work to other production companies, which the department then oversaw. The Keika Group's production company was in charge of *Imperial Bodyguards*, so it was difficult for even the station's director of production to influence the show.

Japanese advertising firms had gained a lot of power when they started purchasing all the commercial slots for specific programs. They marked up those slots and sold them to other companies, allowing the TV station to receive stable income and the companies to hedge their bets while buying commercials for shows that could either sink or thrive.

On the other hand, since the Keika Group paid for all *Imperial Bodyguards*' advertisements in advance, the station could only handle commercials for the show's early-evening rerun, which they'd been told they were free to broadcast. It wasn't just the TV station that wanted to move *Imperial Bodyguards* to prime time—advertising firms eager to claim valuable commercial slots wanted the same thing.

"If we keep going at this rate, we'll still turn a profit. So the young lady can't be messed with. Just see what happens if you step on her tail and get her mad at you."

The operations manager stopped the head of programming from objecting. Public TV stations were free to watch because their programs were interspersed

with advertisements. The department of operations existed to sell those programs' commercials to companies or advertising firms. The Keika Group was buying ad space on the late-night broadcast; since that time slot was usually in the red, the department of operations welcomed that wholeheartedly. They'd also been told they were free to rerun *Imperial Bodyguards* in the early evening, providing another opportunity for ad sales. The department of operations didn't have to do much work to bring in those customers. All this meant the production and operations departments usually took the Keika Group's side.

"How boring. I just want to see what the young lady is hiding behind her mask."

Those reckless words made the three department heads fall silent. They came from the mouth of a newscaster whose nightly news was consistently a standout regardless of programming alterations. At this point, politics were a form of content aired on television to bring in viewers, and newscasters were the only people who could strike back at politicians. That made them nothing short of rulers of the airwaves.

"I bet viewers are eager to see a showdown between Prime Minister Koizumi and the young lady! It would be a piece of history for the century! I'm just sure of it!"

The head of the news bureau spoke up in response. "I get that, but do you know how hard it'd be to actually rip that mask off?"

Newscasters, the faces of a TV station, weren't bound strictly under the station's control. Production company subcontractors worked on news programs, while newscasters portrayed themselves as freelancers there to maintain impartiality. In reality, newscasters were sometimes secretly forced to operate under the station's rules to keep their jobs.

The newscaster and head of the news bureau had both previously worked as reporters, but they'd taken different paths of promotion to their current roles. Around this time, a third promotional path began to gain attention. The people

in those jobs used television to promote themselves and performed wizardry with their words, which allowed them to trifle with and creep into the strongholds of assembly members. The path was none other than that of a National Diet member.

Small electoral districts generally had only one winner in their elections. Without a solid base, the opposition party competed to see how far they could raise their people up. That was a major reason for the emerging path.

"I'll have you know I'm a newscaster and anchor here at this station. Right now, the Fellowship of Constitutional Government is split for and against the prime minister, and the anti-prime-minister faction has no one to turn to for money except the young lady. The prime minister started this fight, so he knows what he's doing."

The newscaster's excited voice silenced the head of the news bureau. Japanese commercial TV stations often owned newspaper companies as well. Important information reported in those newspapers was brought to news programs, which were effectively a form of show business, to broadcast into Japanese living rooms and influence public opinion. That series of events created the political drama that came to be known as the Koizumi Theater.

"The papers desperately fanned the flames while Keika refused to give us any attention. How is that possible when Prime Minister Koizumi is trying to destroy nobles' special rights? It's their lifeline."

At this time, the daily papers—in other words, print journalism—were preparing for the inevitable Iraq War. They'd drawn attention due to the tone of their reporting on the question "Should we really join America's Coalition of the Willing before we think it over properly?" While Europe acted timid and the United States pushed forward on its own, Great Britain followed in the latter's footsteps, and Japan prepared to do the same. The anti-Koizumi faction within the Fellowship of Constitutional Government publicly criticized this decision to join the United States, their numbers creating enough momentum that Prime Minister Koizumi could no longer ignore them.

"It's all *because* of Iraq. The U.S. is trying to cool the antagonism between the prime minister and young lady. That's why the anti-Koizumi group can only make a fuss and nothing more."

Prime Minister Koizumi and the young lady were the only two people in Japan who could object to the United States. As long as they were united in their resolve not to interfere with the States, there would be no change in course regarding Iraq.

"Do the newspaper guys really not see that they're behind the times? The people want entertainment, not facts and real life. What could be more entertaining than someone else's war? The showdown between the prime minister and the young lady will probably happen after it's over."

At this rate, the Japan Self-Defense Forces would deploy to the Gulf too, but the newscaster still called it "someone else's war."

The people in the room shared the understanding that they shouldn't fan political flames, since it could interfere with the significant "entertainment" Iraq provided people. The media was truly rejoicing in its prosperity.

"She never hit back at him, did she?" The head of programming gently tried reframing the subject.

The newscaster didn't oblige him. "She's still just an elementary school student. Don't you think the adults in her life protect her? I want to rip them away and broadcast her true self into people's living rooms! I'll show them reality!"

These kinds of people didn't exactly lie, but they didn't necessarily tell the truth either. They *had* to be that way. The newscaster, just like those viewers in their living rooms, felt that this was all someone else's problem.

"Besides, you know what people love? The story of Icarus."

Icarus was the boy with wings made of wax who'd perished when he flew too close to the sun, which melted his wings. Power was both a blessing and a

curse. It could push those with appeal to the very top, but it also damaged them beyond repair if they ever fell from their heights. Media employees took that concept from their private rooms in Japanese restaurants and dragged it all the way to television broadcasts.

The newscaster looked completely disinterested, as if observing an ant, but no one faulted him for it. In this era, viewers in their living rooms were connected closely to the things on the other side of the television. These media employees' opinions were the same ones found in those Japanese living rooms—the opinions of the public.

That was a natural fact to the people in the room, and none of them could deny the newscaster's next words:

"What do you say? Sounds like the perfect show, huh? You'd have the prime minister in one corner and a young noblewoman with massive power and wealth in the other! If they fight it out, maybe we can show everyone the moment when one stumbles and loses everything! It'd be even better to stir them up and see *both* of them sink in the end."

The worst part of it all was that the newscaster dismissed this as nothing more than a seasonal event for that particular year. The news was always after novelty, so he felt deeply that both the prime minister and the young lady were becoming unusable subject matter. But he—no, the whole media—was in for a major shock.

The Koizumi Theater's show was going for an extended run. Its villain, the young lady, would stand her ground as opposition, despite being continuously attacked all the while.

(Movie review: Imperial Bodyguards: The Tomboy Lady's Improv Theater)

"Our lady is fighting so hard! We can't just sit here and hide behind her!"

Viewers around the world, feast your eyes on the most powerful young lady!

A movie adaptation of the spring 2003 drama Imperial Bodyguards titled The Tomboy Lady's Improv Theater is now playing in theaters.

Unlike its sedate TV counterpart, the movie is a whirlwind of gun action and hails of bullets that will make your heart race. The plot follows the imperial bodyguards who protect a young lady until they realize that their mistress is striking down evil in the name of restoring the world order. The protagonists struggle to stop her in the first half, but once the young lady ends up the target of a large terrorist organization, they team up and begin to fight alongside her.

Brilliant scenes of gun action performed by actress Lady Keikain Runa are the highlight of this movie.

Though Lady Keikain Runa could only film during her school's winter break, she stunned the movie's crew by performing every last scene without a single flaw. Her ability to strike every enemy bullet in midair with her nine-millimeter firearm left me speechless. It's an unforgettable display of gun mastery. She puts down every last enemy in her path to the special score composed just for her gun scenes. The next stunner was when, with dazzling proficiency, she used her protective umbrella made of bulletproof fabric as a sword. Her flawless combat abilities make you wonder why she even needs bodyguards in the first place. The final scene features Lady Keikain Runa jumping away from an exploding building. The sequence was filmed in the United States, and came out as a gripping stunt. The actress's sheer physical aptitude in the beautiful action scene is sure to captivate every last viewer.

Now, don't forget that the story centers around negotiations between an imperial bodyguard (Iwasawa top actor), female bodyguard for the Keikain family (top Keika Opera Company star), and actors hailing from Hokkaido. All were enjoyable characters and added to the thrills.

"How are you so calm when you've just come from a gunfight?"

"Any less, and I wouldn't be fit to protect my lady."

On another note, it's impossible to miss this movie's social commentary. It references diplomatic immunity and second-class citizens' crimes. The young lady's goal is to eliminate evil like some sort of heroine, though in reality, that would be a criminal act. However, the young lady is protected by diplomatic immunity, meaning the imperial bodyguards are unable to stop her. Those special privileges have existed since the mid-Showa era, and have been linked to plenty of scandals, making them a focus of many movies and TV shows in which the ultimate villain escapes without being brought to justice. This movie flips the trope on its head and makes the recipient of diplomatic immunity into a dark heroine.

"Let's say what I'm doing is evil. After failing to track down all those evildoers I punished, can you really sit there and call yourselves 'just'?"

Since Northern Japan's annexation, its former citizens have been referred to derogatorily as "second-class." They're supposed to have the same rights; however, economic discrimination against that vulnerable group and the hotbed of crime surrounding them means the problem smolders to this day. This movie brilliantly criticizes the criminal organizations concerned, bringing one of Japan's current shadows front and center.

"I don't care what you have! We have nothing! No money, no country, and no pride! So we'll steal everything this country has!"

These "second-class citizens" must empathize with the cries of the young Russian man cast as the movie's villain. It proves the film is more than just a simple work of entertainment. A gunfight between the villain and Lady Keikain Runa is one climactic scene toward the end of the movie. Though an imperial bodyguard swoops in and saves the girl in her moment of danger, exactly as you knew he would, it's hard not to break out in a sweat from sheer suspense.

Of course, Lady Keikain Runa singing "Micaela's Aria" from her famous repertoire is the movie's highlight. The director, who begged to film a movie with her, leads you to an entirely new world of entertainment, social critique, and art.

"Is that young lady really who she says she is?"

Every element in the movie helps the main stars shine. One contribution was the choice to use a real PMC for the firefights, doing the television version justice. The American government allowed Lady Keikain Runa to use guns in the action scenes, and the USFJ play the role of the young lady's rescuers, since their country is our ally. There's even a guest appearance from the American president, whose voice is heard speaking to Lady Keikain Runa over the phone. This movie's sheer scale is already sparking excitement throughout the United States as well.

A new legend was born as the U.S. was forced to raise this movie's rating in an attempt to stop American children from imitating the beautiful, awe-inspiring young lady. If you don't go see these two hours packed with entertainment and thrills, you'd better prepare to be left out of conversations for a while.

Look out, world. The young lady can't be stopped!

(Excerpt from Japanese interview.)

"Keikain Runa-san, congratulations on your Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress for *Imperial Bodyguards: The Tomboy Lady's Improv Theater*! Before we start, I'd like to hear what's going through your mind."

"Thank you. I truly can't believe I was nominated for such a historic American award."

"Despite its late-night time slot, the *Imperial Bodyguards* series exceeded a 10 percent viewer rate, and early-evening reruns reached even higher than 20 percent viewership. It's a very popular drama. Have you heard anything about the speculation that it might move to prime time?"

"The Keika Group actually prefers that it stay a late-night show. Moving to prime time would get complicated."

"You've made guest appearances in TV shows, but in this movie, you step

onto center stage in a leading role. I'd love to hear about your casting."

"I really like detective dramas, you see. They're so intense and cool. I was ecstatic when I formed a personal connection to one of those shows."

"The *Imperial Bodyguards* movie is still selling out, even well after its release. Are the rumors true that you received a flood of offers to star in Japanese and American movies?"

"Yes, that is true, but I turned all the offers down. If I hadn't, I'd have spent my entire junior high school career filming movies! I haven't even started junior high yet..."

(The people in the room laugh.)

"Too bad. Are you uninterested in becoming a full-time actress?"

"I'm still only in elementary school. I'll have to answer that once I'm in junior high, at the earliest."

"I imagine that many of your scenes, especially the gunfights, were extremely difficult. Did you ever use a stuntwoman?"

"Everyone told me I should, but it's hard to find a child stuntwoman. Some scenes, like jumping from the exploding building, I figured I'd have no choice but to do myself. The Hokkaido actor kept asking 'How does she not die?' during filming. Isn't that mean? I heard the director gave him a good scolding about that."

(Everyone laughs for a while.)

"Which scene was hardest to film?"

"The gun scenes and jumping from an exploding building weren't really that difficult. What hit me hardest was actually the filming schedule, especially the time difference that came with shooting in Hollywood. I couldn't have gotten through it without chartering a business jet."

"Although he only contributed his voice, the American president gueststarred in a phone call scene. Even the American military was involved with this film. Could you tell us about that?"

"I happened to know the president already, and I'm very honored that he agreed to do a cameo. American special forces, and even the Secret Service, lent us a hand while we filmed overseas. I'd like to express my deepest gratitude for their help."

"Fans of the classics have been calling you a twenty-first century Sarah Bernhardt. Have you ever thought about studying abroad in Europe?"

"It's true that I've been recommended options like that, but I'm not ready to think about my distant future yet. I hope to make a decision after I graduate from junior high to high school."

"Do you have any interesting stories about your costars?"

"Let me think... We planned a promo in which the actors from Hokkaido would all take a late-night bus trip across Japan, but when the director brought it up, they cried and begged him to spare them. The cameraman was filming that too, so it's all going to air, even their negotiation with the secretary to keep the footage off TV. Don't you think that's terrible?"

(Even more people laugh.)

"Did any of the actors get your heart racing?"

"I'd obviously like to keep that secret, if you don't mind."

"Finally, please share a message with the viewers."

"Of course. *Imperial Bodyguards* is an intense, moody detective drama about the people who protect imperial Tokyo's most important citizens. It has action, theatrics, and all kinds of excitement. There's even romance, though I'm not involved in that part, so that's something else to look forward to. I hope you'll go see *Imperial Bodyguards: The Tomboy Lady's Improv Theater* on the big screen."

"Thank you so much for speaking with us today."

(Excerpt from foreign media interview conducted in English.)

"Congratulations on your Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress, your ladyship."

"Thank you."

"Sorry for the blunt question, but Europe and the U.S. see you as an heir to the Russian throne due to your Romanov blood. Do you care to comment on this?"

"Well, I'm actually just a Japanese person named Keikain Runa, and that's the best answer I can give you."

"Are you aware that you're still influential in Russia, and that people there are waiting for the young lady who saved them from economic hardship to return?"

"That's the first I've heard of it. I can only give the same answer as before. I am Japanese, and Japan is my home."

"There are rumors that the Moonlight Fund, the group that saved the Russian economy, is a storehouse for the Romanovs' wealth. Do you care to comment?"

"I can't deny that the Moonlight Fund uses a private Swiss bank account, but I have to object to the claim that it's for storing the Romanovs' assets."

"As the EU expands, blue bloods in Europe are starting to make new demands. Will you please speak to how the blue blood in your veins might put the spotlight on you in the future?"

"I don't care to comment on hypothetical scenarios."

"You seem to have a very deep connection to the American president. I've not only heard that you got involved in the close race in Florida, but that you played a role in publicity after the terrorist attacks. What do you say to that?"

"A Japanese elementary school student controlling American politics? You couldn't even get away with something so silly in a movie."

"Speaking of movies, I understand you performed all sorts of flashy action

scenes yourself. Is that because you expect such things to happen to you in real life?"

"That's right. I train so I can protect myself at the most basic level."

"As an ally of the U.S., Japan is cooperating regarding the war on terrorism. What level of influence do you have over such policies?"

"Once again, a mere child doesn't have enough influence to affect domestic policies."

"But during the wars in Afghanistan and now Iraq, which Washington, D.C., is abuzz about, your companies constructed distribution centers and raked in profits."

"A general trading company was made to import natural resources to Japan, since it lacks those resources. I will say that, given those circumstances, a processing trade country like Japan needs natural resources from places such as Central Asia and the Middle East. That means distribution centers will inevitably be constructed."

"I've heard rumors that you're the one controlling the Keika Group. Is there any truth to that?"

"Duke Keikain is the current head of the family, and the Keika Group is a Keikain family asset."

"There's talk that you led the way in disposing of bad debts as head of a zaibatsu, and held that influence over multiple prime ministers like a fixer. Can you confirm that?"

"Why would any grown man with the title 'prime minister' obey whatever silly things a child had to say?"

"What do you say about the conflict between yourself and the Koizumi administration over debt disposal and participation in Iraq?"

"I've heard the gossip that the Keika Group has its hands in both business and politics, but I have to suggest you contact their public relations team and ask

them."

"Please comment on the issue your movie touched on of poverty among the former Northern Japanese people."

"The Japanese government is working to end the disposal of bad debts, and I'm afraid that's caused high rates of unemployment among the people. I hope the Keika Group, with its links to Hokkaido's economy, can help appeal to the government to solve that issue."

"You're one of the few coloratura sopranos in Japan. Do you plan to pursue a musical path in future? Or could this movie be the start of a career as a Hollywood celebrity?"

"Ah ha ha! Once again, I'm perfectly satisfied being Japanese. I have no plans to leave Japan right now."

(Attendant speaks up, dismissing the journalists.)

"Please wrap up the press conference now."

(Press conference ends.)

"Even if you'd never starred in a movie, I think you would've lived your life as an actress," Director Shirosaki told Keikain Runa in the greenroom before a TV interview. "I'm not suggesting that's a bad thing. They always say that women are actresses by birth. But you, my lady, throw yourself into everything you do. Do you know how anxious the people around you have been?"

"You're the director who kept making that happen. Do you really have the right to complain about it?"

Keikain Runa glared at Director Shirosaki in protest, but he was entirely unmoved. Through their time working together on the movie, she'd realized that he was the same kind of person as Ishikawa Nobumitsu, the photographer.

"Of course. I'm a movie director, you see. What's wrong with asking for the ultimate—no, the *perfect*—performance from my leading lady?" He puffed up

his chest proudly.

Keikain Runa smiled stiffly instead of getting angry. The director was an impressive sort; he was even able to ignore the glare from Eva, the young lady's maid in the room with them.

"Let me ask you something, my lady. What depths do you plan to sink to next?"

"Calling it 'sinking to' something is a rude way to put it."

Director Shirosaki didn't seem to care about that objection in the slightest. If Angela, Runa's secretary, had been there, she might've flipped her lid and chased him out of the room. But Angela had been promoted to company director of Keika Securities under the Keika Holdings umbrella; she was transitioning out of her secretarial position. Taking her place would be Eva; Ichijou Erika; and Tachibana Yuka, who would become Keikain Runa's classmate once they entered junior high. They'd apparently chosen to take a softer approach with Keikain Runa, and they refrained from chasing the director out.

"That's how I want to say it. Most people in this world will never amount to anything, my lady. They call themselves 'adults' and pretend that it means something. You, however, will definitely become someone whose name is remembered by history."

Director Shirosaki's face was as serious as Keikain Runa had ever seen it. She would later go on to watch one of his documentaries, only to learn that he sometimes made the same face while telling actors how to perform. For now, however, she was simply in awe of that serious look.

"Master one thing, and people call you 'great.' Master two things, and people call you 'a genius with a gift from above'. But do you know what people think when you master three things or more?" Director Shirosaki paused there. When he continued, he spoke slowly, like he wanted her to understand. "They fear you sold your soul to the devil."

Though she was an upstart, Keikain Runa was a noble from a dukedom and

had inherited the great Romanov family's blood. She controlled the Keika Group and used its political ties to influence the Japanese and global economies every day, maintained strong connections to the American and Japanese governments, and remained so popular in Russia that its people awaited her return. She was an accomplished scholar and athlete, beautiful, and a top coloratura soprano in Japan. Now, she was debuting as an actress. She could only chuckle sadly and admit that selling her soul to the devil wasn't an unreasonable explanation.

"At this point in your life, it would be hard for you to become a normal person. My lady, you may be preparing for this already, but people will both fear and deify you as your life goes on. As thanks for starring in my movie, I want to warn you to start thinking about the end."

Director Shirosaki looked away from her. He turned his eyes to the polished mirror set up in the greenroom and focused on her reflection.

"Monsters in movies pretty much always end up the same way," he muttered. "They either kill people, or they're killed by people. In special cases, a monster turns back into a human. The gimmick that does it is 'love.' I don't think there are many possible outcomes for you, my lady. You'll rule as a queen, or the masses will overthrow you as a dictator..." Then the director chuckled. He probably meant his next words as a joke. "Or maybe getting married will turn you from a monster into a woman."

"That's sexual harassment."

"Men can't give birth, after all—that's biology. So don't forget that you hold the special privileges of women." That seemed to be the end of his warning. Leaning back in his chair, he adopted a playful tone. "Why do you keep doing those boring interviews? You did them before the movie was even released, and now it's selling out everywhere."

"That's part of the job. You should be happy, since you get to do them with me."

"I want to film you, not do interviews with you! In fact, if someone worse than me is going to film you, I might just demand he hand over his camera and let me do it."

With that, Director Shirosaki steered the subject back to movies. Keikain Runa truly felt he was one of the people in movies who would be called "great."

"The lifespan of the actress Keikain Runa seems long, but it'll be very brief. Still, I've been able to film the era's defining actress. It's the ultimate moment for anyone who calls themself a movie director."

"Oh my. Does that make me Audrey Hepburn?"

"I'm sure you'd have shone in Roman Holiday too."

The television interview wound up being nothing more than inoffensive entertainment news, but Keikain Runa would think back to the conversation in the greenroom long after that day was over. She would always be grateful to Director Shirosaki for hinting what her final choice should be. However, she had yet to learn that—as someone who never compromised when it came to movies—the way he used her in his projects would become a real headache in her life.

"All right, Professor Kanbe. I'd like to hear your thoughts as our commentator on the Koizumi administration's strategies, and future developments for the administration."

"Thank you for having me. The Koizumi administration is under pressure to handle the major diplomatic problem coming up. Our country has pledged to join the likes of Great Britain in aiding the United States' invasion of Iraq. But will the Diet really want to take on the responsibility of dispatching troops?"

"About that—hasn't the opposition now announced that they'll object to dispatching troops?"

"That's right. However, the Koizumi administration holds a majority in both

houses, and managed to pass a special law about that during last autumn's extraordinary session. Hidden behind more exciting news like the Russo-Japanese leadership summit to discuss the Karafuto problem is the major diplomatic victory the Koizumi administration will gain by dispatching the JSDF."

"You mentioned the Russo-Japanese leadership summit and their work on the Karafuto problem. With the negotiations still ongoing, some claim the summit hasn't managed to decide anything. What do you say to that?"

"Right now, it might be best to think of that summit as existing solely to address the issue of Iraq. While Japan and the U.K. will side with the U.S., that's not true of the European countries surrounding the EU. That's why you should view the summit as Japan's intermediary dealings between the U.S. and Russia. With the U.S. involved in Japanese national security, they used our debt to them to ensure we'd participate in talks with Russia. Please remember to view the situation with that context in mind."

"Speaking of diplomacy, corruption involving nobles connected to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Privy Council came to light and caused the resignations of the secretary-general and ruling party Diet members. How did the Koizumi administration pull off their diplomatic win despite that?"

"Firstly due to Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. He's a former prime minister himself, and even before the terrorist attacks, he used his position as Minister of Crisis Management to connect with the U.S. on issues of national security. That was a major factor. You also can't overlook Prime Minister Koizumi's decision to leave Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa in charge of everything related to diplomacy and national security while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wasn't functioning. A unique trait of the Koizumi administration is that they generally leave policy in the hands of the cabinet ministers and save only the most crucial matters for the prime minister to take charge of. It's a clever division of labor. With Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa in charge of diplomacy and national security, Minister Takenaga is responsible for domestic affairs and economics."

"Since you mention Minister Takenaga, I'd like to ask you about his economic policies going forward. The American IT bubble's collapse brought the current stock market average down to the fifteen-thousand-yen level, and banks are still struggling to dispose of bad debts. Now that current value accounting has been introduced and measures have been taken to break up zaibatsu, do you foresee a change in that trajectory?"

"Minister Takenaga has spoken about injecting public funds into financial institutions, and he likely intends to finish removing bad debts all at once. The restructuring of financial institutions in the late nineties gave birth to megabanks, but many of those are still struggling with bad debts. Shifting to current value accounting in that state includes the large sums set aside for dealing with debts, and you should note how the nearly collapsed zaibatsu finally sprang into action because of it. It's clear that more reorganization is necessary, even if that means methods of nationalization."

"How do you feel about Minister Takenaga's stance on Keika Holdings going public?"

"Keika Holdings was a kind of government-affiliated bank that forced banks, securities firms, and insurance companies on the verge of collapse over bad debts in the late nineties to reorganize. Management has rapidly expanded over the past few years, and the companies were sold to the Keika Group, an emerging zaibatsu. But with so many connections to the government, Ministry of Finance, and FSA on the inside, those financial institutions are going to become the focus of attention once again as they work on ridding themselves of bad debts. Now the government is thinking they'll create a model for escaping the issue of bad debt disposal by making financial institutions that were on the brink of failure go public. They're also calling on Keika Holdings to assist other financial institutions under pressure now that current value accounting has been introduced. Those are the two sides to the problem of public listing. If Keika Holdings is listed on the stock market, they'll be praised for finishing their work on their nonperforming loans. If they stay private, they'll

have to deal with the aftermath of the current value accounting factor. Minister Takenaga and Prime Minister Koizumi are like-minded. They're very skilled at coming up with multiple plans that feed into a single policy and presenting it to the public. The downward trend of stock prices is concerning, but bad debt disposal will apparently proceed on its steady course."

"The Koizumi administration is spotlighting their achievements both here and abroad, but it looks like the opposition party has their own plan in mind."

"That's right. The opposition coalition government of the nineties failed to fully unify, and they learned their lesson when the ruling party reclaimed the prime minister's seat. They also learned that you have no seat at the table unless you're in one of the two major parties, since proportional representation shifted things through the small electoral districts. The opposition party is trying to show that now that they've formed the unified Democratic Allied Fellowship, they've created a coalition that can win in the next general election. Right now, this country's parties include the ruling coalition, the opposing party with their DAF, and the Karafuto Social Democratic Party, with the former Northern Japanese government occupying seats and cooperating through a confidence-and-supply agreement."

"What do you foresee in the world of politics, Kanbe-san?"

"In Nagata-cho, it's looking like the newly formed DAF might not last long; they're struggling to get the organization in order. If they disband, the debate about sending troops to the Iraq War will become unavoidable. Meanwhile, Karafuto continues to struggle with high unemployment while calls for responsibility are directed at the Karafuto Social Democratic Party for their confidence-and-supply agreement. That's advantageous for the opposition party, and now we'll have to wait and see how many seats they can steal in the Karafuto district."

"Can you share your thoughts on the House of Councillors?"

"They have a majority there, so I doubt we'll see the House of Councillors

cause a stagnation of the Diet resulting in mass cabinet resignations like we saw in the late nineties. Its composition won't change, even in the 2004 House of Councillors election. And if the opposition manages to win an administration change, it'll be interesting to see how they handle a minority government in the Diet."

"And your thoughts on the Privy Council?"

"That's a bastion of fifty nobles that's currently under harsh criticism from the people. However, the establishment of the law making the deputy prime minister its chairman has allowed the cabinet more influence. Instead of opening up the House of Councillors, which used to be the House of Peers after the war, the Privy Council increased its members and made a show of its hidden power during the regime change of the nineties. Now they're putting up a fierce fight against the Koizumi administration's measures to strip nobles of special rights. That said, they lost power in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs scandal and are busy waging a defensive war in the face of the cabinet's increased power. They're an agency of the National Diet, and the Diet has regulations over them, so they won't be able to make a move unless the Diet is in chaos. The Koizumi cabinet knows that very well and is governing with a firm hand."

"Thank you so much for joining us. We're going to take a commercial break. When we come back, we'll talk about the failed terrorist attack on the Shinjuku Geofront."

Glossary and Notes

Head of Foreign Leadership Analysis: Head of a CIA department. Their job description is exactly what it sounds like it would be.

Prime-time/late-night time slots: Prime time lasts from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. In Japan, it's referred to as the "golden slot." Late night is usually from 11:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. Keika holds the 2:00 a.m. TV shopping slot.

Promotional late-night bus tour of Japan: A reference to *Suiyo Dodesho* and their three-night-long bus tour.

"Most people in this world will never amount to anything": Based on a quote from *Penguindrum*.

Chapter 4:

The Lady Spectates

COME TO THINK OF IT, what's going on with Father's company merger?"

We were having a group lunch with higher-ups from our companies. We hadn't been able to do this for a while, since I'd been sick. I wanted to show that I'd recovered, though, so I called the first lunch meeting in some time. These had been humble gatherings with only Ichijou Susumu and Tachibana at first, but they'd turned into giant parties that we held in Kudanshita Keika Hotel's main hall. Not only did guests come from our five main companies—Keika Holdings, Akamatsu Corporation, Keika Electronics Union, Keika Railway, and Keika-Iwazaki Pharma—directors from our few dozen subsidiaries attended too. The lunch certainly couldn't be called "humble" any longer.

The guests' topics of conversation included my improved health, next year's reorganization of Akamatsu Corporation into Keika Corp and Keika Railway, Keika Holdings' public listing schedule in accordance with attitudes in the Diet, and Keika-Iwazaki Pharma, which I'd just asked about. Keika Electronics Union had finished merging, and the rest of the Keika Group was trying desperately to adapt to the changing times. Since I was the group's true owner my poor health had significantly influenced them all during this process, which made me feel bad.

"They'll soon sign a memorandum with Hatabe Pharmaceuticals regarding the integration. Their new name will be Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma."

Angela, seated at my side and not eating, gave me that report promptly. She would leave to become a director of Keika Securities under Keika Holdings next year, and she was informally preparing to become Keika Holdings' CEO someday. I was sad about this, but also relieved, knowing she'd be the right person for the job.

"I've heard one rumor that I'm curious about." Angela's next words turned the mood grim. "A certain megapharma corporation is talking about buying the company once it finishes its merger."

Listening, I realized I'd have to confirm that after the lunch meeting. *Megapharma*. That term, short for "megapharmacy," referred to the largest pharmaceutical companies. Ever since the late nineties, European and American drug manufacturers had constantly acquired and merged with other companies, expanding their scale in the face of skyrocketing drug-development costs. Those global giants were indeed struggling with the fallout from the bubble bursting, but they weren't going to ignore the Japanese market, which had the second-largest economic scope in the world. They always kept a watchful eye out for the right time to enter.

After lunch, I ate my pudding in a side room, asking Angela for more details. "Do they have a reason to buy Father's company?"

"The most obvious reason is to instantly obtain a sales network in Japan."

Entering the Japanese market came with both language and cultural barriers. Pharmaceutical businesses would have to form relationships with the medical community, this country's ivory tower, which would make things difficult for newcomers. These megapharma companies had grown enormous through acquisitions, and it would be more efficient for them to simply buy an additional Japanese company than to enter each sector themselves.

"If that's all they want, can't they buy another company?"

"Keika-Iwazaki Pharma supplies medicine to U.S. forces here in Japan as well as to the JSDF. And behind the scenes, the JSFD and U.S. military are secretly stocking up on medicine."

I started to feel sick, but I closed my eyes and pushed the sensation aside. That proved that the JSDF and U.S. forces were preparing for a war. The medicines Angela just mentioned would be connected to the place they planned to attack; it could only be Iraq.

"Medicine to combat chemical weapons?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

My maid Tachibana Yuka, who was in the room with us, served me a calming herbal tea. I savored the scent and released my tension. Iwazaki Pharma was part of the Iwazaki zaibatsu, which had formed with a close relationship with domestic policy. Meanwhile, Keika Pharma was known to occasionally get involved with the military during its business development. Both companies knew how to take on confidential work. In short, they could secure profits over long periods of time both during and after wars. It made sense that the megapharma company had their eyes on Keika-Iwazaki.

"But I believe the biggest reason for their attempted acquisition is you, my lady."

"Me?"

I was shocked, so Angela explained the reasoning based on American business philosophy. It turned out to be a very simple matter of capital.

"They'd become a core Keika Group company, but that would actually be a clear downgrade in status. That part, on its own, also goes for the Iwazaki zaibatsu. And now that you've stepped back, my lady, you've become distant from the Keika Group's leadership. Wall Street would look at that from outside and think Keika-Iwazaki could be cut off."

"Ah..." The noise slipped out of me involuntarily.

I didn't understand this family rhetoric, nor did I care to try. Since the megapharma company was much bigger than Keika-Iwazaki, they felt they could simply throw money at them if anything went wrong. If that was the case, we could put up a defense against them.

Just as I thought that, the door opened, and Nakamaro-oniisama entered. "I'm glad I found you. An employee at the lunch said you were asking about us, so I came here to see you. It looks like you're feeling a lot better."

"I'm sorry for worrying you. How is Sakurako-san?"

"She's good, as always. We should find time to have dinner together. Sakurako's really looking forward to it."

"I'd love to come along with Kaoru-san."

After greeting me like a sibling, Nakamaro-oniisama adopted a Keika-Iwazaki executive's expression, handing me some documents. Not even I understood what was written on them.

"Do you remember my plan to go to New York last year? I was there in part to attend a trade expo showcasing new medicine, but after that, I managed to sign contracts with multiple start-ups. It looks like one has been successful. It's getting a whole lot of buzz in the U.S."

"Congratulations. That's great news. I'd be happy to pay for development and manufacturing costs, if you like."

The current process to develop new drugs required tens of billions of yen and at least a decade. It was a massive ordeal. The previously mentioned megapharma company had merged and acquired new companies so often to scrape together that money and time.

"No—that's the thing. It went *too* well. They want this medicine so badly, they're now trying to buy up all of Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma to get it."

I see. So that's how the problem came to be.

How should one avoid a hostile takeover? The easiest method was not to take a company public at all. It went without saying that a company couldn't complain about management if they held all their own shares. But companies still went public; it was an easier way to secure funds, increased employee morale and name recognition, and meant the business wouldn't be managed by a single party. Another big influence was probably that it enabled the company's founders to sell off their equity and earn a profit. The downside was that public companies' internal decision-making was limited, and it was also

possible to end up in a hostile takeover situation.

"What does the stock ratio look like?"

Angela answered me, bringing up an onscreen pie chart that showed Keika held less than half of the company equity. "According to the merger memorandum with Hatabe Pharmaceuticals, it's a 4:3:3 split for Keika, Iwazaki, and Hatabe respectively."

Keika had control, but that didn't mean we could run roughshod over the other two sides. That was what led to this situation. In other words, there was a risk that this megapharma company could throw money at Iwazaki and Hatabe and make them sell their stakes, which would mean the megapharmacy acquired the company.

"So which megapharmacy planned this takeover?"

Angela silently brought images up on the monitor: two separate logos.

"Charles & Earhart, and Arts Nova. It sounds like they're really feeling the pressure now that Eflaro's announced a strategic partnership with Japan's Gainai Pharmaceuticals. That 'strategic partnership' looks more like an acquisition to me, though."

Eflaro—itself a megapharmacy—had formed a strategic partnership with Gainai, but the convenient relationship Gainai found itself in shocked the industry. Despite Eflaro claiming 50.1 percent of the stock and making Gainai a subsidiary, the latter had announced managerial independence, said there would be no changes to the company name or representatives, and declared it would remain listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange. When Arts Nova International learned that, they'd jumped into action, entering a license agreement with Iwazaki Pharma. That led them to investigate the company. Once Arts Nova learned about our internal situation, they tried to approach the Keika and Hatabe sides in hopes of entering a strategic partnership as well. That was the exact moment Charles & Earhart launched their attack, however. Hiring a major Japanese brokerage as their advisor, they quietly approached the

companies with the intention of buying all three together.

The acquisition would cost roughly 1.3 trillion yen. That sum wouldn't be paid with cash; instead, it would rest on the current value accounting now being debated in the Nation Diet, as well as an internal stock-swap system. The current market cap for all three companies was roughly one trillion yen. With a premium of 30 percent, it wasn't a bad deal. However, if Charles & Earhart came for Iwazaki and Hatabe's shares in a hostile takeover, they could obtain the majority for six hundred to eight hundred billion yen. That wasn't an impossible sum to pay for a megapharma company advised by a Japanese brokerage. It was also very possible that, once the government introduced current value accounting and lifted the ban on stock swaps, they'd jump at the chance to have a model case. At that point, this would devolve into a political issue, which wouldn't do any good.

"Oniisama, how will you handle this from the Keika side? I wouldn't mind if you took money from the Moonlight Fund to prevent a hostile takeover."

Nakamaro-oniisama sighed and smiled sadly, probably a sign of the burden he felt as the next successor in line. "You see, Runa, I'm actually the one eager to take this offer up."

When he revealed the truth to me, I was startled. It was the kind of family misunderstanding you saw everywhere in this world.

"Iwazaki Pharma and Hatabe Pharma started from the same place. Keika only has a short history. Iwazaki Pharma merged with many Japanese pharmaceutical companies to grow, yet Keika now holds the operation's reins, which doesn't make the Iwazaki side very happy. That helped drive the merger with Hatabe Pharmaceuticals. It was partly because Iwazaki wants to make a comeback."

Just because the zaibatsu's top members were friendly didn't mean everyone underneath would accept or understand things. That was only human nature. A Keika from a rising zaibatsu marrying an Iwazaki from one of Japan's most

prominent zaibatsu had naturally resulted in discord in the lower levels.

"They can only say those things because of Eflaro's business partnership with Gainai, though. Now they feel like they have the option of accepting foreign investments. And the organization will be brought together when they have a common enemy."

Is that really a good idea? Merging with Iwazaki Pharma and Hatabe Pharmaceuticals, then taking foreign capital on top of that, would put them out of place in the Keika Group.

Nakamaro-oniisama seemed to understand what I was thinking and smiled. "To be more serious, this future is also *your* future. I think that Keika Holdings, Keika Railway, Keika Corporation, and so on need to go public. The Keika Group is too large for you to carry all on your own. Then again, if you're going to take on the world in battle, those companies are still too small. The government will take action to dismantle the zaibatsu someday. We, Iwazaki, and the other zaibatsu all know that, so now we're looking for a way to survive."

Disposing of bad debts and introducing current value accounting after the bubble burst would probably deal this country's zaibatsu a fatal blow. Anyone trying to protect long-standing zaibatsu under those circumstances would inevitably be destroyed. They desperately needed reinvention. Oniisama was predicting that far ahead. As long as we had him, I was certain the Keika Group would be secure.

"Tell me, Oniisama, would you lead the entire Keika Group in my place?"

"I have plenty already, Runa. Since you don't have enough yet, we'll end up clashing someday. At the very least, the Keikain family will secure enough funds to last up to your generation and the generation of the child in Sakurako-san's belly, so you can have your fun for now without any worries. I won't get in the way as long as you don't do anything dangerous."

I was shocked by the bombshell Nakamaro-oniisama revealed so casually. I congratulated him and watched him smile, looking truly happy. Someone who

hadn't been alive in the game story was going to bring forth a new life. It was like an affirmation of everything I'd done to this point. I was so happy.

After that day, Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma met with Arts Nova and announced a strategic partnership. Arts Nova would acquire 50.1 percent of Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma and make them a subsidiary. However, Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe would be allowed to manage themselves independently, keep their name and representatives, and maintain the Keika Group and Iwazaki zaibatsu's entitlement to participate. The media turned the agreement into a major story, speculating that the Japanese pharmaceutical industry would be next in the string of corporate reorganizations.

During that process, the Keikain family sold off half their equity to Arts Nova for two hundred billion yen. It was easy to overlook that sum in the shadow of the trillions of yen Keika Holdings would receive when it went public, but a certain young lady would use it to prepare things for her nephew who had yet to be born; she'd been turned into a doting aunt.

Thanks to its business integration, Keika Corp would take on a large number of customers. Naturally, managing and organizing that network was no easy task. With over a hundred subsidiaries taking on more than ten thousand new clients, this was naturally more than a day's worth of work.

"... That's why I decided to purchase a building to help with organization."

Even I wanted to ask how the heck an elementary school student could make a decision like that, but none of the adults in the room objected.

Probably more than a hundred of them were staring at me in Kudanshita Keika Tower's mass-meeting room. They came from the management of Akamatsu Corporation, Teisen Ishii, Teimen Corporation, and Kanegana Textiles. The Keika Group had grown dramatically, so they sought my decisions regarding many more situations than before. At the same time, I did need to make a show of who the boss was, even if I was just an elementary school student.

"To clean up something big, start with a room you aren't using, fill it with all the things that need to be organized, then work on emptying that room. They say that's the trick to it. I happened to find a handy building, so I'm planning to fill it with everything that needs organizing."

I watched the others look at the building projected on the screen behind me. People from Kansai seemed to recognize what they saw.

I revealed the building's name to the room. "That's Kansai Airport Rinkai Tower. I hope to make it a corporate reorganization headquarters where we can put things in order. The current plan is to buy the district around it too and make that Keika Group's distribution center in western Japan."

Both private and public sectors had put a total of six hundred billion yen into developing that district, but that had just turned into another bad debt after the bubble burst, placing a big strain on those involved. The building in question, which had become symbolic of the district, was priced at six hundred thirty billion yen. Okazaki Yuuichi, the executive at my side, took over speaking next.

According to managing director Toudou Nagayoshi of Akamatsu Corporation, "Making someone assist you on that project will be the same as bringing them into that sphere by saying, 'You'll be the next director in ten years.' I'd be glad if that got rid of their speculative, adventurous spirit too, though."

This was part of the far-reaching plan too. That was why Okazaki and his subordinates, employees here representing the Moonlight Fund, were separated in the meeting. Ichijou Erika happened to be with them. She was probably worried about me now that I was back to work after my break, as was Tachibana Yuka. She'd been assisting Ichijou Erika and seemed to be backing her up, but maybe I was only imagining that. Dressed in their maid outfits, they really stood out against all the meeting room's business suits. Of course, no one stood out more than I did, but that was beside the point.

"As my lady mentioned, many trading companies have roots in Kansai. I'm

sure everyone here knows that this area is a center of reorganization where businesses get their affairs in order. She wants to avoid any foolish regional overconcentration by building headquarters in both Tokyo and Kyoto and later turning Kansai Airport Rinkai Tower into a supplementary Kansai base. The Keika Group has also announced Keika Railway's construction of a Naniwasuji Line, allowing for limited express travel from Kansai Airport to Shin-Osaka in under an hour..."

As the meeting continued, we received one opinion after another from Kansai locals. They seemed to understand that Keika—that I—wouldn't neglect the area.

"Having two headquarters in Tokyo and Osaka is fine, but where are you going to put them?"

"In both cases, we plan to purchase land and buildings owned by Keika Holdings and redevelop them. We're currently looking for potential sites."

"If you're searching for a distribution point, wouldn't Kobe Airport—which is still under construction—be better?"

"Kobe Airport and Port Island are both on our list of candidates, yes. The Port of Kobe's facilities can handle some of the largest quantities of freight in all Japan, and if we got involved in shaping Port Island's second construction phase, we could probably create a fitting base for western Japan. The problems would be that the airport doesn't function twenty-four hours, and that the location needs more time to finish developing. Also, the Keika Group can ease worries among Kansai clients by indirectly participating in the Kansai Airport situation, which has hindered the Kansai region and its disposal of bad debts. That's one reason we made this decision."

"Keika's getting involved in Kansai Airport too?!" exclaimed an executive from Kansai.

I smiled awkwardly. He probably hadn't meant to let his true feelings out so earnestly. Afterward, the story of Kansai International Airport, aka "Kanku," and

its fearsome den of bad debts became a very dark subject. Keika Holdings had avoided having bad debts sent to the Resolution and Collection Corporation, and I wasn't stupid enough to have them butt into those shady dealings going on.

However, most of our Kansai-region business clients struggling with bad debts were small-or medium-sized. Since those bad debts were indirectly related to Keika Corp's organization of clients, Toudou and Keika Holdings CEO Ichijou signed a memorandum in front of me promising to work together.

Times like these reminded me how good it was to be at the top of a zaibatsu, where I could exercise so much power and responsibility. Well, it was good so long as I didn't get too comfortable with it. I could turn into a dictator suspicious of everything.

"No, we have no intention of getting involved with Kansai Airport's second stage of construction," replied Okazaki. "They're used as AIRHO's western Japan base, but we chose them because they operate day and night to handle air freight. Allow me to emphasize that we chose to purchase this building not because we wish to be involved in the airport's operation, but strictly because it allows us to indirectly provide help with bad debts."

Once Okazaki answered that safely, the next question made the meeting room freeze over. It came from a Teisen Ishii executive whose name I remembered was Tenman Hashimitsu on the seating chart I'd looked at.

"Will Akamatsu Corporation move its resource management department out of the headquarters here in Kudanshita?"

The merger we were going through was a relief operation conducted by Akamatsu Corporation. The party financing it was the Moonlight Fund—more specifically, the resource management department. In other words, this man was asking if the headquarters would move to Tokyo or Osaka.

Okazaki firmly denied that. "No, they'll stay here in Kudanshita."

"In terms of governance, it seems like it'd be best to define the resource

management department firmly. But I understand. Go ahead."

That statement, which sounded like a suggestion to interfere with the Moonlight Fund, a business under my direct control, made everyone in the room turn and look at me. I just kept a smile glued to my face like a mask. If I fired an executive for this level of meddling and provocation, I'd be no different than a dictator.

Toudou's reaction after the meeting said it all. "You should be happy, my lady. It seems like you've found an ambitious person to succeed me."

Executives with ambitions were capable. I couldn't help but recognize that a giant general trading company like Keika Corp would never function without people like that getting us through.

"My lady, are you familiar with subprime loans?"

Angela's simple question sounded like a demon whispering in my ear. She'd just announced how she planned to achieve profits as a director at Keika Securities' North American business.

"'Subprime' refers to loans that are less than prime, correct?" I had to pretend that I didn't know what she was talking about. Only I was aware that those were a trap that would lead to destruction.

Angela had no knowledge of that outcome, so she continued brazenly, "That's right. They're loans meant for a base below first-rate customers, and they're on the verge of taking off with Wall Street right now."

It started when the United States amassed a surplus of money meant to fund the handling of the crisis following 9/11. After the terrorist attacks and bursting of the bubble, they greatly lowered policy interest rates as a wartime strategy for the coming Iraq War. Now markets were on the verge of forming another bubble with the leftover money. Subprime loans came into focus in the course of that.

"Two things give you social status in the United States, and loans for those two things are being provided on the basis of trust. The first thing is cars. The U.S. has a society built around cars, and owning one can signal to others that you're reliable. The second thing is houses. Once you have a house, American society begins to see you as successful. Most financial institutions already cater to prime, high-quality borrowers with car and house loans, but few offer any loans to riskier non-prime borrowers. Keika Holdings' North American division is thinking of venturing into that area. What do you say?"

The bubble had appeared in wartime, when interest rates were unbelievably low. That was why land prices soared even though American economic conditions were still poor. They were on the verge of the same conditions Japan had gone through from the late eighties to early nineties. CEO Ichijou and I had both experienced what came after that; we knew it well.

Ichijou and I exchanged glances. We both knew this was a bad idea. He expressed concern first, pointing out these subprime loans' interest rates. The report showed a rate that would've been unthinkable even during the long-ago bubble.

"An 8 percent annual interest rate on a mortgage with no down payment?! That's insanity!"

Interest rates dictated the interest one paid on a loan, but there was another way for a financier to look at them: as the bad debt rate. In other words, the higher an interest rate, the higher the chance that they'd never see their money repaid. An eight percent annual interest rate was like saying "We'll lend you ten million yen, which will be eight hundred thousand yen in interest," but it was also like saying, "There's an eight percent chance that the ten million yen won't come back to us." If a financer lent thirteen people money, and one didn't pay them back, losing even that one large sum of money was something they couldn't ignore.

"That's why we keep the payments low for the first four years, then immediately raise them for the fifth year once our principal has grown. If land

prices go up during that period, they can refinance to repay the loan."

During Japan's bubble, I heard that all the time. Well, actually, I'd just been a baby.

Angela didn't hesitate in her explanation at all. Subprime loans were a work of art that used cutting-edge financial engineering strategies. That was why everyone charged straight toward them, unaware of their realities. Angela was well versed in these financial engineering strategies from Wall Street.

"CEO Ichijou's fears are warranted," she agreed. "That's why we'll use this method to lower interest rates. When you combine prime and subprime loans, the risk goes down."

Combining a ten-million-yen loan with an annual interest rate of 8 percent and a ten-million-yen loan with an annual interest rate of 1 percent averaged out to a loan of twenty million yen with an annual interest rate of 4.5 percent. Then that was sold as two separate ten-million-yen loans, each with an annual interest rate of 4.5 percent.

Ichijou, who'd witnessed the end of the bubble, could point out the problem with that logic. "The depreciation of land in Japan harmed every property value in the country. That's like combining a glass of wine with a glass of mud; neither will be drinkable."

Angela didn't waver as she came to the ultimate bit of deviousness behind the subprime loans. "I won't deny that possibility. So let's walk away with only the commissions on the loan sales."

Ichijou and I were speechless, but Angela didn't mind us. Clearly enjoying herself, she explained the Wall Street theory behind the scheme. Angela and I had known each other for years, but situations like these showed that we had different values.

"First, we'll build a specialized fund to produce tons of subprime loans. I thought of asking Keika Holdings for financing, but that seems like a bad idea, judging by how pale you both are. Still, we can borrow it from the Japanese

market at a low interest rate."

She was describing the initial loan we'd need. The market was currently full of money because interest rates were low. Japan had a zero-interest-rate policy, and nowadays it was possible to borrow funds at a .25 percent interest rate. You needed to hedge against exchange risk, but Angela's idea was to borrow twenty million yen at a .25 percent rate in Japan and lend it in the United States at a 4.5 percent rate. It was an easy way to make a tremendous profit.

Her plan only grew nastier from there. "We'll mix prime assets like government bonds into those subprime loans we receive and sell them as securities. The assets will go to the investors, and we'll keep only the commission without the security. Judging again by how pale you two are, you won't want to collect interest or act as payment proxies, so we can sell those rights to other agencies. Don't you see? We'll collect only the commission and take on no risk."

"And you're okay with this?!" I couldn't hold it in any longer. We'd be selling loans to people and running away when the prices fell, preying on the weak by telling them paying was their own responsibility.

Angela's next words showed that she didn't understand my concerns. "You're a kind person, my lady. And you may be averse to forcing other parties to take on the risk. However, if both parties agree on these deals, they're proper transactions, even if they're basically a grift."

"They're more like a trick played while gambling," Ichijou couldn't resist interjecting.

Angela was unshaken. The geniuses of Wall Street had come up with this system to prey on countless fools, which was why finding its weaknesses was impossible based on what we were hearing.

"To be accurate, if you present them as a trick from the start, you can act like they're a fair deal. That will require third-party evaluation, but if you ask the ratings agencies to give this an AAA rating, you'll probably find buyers worldwide."

This was where ratings agencies came into play. Their ratings were useless during the IT bubble's collapse and the Russian currency crisis, but since they were a high-level financial craft, people who didn't understand ratings properly blindly believed in them to this day. Japanese financial institutions were rated based on their nonperforming loans based on government bonds, and Keika Holdings maintained a rating equivalent to that of Japanese bonds. In other words, financial institutions rated by a third party as having credibility equal to government bonds would use that status to sell securities—securities that amounted to fraud. Selling those to customers, even after those customers had the risks explained to them, was crueler than something a common swindler would come up with.

"I won't do anything that hurts your credibility, of course. I'll have insurance agencies guarantee all the securities we sell in case the unthinkable happens, and we take a loss."

In other words, we'd be selling the loans knowing that they might default.

Even with my eyes fixed sternly on her, Angela showed no hesitance. "My lady, insurance is the greatest gamble one can take in life. It may be a disadvantageous gamble, but all the major players will buy insurance if the returns are high. At the very least, the current president's monetary policy is likely to continue for a while. If he's reelected next year, these loans will continue to sell until 2008."

I knew that. Financial engineering itself was like gambling, and insurance was the ultimate gamble. We'd come out on top if the loss didn't occur by a specified date, but if it did, we were out of luck.

"So, how much would you be making, and how much could you sell?" Ichijou quietly asked Angela to confirm the sums.

Having known him for many years, I realized from his voice that he believed these would all turn into nonperforming loans. Keika Railway's financing was

trivial enough that we could handle it within the country alone, but Angela didn't sense that. Her voice practically singsong, she revealed an amount we could hardly believe.

"Right. Judging by your faces, you don't seem to care for this plan at all, so why not go for a safe margin of one hundred billion dollars? We'll gain a billion dollars in profit at a 1 percent commission rate. That way, no one can complain when I become CEO of Keika Holdings."

She was right. This plan would also be a route to establish Angela as the next CEO after Ichijou. She was the only trustworthy, high-ranking person managing the Moonlight Fund—a part of the mishmash Keika Holdings. If we wanted her to be accepted as CEO within a few years, she'd need some successes under her belt. Angela thought she'd found the ultimate strategy for that, but she was actually about to step on a landmine.

"I'm curious about something." Ichijou closed his eyes, collecting his thoughts as he spoke. He was trying to take other businesses' temperature now, which could be called a harmful practice within Japanese companies. "Other financial institutions will probably find out about a plan of this scale. They'll likely take it up too, just like they did when we undertook Russian bonds, and they won't be as reserved as you. What do you think of that?"

In reality, Japanese financial institutions hadn't gotten involved with the subprime loan issue because their hands were full with bad debt disposal. The ones at the top, like Ichijou, took a painful hit when land prices dropped. But in this world that I inhabited, many institutions—including Keika Holdings—had finished disposing of their bad debts and were on the verge of changing into a brand-new hell. That was the fear I saw in Ichijou's expression.

When she answered him, Angela had a lovely-yet-cruel smile on her face. "I welcome that, of course! As always, Keika Holdings just has to take over any financial institution that sustains a fatal blow, right? We can make a megabank that can compete with the rest of the world, just like you used to want, CEO Ichijou."

That was a different approach. Issuing subprime loans alone was a nausea-inducing evil, but Ichijou and I were lost for words in the face of this theory—a theory consisting of complete rationalism and monetary greed. Angela understood that subprime loans were a time bomb, and she wanted them to go off when other financial institutions picked them up. Then Keika Holdings, coming out surprisingly unscathed, would take over those institutions just before they collapsed.

I looked at Ichijou and saw him gazing at the ceiling in grief. He was probably feeling the difference between regional bank workers and Wall Street elites.

"Keika Holdings is scheduled to be listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange soon. That'll force you to think about stockholders and maintain a stable stock price. However, the markets and government will also want us to conduct ourselves as a symbol of Japanese financial restoration. At our current scale, we won't be able to transition from a Japanese megabank to a global one, so what option do we have but to swallow the others?"

A memory came back to me. There had been a conspiracy theory that America, more specifically Wall Street, set up Japanese financial institutions to take the fall during the bubble. That was a conspiracy theory I couldn't laugh at any longer. I'd seen just how evil the people of Wall Street could be, controlling the world from their skyscrapers, not hesitating at all to make cruel, unfeeling decisions based on self-interest and rationalism. Angela looked at me. She was smiling, but I had to look away from her when I spoke.

"Tell me, Angela. Is the U.S. government ordering you to do this? Or is this your own personal desire?"

"Good question. The government's given me some orders. If we turn into a global megabank, this country alone won't be able to handle our capital structure, so my orders are to teach financial systems in Japan a bit of Wall Street logic."

Keika Holdings would be going public. In exchange for the profits we'd reap

from that, the Keika Group's share ratio would drop, creating a chance for foreign capital to enter.

"Now that current value accounting is being introduced, disposal of bad debts is in the final stages. Other institutions will probably suffer paper losses again, but I'm sure Imperial Iwazaki Bank and Futaki-Yodoyabashi Bank will be fine. Honami Bank and Gowa Osan Bank are the ones that may not make it out. I expect one of them, or maybe even both, to come to Keika Holdings for help."

In this world, the Keika Rules had steered Japan through its disposal of bad debts. However, the rules' flaw was that you had to pour a lot of funds into new banks when merging. I'd used that as a shield during emergencies to keep dumping funds into Keika Holdings through the Moonlight Fund, but once we'd gone through with our stock offering, the new Keika Holdings might not be able to use that strategy. Or rather, I doubted the Koizumi administration of Minister Takenaga would allow it.

That was because another prime financial institution had remained hidden—postal savings. This was the period when privatization of the postal service was beginning to connect to disposal of bad debts, appearing at center stage as a political pawn. I wasn't sure, however, whether that was just a coincidence, or if it was calculated.

"I see. You'll go for a third-party allotment of shares with foreign capital?"

When she heard that Ichijou understood, Angela clapped happily. "Exactly. We'll use Keika Holdings to open the door to foreign capital. It's a pretty good scenario, isn't it?"

Wait. This doesn't seem right. "Hang on. You said subprime loans would function until 2008, Angela. Is this bomb going off part of your orders from the American government?"

Angela looked amazed, but I felt more shocked. Our different cultural backgrounds meant that we could use the same words, like this, and still fail to understand each other.

"Won't it be Wall Street's own fault if they get blown up by that bomb? That's not like you to ask, my lady. Is something wrong?"

Please don't cock your head at me like that. I really don't understand this.

"I don't believe the bomb will go before 2009," Angela added. "It'll still be a bit early, but you can probably conduct yourself as an adult by that point."

Ichijou and I looked at her with confusion written all over our faces.

In disbelief, Angela finally asked for confirmation. "What... You mean you don't want to short it?"

"Angela, what exactly do you think of me...?"

I'd been enraged, but Angela had thought I was joking. Her quick question dispelled my anger. Now this made sense. Angela was giving me a pass with this entire scheme. It seemed like she really was loyal and trustworthy after all, although that was making her sound heroic.

"It's the rebirth of King Midas."

"Sorry, Angela, but I want you to reject this plan." I expressed my complete rejection of subprime loans.

She replied simply, neither avowing nor disavowing her stance. "I see. So this is where you draw the line, my lady?"

"Having come as far as I have, I've resorted to sinister means of making money. I know I've sent those whose top priority is money to hell." I wouldn't whitewash it. My hands might not be bloodstained, but they didn't produce gold like King Midas's either. "This plan will cause too much damage, though. I won't be the one who pulls that trigger."

"But investment banks on Wall Street are already on board. The funds you burned while you were playing with fire are particularly eager. Whatever you decide, my lady, that trigger is going to be pulled."

Angela spoke casually, but her words only emphasized the situation's hopelessness. It wouldn't go the way she thought, and we wouldn't be able to

stop it either. The funds I'd burned—vulture funds that suffered major losses in the crash after I finished off the U.S. IT bubble—were now eyeing subprime loans to make up for those shortfalls. In truth, the loans would be very profitable once they shifted to high interest rates, at least before the collapse.

"Still, my lady has decided not to embark on that path. I agree with her choice." Ichijou spoke confidently as CEO.

Angela raised her hands in defeat against me, the organization's effective owner, and Ichijou, the person in charge of it. "Very well. I won't do any more than keep up with the strategy."

"But you'll still keep up with it." I glared at her.

Still, in a way, this was a necessary expense. I'd succeeded with a legendary campaign, and now I, or rather the Moonlight Fund, was being watched closely by politicians and financial entities—as well as the CIA, which Angela worked for. The artificial bubble caused by subprime loans was the plan of the United States, which was busy with the Iraq War and its cleanup. That meant everyone had to get on board to some extent.

"I'll aim for fifty billion yen in car loans, not mortgages."

"Put together a consortium to pull in a hundred billion yen, and make sure our share doesn't go above thirty billion. Make sure the loans are only for Japanese cars. Once that's settled, talk to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. Then announce it as a means of supporting the United States."

With this compromise, Ichijou was demanding even more of Angela. Japanese cars sold in America, like those made by Teia Motor Co. and Ayukawa Motors, were expensive but high-quality products; many customers even toward the top of the subprime base preferred them.

A consortium would mean forming a buying group with other financial institutions, which would not only reduce losses in the event of bad debt but would also provide car loans to support Japanese car sales in the United States.

With a sum as high as one hundred billion yen, we'd have to get in touch with the METI, whose jurisdiction included the automobile industry, to coordinate with Japanese financial institutions. Then we'd talk to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hopefully score points with the U.S. government for our efforts to help American subprime borrowers obtain cars.

Perhaps Ichijou's position had enabled him to bring up these sorts of things now.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Angela. "With so little achievement to my name, I won't be forced out of your seat?"

"As long as Wall Street doesn't burn you, no one will criticize that level of success."

As a market leader, Keika Holdings held nearly 50 percent of the shares of an American net bank specializing in account settlements, and those settlement commissions were coming along nicely. They also had connections to high-tech Silicon Valley firms, and the Keika Electronics Union had now been established to handle business affairs, so the American division was ramping up technology investments.

As an account settlement bank overwhelmed with shares, they couldn't ignore us when it came to payments for things like online shopping. It wouldn't be long before online shopping really took off, as the U.S. consumption market danced with joy in the subprime loan bubble.

"To be frank, you could do absolutely nothing and my seat would still be yours, thanks to my lady."

I took a bit of offense to Ichijou's biting words. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"I know. You aren't doing anything for the moment, at least." Ichijou turned on the wall monitor. When I saw the chart he pulled up, I couldn't respond. "WTI jumped to forty dollars over predictions that war will break out in Iraq, but a certain fund keeps buying cheap twenty-dollar shares from Russia using

futures options."

That was none other than the Moonlight Fund, which had become a major player in bringing oil and other natural resources to Japan. It was even said that the Moonlight Fund was involved in 20 percent of crude oil and 60 percent of Russian oil. The tankers of the Keika Corp, once known as Akamatsu Corporation, traveled the Sea of Japan with funnel marks depicting a crescent moon and cherry blossoms—the Keika Group's crest and a symbol of their prosperity.

"Well, they really brought the price down on their bond options..."

"Prime Minister Koizumi sees you as his enemy precisely because you've been doing this for so long, starting even before the war." Ichijou was blunt in the face of my excuse.

The Moonlight Fund was the biggest absorber of dollar-based Russian bonds, for which they chose to be compensated with oil options. The Russian government therefore didn't need to repay us in dollars, and we secured cheap oil in return. After that, when we sold off all that oil before the start of the Iraq War, things got even dirtier...ahem, even *craftier*. The buyer wasn't Japan, but the chief consumers of Russian oil connected to the nation by pipeline—the countries of Europe. We profited five billion dollars in the first quarter alone.

"Keika Holdings' North American division has always been in charge of turning these dollars to yen and nothing else. No need to change that now."

The Moonlight Fund adopted New York as its main area for trading resources because they did transactions in dollars. When it came to Russian dollar-based bond purchases, natural resources, and oil in particular, the dollar was still mainstream, although the euro was taking off throughout Europe. They'd also reaped profits from American IT companies not long ago.

"No need to panic either. You're one of the few people who can access the Moonlight Fund and look at the entire picture. Whatever the masses may say, my lady and I won't believe them," Ichijou concluded.

After a short silence, Angela's face went expressionless. "Okay, Boss," she told him. "I'll join you on this train of yours."

After our discussion ended, I stopped him and asked, "Was Angela really panicking, Ichijou?"

He smiled awkwardly. "You couldn't tell? She wasn't just trying to get ahead. She was showing her competitiveness against a certain person."

I cocked my head, unsure what he was talking about.

He smiled again and revealed the name of this supposed rival. "I'm talking about Okazaki-san. He's the dealer who brought you into a huge operation that turned out successful. Wouldn't it be more surprising if she weren't jealous of him?"

That whole subprime loan gambit was just Angela's way of proving she could bring in more returns than Okazaki... I had no words to respond with. When Ichijou saw that, he left the room with a strained smile still on his face.

The Keika Group's incorporated foundation, the Choufuu Council, donated books to Imperial Gakushuukan Academy. That was one of the council's charitable endeavors. The books they provided included classics, popular fiction, and even research documents.

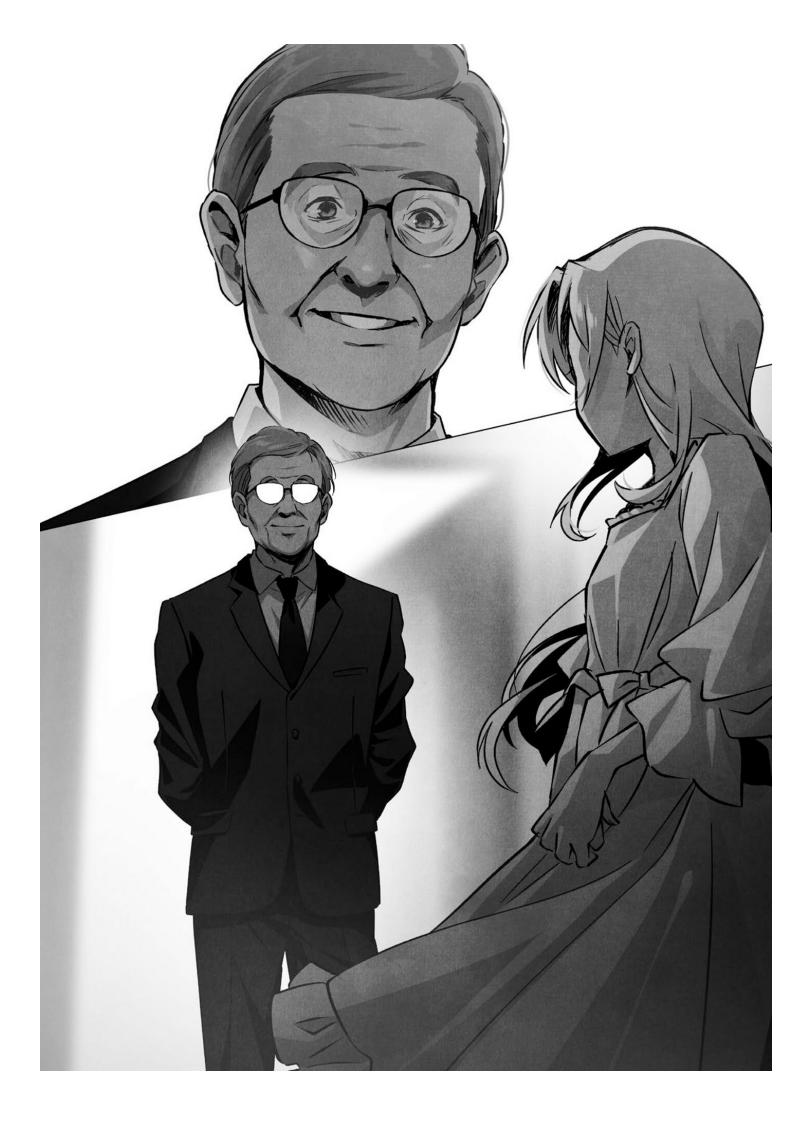
To thank the council, the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy Library housed the donated books on shelves displaying the crescent-moon-and-cherry-blossom emblem—Keika Group's logo.

I'd left the ceremony going on to explore the area around those bookshelves. Just being surrounded by the rows of shelves, not a single soul around me, made me feel like I'd been pulled into a different world.

That was ruined when Governor Iwasawa opened the door and called out to me. "'We are all worms, but I believe that I am a glowworm.' Do you know who said that?"

He'd said he wanted to speak to me during the ceremony, which was why I'd slipped away. Now, though, the sudden question left me baffled.

Shutting the door, Governor Iwasawa revealed the answer.



"Those words supposedly came from a young Churchill, the British prime minister, when he was just a boy. I believe he was able to become such a great ruler because he took pride in himself."

The words *had* sounded like something Churchill would say. From his unique way of expressing himself, I likewise understood how a politician like him could win the Nobel Prize in Literature. He probably shared that trait with Governor Iwasawa, himself an author and politician.

"I had you come here so I could atone. I've been deeply troubled by the secret I've kept inside me, so I decided to tell you and you alone."

Governor Iwasawa opened the book in his hand. It was a literary work written by a friend of his, telling a story of politics, money, and women through the author's unique aesthetic lens. It was a masterpiece—or, rather, an odd work that had charmed many readers. The author had even been taken to court over it.

"I must confess that my people tried to deceive you and strike back against Prime Minister Koizumi. Tachibana-san already gave them a warning, but if you were a boy, they probably would've demanded action from you. That's just how ugly the United States' actions are right now."

The Iraq War would begin soon. They would get revenge for 9/11, finish the job from the Gulf War, and meet demands after the war burst the IT bubble. Their final resolution to the Middle East issue wouldn't be one of justice; it would be a hegemonic state intended to exert their power, nothing more. Japan had declared their intent to get involved in that war too.

"If only I'd had your power, this war could've been avoided. I'm very sorry it couldn't be stopped." Governor Iwasawa was looking at me.

I shook my head. "I don't have that much power. Besides...wasn't this inevitable?"

Using the word "destiny" to describe it would be too heavy, and looking at it

as kindness from adults was too cruel. Still, when I thought back to that time, it was the only answer I could give. Governor Iwasawa and the other adults had stopped me from staining my hands with blood in Iraq because I was still just a child.

"I want to ask you something while you're here," Governor Iwasawa continued. "I have a feeling... No, I'm certain that if you had to bet on Prime Minister Koizumi or me, you'd choose the prime minister, wouldn't you? What is it that the prime minister has that I don't? If I possessed that quality, I would've run for prime minister instead of governor..."

I couldn't tell whether it was jealousy I saw on his face. He tried to conceal it with a smile, but he couldn't hide the rage deep in his eyes. To be honest, there was a definitive answer to that question, but it would be rude to say it out loud now. I simply smiled.

That turned Governor Iwasawa's own smile into a sad one. "I'm sorry. I almost got caught up in my friend's anger just from holding his book. Forget I said anything."

"Did you say something?"

I smiled again to put an end to the discussion. The governor shrugged his shoulders as I returned the book to the shelf.

After a knock, the door opened. It was Takamiya Haruka, the head librarian.

"Are you done sharing your little secrets, you two?"

"You were listening to us, weren't you? You never change, eh?"

"If not, I'd recommend not having your secret chats in my castle, Governor."

I later learned that the two were old friends. Governor Iwasawa was active in literary circles, while Librarian Takamiya read everything she could get her hands on in that world, and they'd come to understand each other's personalities well.

Reflecting on the surprising histories people had, I decided to leave the room

so as not to interfere with their chat.

Chapter 5:

March 20

THE MOONLIGHT FUND'S core treasury was stored underneath Kudanshita Keika Tower. With more than ten trillion in total assets, the treasury was a large stockpile set aside as prep for a potential emergency. It included stocks and bonds, gold and silver ingots, and crates of money—single boxes holding a hundred million yen each. The room even contained things like jewels and artwork sent to the fund as gifts. With a total of far more than fifty billion in assets alone, the treasury's single front room contained a mere hundred million yen on its own.

It was the money I'd once stared at in the manor, when I began the bad debt disposal that led to where I was today. I kept the money there in the treasury so that I'd never forget those times.

"There you are, my lady."

I heard a voice behind me, but I didn't turn away from the hundred million. Ignoring my strange behavior, Okazaki Yuuichi nonchalantly told me about the matter at hand.

"It's started. The war in Iraq."

"Very well. The winner's already been decided, after all."

As the world media focused attention on the start of the Iraq War, those who had already foreseen its outcome were now ramping up for what would come after it. I didn't join them in those efforts.

"I hope it doesn't turn out like Vietnam."

"Tell me, why do you think the U.S. lost in Vietnam?" I asked Okazaki, keeping my eyes on the money in front of me.

He responded plainly in a cheerful tone. "It's a simple answer. They confused

their methods with their objective."

"Their methods? Their objective?"

When I turned around, I saw him smiling. He was looking down on human lives from a bird's-eye view—an appropriate attitude for the place we were in.

"It's hindsight now, but if they feared the domino effect of communism, they should've fought an all-out war in North Vietnam rather than a defensive war in the south. The eastern general secretary was clearly smarter in that regard. In the Manchurian war, his country mercilessly nuked both friend and foe and stopped us. That general secretary's later years were questionable, but I'd give him passing marks as a leader. A solemn fact is that his country was victorious in the Second World War because they sacrificed tens of millions of lives."

Victories didn't last forever. That fact was steady throughout all history. The country the bloodstained general secretary had tried to protect no longer existed. Even now, I didn't know what to think of it.

"I wonder if the United States will make the same choice now," I murmured to myself.

Okazaki heard the question. What came out of his mouth next was a resolute statement about the future I'd been hiding. "Indeed. You've been trying to focus on that point, and now you're here with your wings clipped because you were thinking ahead."



"...How long have you known about that?"

The smile remained on his face. We were the only two people in the room, of course. "When you fell ill, I thought something was up. You're the young lady who built bases for the United States in the Gulf, calling them distribution points, because you predicted this future. You foresaw the outcome, thought about it logically, and came up with that plan of action. But you did it while looking at the proxy war in India and Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of people dying, and many, many more becoming refugees. You're a monster for thinking up the plan you did."

He said it like he was joking, but I felt like a criminal being grilled by a detective. I was definitely a murder suspect in that scenario.

"You broke down after that. If human lives really meant nothing to you, you wouldn't have felt all that weight. You didn't just break because you were disgusted, did you? You broke because you realized you were *capable* of something so disgusting."

Okazaki had seen right through me. I'd predicted an outcome based on the defeat in Vietnam and the terrible state of Afghanistan, and now he was saying it all out loud to me.

"So where would the United States drop those potential nukes, my lady?"

To reiterate, the war wasn't *truly* caused by religious or economic issues. It was a conflict over the going rate for a human life. To reference something even older, it was a mere variation on the Cold War's mutually assured destruction doctrine. America was forced to handle the asymmetrical war against terrorist organizations and, unable to get themselves out, they'd climbed to the enemy's stage. But that made things easy. The U.S. only had to take that stage—asymmetrical war—and forcibly make it a conventional war. That was possible in this world.

Now the "Nagashima Doctrine"—the act of bombing areas to destroy guerilla fighters alongside other local inhabitants—had formed, and Afghanistan had

Pakistan, a neighbor who'd dispatched militia fighters to them, though they struggled with the cost of that justice behind the scenes. Those calls for justice were countered by the fear of going to war with India, their neighbor; the U.S. was signaling to diplomatic sources that they wouldn't align with Pakistan in the event of a conflict between them and India. Afghanistan's war of annihilation, in which chemical and biological weapons had been used and Indian mercenary soldiers sent in, was starting to function as a tool of fear—not blind justice.

What America was trying to do—what I'd tried to do by displaying my political strength to the neocons—was simple. They wanted to show the world their revenge for the terrorist attacks against them.

The U.S. would bomb those regions with nukes or equivalent weapons to even the score and claim the land. It was a genocide of millions of Afghans and Iraqis in revenge for the 9/11 terrorist attacks. If they established the rate of human life as millions of people to a few terrorists, the resulting fear would last long enough to suppress any foolish backlash from occurring against them. Machiavelli wrote "When it comes to ruling, it is better to be feared than loved." That was all this was—a simple but cruel assertion of dominance.

That was why I thought I could avoid Iraq's future quagmire through the sacrifice of those millions of lives. And it nearly broke me. When I saw the report about actions being taken in Washington, I realized that my thoughts were actually being implemented in real life. In other words, if I wanted to, I could sacrifice millions of lives as collateral damage to mildly improve the United States' future. That would be a turning point that led my own country to a slightly better future too, since Japan was an ally and economic dependent of the U.S.

"You people haven't done anything to me, but I want millions of you to die so that I can build a better future with my country."

When I realized that was essentially what I was saying, I fell apart. Prime Minister Koizumi saw that I was being a reckless child, scolded me, and forced

me out of the situation. That was where we'd landed now.

"On the surface, Iraq is a federation composed of Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites, but it's really a dictatorship run by the Sunnis. I don't think the U.S. would nuke Baghdad, since they have to think about what'll happen after the war. But they do have to show off the bomb for it to have political impact. There can only be one answer, right? They'll hit the center of the Sunni Triangle, Fallujah."

I'd predicted that far ahead, put that much thought into it, and been stopped just as I was about to move. I wasn't sure whether that was good or bad.

"I don't actually think they'll use nukes, at least."

"That's why Iraq might turn into another Vietnam. People sure are fools."

Sensing something in Okazaki's tone, I glared at him. He'd been there with me like this on 9/11 too.

"Tell me, are you satisfied with this option for the future?" I asked.

My voice was a bit fearful. World leaders made decisions with these heavy burdens on their shoulders; no matter what they chose, their own people and other civilians were led to their deaths.

Okazaki smiled to cheer me up. "I am. I get to watch your chosen future from the front row, and now I know you're not an omnipotent, omniscient god."

This war would become history, and the decision to *go* to war would surely be judged by even later history. However, I was a child, and so the adults in my life made me step back to avoid that judgment. For that, I was grateful. But on the inside, I lamented those adults' stupid actions.

This world is so foolish and so kind.

"I'm going to stay here a while longer. Call me if anything happens."

The Iraq War ended within a month, as I'd predicted, and the seemingly endless postwar period was on the horizon.

The truth that I'd tried to be involved in that war no longer existed.

Glossary and Notes

Charles & Earhart: Megapharmacy that made ED drugs.

Arts Nova: European megapharmacy among the top in the industry.

Status in the U.S.: A common success story was to get a car, buy a house, and then buy a gun to protect or steal such assets.

Prime loans: The ultimate prime loans are government bonds.

Rating agencies: Moody's and S&P are famous ones.

Insurance: The official title is CDS (credit default swap). Japanese insurance companies plummeted to hell when the stock holdings of banks with bad debts deteriorated. In the mortgage crisis, AIG had to pay insurance premiums in the event of default on a subprime loan, leaving them no option but nationalization. A combination of loan types existed, so it was demanded that AIG pay the guarantees on all their subprime loans.

Safe margin of one hundred billion dollars: When Lehman went under, there were nearly two trillion dollars' worth of subprime loans, and roughly 16 percent had turned to nonperforming loans.

2009 collapse: This was the year General Motors collapsed. In other words, Angela believed car loans to subprime borrowers would go belly-up and take mortgages with them. In real life, mortgages collapsed first, and GM caught fire from that blaze.

King Midas: The king with hands that turned everything he touched to gold. He's the reason we now say "the king's ears are donkey's ears."

Consortium: A joint enterprise.

Chapter 6:

Various News Excerpts

"Restructuring of domestic corporations is picking up steam. This comes thanks to companies now holding onto cash from sales, under pressure of credit retraction in the face of the bubble bursting; the strong yen; and banks' progress disposing of nonperforming loans. Unemployment sits at roughly 4 percent, which is sure to turn into a hot political issue in the near future due to corporate restructuring by domestic appliance companies. "Matsuyuki Electronics Industries has adopted an early retirement policy, announcing a sixthousand-employee reduction, while Shibaura Electric Co. has announced layoffs of ten thousand workers and consolidation of its domestic factories.

"In the wake of Somy announcing a ten-thousand-employee reduction, the newly launched Keika Electronics Union is drawing attention through its commitment to temporarily refraining from restructuring layoffs.

"The former Furukawa Telecoms has announced eight thousand workers are being laid off after a business slump, and concerns are being raised about pressure for more layoffs in future..."

"More domestic companies are moving their factories to Karafuto as they make progress restructuring.

"The sudden yen appreciation in 1995 that set one dollar at a base of eighty yen made it impossible for companies to resist moving more factories overseas, but gaining Karafuto entailed a pool of domestic laborers who would work for twenty percent less than mainland prices, so a rush to build factories there is underway. However, Karafuto still sees an unemployment rate of over twenty percent after escaping its socialist economy, and no solution to the issues of migrant workers and second-class citizens has emerged yet..."

"Government officials have revealed their goal to introduce current value accounting by passing new legislation in the Diet.

"Banks have objected to current value accounting, saying that it will only land more bad debts in their laps that they'll need to dispose of. Between the progress they've already made and demands from the thriving IT industry, however, many see it as a pillar that will lead the nation to a new period of economic growth. The Minister of Financial Reconstruction, meanwhile, has declared that the cabinet will address the issue of financial institutions' bad debts with an injection of public funds..."

"As the government progresses with bad debt disposal, dissolution of zaibatsu is occurring more quickly. Zaibatsu-owned companies are ramping up disposal of nonperforming loans, wanting to avoid the introduction of current value accounting and public fund injections. They've decided to increase their funds by transferring or selling off shares of affiliates. Futaki-Yodoyabashi Bank, formed by the merger of two large zaibatsu, kickstarted this when their shareholdings were found to have violated the Antitrust Act repeatedly, despite both sides having finished disposing of bad debts. The parent companies of each party also sold off stock to increase their capital-to-asset ratio, hoping to avoid an injection of public funds. Honami Bank, which underwent a business merger spanning multiple zaibatsu-owned financial institutions, is not only still struggling with bad debts, but has also lost its reputation for trustworthiness after this spring's system failure. The zaibatsu's parent companies and asset management companies are selling off stocks to increase Honami Bank's capital and avoid nationalization.

"In light of the current state of Japanese zaibatsu, Iwazaki has decided to dissolve its parent company, fearing public outcry if it remains. Now that many zaibatsu have sold off their parent company's stock holdings, the Nikkei Stock Average has slumped into fifteen-thousand-yen territory. However, in the face

of zaibatsu disappearing, some have expressed the desire to maintain business groups that loosely connect all zaibatsu companies..."

"A Russo-Japanese leadership conference to discuss the issue of Karafuto has been held in the third-party location of Geneva, Switzerland. Both countries' leaders agreed to continued talks on this subject, jointly announcing an increase in natural gas and oil imported from Siberia. The United States secretary of state participated in these talks as well. While it's believed that Russian and Japanese leadership discussed the War on Terror with the secretary, no representative from the three countries would comment on that. The Geneva conference was originally planned as a venue to shape international opinion on the looming invasion of Iraq. In response to the EU countries reluctant to participate, Japan, Russia, and Great Britain have joined with the United States in hopes of persuading European nations..."

"The United States Congress is in disarray. This comes after the U.S. president sought approval to prepare for an Iraq offensive that included authorization for weapons of mass destruction, leading to the discovery that the U.S. planned to use WMDs, including nuclear weapons, against Iraq. An investigation into the terrorist attacks against the United States found that the perpetrators' plot to use WMDs against the country failed. White House staff commented that the actual perpetrators had already been dealt with in Afghanistan, and now it was time for revenge against Iraq, the principal offender. If their comments hold true, the use of nuclear weapons may be unavoidable.

"The coordinated terrorist attacks in 2001 targeted the United States and its friends and allies. Planes were hijacked and deployed as weapons in New York and Washington, anthrax was used as a weapon of terrorism, and a shooting spree occurred at India's parliamentary building. However, these were diversionary measures to distract from the real attack, which entailed hijacking a train in Denver and loading it with nuclear materials. It was later discovered

that the terrorists responsible were attempting to build a detonator in Akihabara, Tokyo.

"Iraq financially accommodated these terrorists, and now that it's been discovered that they attempted to illegally obtain a nuclear missile from the former Soviet Union, experts say that Congress will likely approve measures for war despite some opposition.

"A journalist with contacts in the Department of Defense says that the crux of the issue isn't Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, but their intentions for those weapons. He spoke on the condition of anonymity with a general who provided the following quote: 'This is essentially revenge for the Americans attacked and an example to anyone thinking of attacking us again. If Iraq has weapons of mass destruction and their plans for them were linked to 9/11, it's our duty to head them off with preemptive war. This is an asymmetrical conflict, so the terrorists won't learn a lesson from our revenge unless it's a dramatic event like 9/11. That's why the Iraq War has to become a symbol through asymmetric war..."

"Fighting in Iraq has nearly reached its end, and nations around the globe have mixed feelings about the fracturing of the country. With Baghdad having been captured and Iraqi leaders fleeing, Iraq—in a state of anarchy—has split into three factions. The first is the Sunni district, located in central Iraq in the Baghdad area, which is occupied by multinational forces. Control over the area is poor, with local sentiment souring over the loss of public safety. The United States' plan to dismantle fighting power early in the conflict is steadily becoming a fantasy.

"The second faction holds the Kurds' territory in the northern region, where the Kurds have proclaimed independence from Iraq. In accordance with this declaration, neighboring Turkey remains under martial law. The U.S. has entered diplomatic talks with independent Kurds to return to Iraq, but they reject that option, citing Iraq's past oppression. This region contains both

untapped oil and water resources due to its location upstream on the Tigris River, leaving the U.S. State Department in a vexing situation.

"The final faction consists of Shiite residents. Its territory is to the south, where neighboring Iran has intervened to protect inhabitants. The U.S. Department of Defense is currently concerned over whether Iran, which now occupies this region, will withdraw its troops once Iraq has collapsed.

"The United States' objective in this war was to topple Iraq's existing regime, with no intentions of destroying Iraq itself as a nation. Now that Iran has intervened, Washington is already in the midst of shake-ups, as the State Department and Department of Defense both failed to predict confrontations between American and Iranian forces in Iraq..."

"The Keika Group has begun to update its card system. Users are already receiving their latest IC cards. Keika Group IC cards, also known as K-Cards, have integrated the card operations of not just Keika Holdings and Teisei Department Stores, but also expanded to incorporate East Japan Imperial Railway's IC cards, which will serve as employee ID for Keika Group workers as well as personal identification for residents of Tokyo, Hokkaido, Chishima Prefecture, and Karafuto.

"This will allow Karafuto laborers without identification papers who come to Tokyo for work a safety net in the form of a personal ID and bank account. Keika group personnel have remarked that further economic steps can be taken with precise statistics from their cards.

"However, some express fear that their personal information will become free for the Keika Group to use as they please..."

"The investigation into the failed Shinjuku Geofront terrorist attack is ending. The large-scale plot was planned after the events of September 11. It was prevented, unlike the attacks in London and Spain; however, if executed, the

Shinjuku attack would've resulted in unprecedented casualties. Thus, police have been intent on investigating the incident thoroughly.

"What came to light was the existence of an underground group of organizations that has been referred to as a terrorist network. The failed plot was not only orchestrated by religious extremists from above; investigators were shocked to find criminal domestic groups involved as well.

"The main organizations implicated comprised a diverse group of radical leftists, environmentalists, religious extremists, and crime syndicates, with participants in the Second February 26 Incident and former Northern Japanese military members named as those slated to carry out the attack. The Metropolitan Police Department continues to investigate thoroughly and gather evidence.

"The failed terrorist attack targeted the Shinjuku Geofront—a major underground city being built in Shinjuku's new urban center around the Shinjuku Shinkansen currently under construction. Anonymous tips from within the group alerted police to the plan to blow up the area, leading to suspected terrorists' arrests.

"While this attack was fortunately prevented, unlike those in London and Spain, Japan was shocked to learn that it was a target of such a terrorist attack, leading to National Diet discussions of national security as well as public welfare concerns..."

"National consumption is rising after a long slump. Digital electronics are leading the way, namely DVD players, digital cameras, and cellular phones, which some now refer to as the 'three sacred treasures.' Electronics shops have seen plenty of success since the new fiscal year started this spring as consumers seek out these digital electronics, and domestic manufacturers are crying with joy as they fail to keep up with demand.

"Given the strong yen and economic slump from recent bad debt disposals,

domestic electronics manufacturers have resorted to restructuring, moving factories overseas. However, since Karafuto's return, they've begun building more factories to produce these products there. That has caused unemployment to decline in Karafuto, where many laborers work at low salaries due to economic disparity. Yet in what some may call an ironic turn of events, mainland unemployment rates are rising as electronics manufacturers close mainland factories while restructuring. Some analysts are concerned that companies are beginning to sell imported digital electronics, since domestic factories are unable to keep up with demand.

"Nonetheless, companies that made large investments are seeing favorable returns. For example, Keika Electronics Union's former Shiyo Electric Co. group, which has been concentrating investments into small liquid crystal devices, has decided to invest further in an attempt to differentiate itself from other companies.

"Keika Electronics Union also plans to build a large-scale factory in Karafuto..."

"Despite the ongoing standoff between the two parties in the National Diet, a draft budget for the coming fiscal year has been completed. The Koizumi administration has overcome a major hurdle in the Diet; the current hot topic throughout Nagato-cho is when dissolution will occur.

"As events in Iraq continue to defy the United States' expectations, the opposition party is fiercely questioning the Koizumi administration over their responsibility for the decision to dispatch troops. However, the ruling party is handling the situation without changes in course. The opposition is appealing to the public, stating that they are now capable of taking the prime minister's seat in the next election, and emphasizing their differences from the Koizumi administration. They are attacking the ruling party with demands that the JSDF withdraw from Iraq. Even individuals within the ruling party have voiced concerns that they'll lose their office if the JSDF suffers many losses in the war..."

"The cabinet has approved the injection of public funds into all existing megabanks as part of the government initiative to finalize disposing of nonperforming loans. The Financial Services Agency is carrying out megabank inspections in accordance with that decision; the results of the process will determine the amount of public funds injected into the banks.

"Current value accounting was finally introduced this spring, bringing previously untouched bad debts to light. Even after the public fund injection, unstable banks may be nationalized as a solution.

"While bad debt disposal proceeded, Japanese city banks went on to form multiple megabanks. Yet the government has lost its temper at the length of the process and finally begun standing up to banks, much to the industry's fear.

"This injection of public funds will allow banks to make advance repayments, and institutions such as Keika Holdings, Imperial Iwazaki Bank, and Futaki Shiromizu Bank have announced their intention to repay as soon as they receive the injection.

"Other megabanks will struggle with immediate repayment. Not only will the government be placing pressure on their management, the banks may also be forced to reorganize in the form of nationalization..."

(from *Economics Monthly Zaibatsu* special feature *Zaibatsu in Crisis, Part Three! The Bloated Keika Group!*)

Zaibatsu are currently struggling with bad debt disposal and restructuring. This edition of our series continues from "Iwazaki's Obsessive Betting on Karafuto" and "Futaki-Yodoyabashi's Thoughts of Marriage and Dissolution," covering the bloated state of the rapidly swelling Keika Group, which has its hands in both politics and business.

Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma: Must the "Originator" Sell Itself to Foreign Capital to Feel Relief?

Keika Pharmaceuticals (now known as Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma), originator of the Keika Group, has formed a strategic partnership with Arts Nova Inc., a megapharmacy and source of foreign capital. Though it maintains management rights, the company has essentially sold itself. Costs associated with developing new drugs have skyrocketed in recent years, and major pharmaceutical companies worldwide have resorted to merger after merger to cover them. Industry insiders have been prepared for these foreign disruptors to reach Japan's shores.

When the bubble burst in the nineties, the Keika Group's plan was to weather their bad debt disposal process by joining up with the Iwazaki zaibatsu. They suddenly grew in size when the Ministry of Finance chose conglomerate Far Eastern Bank as its model case for bad debt disposal, and friction arose within the hierarchy of new acquisitions they rescued from the bad debt disposal process. Keika Chemicals, Keika Shipping, and Keika Storage merged with Iwazaki zaibatsu companies, leaving only Keika Pharma, which decided to merge with Iwazaki Pharma while maintaining management rights. Keika Pharmaceuticals was still treated as the originator of the Keika Group, but now that the center of the organization's power has shifted to the likes of Keika Holdings, Keika Corp, Keika Railway, and Keika Electronics Union, sources within Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma say that their relatively small size has become a source of shame.

Now that the Keikain Dukedom's former Keika Pharma has sold itself, some Keikain family members see a need to send personnel to emerging companies. Still, the family's delicate internal relationships give others pause...

Keika Holdings' Successor: From Foreign Capital?! CEO Ichijou's Regrets and

Persistence after Failing to Find an Internal Successor

Keika Holdings has become the crux of the Keika Group's success. The company was formed to gather financial institutions on the verge of collapse, creating a model case of bad debt disposal for the government. However, by gaining a monstrous level of income through the Moonlight Fund, they miraculously emerged as Japan's very first megabank. Rumors emerged about who would succeed CEO Ichijou, the company's figurehead. The competition that followed wasn't limited to executives from financial institutions taken in by the company; it included retirees from the Ministry of Finance and other recruited personnel. Still, it appeared that no one had stood out yet.

That was when shocking information emerged. It was announced that Miss Angela Sullivan, Keikain Runa's personal secretary, would take a director position at Keika Securities under the Keika Holdings umbrella. Prior to working as a secretary, Sullivan was a fund manager for the Pacific Global Investment Fund. Before she could be hired for such a role at Silver Woman Securities, she was headhunted by the Keikain family and became their personal trump card. Keika Holdings employees speculate that she will one day take the CEO role after becoming president of Keika Securities.

Even with their bad debt disposal concluded, and the Moonlight Fund as an enormous source of income, Keika Holdings isn't without flaws. The company continues to struggle with redundancies in physical locations and among personnel of financial institutions they saved from bankruptcy. While the organization is still restructuring, the government is seeking a public offering from Keika Holdings (something of an institutional bank for the Keika Group) as they're pressured to secure income sources outside the Keika Group. Keika Holdings' public listing has already been finalized, and there are now rumors that all megabanks may be injected with public funds as the government picks up its efforts to dispose of bad loans...

with Their Bad Debt in the Form of Landholdings?

The Keika Group is ramping up investments, leading to the rapid expansion of Keika Railway's projects, but many sources say that has become the group's Achilles' heel. The logistics divisions of companies such as Teisei Department Stores and Sougou Department Stores held land that resulted in numerous bad debts. Furthermore, the hotel divisions' work on developing local resorts was itself a massive source of bad debts. These divisions are now Keika Group subsidiaries. Keika Railway PR claims they're taking appropriate measures to dispose of bad debts as their company reorganizes, but that was carried out using current value accounting; if land prices fall further, they'll have to go back to the drawing board to dispose of more debt. Nevertheless, Keika Railway is increasing investment into large-scale urban projects like Shin-Tokiwa Railway, Shinjuku Shinkansen, Naniwasuji Railway, and more. Their investments are currently said to exceed three trillion yen. If these expenditures become nonperforming loans, management at Keika Holdings, their financer, will take a direct hit. That is a major reason the government insists on Keika Holdings going public.

Keika Railway President Tachibana Ryuuji-shi came to be known as the right-hand man of the late duke and fixer Keikain Hikomaro and is seen as the only person who can handle the shady figures who come with land development. The government, fearing the enormous investments would turn to bad debts, reportedly told the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's Office of Special Investigations to set their sights on that man. Many feel that the Koizumi administration made an example of him in their efforts to dispose of bad debts, break up zaibatsu, and strip nobles of special privileges.

Keika Railway plans to finish reorganizing within the year as President
Tachibana prepares for his exit. However, he has yet to announce a successor,
drawing speculation as to whether he'll choose a top member from one of their
acquired railroads, select a retiree from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure,
Transport, and Tourism, or recruit an executive from West Japan Railway in

Keika Corp: Amid the Chaos of Countless Acquisitions, What of the Terms "Moonlight Fund" and "Corporation"?

Keika Corp is crying out in agony over the merger of Akamatsu Corporation, Teisen Ishii, Teimen Corporation, and Kanegana Textiles. Though rumors circulated that the lower-ranking general trading company was a hidden stronghold of bad debt, the rescue merger, which went so far as to include Kanegana Textiles in its business slump, was genuinely effective. The Moonlight Fund, the breadwinner of Keika Holdings and the reason for the Keika Group's expansion, emerged in the midst of this reorganization. It amassed wealth through IT investments but shifted to natural resources before the IT bubble burst, and Akamatsu Corporation's resource management department had since unified the business.

Some have argued that this resource management department should move under the unified company's direct control. One source reports that this caused tension with Keika Holdings.

CEO Ichijou of Keika Holdings and Managing Director Toudou of Akamatsu Corporation (tentative director of Keika Corp after the merger) signed memorandums on this topic agreeing to keep the current setup.

Yet to Keika Holdings—which the government wants to go public to escape its status as an institutional bank—the Moonlight Fund is a core asset, the survival of which might come into question as a result. Their business affairs side, Akumatsu Corporation's resource management department, will probably receive more attention in future.

Trying frantically to unify the company, Managing Director Toudou has brought up the Keika Corp name in response to these trends. This resulted from opinions that the company was the only one that could grasp the entirety of the Keika Group after demands were made for Keika Holdings' public listing and

removal as an institutional bank. According to an insider source, "Keika Holdings is expected to go public, but the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's Office targeted President Tachibana of Keika Railway, the company that leads the Keika Group. The only person who can take charge of the bloated Keika Group now is Toudou-san, whom the Keikain family regards highly…"

Keika Electronics Union: How to Overcome Unsuccessful Mergers? The Keys are Small LCDs and Restructuring

Keika Electronics Union was born from a merger between well-known
Japanese and American computer corporations. Yet their central companies,
Furukawa Telecoms and Portercon, are under pressure to escape recent business
slumps. Shiyo Electric Co.'s incredibly successful small-scale liquid crystal screens
aren't enough to carry Keika Electronics Union down the long, hard path of a
giant multinational corporate reorganization.

CEO Karin Viola has announced a three-year pause on restructuring during the merger, but that can be interpreted as a declaration that major restructuring will occur three years from now. A source is quoted as saying, "Furukawa Telecoms was thinking of laying off eight thousand people, and Portercon was going to get rid of eight thousand five hundred by restructuring. The cost of those employees must really weigh on the management now." There are hopes that the former Shiyo Electric Co.'s concentrated investments in liquid crystal will bring more investments and job reshuffling, allowing them to weather the storm of restructuring. On the other hand, those involved are probably anxious about the cut-and-dry thinking that foreign capital managers display.

Furukawa Telecoms' and Portercon's current computer sales aren't adequate for a company of this scale, and while many in the industry speculate that even more acquisitions are becoming necessary, attention is turning to institutional bank Keika Holdings to see whether they can provide those funds. The company additionally plans not only to change course and introduce a direct sales system in their household appliance stores, but also to construct factories in Karafuto—

Moonlight Fund: The Keika Group's Inner Sanctuary? Just What is This Mysterious Organization's Nature?

Akamatsu Corporation's resource management department is located in Kudanshita Keika Tower. That location itself is the heart of the Moonlight Fund. Run by only a few dozen employees from Akamatsu Corporation and Keika Holdings, the fund is rumored to hold total assets of over a hundred billion dollars. It functions as the Keika Group's effective leader.

Young Lady Keikain Runa owns the fund, and despite denials from the Keika Group and Japanese government, rumors abound that it's a front for the Russian Romanov family to hide assets.

As those involved with the Romanovs repeatedly demand those funds be returned or used to support them, the Russian government has grown cautious of the Moonlight Fund, which is becoming a diplomatic issue.

Between influencing the American presidential election, maintaining a strong connection with the U.S. president, and providing money for Izumikawa's faction in the Fellowship of Constitutional Government, Keika is referred to as a "political business," but all actions earning that description are carried out within the Keika Group itself. As an organization, the Moonlight Fund is a mysterious immaterial entity. Keika Holdings is in charge of its account management, but the fund uses untraceable private Swiss bank accounts. Moonlight Fund personnel are even transferred from Akamatsu Corporation and Keika Holdings; thus, the official stance of the Keika Group's PR department is that they have no public relationship with the Moonlight Fund.

Furthermore, the fund has implemented staggering security, and the only people to know its full scale and total assets are rumored to be Keika Holdings CEO Ichijou Susumu, Keika Railway President Tachibana Ryuuji, Keika Corp Managing Director Toudou Nagayoshi, and Angela Sullivan, personal secretary

of the Keikain family's daughter. The fund is the Keika Group's safety net, and rumors that the group's present executives set up young Lady Keikain Runa as their puppet, removing her from the Keikain family's control, are being enthusiastically spread by Keikain family members.

Other rumors claim the Koizumi administration is targeting the Keika Group over this Moonlight Fund. It's impossible to predict what will happen to the mysterious organization once Keika Holdings is listed on the stock market...

Glossary and Notes

Congressional approval: From Senso wo Hajimeru no wa Dare ka: Wangan Senso to America Gikai by Aida Hirotsugu (Kodansha Gendai Shinso). This is grim subject matter, considering that the Nayirah testimony lurks in the background. I referenced this alongside America no Riron by Yoshizaki Tatsuhiko (Shinchosha, 2003).

London/Spain terrorist attacks: In reality, the London attacks took place in 2005, the Spain attacks in 2004. In this world, the state of the Iraq War results in numerous terrorist acts of revenge; that's connected to the debate over the use of WMDs as well.

Failed Shinjuku Geofront terrorism: Came about due to nearby terrorism and was successfully stopped.

Digital electronics: These were made in factories in China and Southeast Asia at the time, so they didn't boost Japanese employment rates much.

Chapter 7:

The Lady's Supporting Roles

A MEETING was taking place in the American embassy.

"The Keika Group has expanded rapidly through acquisitions, and their inner workings haven't stabilized yet. We don't know who they have on the inside or who's infiltrated them. Despite this, Keika Railway President Tachibana Ryuuji, who has real control over the Keika Group, is putting together their inner workings under the surveillance of the U.S. and Russia...or, to be more accurate, he's trying to protect Keikain Runa."

Five people sat in the windowless conference room. The American ambassador was joined by the head of the East Asian department, who had come from America to help plan their maneuvers. An information analyst was there to explain the plan, along with Eva Charon and Yulia Molotova. They were, of course, dressed in suits.

When he heard what they had to say, the ambassador followed up with a question to confirm the situation. "That means Tachibana-shi will prioritize the young lady's safety over business?"

"Exactly," Eva Charon replied to his words. "When it comes to the Keikain family's inner workings, at the very least, there's no doubt that he will pick Keikain Runa over the Keika Group."

Angela had transferred to Keika Holdings, the Keika Group's public face, forcing Eva to attend this meeting. Still, she couldn't let her dissatisfaction show on her face while speaking to a superior.

"The problem is that Keikain Runa-sama, the duke's daughter, hasn't noticed that herself," Eva explained. "Or rather, she's pretended she hasn't noticed it all this time. She is both subject to American and Russian surveillance, and a person to be protected. In other words, people like us will be joining the Keika

Group, the massive band of companies she leads."

"What waits ahead is a battle of making allies and dragging each other down..." That was a traditional art that had continued ever since the Cold War. The East Asia department head sighed.

The United States had achieved a major victory when they sent Angela Sullivan to be Keikain Runa's secretary, but they still couldn't stop her counterattack against Furukawa Telecoms. They needed to increase their surveillance of her, but no one could catch up to her amid the massive corporate expansion. Now Angela had been promoted to a position at Keika Holdings. The CIA both welcomed this, and was troubled by it.

"The Keikain Dukedom, a once-major zaibatsu, concentrated their aides and vassals on Keikain Nakamaro, the current family head. His wife, Keikain Sakurako, is a relative of the Iwazaki zaibatsu, the greatest zaibatsu in the country and a major influence on Karafuto's economy and government. The Keikain family has gained many connections to the Iwazaki zaibatsu, which partially explains why Keikain Runa added so many people from Karafuto to her group of associates. Because of all this history, the former Northern Japan's intelligence network and their cohorts, the former KGB, managed to form a faction within the Keika Group."

Eva Charon was exposing the Keika Group's inner workings, but if the young lady in question and her butler saw her report, they would think the information in it was already well known. It went without saying that corporate spying activities needed a lot of time and money to succeed.

"Most likely—no, almost certainly—the Russians are up to the same things we are. They're infiltrating the Keika Group. We'll have to keep handling them and also make sure that the Keikain family and Lady Keikain Runa don't react poorly."

After listening to this strategy, Yulia Molotova laid out her thoughts, her tone coming across disinterested. "A honeypot? It's overused, but it's a reliable

tactic."

On the table was a report on Keikain Runa and the Keika Group with multiple people's photographs attached. Keika Railway President Tachibana Ryuuji, Keika Holdings CEO Ichijou Susumu, and Akamatsu Corporation Director Toudou Nagayoshi all had wives and children. They rejected the three men as potential targets, fearing that an unsuccessful honeypot would enrage the young lady. Keika Electronics Union CEO Karin Viola, newly added to the Keika Group umbrella, was recruiting in America, so she was sure to send collaborators to Keika Electronics Union. That left only one target.

"Okazaki Yuuichi, company executive at Akamatsu Corporation—essentially the Moonlight Fund's boss. He's the man who led the young lady into actions that greatly harmed our country, and a key person who can't be removed in the face of our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He even knew that her reckless behavior was in preparation for a war in Iraq. He's someone we need to get our hooks in," said the head of East Asia, sounding resolute.

The ambassador followed up. "The Russians have probably come up with the same plan."

The look on his face implied that he shouldn't have to say any more. Espionage was closely connected to politics. The higher you rose toward the top, the more political connections you found people had. The ambassador never actually used the dirty words "obstruct" or "eliminate," but this was his way of telling the others to carry out their plan.

The information analyst summarized the strategy. "We, along with our collaborators within this country, are investigating this target's relationships. Once all the data is in order, please carry out the plan. Also, if you confirm Russia is involved during your investigation phase, those executing this operation can use their discretion in obstructing or eliminating them."

Eva Charon and Yulia Molotova stood and bowed to show they accepted their orders.

Naturally, the CIA's East Asia department was surveilling Okazaki Yuuichi's activities. That was a way of confirming whether similar operatives in the same trade were nearby, and also of informing them that the CIA would take action.

"Do we have data on the girl from the Chinese place in Yokohama where Okazaki eats?" Eva Charon was seeking information from the United States embassy's CIA office.

Yulia Molotova read from the report. "Ryuu Suzune. She's the daughter of an influential Chinese family living in Karafuto. The restaurant Okazaki visits belongs to a network of expats from Hong Kong, as does the girl. They seem to see each other fairly often. My recording device picked up a worker saying they're like siblings with a big age gap between them."

It was easy for the U.S., a hegemonic state, to obtain information. but it was clear now that their ability to interpret that information was lacking. Why was an influential Chinese family's daughter interacting with Okazaki? Why was he connected to Chinese networks in the first place? They couldn't see the full picture.

"Any intel on other spies?"

"Irina Berosova. She came to Japan as a student studying abroad and currently works at a convenience store that Okazaki Yuuichi always visits in Yokohama. She goes to the Russian embassy once a month, and although she's officially employed by the convenience store, she only works there about once a week."

"And those are the days he goes to Yokohama, right?"

Yulia chuckled and confirmed Eva's suspicion. Humans' actions naturally turned into routines. That unconscious reliance on a familiar schedule was the easiest aspect of a person to target.

"I've also confirmed that a detective is investigating us. The Keika Group apparently asked him to check whether any pests were following people close to the young lady."

"Do we look like pests? Sounds like they're on high alert too."

They'd grasped the situation. The next task was to decide how to approach Okazaki. Of course, they'd have to do that and sabotage him at the same time.

"It would be easiest to say we're daughters of American military in Yokosuka." As she moved, Yulia came up with their cover story, which followed a very common pattern. "Someone attacks us, Okazaki happens to be nearby, and we call out to him for help... It's clichéd, but after that, we can get by with our words and bodies. We can cause a hassle for rival agents by saying the attackers were foreign mafia, but we shouldn't go past the point of teasing them."

The Keika Group was fully entrenched in Japanese politics, so if the CIA's strategy went overboard, it would receive a fatal blow in the form of objections from the Japanese government. And, to put it more honestly, they were scared of the revenge the young lady might take if she heard about this. At the very least, Eva and Yulia remembered that Keikain Runa and Okazaki had worked together to crash the American stock market and make off with tens of billions of dollars.

"'We've made our move, so back off.' It's just a light warning to them."

"'Don't poke a bush and scare out a snake.' That's not an American expression, though."

At that point, they'd come up with a cover story that showed restraint.

"There's a feud breaking out between the Chinese and Russian mafias in Yokohama, and a shop in Chinatown will just happen to be attacked. They'll want revenge on the Russians, so they'll harass me in front of the convenience store, and Okazaki will come to my rescue."

"Don't forget to do some damage to the convenience store during all that. Also, what shall we call this strategy on the report?"

Yulia agreed with Eva's suggestion, but couldn't come up with a name. Calling the strategy something that revealed the entire point of the mission wouldn't

aid them. However, avoiding the subject of the mission entirely made its name hard for those involved to remember. With no response, Yulia gave up, asking Eva to think the name up instead.

Eva suggested naming the mission after a puppet in a movie that the young lady had laughed at. "How about 'Operation Vorpal Bunny'?"

With that, the honeytrap mission had been set up, only for it to fail massively in the end. After being contacted by Kanagawa Prefectural Police, a very reluctant Eva and Anisha Egorova headed to the Kagacho Police Station, where they entered a conference room with an almost impossibly tense atmosphere. There, they found Yulia and Irina Berosova, who made no attempt at eye contact. Then there was Ryuu Suzune, who seemed unbothered as a third party in the case. Eva was looking at Okazaki, who made no attempt to hide his smile, when the policeman in charge appeared before her.

"I'm Maefuji, from the foreign affairs section," he said. "I'm also considered the man in charge of a certain young lady. Need I explain further?"

"No, thank you. Won't you tell me what's going on? I work closely with that young lady."

"As do I. Let's clear up this mess."

Like Yulia and Irina, Eva and Anisha made no attempt at eye contact.

"It's very simple," Maefuji continued. "Some organization funneled money to an underground group to hinder a third organization. Something must've gone wrong, however, because they plotted to charge them twice for it."

In response, both Eva and Anisha put their heads in their hands. Things like this often went off the rails, usually because someone involved headed their own direction and led the mission to failure. This was one such example.

Ryuu Suzune clutched her stomach, laughing silently. No one bothered stopping her.

"The people of Chinatown found out about this, and the idiot ran to a

convenience store and started a fuss. There, Yulia-san and Irina-san were roped into doing what the organization had already planned. What showed up next wasn't a knight on a white horse, but a black-and-white patrol car. Need further explanation?"

"…"

"…"

Their silence was confirmation to Maefuji. He continued his story casually, gesturing, and definitely not forgetting to include a few biting words. "I'm sure this incident will be suppressed as a diplomatic affair, or as my lady's business. The Kanagawa Prefectural Police are furious, though, and I got called all the way out to Yokohama. It's your job, and I can't tell you to walk away from it, but could you please try to hide it a little better, at least...?"

At that point, Eva and Anisha were forced to reveal everything in front of the secretly enraged Public Safety Officer Maefuji. Yulia and Irina were crestfallen, while Ryuu Suzune and Okazaki roared with laughter.

As the targeted party, Okazaki made his decision. "All right, then. If my lady hears about this, it'll be a big problem. Why don't we say you owe me one, and we'll call it even?"

Eva and Anisha broke out in a sweat, but the fact was that Okazaki was the only person who could put this failure to bed.

"Let's say you were *pretending* this was a honeytrap operation against me, but you were actually testing my lady's associates. It's Yulia-chan and Irina-chan, right? Now that this has happened, you won't betray me, will you?"

Seeing how he could say such a thing with a smile on his face, the two girls trembled. Eva and Anisha managed to look unfazed, but it wasn't as if they could balk under the circumstances.

"Get to Okazaki with a honeytrap?! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha... That's so

stupid!"

That night, Okazaki, Eva, and Anisha told their cover story to Keikain Runa. The young lady burst into laughter, just as they'd expected. That was as far as she treaded into the issue.

"Ryuu-san, there's something I wanted to ask you."

"Me too."

"You can relax a bit more, you know. Starting today, you'll be one of my lady's associates."

It was the first meeting between Keikain Runa and this group of associates. Yulia and Irina were speaking to Ryuu Suzune, their faces somewhat pained.

"You weren't involved in the incident at all, so how did you end up here?"

"That's simple," Suzune replied. "I'd had orders to win Okazaki over ever since he got famous in Hong Kong. That was in 2000."

Chinese people living in Hong Kong had heard of Okazaki, and the Chinese residents of Karafuto, which was treated as the same country, moved to win his favor. The American and Russian intelligence agencies had mistakenly thought the Chinese expats would trust blood and connections over their country; the U.S. and Russia fell right into the trap they'd laid long ago.

As part of his deal, Okazaki had tossed—or rather, *sent*—Ryuu Suzune into the young lady's group of associates.

"Don't tell me..."

"Okazaki-san kept visiting your restaurant because..."

"I mastered the chicken recipe he tried in Macau and said was delicious."

One reason poverty was so frightening was that it removed someone's ability to see their options. It not only eliminated options, it prevented new ones from appearing when they should. In the words of a college professor who appeared on television as a commentator:

"There are two ways to approach poverty. At what point do you rescue people on the verge of falling into it? It costs less to save someone before they're completely impoverished, but most citizens don't approve of such an act, since it's hard to measure the benefits of saving people. Saving them at that stage can create a moral hazard; some people can think 'I know they'll save me,' while the vast majority of the public will feel jealous, wondering why only that one person was saved instead of them, and why that person couldn't simply save themselves. However, it's even more difficult for people to climb out of their impoverished state when that's their baseline, because they'll have no concept of 'escaping' poverty whatsoever. The former case involves 'escaping' poverty as an action. The latter case can be much worse, because the person might not even understand that they're impoverished at all."

A minority of the impoverished had aspirations, ambition, and talent that helped them escape. Of course, they paid for it; being fully aware of the price was what allowed them to get out of poverty.

The city of Yubari, in Hokkaido, had struggled with huge debts after the closing of the coal mines, but two companies came and shouldered the debt for them. One was the Keika Group, which acquired Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank and was now amassing support in Hokkaido. The other was the Iwazaki zaibatsu, which managed the coal mines in the region.

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"May I sit here?"
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"Go ahead."

It was early afternoon at Shin-Yubari Station. One girl approached another sitting on a cross seat of a KiHa 40 series train car. The seated girl was named Kushunnai Nanami, and the one who approached her was called Enbuchi Yuna.

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"That's a lot of green, huh?"
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[&]quot;It sure is."

The girls' school uniforms weren't local. They wore the uniforms of Imperial Gakushuukan Academy, a Tokyo school for elites like the children of nobles and zaibatsu families. Outside the window were mountains and lush leafy trees. Greenery, in short.

"I hear they turn white in the winter."

"Well, this is Hokkaido."

When it was cold, snow fell, turning the trees white.

Seemingly bothered by the girls' lifeless conversation, a voice came from the next seat. "Can you please put a little more effort into your chitchat? We'll be seeing a lot of each other, after all."

A girl with glasses, dressed in the same uniform they were, poked her head up from the other side of the seat. They looked at each other and introduced themselves.

"Kushunnai Nanami."

"Enbuchi Yuna."

"Nozuki Misaki. Nice to meet you."

They fell silent for a bit. It wasn't as if they didn't want to speak; they simply had nothing to talk about.

"It sounds like the place we're headed—Yubari—is taking on lots of immigrants from Karafuto."

"I'm sure they were glad to start living in Hokkaido instead of Karafuto."

"Successful people in Karafuto are creating new towns to live in, after all."

Yubari was becoming a new hometown for the former Northern Japanese government's privileged class. They took their assets and fled to the mainland, as did former Northern Japanese soldiers who'd been paid for shedding blood. Meanwhile, the Keika Group became key to maintaining the city.

The Iwazaki zaibatsu had introduced the Keika Group to this area.

"Yubari used to belong to Iwazaki Mining Industries, after all." Nozuki Misaki said, bringing up what she'd learned about the city's recent circumstances. "Karafuto is working on streamlining its coal mining, but I hear they might reopen Yubari's mines as a mainland training center."

Karafuto's miners were paid extremely low wages unimaginable to most Japanese people, and while the safety of their mines was in question, it was in a way inevitable that Hokkaido would be chosen as a training location for them. Entrepreneurs from Karafuto also frequently bought closed mines and employed extremely cheap laborers in shady operations. These towns with deserted mines were becoming a problem.

"Your name's Nozuki-san, right? Why is Keika paying for us?"

"Well, to be more accurate, they're paying for three thousand workers and family members like us. Kitakaba Security is building a training facility here under the pretext of using it to practice drills, Enbuchi-san."

"You can call me Yuna. A pretext. Right..."

Kitakaba Security—the company that had purchased them—was a subsidiary of the Keika Group's Akamatsu Corporation, which did defense work. Japanese general trading companies were heading to all corners of the world and sometimes needed firepower to protect their workers. Akamatsu Corporation in particular was focusing its efforts on natural resources, specifically Russian oil. If you wanted to do business in that politically unstable land, you needed someone who could fight on your behalf.

"Well, if we do our jobs right, everyone in the orphanage will get to eat delicious meals."

"Exactly, Kushunnai-san. It sounds like they're bringing the orphanage to Yubari too."

"Thanks, Nozuki-san. Yubari will be our new home."

When Northern Japan collapsed, many citizens fled to Hokkaido and then

made their way to Honshu. The mainland began to see those refugees as a problem, but Keika negotiated with the city of Yubari to allow anyone arriving there to obtain personal identification by means such as family registers. It was an incredibly kind way to receive them. Former military members took on defense work for the Keika Group, expanding the business into Karafuto by defending Iwazaki Mining Industries. As thanks for the contributions to Yubari's finances, the city began producing more Yubari melons, to which they gave the Teisei Department Store Group exclusive sales rights. They also constructed large generators and massive garbage incinerators powered by methane gas released from the coal mines. They drew up a plan for a garbage transport train that could collect trash from the rapidly growing city of Sapporo, and constructed a major dam through the Yubari River integrated development project. Finally, they even prepared ventures to boost employment.

"Ah, the limited express stopped."

"A lot of people are getting off. Now they're coming to our train."

"Hmm. I'm sure the people coming from Karafuto are grateful for the railroads."

They'd need a way to prove their identity to get a driver's license, and they'd need a residence to prove their identity. The great thing about trains was that anyone could ride them if they had money. The railroads in this area served as their method of transportation.

"We're really heading to Yubari, huh? I wonder what kind of people will be there."

"Who knows? We'll have to find out when we get there."

As they spoke, two more girls their age dressed in the same uniforms boarded the train on its way to Yubari. They locked eyes with the first three girls and introduced themselves.

"Nice to meet you. My name's Rudaka Miu."

"I'm Akibe Riko. Nice to meet you."

The conversation would naturally take off now that five people from such similar circumstances had gathered. They'd even been brought together for the same purpose—to be aides to Keikain Runa, their mistress. It was inevitable that the discussion's pace would pick up.

"I bet I'll be the leader," Kushunnai Nanami claimed.

"We only just met and you're already assigning roles, Kushunnai?" Enbuchi Yuna pushed back. Yuna, who would serve as a guard, was a slender girl the same age as her mistress. She gave off a sporty vibe.

"I was picked because I looked the most like her out of all the candidates," Nanami insisted.

"Ah. Then it makes sense that you'd be the leader," Nozuki Misaki agreed. Unlike Enbuchi Yuna, Misaki didn't try to hide the scholarly look her glasses gave her. She was well aware of her role as advisor within this group.

"So, if push comes to shove, you'll have to impersonate my lady? I get it. You can be the boss."

It was a possibility she might have to stand in for Keikain Runa, but her lesser social position might seem that much more incongruously humble when it was time to act as her mistress. To avoid that issue, the standin had to seek a higher status. Of course, Nanami had the physical abilities, brain power, and good looks needed to rule at the top of her social class, and since the guard and advisor accepted her position as leader, the other two had no reason to oppose her.

"In that case, let's get along. I came here as a maid."

"So did I. Well, I'll more be doing odd jobs."

Rudaka Miu and Akibe Riko voiced their roles without objections. Keikain Runa already had a maid her own age, Tachibana Yuka, but she couldn't personally attend the young lady all on her own at every moment. Keikain Runa

had decided to take in orphans from Hokkaido and Karafuto because she realized she had no faction of her own, despite being adopted into the main Keikain family. Tachibana Ryuuji and Toudou Nagayoshi had really bent over backward to put together this group of associates.

The train pulled into Yubari Station. Yubari's prosperity had ended when the coal mines closed, but now it had the facilities to take in large numbers of people. With the influx of immigrants from Karafuto, it was regaining its spirit.

"Didn't they say someone would come pick us up...?"

"Is it those people? They're waving at us."

"They're clearly not Japanese, and they're wearing the uniform of the school in Tokyo we'll be going to. Yeah, it's pretty easy to tell who they are."

Irina Berosova, Yulia Molotova, and Ryuu Suzune had come all the way from Tokyo to greet the five girls. Irina and Yulia clearly weren't the same age, but Ryuu Suzune gave off a genuine "young lady" vibe, unlike the associates aboard the train with their very different upbringings.

"Welcome to Yubari, our second home. I'll show you where you'll live." Ryuu Suzune had a bright smile on her face.

The girls would actually reside in Tokyo, but they'd enter the Yubari address in their family register and conduct themselves as Japanese citizens from Hokkaido. Yubari was still full of empty houses that could serve as their temporary residences.

"Hang on. Aren't we missing one girl?"

"You're right. There's supposed to be six."

Irina counted the girls while Yulia looked at her list. They never made eye contact; the five girls could tell the pair disliked each other.

"We were the only ones on the train wearing this uniform."

"Ah, a station worker's coming over here... Oh? A phone call?"

Glasya Marsheva, the last member who was supposed to join them, hadn't felt like breaking out her uniform just for the train ride. A station worker later found her wandering around Tomakomai Station after she missed her stop.

That was the story of how the girls who'd serve Keikain Runa first met.

Kaihouin Hotaru's mornings started early. She woke up when the sun rose, kneeled on the floor, and meditated. She definitely wasn't falling back asleep, but only she knew that for sure. Her Tokyo residence was a Den-en-chofu apartment building. While her family occupied their main house in Nara, Hotaru lived in the apartment with an assistant. The assistant hadn't even felt her presence back when she was in kindergarten, but she'd started to recognize her lately, and even greeted and chatted with her during meals.

"Good morning, Hotaru-chan!"

In front of the school gates, she met up with Asuka, and they chatted as they made their way to the classroom. Asuka was usually the only one talking during these conversations, but she seemed to understand Hotaru's responses through nods and shakes of her head. Hotaru attended most of her classes, and her grades weren't terrible, but they weren't outstanding either.

At lunchtime, Hotaru usually ate with Keikain Runa—the main pillar of the class girls—Asuka, or their friends. She didn't have any real preferences in terms of food, but she took cleanup after lunch very seriously. At first, people told her to leave it to the associates or pay someone to do it, but the school's walking encyclopedia and head librarian—Takamiya Haruka—silenced them all.

"Keeping things orderly is part of a good education," she insisted. "It's an important opportunity for you to maintain the school rules and instructions as you learn how to do something for your class. I'm firmly against you students who want to deprive people of a valuable lesson!"

The students cleaned up very reluctantly, but the earnest way this year's new students cleaned earned them praise in the staff room. That was because

Keikain Runa and Kasugano Asuka led the cleaning efforts. As a politician's daughter, Asuka knew how important it was to gain popularity. Keikain Runa, a noblewoman from a dukedom, had a different background. She took charge of cleaning all the same, however, so her associates and classmates earnestly followed suit.

"What? If you're capable of doing something yourself, you *should* do it. Isn't it nice to have things clean?"

At Asuka's side, Hotaru heard Keikain Runa tell their classmates this boastfully.

On the other hand, Runa smiled awkwardly and revealed something more believable to her inner circle. "CEO Ichijou at our company still cleans the executive suite toilet himself. I've learned you can't hold a position like that unless you can clean that way, at the very least."

Angela Sullivan and Karin Viola, who came from Western society with its strict class system, saw this as an affront. They got into a fight with CEO Ichijou when they insisted that he stop cleaning his bathroom, telling him that the routine was damaging to the young lady's education. Cultural differences showed up in times like these.

Hotaru's job that day was to carry the garbage out to the trash bins. She hauled the garbage can along.

The students she passed seemed startled. She'd let her guard down and frightened them with the garbage can that seemed to be floating along. She would have to be more careful.

Hotaru attended her afternoon classes too. Although she felt like sleeping sometimes, she did her utmost to strain to stay alert, so she had yet to be scolded in class.

She belonged to the occult research club. Attendance wasn't mandatory, and the club had few members. She'd joined in the first place because a senpai invited her; to do so, that senpai had to be able to "see" her. Only the senpai;

Asuka; Kanna Mizuki, a recent guest at Keikain Runa's tea party; and Takamiya Haruka (so long as they were in the library) could perceive Hotaru when she tried her hardest to stay hidden. Recently, Hotaru had spent her time after school borrowing library books and reading them in the occult research club room.

"Thanks for waiting. Let's walk home together."

When the club meeting was over, she walked home with Asuka. Sometimes they had a girls' party and stopped by a café on the way for tea. Asuka would still be the only one speaking, but they both enjoyed it that way. Hotaru returned home, studied, ate dinner, took a bath, and meditated before going to bed.

Hotaru was the girl who was "supposed to become a *zashiki-warashi*." At the very end, she was saved by Asuka's mandarins and had to learn to seek her own destiny.

Just what am I going to become...?

She asked that question every day. She knew that her power as a *zashiki-warashi* had been dwindling over the past years. She granted fewer blessings to the people around her. Asuka's father was struggling in the election, and Keikain Runa was stuck in a political dilemma. If she were a real *zashiki-warashi*, those things probably never would have happened.

Hotaru was still young. She understood her power, but not the raging current known as "the times" that was washing it away. That was why she felt lost.

If I become a real zashiki-warashi...I won't be able to go to school with everyone...

She was scared. The thought of turning from a special person into a normal one filled her with fear. But now she knew that being normal meant a fun life. She just didn't *understand* it, and she didn't want to.

Hotaru thought back to a certain book that Takamiya Haruka, the witch of the

library who garnered both fear and respect from students, had lent to her. As soon as she finished reading it, Hotaru went out and bought it from a bookstore. The witch had broken the curse of the *zashiki-warashi*.

"I know what you'll become, but the only thing you can ever be is 'you.' So don't let those thoughts trouble you."

She read it over and over, her tears never ceasing.

This was how Hotaru came to accept her return from *zashiki-warashi* to human.

"Good morning, Hotaru-chan! Ah! Runa-chan, good morning!"

"Good morning, Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan."

Asuka and Keikain Runa smiled just like they had in kindergarten. Their smiles and friendship were like beacons guiding Hotaru. That was why her words came out so naturally.

"Good morning, Asuka-chan, Runa-chan."

"Huh...?"

"For real...?"

Hotaru smiled in amusement at their staggered reactions. Her life as a human had only just begun.

Glossary and notes

Yubari and the Iwazaki zaibatsu: Mitsubishi Minami Ooyubari Coal Mine closed in 1990. In the year 2000, Yubari's population was around fourteen thousand people. Adding another three thousand had a major influence on the city government.

Yubari River integrated development project: Yubari Shuparo Dam.

Cleaning and social class: The upper class see themselves as giving the people of each separate class jobs. By not cleaning, and hiring janitors from the lower class to do it, they feel they fulfill their responsibility to employ people.

The book Takamiya Haruka lent Hotaru: The Little Prince by Saint-Exupéry.

[[Let's Celebrate] Keika Railway Part 57 [Etchujima Branch Line Now Open]]

1: Anonymous: ID: ???

This is a thread to chat about the Keika Railway Group.

Sit back, relax, and discuss KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co., tourist travel on the Etchujima Branch Line, Kagawa Railroad, Shikoku Shinkansen, or any route still under construction.

2: Anonymous: ID: ???

Second.

Here are the stops on the Shikoku Shinkansen route:

Shin-Sakaide - Shin-Chayamachi - Okayama - Aioi - Himeji - Nishi-Akashi - Shin-Kobe - Shin-Osaka

Standard: o — — o — — — o — — o — — o — — o — — o

3: Anonymous: ID: ???

Here are the routes still under construction right now:

Shinjuku Shinkansen

Shin-Tokiwa Railway

Oita Airport Connecting Railway

Naniwasuji Railway

Nagoya Bay Freight Railway

Subway, Sumiyoshi to Toyosu route; Kyushu Imperial University Connecting Railway; Kitakyushu Airport Connecting Railway; Fukuoka Artificial Island Cargo Terminal; new Fukuoka Artificial Island Station, subway, and direct line to

Kagoshima Main line/Kashii Line; Haruda Line Hiyamizu Tunnel improvements

4: Anonymous: ID: ???

The current group includes:

KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co.

Etchujima Railroad (opening this spring)

Kagawa Railroad Group (Kagawa Railroad, Shikoku Shinkansen, Shin-Osaka Station platforms, Keika Bus)

Keika Developments

Kuzuryu River Railroad, Type II Railway business, night trains, Kozuke to Aomori route

10: Anonymous: ID: ???

BTW, what's going on with the Etchujima Branch Line that opened this spring?

I live far away from it, so I've got no clue.

13: Anonymous: ID: ???

I think it's pretty convenient.

I just choose not to look at the sheer carnage of the Soubu Line.

17: Anonymous: ID: ???

The Soubu Line's always a mess.

You'd never know it was connected to the metro Tozai Line.

19: Anonymous: ID: ???

Maybe they wanted to send trains to the Keiyo Line?

It looks like they're making full use of the Kudanshita return line to let the trains get away.

Wouldn't it be better for them to buy Shin-Kiba and Osaki's Rinkai Line?

30: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>21

Even Keika would hesitate to buy those with their construction costs...

I don't think the Rinkai Line purchase will happen until the Shinjuku Shinkansen is done.

32: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>19

It's not that they're sending trains away. It's more like they're complaining that the metro Tozai Line and Keiyo Line ended up being the main route, which wasn't what they expected.

>>30

I hear they do want to buy it, but the acquisition costs are holding them up.

The city would want to start with capital recovery to sell at a good price to Keika, but for now, they've made the Shinjuku Geofront and its Shinjuku Shinkansen their big projects for the city. They have to focus all their energy on those at this point.

The Rinkai Line is already built, so maybe they'll eye it once the Shinjuku Shinkansen is finished.

33: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>32

But Keika Railway switched presidents, and now they're in the middle of reorganizing, right?

I think they're turning into a major railroad group with Teisei Department Stores and Keika Hotels under them.

Now if they just got themselves a pro baseball team, they'd be living the dreams of a railway zaibatsu from the old days.

40: Anonymous: ID: ???

Keika Holdings is the nucleus of all things Keika, and they've got the new Keika Electric Union, the combined Keika Corporation or Corp or whatever.

To think, only a few years ago, they were just a mid-size zaibatsu with bad post-bubble debts, selling themselves to the Iwazaki zaibatsu.

41: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>40

I'm an insider. The organization's getting huge, and internal communication is ending up down the tubes. It's so bad.

42: Anonymous: ID: ???

Isn't Keika Railway still better than the rest?

I work for Keika Corp/Corporation and we have literally no communication at all lol.

We don't even know who our bosses are LMAO.

43: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>41 >>42

Keika Railway is basically like a subcontractor of the privatized Imperial Railways, so things should get better as they keep bringing in more people from there.

They have to work especially closely with East Japan Imperial Railway because of the train connections in the city. I heard they had a lot of people formerly from the public sector join the company too.

As for Corporation or Corp... looks away quietly

>>43

Hey!

C'mon, say something pretty please

50: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>45

Well, I don't think it'll fall apart, at least.

This big merger is partly to take care of bad debts from lower general trading companies, and they're still reporting profits and everything. No idea where they're making their money, though.

68: Anonymous: ID: ???

Gotta be Akamatsu Corporation's resources division, right?

They're famous for being a big player in Russian oil, after all.

Tension in the Gulf will probably drive oil prices up too.

69: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>68

Huh?

I thought the Keika Group made their money in IT.

70: Anonymous: ID: ???

That's how it started, but they make more through natural resources now.

Keika Corporation/Corp is running that side of things.

People are trying to find out if they still invest in IT, but the jury's out.

71: Anonymous: ID: ???

This thread's going off topic, so let me get it back on track. Keika Railway put out a press release saying they're doing something in Narita.

That's Higashi-Narita Station.

72: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>71

Higashi-Narita Station used to be Narita Airport Station, right?

That was the worst station to ride from.

86: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

They say they'll be turning the unused platforms into VIP platforms.

VIPs get special treatment on their way into the country. Once they get off a plane, they can drive to Higashi-Narita Station.

A lot of that station is unused, so they can put in more security checkpoints. The question was just where to store the VIP train.

Only later did they realize the tracks were different widths, blocking the crossings and connections, so it was going to turn into a major construction project...

87: Anonymous: ID: ???

Narita's been pretty strict lately.

They added a lot of security after the failed Shinjuku Geofront plot because they thought radicals in Narita might try something next.

Right now, that's the only place you'll see the Keika armed maids outside of Kudanshita.

88: Anonymous: ID: ???

Narita's also a hub airport for AIRHO, which is part of Keika Railway now.

They'll probably shell out to extend Runway B too.

It has to extend three thousand five hundred meters, avoiding the land of people opposing it.

[Image link]

89: Anonymous: ID: ???

Why don't they just build another terminal at this point?

Well, it's a major global airport, so I guess a project this size needs things to be big and spread apart...

90: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>89

claps hands I never thought of that!

I'm going to go bring it up now!

91: Anonymous: ID: ???

Could it be that people working on the project are posting in this thread?

102: Anonymous: ID: ???

I just remembered that Dog Express from the Keika Group is building a railroad in an interesting place.

103: Anonymous: 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.

105: Anonymous: 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.

Hint: Yokatopia and Solaria

113: Anonymous: ID: ???

Wasn't Fukuoka going to build an ark city because of their population increase from Northern Japan?

116: Anonymous: 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's freight lines are being called "barter dealings," though.

119: Anonymous: 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.

121: Anonymous: ID: ???

But slums won't go away without jobs, and Fukuoka has a lot of influence as a stopover for Asia.

127: Anonymous: 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.

132: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>127

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...

133: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>132

Oh nooo...

137: Anonymous: 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?

141: Anonymous: ID: ???

That's why Fukuoka Prefecture is pissed, and Fukuoka City isn't worried at all...

145: Anonymous: 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.

147: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>145

There's also the construction work to renovate Hiyamizu Tunnel on the Haruda line. What are they going to use that for?

154: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>147

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 Line 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 Tosu, which is convenient for the Haruda Line since they only ever did freight shipments in the first place.

155: Anonymous: 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.

161: Anonymous: ID: ???

Truck driving is tough work. They've been saying there's a manpower shortage for a while now.

167: Anonymous: 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.

168: Anonymous: 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?

171: Anonymous: 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.

173: Anonymous: 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's system completely, their costs will go way down. So why is Keika refusing?

180: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>173

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.

187: Anonymous: ID: ???

Other convenience stores are setting up combined distribution bases nearing high-speed IC. Can they really stay competitive?

193: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>187

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.

195: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>193

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.

200: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>195

The stock market doesn't appreciate them, though...

213: Anonymous: 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 Line...

Glossary and notes

Narita Airport situation: Runway B's provisional opening took place in 2002—the same year as the World Cup. Narita Sky Access wasn't finished until 2010.

Hakata Bay artificial island: Island City. Kashii's new urban center at Chihaya Station was built simultaneously; it later became the holy land for certain idol producers.

Kyushu Imperial University relocation: Moving the school to the Itoshima Peninsula meant leaving Fukuoka's new urban center, temporarily reducing applicants.

Conglomerates valued lower on the stock market: In other words, conglomerate "discounts." Conglomerates—corporate giants that run many businesses—are hard for investors to value precisely because they're so diverse, often reducing valuations. Many American companies, seeing stock price as very important, try to avoid this by retreating from or selling off anything besides their main business

Chapter 8:

The Villainess Meets the Fortune Teller

THE CHILLY DAYS had ended, and cherry blossoms were in full bloom. It was the day of our graduation from Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's elementary grades.

At school, Amane Mio-chan—a girl who was like a little sister to me—handed me a bouquet. "Congratulations on graduating, Runa-oneesama."

I smiled and replied, "A year goes by very quickly. I'll be waiting for you."

"Okay!"

"It must be hard to be so popular, Runa-san."

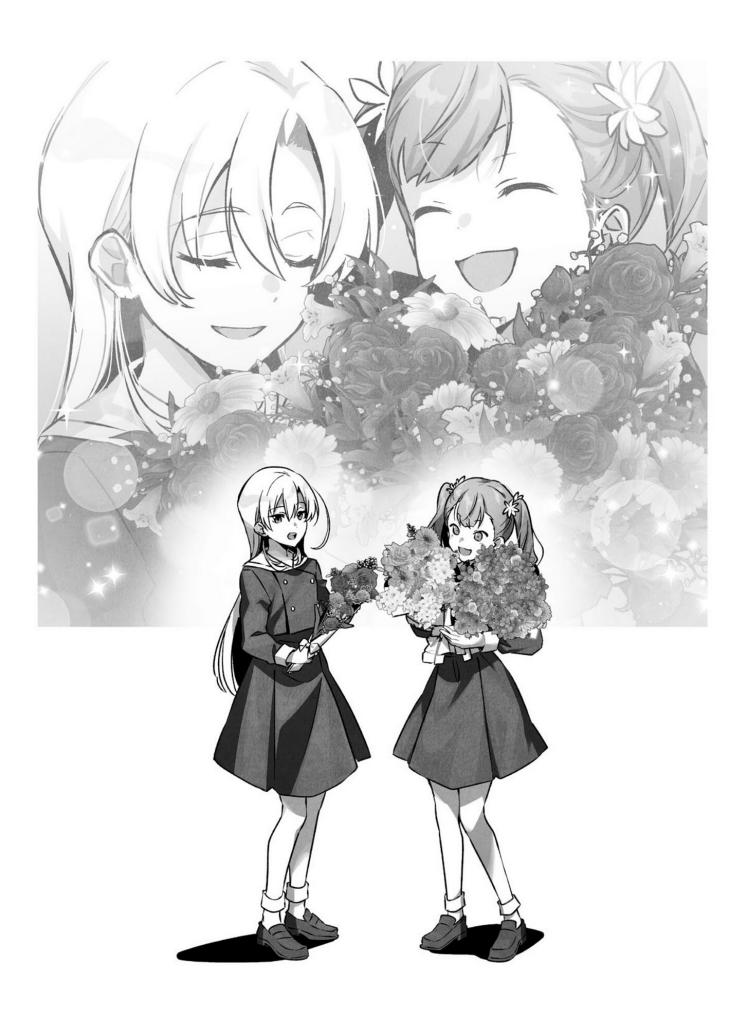
"The same goes for you, Asuka-chan."

Asuka-chan was carrying more bouquets than I was. Both her classmates and underclassmen saw her as doting and helpful. Hotaru-chan approached us, seeming to follow the flowers' scent; I was surprised to see her in full form and smiling today. I rested my bouquet against my shoulder and walked into the classroom, addressing Eiichi-kun when I saw him look at me.

"Do your best as our class's representative today."

"You're pushing your responsibilities onto me, aren't you?"

"No! My grades only put me fourth in this class!"



When I tried acting huffy, the second and third-place classmates chimed in.

"Keikain, you get good academic scores, but you don't take anything seriously all the way through. That's why you end up making silly mistakes and getting worse grades."

"You've been through the wringer, Keikain-san. You couldn't concentrate on some of your tests. I needed that weakness to outscore you."

All four of us had just barely surpassed the highest recorded grades in the school's history. Most past class representatives would've been boasting about my test scores from autumn, when I'd been a bit unwell. The faculty and board of directors had supposedly argued over who to appoint the class representative, but it went to Eiichi-kun in the end, which I celebrated.

"Congratulations again, Class Representative."

"A win's a win. I'll always be proud when I can beat you, Runa."

I set my bouquet down on my desk. I wonder what the real Keikain Runa would've done in this moment?

"Beat me in what, exactly? All three of you already got taller than me."

The boys in class would outgrow the girls from this point forward—a victory in its own right.

"I'm curious, actually. What do you guys want to beat me at?"

After a moment of silence, Yuujirou-kun replied first. "In my case, it's simple. I want to build a relationship with you like the one you have with my father."

That goal was easy to understand. Rather than surpassing me, it was more about outdoing both me and his father—Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. However, inheriting his father's political base would mean chasing his own older brother out of the picture.

Yuujirou-kun seemed to sense what I was thinking and explained further. "My brother made it to the House of Councillors thanks to you, Keikain-san. He's

thought of taking over Father's electoral base, but he's also talking about moving to Hokkaido to build a foothold."

Indeed, Yuujirou-kun's brother had support from Hokkaido's business world outside of his father's main supporters. But he'd spoken about moving there because the ruling party, the Fellowship of Constitutional Government, was losing support in Hokkaido. Both parties had been embroiled in scandal since the previous year, and pressure to resign was frightening important Diet members in the ruling party.

"If he moves, my father's base will be open. My older sisters' husbands might go after it, but if they lost, it'd have to come back to me. It's important to think about the worst-case scenario."

"What's that? You think working with me is the worst-case scenario?"

"I mean you're overqualified to work with a city or prefectural politician."

He was making light of it, but Yuujirou-kun genuinely seemed to think he might have to fight his brothers-in-law to rise to his own father's level.

Next, Mitsuya-kun made his own declaration. "My goal isn't about Keikain. I want to outdo Teia."

"Me?"

It was a declaration of war against the unsuspecting Eiichi-kun, and we gulped when he saw the serious look in Mitsuya-kun's eyes. "I already know I'll go to an imperial university and get a government job, so for me, grades will be everything. I have to find a way to get better marks than Teia for once."

All three of us, even Eiichi-kun, nodded at his undeniable logic.

Yuujirou-kun followed up with a teasing question. "So you're going to change your current schedule and spend more time studying?"

"I hope so, but I know that won't ensure I succeed as a bureaucrat. I want to spend the same amount of time studying that you guys do and *still* surpass Teia."

Of all of us, Mitsuya-kun had the most options for his future. He'd been the engineer in charge of TIG Backup Systems, adapting so much cutting-edge technology that he received job offers from Silicon Valley. Still, it sounded like he had every intention of working in government.

"Then go for it," said Eiichi-kun. "But I'm not losing to you or Yuujirou!"

Although I'd gotten the three boys so fired up on this topic, I was the one to throw some cold water on them. "What about me? What about me?" I'd been looking forward to hearing their answers.

Eiichi-kun closed his eyes, thought for a moment, and then took my hand. "I can't do better than you right now, and I want you on my team. So, Runa, will you marry me?"

Please remember where we were at this moment: in an Imperial Gakushuukan classroom, getting ready for graduation. So all the students around us heard what he'd said to me.

Eiichi-kun was grinning like he'd come up with a great idea. I took a deep breath before I gave him my answer.

"You're so stupid, Eiichi-kun!"

Once we reached junior high, the number of classes would double. The three elementary classes had held one hundred students, but there were six junior high classes with two hundred students. The high school contained twelve classes with four hundred students total. Scholarship students were a driving force in that increase, and also a major plot point in the game. I wanted to look a bit harder at those students.

There were distinctions between students, even between junior high and high school. The first type had graduated from elementary school. Those students belonged to noble or zaibatsu families, or political families from the privileged class. They were allowed to wear gold folding-fan crests as the school badge on their chest. People called them the "gold badge" crowd.

Then there were scholarship students who entered during junior high, usually groups of gold-badge students' associates. They wore the junior high's silver badge as well as a house crest to show whose family they served, so they were called the "silver badge" crowd.

Some students in high school, where most of the game's story took place, naturally wore bronze badges; those were scholarship students as well. They included students with great mental or physical abilities, gifted artists, and those making their classes' best grades. Most wore a single bronze badge. However, those of us in the privileged class could give them our family crests to wear, just as with the silver-badge crowd, forming a relationship of service and respect.

This arrangement made it easy to see how daimyo culture had influenced Japanese nobles, but it was also frankly impressive how the powerful people in our country had formed a system to handpick excellent personnel and place them under their protection.

"Are you ready, my lady?"

"Yes. I'll be right there."

Despite the junior high's hierarchical system, few present-day nobles or zaibatsu sent their aides to the school. However, noble families with the right to enroll associates sometimes sponsored top students in rural areas for the family's own benefit. If they achieved great success, those students would be indebted to the family for their hospitality.

The Keikains were one family enrolling students. We'd purchased ten endorsements from noble families this year, including one for Tachibana Yuka. The students we enrolled were intended to enter junior high alongside me to serve as guards and associates, of course.

"My lady, you're here," Tachibana Yuka remarked.

At that, the nine prospective classmates sitting in their chairs stood and bowed. These people were to become my pawns. More than half were visibly

foreigners, and I remembered Tachibana telling me he'd purchased outstanding children from Karafuto orphanages. The cynical reasoning he gave was that, with no one but me to rely on in life, they'd put their lives on the line to protect me.

"Please be at ease. I'm Keikain Runa, and I'll study alongside you in junior high. Let's have a nice time together."

I was already infecting them with my power as if it were a poison. In the end, these students were expected to become puppets for people of the privileged class like me. Organizations in Japan functioned by separating authority from real power. We members of the privileged class were displayed like decorative flowers in a solarium; in the end, we were only expected to pair up with someone who held true power and pass our blood on to the next generation.

Well, that held true until the Showa Era. Now, in the Heisei Era, our value to society was declining. Elimination of bad debts was setting zaibatsu on the path to dissolution, because nobles with nothing to offer but their blue blood had failed to share that blood with the leaders of the next IT bubble.

The IT revolution arrived on a tremendous rising wind generated by technicians bringing their talents to the world for the first time. It was more efficient for them to go after European blue bloods than those of us in Japan. I would've been a bargain under earlier circumstances, but I'd now become an extremely rare product with premiums attached. Any potential husband of mine would have his hands full with all kinds of trouble. But that was off topic.

"There's eleven of us, including Katsuki Shiori-sama and me. A couple of us should be assigned to most of the six classes."

Forming a group of associates was one of my jobs in junior high, but Imperial Gakushuukan Academy wouldn't be corrupt enough to lump them all together in one class. Classes were assigned randomly, so some people would definitely end up alone in a class without associates at some point. The Keikain family wanted to enroll twelve associate students to avoid that situation, so they'd

bought a number of endorsement slots from other noble families.

Wait...

"Eleven?" I asked.

In response, Tachibana Yuka bowed her head guiltily. "My apologies. We were supposed to secure twelve slots, including that of the Katsuki family, but we had to give one slot up due to a relationship with the previous family head. We turned that student's endorsement slot over to the Katsuki family."

"Huh? You mean someone who wanted a slot from the Keikain family ended up enrolling as a Katsuki endorsement? And they didn't complain about this at all?"

Asking for a Keikain family admission endorsement was tantamount to asking for our protection. Being admitted to Imperial Gakushuukan Academy through a Katsuki family endorsements meant that the student wouldn't receive the Keikain family crest to wear as a badge. It seemed entirely possible that this would upset them.

"They did not. The student in question was satisfied with that outcome. I understand her goal is simply to enroll at the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy, and she's pledged on paper that she won't seek the Keikains' protection."

"Who is this student? Does she have some connection to my grandfather that my father couldn't turn down?"

"That's right. She's the adopted daughter of Kanna Sera-sama, from the fortune-telling family. Her name is Kanna Mizuki-sama."

Tachibana Yuka spoke the name casually; it was one I remembered from the game in my past life.

The Kanna office building was deep within Jinbocho. When I realized it was so close to my home in Kudanshita, I made an appointment to see Kanna Mizuki in person. In the game, her character was a love-crazed girl who had a new

boyfriend each month. She seemed to be present to make you think about the game's romance mechanic, but her affinity stat actually increased with each game route you cleared—a hidden mechanic. Kanna Mizuki was also a gauge for student opinion about the scholarship students' reformation of the high school.

This part wasn't mentioned in the game, but Kanna Mizuki probably also aided Keikain Runa as the Keikain family's personal advisor. She was in the game up to the first semester of third year and never once confronted or challenged Runa. However, things changed rapidly in the second semester, when Kanna Mizuki decided to study abroad and the school conflict came to a head. According to the books outlining the game's backstory, Teia Eiichi, Izumikawa Yuujirou, and Gotou Mitsuya had conspired to force her to go abroad. I wasn't daring enough to shrug off a character like that.

Tachibana Yuka and Ichijou Erika joined my outing.

"I'll get a car ready."

"But it's so close..."

Tachibana Yuka looked openly displeased by my rejection of the vehicle. She'd been trained as a maid, but she was still a child and probably didn't realize she was failing to control her emotions. Seeing through to her true self amused me. At any rate, Jinbocho was less than ten minutes away from Kudanshita on foot.

"Shall we go for a walk, then?" said Ichijou Erika.

It was a relief that I could always count on her sensible suggestions. I was so glad I'd scouted her. With that, I took my two maids on a walk.

I'd been excited to see what kind of building the fortune-telling family had, but it turned out to be a completely normal office complex. I kept my disappointment to myself, though.

"You must be Keikain Runa-sama. We've been waiting for your arrival."

While Tachibana Yuka and Ichijou Erika waited outside, a female employee

led me to a waiting room. The eight-story building's first and second floors contained offices; the upper floors were the living spaces of the Kanna family themselves, as fortune tellers of their level generally permitted the clients who reached out to them to make house visits.

Only the women in the Kanna family were fortune tellers, and many of the jobs they took were sexual in nature. Kanna Sera, the leader of the family, was talented in matters of both divination and carnality. She'd amassed her current wealth as the mistress of Keikain Hikomaro, my grandfather. Angela had investigated her background and summarized it simply:

"She's a spy. A honeypot."

I agreed. Kanna Sera always seemed to be spotted with people high up in the business and political worlds. She'd reigned over Japan's dark side along with my grandfather. That was how she'd gained so much secretive information—not just as a fortune teller, but also as part of a high-class prostitution ring.

"Kanna's fortune-telling is famous for its accuracy." Answering the question in my mind, the employee gave me a customer-service smile.

Women were usually the only Kanna family members to become fortune tellers. However, Kanna Sera also scouted orphans she called "Kanna Sera's daughters." Those girls were very loyal to her, the head of the family. That said, between the next-generation Keikain heir taking over and their patrons losing money after the bubble burst, the Kanna family was undergoing a battle over who would inherit Kanna Sera's position now that she'd stepped down.

"Hey, that's the Keikain girl..."

"Someone so important came all the way here?"

"So that's why she said she had an emergency change in schedule...?"

I can hear you people. Not that I'm going to say anything.

Secretive consultations like this were usually about scandals, so there was a long waitlist for appointments. And if you wanted a Kanna to tell your fortune,

you had to know someone who could introduce you. This was their way of getting rid of outsiders.

The Keikain family had secretly helped support the Kannas; that was why I could pull rank like this now. But the Kannas also charged "market price" for divination.

"But I'm not here for fortune-telling..."

"You're not? Then what is your business here?"

The employee had happened to overhear my murmur and wanted to understand what I was up to. I'd later learn that she was a high-level fortune teller in the Kanna family as well.

"Kanna Mizuki-san is enrolling at our junior high. I wanted to meet her in person."

"I see. So that's what this is about. That explains why the master cleared her entire schedule."

Wait a minute. That's news to me!

"Mizuki-chan is the Kanna family heir, after all." The employee revealed that to me without the slightest hint of hesitation, then led me to a waiting room outside of the private residence area. "Please wait here."

I sipped my grape juice as I waited. The best fortune tellers usually restricted themselves to private, one-on-one meetings. Excluding people like attendants from the room made the fortune teller seem more trustworthy. Their ability to create such spaces was why people treasured them in the first place. Of course, when a man and woman were left alone in such an environment, it wasn't strange for things to escalate.

After a bit of waiting...

"Thank you for your patience. I am Kanna Mizuki."

Something wasn't right. Kanna Mizuki and I were supposed to be the same age. I was developing at the same pace as my peers, but her body was

practically fully grown. Her face and gestures had lost their youthfulness.

"I'm Keikain Runa. You can relax. I just came here today to get a look at your face."

"Thank you. I beg your pardon, but how old are you, Keikain-san?"

She'd instantly slipped straight into my thoughts. Her first blow was a powerhouse punch; now I knew she was the real deal. I responded with normal chitchat.

"I believe we're the same age. I'm starting junior high this year. Weren't you using my family's endorsement slot to go to Imperial Gakushuukan Academy?"

Kanna Mizuki looked startled. She scratched her head, breaking eye contact with me. "Whoa. Master was serious? I thought it was all a joke..."

Wait just a second. What exactly did the Kanna family have on the Keikains if they could snatch one of our endorsement slots?

Suspicion must've been written all over my face, as Kanna Mizuki wasted no time spilling the details. "I don't think she's done your family any other favors, but Master could probably claim an endorsement slot because she told the Keikains they'd be targeted during the Second February 26 Incident."

"Oh, dear. I see why my father couldn't deny you, then."

Keikain Hikomaro had been a dominant postwar fixer who went to the Kanna family for all his information. Making good use of their leads, he avoided the disaster of the Second February 26 Incident—a coup d'etat by the imperial police and self-defense force that had never occurred in my past life.

Kanna Mizuki's life story began after that. She'd been raised in an orphanage, and was a victim of sexual abuse. Kanna Sera adopted her after that, but her hardships were said to be the source of her talents.

"You've lived a very brave life, I'd say..."

"It's nothing compared to yours. I only need to focus on my own life, but you're responsible for hundreds of thousands of Keika Group employees."

Hearing her say it aloud forced me to acknowledge the weight on my shoulders. We'd only just met, but our conversation was giving me whiplash. She was a fortune teller, all right.

"Since you're already here, why don't I read your fortune?"

"Excuse me?" My voice came out shocked. It was such a sudden change in topic.

Kanna Mizuki smiled and placed her tarot card deck on the table. "You came here to visit me, right? I don't think you'll get a good idea of who I am unless you see me do my main job."

There was logic to that. The problem was that the Kannas charged "market price" for divination. "I don't know what the 'market price' of a reading should be. What does that mean?"

"Oh. 'Market price' is how we explain that this isn't so much a payment for fortune-telling as a wager on fate itself."

Ah. She sounds like a proper fortune teller now. Her eyes and mood had gone from those of a girl with a hint of sensuality to those of a mysterious, adult woman. I could see that men would love this sort of switch.

"Our predictions are merely one possible future. As client, Keikain-san, it's up to you whether you choose that future. Ultimately, choosing a future is a gamble on your part."

Kanna Mizuki paused there, her nimble fingers arranging her tarot cards. I felt my eyes drawn to her each and every movement.

"Before someone gambles, they usually place a bet, right? The 'market-price' wager is just a number to show how seriously you take the consultation."

"What happens if the 'fortune' doesn't come true?"

"You'll be upset with us, but that's all. It's our job to be an outlet for resentments like that."

With that, Kanna Mizuki laid out the twenty-three major arcana cards. *Wait. Twenty-three?*

"Hey. What's that plain white card there with the others?"

Kanna Mizuki probably got that question all the time; she answered with a classic customer service smile on her face. "It's supposed to be a spare card in case you lose one. However, we use the spare card in tarot readings, for a total of twenty-three cards. Supposedly, Master once forgot to remove the blank card for a reading. That made the outcome more accurate, so she started leaving it there intentionally." She held up the blank tarot card, her expression that of a true fortune teller. "In truth, this card represents something one can't see, or even that one doesn't want to see. When it appears, we ask the client whether they want to see the answer. If they do, we place another card on top of it."

Some people didn't want to see their pasts. Others only took interest in the future *because* it was unknown. Anyone who visited a fortune teller probably wanted a good future, but everyone—including me—had secrets deep in their heart that they didn't want dug up. I suspected details like the blank card were why the Kannas' fortunes got such good reviews.



"What is it you'd like me to read for you?"

It was time to place my bet. I handed over my silver badge engraved with the Keikain family crest. "As a test, I'll bet my future. You can use that however you want, and I'll do the same with the fortune you tell me."

With that, Kanna Mizuki's reading began.

In the game, her readings were only about the protagonist's compatibility with love interests, and she would only reveal the final outcome.

Watching her like this, however, I was frankly impressed by the amount of time and care she put into readings. Tarot readings were generally done by combining the cards' meanings with information from the client. In psychology, that method would be called a form of cold reading, but many fortune tellers pinpointed the future the client was seeking before even doing the reading. If someone was visiting a fortune teller, then in a way, you could already discern information about them from that fact alone.

Kanna Mizuki shuffled the cards as we discussed this topic. "Fortune-telling isn't such a convenient thing. We think of it as closer to a curse than anything."

"A curse?" She was contradicting my idea of divination, but talking to me like this was still a method of communicating with her client. It was probably a fortune teller's technique to obtain information about me.

"Yes. A curse that sets the future in stone. Having your fortune told is the same as losing two things—your future, and your possibilities."

Those were major concepts indeed.

Kanna Mizuki smiled when she saw my uncertainty. "No need to be scared. Allow me to explain. First, you have the future. There could be two paths: one called path A, and another called path B. If you knew path A contained a pitfall, which would you choose, Keikain-san?"

"Well, I obviously wouldn't want to run into the pitfall, so I wouldn't go down path A."

"Even if you found money on the ground after getting past the pitfall?" When I heard that, I clapped my hands.

Seeing that I understood, Kanna Mizuki continued explaining, the same smile on her face. "That's the downside of knowing the future. Once you learn about a possible future, you may close the door to it."

Fortune tellers weren't all-powerful, so perhaps she said this up front as a safety measure. Now, though, I was curious about the second half of this "curse." "Then what about 'possibilities'? I'm not sure I see the difference."

Her expression remained unchanged: a loving smile gently guiding me into the world of fortune tellers. "I just presented you with options A and B, but what if there was an option C as well?"

I see. So, that'd be the "possibility." She was right to call fortune-telling a curse that sets the future in stone.

As I pondered this idea, Kanna Mizuki placed five cards on the table in a line.

"Keikain-san, I've drawn five cards for you. From left to right on your side of the table, these represent the distant past, the past, the present, the future, and the distant future. You can think of the past events as being an equal distance as the future ones."

"So if the far-left card represents an event six months ago, then the one on the far right will be six months in the future?"

"Exactly."

She slowly turned over the card on the far left, revealing an illustration of an upside-down king. "The Emperor reversed. Keikain-san, did you experience a loss of power?"

I froze. I had experienced that. I'd received a harsh blow from Prime Minister Koizumi over Iraq and really suffered for it. But I couldn't tell her any of that.

Seeing my twitching smile, Kanna Mizuki revealed the second card. Even I understood the next image. Upright tarot cards were read differently from

reversed ones, but not all upright cards represented good things.

"The Moon upright. It seems like you suffered quite a bit of emotional damage."

I absolutely did. The weight of my power, and my inability to follow through on a way of thinking that saw human lives as numbers, had wounded me mentally. However, that was only the second card. This could still all be coincidence.

I focused on the third card, representing the present, and gulped as she turned it over. The upside-down picture that appeared depicted a large star and a naked woman.

"The Star reversed. How should I explain this? In its upright position, the Star represents hope and ideals. When it's reversed, that can mean hope and ideals have been lost, or perhaps that the situation has become more realistic. That's how to interpret it."

I felt sweat drip down my cheek, but I'd lost the strength to wipe it away with my handkerchief. *It's right! It's completely, entirely accurate!* At this point, if she'd brought out a pot of something suspicious, I would've bought it without a second thought.

Kanna Mizuki must've seen how shaken I was, but she remained perfectly calm as she revealed the fourth card—my future. "...The Wheel of Fortune reversed. It looks like an unpleasant event will soon occur."

I see. Now that I knew, I could prepare for this future. At the same time, however, what I really wanted to do was avoid it.

Finally, Kanna Mizuki turned over the fifth card to show me what would happen after that event. "The Hermit reversed. This can have both good and bad meanings, but since it's paired with the previous card, I'd say it means you're going to draw attention in a bad way."

So the Hermit being reversed means drawing negative attention. Looking at all

the cards in a row, I couldn't help but be convinced by them.

"Reading these five cards, it seems you've had struggles that will continue a bit longer, that you'll end up drawing negative attention as a result. How do you feel about that future?" Kanna Mizuki smiled.

The timespan of her reading was about half a year, which meant I had that much time until the event that put me in the spotlight. I know what it is... The snap election in the House of Representatives.

I leaned back in my chair and admitted defeat. "You win. I believe in this future entirely. Your fortunes are the real deal, Kanna-san."

Hearing my tired voice, Kanna Mizuki closed her eyes and quietly bowed her head.

"Oh my, what an adorable young lady. Welcome to our house of fortunes."

The woman smiled at me with a bewitching, mysterious, somehow broken aura. She looked a bit older than Keiko-san, my head maid. Kanna Mizuki, seated next to her at the table, seemed nervous. This older woman was none other than the matriarch who'd established the Kanna fortune-telling family in a single generation—Kanna Sera.

"I'm Keikain Runa. I hear you were a big help to my late grandfather."

"And I'm Kanna Sera. No need to worry about any of that. I used him, and he used me. That was just the way our relationship went."

I'd been told that Kanna Sera had canceled her entire day's schedule when she heard I would meet with Kanna Mizuki. She must've wanted to see my face, just as I wanted to see Kanna Mizuki's.

The pleasant scent of herbal tea wafted from the cups on the table. Next to them were plates of cookies, cakes, and other sweets. The Kanna family daughters had made all the desserts here.

"They look wonderful... Ah! This is delicious."

"I'm so glad to hear that. I told my girls that they might not be able to bake like pros, but they can still make sweets that taste like home. I'm glad I cheered them on."

"Master, I made the cake," Kanna Mizuki said.

"Oh my. If your cakes are good enough to serve to guests, you've really gotten better. Well done!"

It was idle chatter. I wore a smile on my face while internally struggling to control my nerves and conceal my thoughts. That was why images started to appear in my mind—just why had I let go of Kanna Mizuki?

"Congratulations on getting approved to study abroad, Mizuki-san."

"Thank you, Keikain-san. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I do mind, but I think things will fall apart at this rate. I'm engaged to a Teia family member now, and Katsuki-san is bugging me to get my affairs in order."

"Ah ha ha! I'm sorry I played with fire and made your life harder."

Ah. This is a scene from the future. It was the moment I said goodbye to Kanna Mizuki. It wasn't shown in the game, and I saw it now like a waking dream.

"I appreciate that," I continued in the scene. "Now that I've got your connections, money does come in much more easily. I'll get the Keikain family back on our feet."

"And then, once you marry Teia, you'll get your happy ending. But are you sure about all this?"

"I am. I bet my life on the revival of the Keikain family, and now it's finally within my reach."

"I was more talking about Takanashi-san. There's no way you don't know what's going on, right?"

"It doesn't bother me. Who cares if he has a mistress or two? That's what

happens when two families join."

Wait, this doesn't seem right. If I'm saying goodbye to Kanna Mizuki here, my downfall should happen soon after. Kanna Mizuki disappeared from the game to study abroad during the second semester, at which point the scholarship students' revolution ramped up and led to my downfall. Why did things seem so peaceful when the two of us were saying goodbye? And actually, if I was so confident I'd come out on top, which part of my plan went wrong?

"I'll be going now."

"Don't get too reckless out there. Thanks for everything."

"May your life be full of good fortune."

"The same to you, Kanna Mizuki. May your life be full of good fortune."

"...san! Keikain-san!"

I snapped out of it and found myself back in the room where our tea party was going on. Kanna Mizuki looked worried about me, but Kanna Sera was still smiling.

"Huh? What was I doing?"

"What were you doing? That's what we'd like to know. You went into a daze all of a sudden." Kanna Mizuki slumped back in her chair with a sigh of relief.

Her voice mild and calm, Kanna Sera asked me a question. "By the way, Keikain-san, may I ask you to show me what's in your pocket?"

My pocket? As if I was hypnotized, I reached into my pocket and found a certain item. I hadn't brought it with me, of course. I silently placed the Cintamani stone I'd received at Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto on the table.

Kanna Mizuki's expression changed. "Whoa...is that real?"

"It sure looks like it. You should take good care of this. It will lead you where you need to go. May I touch it?"

With my permission, Kanna Sera carefully lifted the jewel. I didn't know what

she was doing, but at the very least, I could tell it wasn't anything bad.

"You could probably sell this whole building and still not have enough money to buy that."

Kanna Mizuki's remark made me quip, "Actually, a fox gave it to me in exchange for my inari sushi."

Some might've seen that as just a joke, but the fortune teller understood my underlying meaning through its whimsical guise. "Ah, I see. It's the real thing, then... Let me borrow it sometime, okay?"

"No. Sorry."

Kanna Sera stared at the stone, looking amused, as Kanna Mizuki and I chatted about it. The last thing they did was give me a pouch to store the jewel in, advising me to keep it close to me as often as possible. With that, it was time for me to leave the Kannas' building.

"So, my lady, how was Kanna Mizuki?" Tachibana Yuka greeted me with that question.

I smiled vaguely and jostled the pouch containing my jewel. "I'm not sure I'll keep her close to me, but I think we could become good friends."

"That sounds nice. It's a great thing to have long-lasting friendships," Ichijou Erika said.

When she did, I mumbled a response and began to think. The vision I'd seen had left me with many questions. In the game, the Keikains—my family—basically collapsed, partly due to bad debts after the bubble burst. Keikain Runa had still held power within the school, however, and managed to hide her family's downfall until the second semester of her third high-school year.

"I appreciate that. Now that I've got your connections, money does come in much more easily. I'll get the Keikain family back on our feet."

That was what I'd heard myself say. I was deeply curious about that "money" I was bringing in. Thanks to all the work I'd been doing, I had a general sense of

the Keika Group's bad debts in this world. They would need forty-five billion yen at the very least, or as much as fifty billion if you factored other things in. That was why I couldn't shake this question.

Who would help a failing young noblewoman like me raise more than fifty billion yen? And why?

Spring had arrived, and we entered junior high in the season of blooming cherry blossoms.

"I don't feel any different, though," I muttered.

"But the atmosphere is different," answered Tokitou Aki-san, who was acting as my guardian today. "There are no swings or slides outside, and boys and girls will start to separate. Junior high is the first step toward adulthood."

She was lecturing me, but I knew she'd been picked as my guardian for internal reasons. The people in my life were starting to change roles. Tachibana, my butler at the top of the food chain, was returning to that position after leaving Keika Railway. However, my former secretary Angela was moving to New York to work as a director for Keika Securities.

I'd wanted Tachibana Yuka to become my next secretary, but she was still too young. Ichijou Erika lacked experience and wanted to retire young once she was married. That left Eva Charon, who could become the second outsider in a row to take the job.

In the end, I decided to have my guardian, Tokitou-san, take the secretary role with Eva and Ichijou Erika working underneath her. When Tokitou-san left the maid division, my co-head maids would be Saitou Keiko-san and Katsura Naomisan, with Tachibana Yuka as head maid apprentice.

Then I'd make Eva Charon, Kitagumo Ryouko, and Anisha Egorova my assistant maids, appointing Nagamori Kaori head assistant maid. The Keika Hotel Group's maid division would educate them, along with the others

assigned to my service, which would hopefully improve the entire organization's training and fluidity. Keika Hotels had acquired a few locations outside Japan as well, and I had faith in their education and communication thanks to the trustworthy CIA and ex-KGB agents living alongside the institutions. Of course, that was if I overlooked the information and connections the agents were passing back to their organizations.

"I know, I know. I get all that," I responded just to get her off my back.

Our car, surrounded by vehicles full of my guards, was driving through a citycenter traffic jam. Akanezawa Saburou-san was my driver for the day.

"We left early, but traffic's still moving so slowly."

Akanezawa-san eased my worries. "No road to Tokyo will be empty this time of day."

Rich students who hated traffic could always commute by helicopter, but I wasn't brave enough to resort to that. I felt better sitting quietly in my car, even if a part of me *did* want to arrive at the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy heliport with a thunderous roar every single day.

"You don't have to be so nervous, Yuka-chan," Aki-san told a girl dressed in the same school uniform as me. The girl was acting calm and composed, but even I could tell she was as stiff as a board.

"Are you nervous at all?"

"Of course. It's like I'm about to go on a date."

Tachibana Yuka had graduated from the maid training school with excellent grades, but she was still a mere first-year junior high student like I was. Perhaps it was normal to feel nervous.

"I want to ask you something as a classmate, Yuka-san. What are you looking forward to in junior high?"

"Nothing would make me happier than to be useful to you, my lady."

I could only smile at her awkwardly. She got perfect marks as a servant, but it

was the wrong answer for a student. I was very grateful for her loyalty, but I knew that it wasn't a good response to hear from a classmate.

"I appreciate that, but I want you to think of at least one thing you're interested in for yourself. After all, we both have long lives ahead of us. Most likely. Also, don't call me 'my lady' at school. Use my name instead."

"My lady?!"

"See? That's all wrong. Call me 'Runa-san,' okay?"

She looked to Aki-san for help, but the older maid understood my reasoning and ignored her. Nervous about acting so familiar with me, Tachibana Yuka timidly said my name. "Runa-sama."

"Very well. I suppose that's all right. You can work on it with time."

I fell silent after that. We'd finally arrived at school.

"I'll be on my way now."

"Have a good day, my lady."

"I'll be watching from the guardians' seats. I have to be sure to get good pictures of you all!"

Aki-san waved goodbye and headed for the guardians' entrance while Tachibana Yuka and I went to look at the class listings. I spotted my name on the list right away. My friends and associates were assigned as follows:

1-A

Katsuki Shiori, Kanna Mizuki, Keikain Runa, Tachibana Yuka, Rudaka Miu

1-B

Machiyoi Sanae, Kushunnai Nanami, Ryuu Suzune

Asagiri Kaoru

1-D

Kurimori Shizuka, Akibe Riko, Glasya Marsheva, Yulia Molotova

1-E

Kaihouin Hotaru, Kasugano Asuka

1-F

Takahashi Akiko, Enbuchi Yuna, Nozuki Misaki, Irina Berosova

Since they'd enrolled using my family's endorsement slots, my bodyguards were also listed; this was as big a group as we'd been able to manage. The bodyguards were scattered among other classes, though, so Tachibana Yuka, Katsuki Shiori-san, and my guard Rudaka Miu would be in charge of taking care of me.

"Good morning, Keikain-san! Looks like we're in the same class. I'm glad we get to be classmates."

"Good morning, Kanna-san. Let's have a good year together," I greeted Kanna Mizuki, who would apparently be my classmate. She wasn't wearing the silver Keikain family badge on her shirt; that meant she wanted to keep our relationship as it was.

Suddenly, a chill ran down my spine. I turned around to see Katsuki Shiori-san glaring at Kanna Mizuki. Even Tachibana Yuka was acting coldly, although her facial expression remained the same. I realized that there must be bad blood

between the three.

As for the boys, it went without saying that I entered my classroom and found the three of them there. Spotting me, they greeted me.

"Morning, Runa." Eiichi-kun's greeting sounded like it did every day.

"Good morning, Keikain-san." I'd heard those exact words from Yuujirou-kun many times before.

"You're late, Keikain." Mitsuya-kun looked at me like it was any other day.

I put a smile on my face and gave them my very first greeting as a junior high schooler. "Good morning, everyone."

With that, my life in junior high began.

We were junior high students now, and I hadn't forgotten that this was the age when children had growth spurts. The day of new semester measurements was upon us. It was an event that had been weighing on the back of my mind.

"You've all grown much taller than me."

I was now the shortest member of the Quartet. Eiichi-kun was tallest, followed by Mitsuya-kun, Yuujirou-kun, and then me.

"If I can't at least beat you in height, what else am I supposed to beat you at?" Eiichi-kun grumbled the complaint.

Boys and girls were reaching puberty, which meant the sexes were separating in social settings. The Quartet, however, remained tight knit. The boys were both my friends and my business partners in turning a profit.

"I don't feel like I'm very strong anymore either," I remarked.

"You say that, but when you and Takahashi-san went up against the boys' kendo club, didn't you crush them?"

I didn't even acknowledge Yuujirou-kun's retort. Takahashi Akiko-san had simply invited me to a joint practice, nothing more. I hadn't done anything

wrong, and I sure hoped everyone saw it that way. That said, Takahashi Akikosan had delivered a crushing defeat to Yuujirou-kun as I watched.

"And didn't you have the highest stamina measurement of your whole tournament bracket?"

I didn't acknowledge Mitsuya-kun's argument either. After all, Asuka-chan and I had each fought until the very end when we competed against each other. We both hated to lose. That would probably force me to enter the springtime regional tournament.

"Aren't you performing as a guest at that classical concert in spring too?"

"I'm hardly a guest. I have to perform there!" I shouted back at Eiichi-kun.

I'd had a long relationship with the Teia Philharmonic, and their spring event was a performance of *Carmen* with stars brought in from Europe. When I saw how they were clearly trying to draw me in, I just couldn't help but take the bait. They'd completely hooked me; I had no other excuse. As embarrassing as it was to say, I was still really excited for the concert.

"Line up, you four. Time for body measurements," the health teacher scolded us in the middle of our chat.

I headed to the room where the girls were getting measured. The classmates around me all had nice physiques, and so did I, but some people definitely had me beaten.

I was surprised. It was hard to put Kanna Mizuki's allure into words. Perhaps because she'd been with men, she was like a brilliant rose just blooming from a bud. Even as a girl, I couldn't help but sigh at her body.

"Is something wrong, my lady...?"

"I'm just appreciating what a big world it is." I gave a random response to Tachibana Yuka's question. How can she be so sensual?

With that question in mind, I turned to look at Yulia Molotova in the distance. She knew I'd be competing in a regional track-and-field tournament and was

excited about dressing as a cheerleader to cheer me on. That plan seemed like it'd be dangerous with the boys around, but as much as I wanted her to call it off, she probably had no intention of backing down now.

"My lady, are you sure you're not being critical? Are you ignoring your own strengths?" Rudaka Miu, who stood next to Tachibana Yuka, glared at me—or, more specifically, my chest. Hers was much more modest than mine.

"I just wondered how I could ever be on her level..." I said.

"They'll grow if you let boys play with th—"

When Nozuki Misaki made that uncalled-for suggestion, Tachibana Yuka—whose measurements were basically average—promptly stomped on her foot. Sometimes there was more safety in silence.

Surprisingly, or perhaps obviously to some, the culture around sexual activity at our school was rather lax. Most attendees lived for the purpose of passing their blood on to the next generation, and there'd been no shortage of scandals in which the son of a noble or zaibatsu family was caught with a female attendant. If those women were lucky, they'd become the men's mistresses. If they were *really* lucky, they would become their wives. Young people had plenty of stamina and passion. It would be foolish to expect no questionable entanglements between them.

"On the same note, would you say yes if boys asked you out?"

We were chatting as we waited in line to have our measurements taken.

Tachibana Yuka made her thoughts very clear. "I'd never abandon you by falling for some boy, Runa-sama."

"In that case, I order you to drop that way of thinking." She was speechless, so I followed up with a proper reason. "I'm close to three boys right now. How can you look at us four and completely cut yourself off from relationships? You should find a boy you like too."

Tachibana Yuka pouted, though I wasn't sure if that was because of my order,

or because she didn't like the number she saw on the scale. It was probably a little of both. For the record, she started eating a little less at each meal after that.

I'd learned that my associates were actually quite popular with boys. Many had already received love letters, but they'd all declined relationships with the senders.

I thought I told them they didn't have to be so loyal...

All new junior high schoolers were greeted with invitations to join the many school clubs. The school was also eager to raise its profile by filling the clubs with its most talented students.

"Keikain-san! Will you join the kendo club?"

"The track-and-field club was here first!"

"Please join our choir!"

I'd expected this sort of thing to some extent. I made my way to the private dining hall, dodging club invitations from my seniors as I walked. As was common in stories with the "evil noblewoman" trope, the dining areas were separated into a private dining hall for those who'd attended since elementary school, and a separate larger hall for those who'd first enrolled in junior high. It was amusing how even the elementary school alumni's private dining hall was decorated like a fancy reception room.

Due to that system, most attendants couldn't join us in the private hall. However, Katsuki Shiori-san met the requirement of having been enrolled since elementary school, so she was allowed inside. Since starting junior high, I'd been discovering her value at times like these.

"What club are you going to join, Keikain-san?"

The two of us were having lunch together. Perhaps it would've been better to eat in the great hall so that I could communicate with Tachibana Yuka and my

other associates, but if I didn't show my face in what was essentially the gold badges' special salon, I could easily end up ostracized. Therefore, I ate in the private hall today.

As the two of us ate our light lunches, I answered, "I haven't decided yet."

Our school allowed students with good grades to skip classes. I wasn't sure whether that was because this was a private school, or because we attended from elementary all the way to high school. At any rate, afternoons and Saturdays were composed of electives that high-achieving students could skip. We Quartet members had already passed junior high-and high school-level comprehension tests before entering junior high, so we were entitled to skip those electives. Mitsuya-kun hadn't wanted to take those tests at first; he didn't need to, since he was aiming to enter the University of Tokyo's law school. He'd changed his mind when he realized the qualifications would excuse him from classes. As a side note, you were also allowed to work on your own projects during morning classes so long as you didn't disturb anyone else.

"Why not try a few clubs, since you have some time?"

"It's not trying them out that concerns me. I don't like being tied down."

"Ah."

I'd made full use of my cheat body to come out on top in elementary school sports, but at this point my natural talent could no longer beat those who put time and effort into training. A good example was my kendo tournament loss to Takahashi Akiko-san.

"I suppose it's the 'ten-thousand-hours problem."

At my words, Katsuki Shiori-san asked, "What's that?"

We were offered black tea or coffee after lunch, so I took a cup of tea before explaining what I meant. "They say it's how much time it takes to master any specific field. In other words, you could spend ninety minutes a day practicing, and perfecting your skills would still take twenty years."

"Is there any guarantee that you'll become a master after that?"

"Who knows? They say slow and steady wins the race, so maybe there's something to it. Anyway, back to the topic of clubs—if I join more than one, I definitely won't have enough time."

If Takahashi Akiko-san had started training in kendo as soon as she'd begun elementary school, she'd only have about three thousand hours down so far. She was completely devoted to that single sport, but still wasn't even halfway to mastering it.

"Ah, Runa-chan! You're eating here today?" Smile.

"Hello, Asuka-chan, Hotaru-chan. Feel free to join us if you like."

I gestured for them to sit at our table. They'd arrived a bit late, and were carrying trays of desserts, which made me wonder if they'd eaten lunch in the great hall. Plenty of people came to the private hall just to enjoy the more lavish desserts.

"You sure have a lot there. Aren't you worried about gaining weight?"

"I'm not eating all of these. I'm going to take them back and share them with my friends in class."

I see. We chatted more after that, eventually landing back on the topic of clubs. "That reminds me, have you two joined clubs yet?"

"I'm in the track-and-field club, and Hotaru-chan joined the occult research society."

That made sense to me. I glanced at Hotaru-chan, locking eyes with her as she took a bite of apple pie. *She's so cute!*

"Actually, my senpai are really excited to invite you to our club, Runa-chan. Want to join us?"

"That's what I've been trying to decide. The kendo club and choir invited me

too. I'll help out as needed, but that's all for now."

"Got it. I'll tell them that. Let's do our best in the summer tournament!" Asuka-chan was as energized as ever.

At that point, I realized I'd never asked Katsuki Shiori-san about her plans. "Are you joining a club, Katsuki-san?"

"No, I'll be in the go-home club."

I was startled by her blunt response, but just then, the bell rang to signal the end of lunch. We'd have to go our separate ways.

"See you guys later."

Nod nod.

"I have classes too, so I'll get going now."

"See you."

Waving goodbye, I remained sitting there on my own. In moments like these, I could be carefree, but I also felt a bit lonely without anyone else around.

"I think I'll finish a bit of work."

As soon as I'd gotten myself psyched up to start, Eiichi-kun struck me down with a merciless interruption. "What exactly are you up to?"

How long have you even been there?!

"I passed Kasugano in the hall, and she said you were still in here," he added.

I wish she hadn't.

Eiichi-kun didn't notice my annoyance. Instead, he sat across from me and ordered a cola. I was happy to see that he never strayed from his natural ways, even in a formal place like this.

"I'll have a grape juice too."

"You really want juice after tea? Anyway, while I'm here, I want to ask you about something. It's about TIG Backup Systems' data center project..."

"Right, you're partnering with our card venture..."

It was an entirely platonic business conversation, but I really enjoyed spending my extra afternoon time that way.

"Ah, Mitsuya-kun. What are you reading?"

Spotting Mitsuya-kun in the library during our lunch break, I peeked at his book. It was a novel that had been adapted into a movie that very spring—a pioneering work that anticipated today's light novels.

"The book's pace is so slow compared to the movie," he said.

"I know what you mean, but some people like that better." I took a seat across from him. The heroic tale had a depth that completely outshone the author's earlier works. I'd read that book first, and was shocked when I went back and read the others afterward. "Still, I think it's easier to read than some books. It's even got maps and illustrations."

"I'm picturing characters from other fantasy books I've read while I read it. This is the one that started it all, huh?"

The movie adaptation helped you visualize the books. Reading the story was even more interesting when you had those defined characters in mind. It was an engrossing tale that depicted different characters' perspectives during a great war in the second half, and how their individual choices influenced the story's outcome.

"I was reflecting about something, Keikain. Do you think we'd make the same choices if we were this story's main characters?"

"I don't think so. Power always captivates those who have it. When you've got power, the idea of losing it is terrifying."

Mitsuya-kun placed his bookmark on the page, closed the book, and smiled sadly. I sensed the question burning behind his silent stare—didn't I already have that power?

I decided to answer him. "Once power grows too much, you can't control it. And, of course, the antagonist might always steal it all from you."

I was imagining an ending in which I was exposed and ruined as the villainess. However, I'd actually laid groundwork so that I could live the bare minimum of a culturally involved life after that. That was partly why I wanted to earn a degree through correspondence courses at Professor Kanbe's college. I also doubted that the Moonlight Fund's Swiss bank account could be fully drained. Ichijou and Tachibana were probably dispersing funds to multiple accounts already.

"So people want power to achieve something, but end up drowning in that power, huh? That kind of makes me sad for this story's hero."

"Although it didn't happen in the book, if he'd gotten that power back in the end, I don't think he'd ever have been happy." Somehow, I just knew that. I'd stared into that abyss, and the adults in my life had pulled me back. "It's scary to lose things and to have enemies. When you possess nothing but fear like that, the world itself starts to terrify you."

"And that turns you into a demon king...?"

The protagonist had enough power to turn into a demon king. He probably could've become a god if he wanted to, but he didn't—not because he didn't think of it, but because he was scared of losing his power. He was also scared of having it, scared to use it, and in the end, became scared of everything.

"Hey, does that manga you're reading make you think too?"

"Yes. Can you tell? This manga covers that same mindset." It was only a mahjong manga, but I could never live like these characters. It would've meant abandoning my humanity. "That reminds me, one of our employees told me something interesting. He said being good at mahjong is a big selling point if you're trying to get hired."

Okazaki had said that. He'd explained it to me after glancing at the strip mahjong game when we went to the arcade together.

"Mahjong's all about balancing luck and skill. A lot of older people also play it, so it's helpful in social settings. Best of all, it doesn't take up as much time as golf."

What Okazaki mentioned was supposedly a holdover from a time when companies were being optimistic and hiring all kinds of different people. Businesses these days didn't have the resources to keep up that pace, and in an effort to employ instantly useful personnel, they ended up hiring weaker staff than before.

"In the end, companies are made up of people. You never know when certain people will come in handy."

"But I doubt being good at mahjong will get you a job these days."

"Going back to the previous topic, it's always those organizations that get tripped up by something they didn't anticipate."

That was exactly what happened at the climax of Mitsuya-kun's book. The winner in the end wasn't the hero or demon king, but a pathetic, obsessed man who lost the book's power only to keep chasing it. That was what made it such a good story.

"Let me ask you, Keikain, what would you have done with that power?" Mitsuya-kun's question didn't sound pointless, but he wasn't deadly serious either. He'd realized where I stood.

"I think the power would've gotten to me. Then something I didn't account for would've pulled the rug out from—"

"I don't know about that," Mitsuya-kun interrupted, then looked me right in the eyes and said, "You're not alone. I'd definitely save you before the power overcame you."

His words sounded more earnest than I'd expected, so I grinned awkwardly. The earnestness made Mitsuya-kun look like he was pouting, which I only found funnier. "Ah ha ha ha! What're you talking about? Well, if I ever *do* fall, come

pull me up."

"I will. Stumble all you like, and I'll come rescue you."

The bell signaling the end of our lunch break rang, and Mitsuya-kun stood up with his book. He would probably read the sequel next.

"I'm going to the checkout counter, so feel free to leave without me."

"Sure." As I watched him head to the counter, I remembered my downfall in the game and quietly murmured to myself, "Liar. You didn't save me at all..."

In this world, would Mitsuya-kun come to my rescue? Or take part in condemning me?

There was no answer to that, so I stood and left the library.

I entered our usual café, Avanti, took a seat, and found Yuujirou-kun staring at a big pile of girls' photographs. He had a troubled look on his face.

"I see it's happened again. Are these girls all potential wives for you?"

"Right. This began as soon as I started junior high. Father told me I have to turn the girls down myself, and now I'm looking them over so I can reject them properly."

As I ordered my usual from the waiter, Yuujirou-kun explained the situation with a pained smile, putting down the pictures and leaving them on the table. Sipping his café au lait, he continued.

"It sounds like my brother's planning to move to Hokkaido for real, so now my brothers-in-law are fighting over who'll get my father's electoral support. That's why I'm receiving these now."

The House of Representatives was a body of proportional representation, and small electoral districts chose its members. These districts generally elected one representative each, ensuring that representation in the House was equal throughout the country. This was decided by something called *sekihairitsu*, but

that was irrelevant to the present discussion. The point was that, if you ever wanted to reach the prime minister's seat, a small district first had to elect you. After all, prime ministers and candidates for that office had to leave their home districts to travel the country, campaigning and helping other Diet members. The first step to becoming prime minister was seeing whether you could successfully inherit those other stable kingdoms. In this case, it was important to note that most prime ministers were selected from the House of Representatives.

"If my brother makes it to the House of Councillors, he'll be up for reelection next year. If he wins, he'll spend six more years in the House. But I don't know whether Father will run for three more elections. With my brother moving to Hokkaido, Father's trying to hold onto his base, and my brothers-in-law are eager to take the reins."

It was like a game of musical chairs if those chairs were the country's seat of power. If Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa retired, and a blood relative announced they'd run in his place, they'd be guaranteed to win unless they were exceptionally incompetent. Those candidates would be in prefectural assemblies and city councils, so whoever succeeded the deputy prime minister would leave an empty seat behind. Yuujirou-kun himself could run for election once he was twenty-five.

"Ah. So the women in these photos have families who want the empty seat?"

"Bingo. If I married one, her father or relative would run for election to protect the seat until I could run myself."

That was how powerful clans expanded. Bonds of territory and blood still held strong in Japan.

"Can I take a look?"

"Go ahead."

With his permission, I flipped through the pictures, starting to get a general idea of the girls' families. "A lot of them are related to general contractors and

civil engineers."

"Rural areas hire more general contractors than anyone. The Koizumi administration is cutting down on public works projects in the name of financial reform, but a lot of places are suffering for that. Some families even sacrifice their daughters for financing. It can't go on like this."

Most Diet members' families were general contractors or civil engineers. Those fields required lots of people, and conserving nature was an important political topic in Japan. Still, we lived in a society that couldn't call the Koizumi administration's policies strictly harmful. The ruling party had basically reallocated money away from cities to rural areas ever since the war; that redistribution enraged urban residents. Lately, it had led them to distrust the government and realign politically, producing more independent voters.

"Agricultural cooperative executives might be next, huh?"

"Long ago, they used to be called village headmen, right? They were wealthy farmers who owned land and managed to move into commerce."

Farmers made up a big share of the rural vote. In Japan, being a farmer meant you owned land and were reputable. Long ago, farmers had borrowed money from banks with their land as collateral, only for those debts to become unpayable. Supposedly, the farmers only survived because they were well-known enough to be powerful. In a nutshell, they participated in public works projects as Diet members, scraped out tiny profits, and used those to pay off their debts. Roads and dams were pillars of public works projects, so they inevitably overlapped with agriculture. In other words, when it came to rural public works, all the same people came up with grand designs, ordered materials, and filled orders.

It would be strange if that *didn't* result in corruption. Still, I couldn't deny that rural areas had survived via that process. Well, you could also say that they *weren't* surviving any longer, and had now shifted to finance reform.

"So, all the women in these families have relatives on city councils or

prefectural assemblies on either their mother's or father's side."

"And whoever they are, they'll keep the seat warm for me until I can run as a candidate."

While we talked, the waitress arrived with my usual order of cake and grape juice. As I enjoyed my cake, Yuujirou-kun asked me something.

"Do you ever receive pictures like these of possible husbands, Keikain-san?"

"Probably. Tachibana throws them out before I can get a look, though."

I'd heard that my arranged marriage candidates included not just Japanese nobles and zaibatsu members, but also powerful figures in Russia, and even European nobles. That still didn't feel real to me, so I left it to Tachibana, who probably rejected them for me.

"What's wrong, Keikain-san...?"

"It's nothing."

Yuujirou-kun was someone who hid feelings of love within himself. In the game, he'd ended up with the heroine, Takanashi Mizuho, only after she confessed her feelings to him first. I remembered how emotional it was to see her expose his secret love despite being determined to ignore his own feelings. His character had set boundaries between himself and others; he'd said that Takanashi Mizuho was like a ray of light when she flew right through those walls he'd built around himself. I drank my grape juice so he wouldn't sense that I was thinking about these kinds of things.

Yuujirou-kun and I enjoyed more lively conversation after that until it was time to say goodbye like always.

"Do you have a minute, Runa?" Eiichi-kun called out to me after school.

I'd known him long enough to recognize the look in his eyes, so I shifted into business mode to discuss what would definitely be something work-related. "What is it?"

"My family is separating from the Futaki zaibatsu, so now TIG Backup Systems is getting a lot of discussion."

"Ah..."

The Koizumi administration was aiming to finish disposing of bad debts by introducing current value accounting, pressuring megabanks with the injection of public funds if necessary. Eiichi-kun's family owned Teia Motor Co., which belonged to the Futaki zaibatsu—a group on the verge of dissolution after merging with the Yodoyabashi zaibatsu. They'd sold most of their stock holdings to pay bad debts for that purpose. Teia Motor Co. had then bought back shares of their company from the Futaki zaibatsu and gained independence. However, no one involved wanted that outcome at all.

"We'll probably organize all our companies into a Teia Group with Teia Motor Co. at the top, so we're discussing whether TIG will join. I said no, since I felt like it should be in your hands. But I thought I'd ask you just to see how you felt."

"How honorable of you. I appreciate it. Thank you."

"That's just my family's situation right now. Let me know if the Teia Group gets in touch with you, and I'll handle them."

TIG Backup Systems was a subsidiary of Keika Electronics Union, but Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, Mitsuya-kun, and I held 50 percent of the shares between us. Eiichi-kun owned 12.5 percent himself, and some people were eager to make the Teia Group look more appealing. They probably wanted to buy our shares to create a Teia Group subsidiary.

"What companies are joining the Teia Group, by the way?"

"Teia Motor Co., Teia Textiles, Teia Trade, Teia Real Estate, Okinosen Industries, Oomidori Construction Company, Oumiya Department Stores..."

When I heard that list of organizations, I suddenly understood. The Keika Group had bought very similar companies. "Do they all use Gowa Osan as their main bank?"

"Right. It sounds like the Financial Services Agency is pressuring them. They came crying to us because they're desperate to scrape money together, so they used the pretense of helping us establish independence."

It felt like the Teia Group was demanding they save Gowa Osan Bank. The Teia Group's leaders probably knew that when they turned them down, though.

I tried to tease out more information. "Are things really that bad?"

"It's more about who owes who. We'd want to help Osan Bank, since we owe them. But Gowa purged a bunch of Osan personnel."

It was scary how Japanese people could operate based on pity and grudges in times like these. They'd been hit where they least expected it.

"So everyone's going to move over to Futaki-Yodoyabashi for their main bank?"

"Right, since we already have ties to Yodoyabashi. They're in the middle of an apology tour right now, though." Eiichi-kun's tone made me think they were ready to forgive them. Next, Eiichi-kun asked me a question of his own. "Are you buying Gowa Osan, Runa?"

"That's tricky. Keika Holdings is working to go public, and if we take them over, we'll stand out as a megabank. I'm sure the FSA is thinking about reorganizing megabanks too."

Japan's financial big bang had slowed thanks to bad debt disposal, but it would speed back up if megabanks were repurposed for global use.

"We'll get rid of bad debts and form a new bank that can stand up to the world!" That cry from Minister Takenaga filled megabanks with fear. Gowa Osan Bank and Honami Bank were being made examples of, and if I'd had to pick one to absorb, I would probably have gone with Honami.

"The government wants to get us listed on the stock market and turn us into a symbol now that we've finished our work on bad debts. After us, they're aiming to do the same thing to Imperial Iwazaki or Futaki-Yodoyabashi."

We were essentially being told one thing: "Japan can only have four megabanks."

But there was a trick to those words. They meant four megabanks *including* postal savings and Norinchukin Bank.

In other words, six banks—Keika, Imperial Iwazaki, Futaki-Yodoyabashi, Honami, Gowa Osan, and Karafuto—plus two more would have to turn into four total. They were telling half of us to merge.

When I was done talking, Eiichi-kun replied quietly, "Marrying you would really have a lot of benefits, wouldn't it?"

"I think it would cause just as many headaches too." I was used to this topic, so I'd reached the point where I could stay composed.

Eiichi-kun, unaware of how I felt, began confidently sharing his thoughts. "You can't run a company well if you're worried about losing your main bank. We've foreseen that trouble, so we're stockpiling money, but you just feel safer if a main bank is supporting you."

At this moment in my past life, financial institutions were being criticized for "lending umbrellas when the weather was good and taking them back when it rained." Institutions like main banks were dealing with the pressure of bad debt disposal, but only I knew just how light a wound that really was.

"I wonder if my marriage will have any kind of love in it at all?"

I sighed, but Eiichi-kun looked confused. "Do you really need that?"

"....." Okay. I see how it is.

I beckoned him closer, leaned toward his ear, and shouted an insult right into it.

"Eiichi-kun, you're so stupid!"

Glossary and notes

The "ten-thousand-hour rule": From Outliers by Malcom Gladwell.

The book Mitsuya-kun was reading: The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien. The second movie, The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, was released in Japan in February 2003.

The mahjong manga: Akagi's "Washizu" storyline, which began in 1997.

The pathetic man: Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*. His obsession, and Bilbo's feelings when setting him into motion, decided the fate of the world.

Rural civil engineers: It really is the only job out in those areas. During Koizumi's reformation, rural civil engineers took a devastating blow.

Hostility between rural and urban citizens: The "single district phenomenon" that brought the opposition party to victory was the major source of the increase in independent voters.

The company that entered the Teia Group: Midori Kai, a corporate group that was like a get-together spot for Sanwa Bank.

Norinchukin Bank: Officially named the Agricultural and Forestry Central Bank. The country's largest institutional investor. Falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries.



Chapter 9:

The Queen Bee's Tea Party

"QUEEN BEE." That was the American term for a female student at the top of the social ladder. Cliques of girls formed around whoever held the position.

"I booked part of the great hall for a three o'clock start."

"I see. Invitations were already sent out. We plan to allow most attendees, but please finalize a complete guest list for us."

Kushunnai Nanami, the leader of my associates, was speaking to Tachibana Yuka. I'd selected the former as my body double in case of an emergency because of our similar statures. She was a dainty girl who acted like a model student, but spent her time off admiring the dolls in my doll room.

I'd received a porcelain doll from Amane Mio-chan's father, and given it to Kushunnai Nanami as a present, hoping she'd take that as an invitation to keep working alongside me. Not only did she appreciate it, she told me she slept with it in her arms at night, although that wasn't pertinent now.

Today, I was holding a tea party in order to rally my faction. Tachibana Yuka and my other associates were eager for the event, but I wasn't fully on board. I'd only just entered junior high, and was going to make a big show of gathering my clique, which just meant that anti-Keikain factions would inevitably form afterward.

"That's exactly why you must establish your faction at once, my lady. You draw lots of attention, so you need to ensure you have a large enough group to destroy opposing factions once they form. If you don't, they'll only gang up on you."

Nozuki Misaki, my advisor among my associates, seemed to sense my lack of enthusiasm. She shared my love of video games; I was even part of a guild she'd formed in an MMO.

"Aren't you suggesting we bring our guild battles to school?"

"Are you sure *you* should ask that, my lady? You already lead plenty of guild battles here in real life."

Don't phrase it like that. Seeing that I fully understood my actions, she fell silent.

I looked to Enbuchi Yuna, Akibe Riko, Irina Berosova, Glasya Marsheva, and Yulia Molotova, who were going over the cafeteria layout. They were temporary workers sent to me with strings attached by the superpowers America and Russia, which were very obviously focusing their attention on me.

The Japanese side, on the other hand, had had the following story: "No one's brave enough to send you people while you're Prime Minister Koizumi's enemy. They can't control you; that's why they place their people around you."

The strangely amused Ryuu Suzune, one of my associates, shared a fact that I appreciated. Russia and the United States wanted to use their influence illegally, which was why they'd sent me associates. But the Japanese government, which could exert its power legally, sent its agents to the Keikain family, my school, and the Keika Group instead.

"At this point, being attached to you is a gamble, my lady," she explained.

"Once you marry, you'll still be connected to the Keikain family, and it's possible you'll create a prosperous family of your own. The thing is, you're extremely secretive, and you try to keep a small group of elites around you. On top of that, you can only control people from behind the scenes, since you aren't a legal adult yet. It's easier to corner someone like that if you have manpower."

Ryuu Suzune's words made me think of Prime Minister Koizumi. He'd really removed everyone we might've been able to use as puppets. Not only that, he'd used logic and emotions to turn Keikain family members and my own people against me. I had no words to respond with.

Ryuu Suzune could tell what was on my mind, so she delivered the finishing blow. "All they have to do is corner you at this moment, right when you want to

act. By the time you're an adult, the prime minister will already have left his seat. You can't get around that, my lady."

I wouldn't come of age for a few more years. The party leader of the Fellowship of Constitutional Government was limited to two terms, so at that point, he'd get to quit while he was ahead. Ryuu Suzune's point was very reminiscent of Chinese expats politics, and it spoke to the scale of power struggles.

"So, what are your plans for the next election? My father told me not to waste any help we can get."

"Enough shady talk before a junior high school tea party. I think I'll pour money into Izumikawa's faction and leave it at that."

Chinese expats were a minority in our country, and I knew they were a source of funds for the opposition party, which had rallied minorities around them. They'd even sent Ryuu Suzune to join my personnel, so I could keep track of what they were thinking politically.

"You don't trust the opposition party either, my lady?"

"What do you think of them?"

"My grandfather told me they have the same eyes as the Red Guards."

Well said. I couldn't help but chuckle. "It'll be tough to control them."

"I'm well aware. We don't plan things in terms of five or ten years. We make plans for the next fifty to one hundred years."

That meant the Chinese expats were confident that I'd be significant in fifty years. *Wait...*

"What's wrong, my lady?"

"Nothing. I'm going to take a walk in the garden to clear my head."

I waved goodbye to Ryuu Suzune, heading to the garden outside of the cafeteria. I just wished Enbuchi Yuna and Rudaka Miu didn't have to escort me

there at a time like this. Of course, they were only doing their duty as my associates.

Come on... Try to remember the faces of Keikain Runa's followers in the game. Were any of them my current associates?!

In the otome game, Keikain Runa held many of these tea parties to show off her power. If her followers in those scenes were the same characters I'd now added to my group of associates, what implications would that carry?

Even in a society of children, like a school, humans were social creatures. Imperial Gakushuukan Academy was separated into six classes, so there would be six queen bees at the very least.

Tea parties were all about declaring "I'm the queen bee, and I dare any of you to complain!"

They were also places to object, "Hang on a minute! I want to be the queen bee!"

Money and connections were important to maintaining one's role in society. Since I'd had to gain those myself, without my parents giving them to me, I needed to assert myself like this. And money and connections were best spent on conserving time, the most valuable resource of all.

"Hiya! We're here for the tea party."

Nod nod.

My first guests were my old friends Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan, along with some of their friends. These other friends were who I needed to focus on, since Asuka-chan would naturally rule them as the queen bee once they got back to their class. Perhaps that was because of her talents, or maybe you should credit her natural virtue. You could also guess that she was using *me* as a way to declare herself Class 1-E's queen bee. Female friendships were complicated, mysterious things.

Asuka-chan waved me over to her. The whispered conversation we began in

the corner of the room was entirely atypical for two junior high students.

"Could you do me a big favor and help my dad out in the election?"

"Don't you know that I'm Prime Minister Koizumi's enemy right now? How would I help him like that? Besides, the prime minister usually scouts his ministers himself. He doesn't take recommendations from his faction."

"I know all that, but this election's looking pretty bad..."

Stare. Hotaru-chan was, of course, glued to Asuka-chan as always.

Small districts generally only elected a single person. That would give the unified opposition, the Democratic Allied Fellowship, a chance to defeat the ruling party. Fundamental rules enabled opposition party victories in an electoral stronghold.

First, the opposition had to maintain 90 percent support within their own base.

Second, 80 percent of independents had to vote for the opposition candidate.

Third, ruling party candidates couldn't hold more than 70 percent of their electoral base.

I didn't know who came up with the name, but that was called the "987 rule." The increase in urban independents was the ruling party's biggest problem. It was particularly striking in districts with prefectural capitals; those would likely be where opposition candidates came out victorious in years to come. Voters were also unhappy about their tax dollars being spent in rural areas instead of their own cities.

"Are things really that bad in Shikoku?" I asked.

Asuka-chan had a simple, devastating response: "Environmental and water issues."

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"Ah..."
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[&]quot;…"

Roads and dams had become a focus as environmental protection became more popular around the turn of the century. The Nagano Prefecture governor had even lost his position over such issues. Japan also faced the problem of flooding when typhoons came, and water shortages when they didn't. Deforestation and river management were longstanding issues of great weight in politics.

Human nature looked at the decline of rural areas in the face of increasing urbanization and wrote off spending money on those faraway places as "wasting resources." Independents enraged by wasteful public projects turned dam construction into a scapegoat that the opposition joined in using to criticize the government.

"We had that project to get water to Chuyo through the Matsuyama fields, but pro-environmental groups got really mad. Now they're calling it part of a three-point plan for environmental destruction and doing everything they can to attack it."

"What are the other two points?"

Asuka-chan responded as simply and devastatingly as she had the previous time: "The Ikata Power Plant and Shikoku Shinkansen."

"Ah..."

"....!"

"What's that? The pilgrimage? That's for all of Shikoku. We're just talking about Ehime Prefecture right now." I persuaded Hotaru-chan that the pilgrimage where she'd been given mandarins was safe. This world could be a cruel place.

Public works projects were major job providers in rural areas. There had once been a movement to build factories in those places, where labor was inexpensive, but it failed during the 1990s when the yen appreciated. Such factories were shifting to locations like Karafuto and Southeast Asia where labor was even cheaper. The Koizumi administration's cuts to public works earned

them support from urban independents and bolstered approval ratings; meanwhile, rural residents grew discontented with their area's decline.

"The cost was the Shimanami sea route that's finished now, so they're looking for another project to pay for the high-speed trains, Shinkansen, and Chuyo water project. Their Diet members won't be any help if they aren't elected, though. We hope they can sneak into a parliamentary official or vice minister role next time."

"The Shinkansen is definitely being built up to Takamatsu, but everything after that still depends on politicking," I said. "People will probably demand we stretch it to Hokkaido if we build through Matsuyama."

Asuka-chan laughed and waved that suggestion off. Being a politician's daughter, she knew when to compromise. "I don't want to rely on you for everything either, Runa-chan. I'd be really happy if you just bought lots of tickets for his fundraisers." She grinned.

Hotaru-chan didn't understand what was going on, but she grinned too.

In short, Asuka-chan had attended my tea party to ask me to buy a fundraiser ticket for each guest she'd brought. Asuka-chan, you don't seem to get it. I'm Keikain Runa, the girl you've called childish ever since we were in kindergarten.

I put on the same grin Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan wore. "We're friends, right? Send the tickets my way."

"You really never change, do you...?"

Nod.

With that, the two walked away. I'd never seen either Asuka-chan or Hotaruchan in the otome game, so Runa must not have had any connection to them. If I made a list of game characters I'd encountered, and those I hadn't, perhaps I'd discover something. Maybe the reason for my downfall in the game would become clear.

Asagiri Kaoru-san, yet another full-fledged queen bee, was the next to arrive.

"We're here for the tea party."

"Thanks for having us, Keikain-san. What an incredible tea party you've set up."

"Welcome. Please enjoy yourselves."

Kaoru-san was also friends with many nobles. Unlike me, she was a legitimate member of the Courtiers—a clique of noble students. Two fellow Courtiers, Machiyoi Sanae-san and Katsuki Shiori-san, joined her today. I didn't hide the fact that the four of us would start a conversation, and my associates and the Courtier girls' friends knew they should back away and form a protective circle around us. *How impressive*.

"We come with a formal request from the Courtiers. Would you care to join us and work together?"

"Can I stay an unaffiliated outsider?"

Kaoru-san sighed. It seemed she was struggling with this too. "The current administration is touting a plan to strip nobles of special privileges, so we want to include you, since you're the prime minister's enemy and all."

After I was forced to use my own special privileges, a public outcry had led the National Diet to debate stripping nobles of those privileges. It appeared to be a matter of time before the law passed, though we hadn't reached that point yet.

"After I joined you, what would your plans be?"

"Well, it sounds like the people up top want you to leave Izumikawa's faction, ally yourself with the opposition, and call for a coalition government. You and the Iwazaki zaibatsu could control Karafuto and make the ruling coalition the majority. Then, with a no-confidence motion against the cabinet, you dissolve them, come out on top, and form a coalition government. That's what they tell me the plan is."

I'd given up somewhat already. Yet unlike me, these nobles were ready to put up a major fight to keep their special privileges. Still, their reaching out to the opposition because they had no real power and no other option felt like the Taira clan seeking help from the Minamoto clan. These were the imperial court's descendants, all right. I couldn't help smiling awkwardly.

"Isn't the opposition exactly who's called to strip nobles' special privileges all this time?"

"That's why they want you to betray major players in the ruling party. That way, the opposition will walk back their stance."

The Koizumi administration cunningly took opposition party policies meant to appeal to independents and implemented them on their own. If the opposition wanted to earn more supporters, appealing policies were the only way they could go against the ruling party; having lost their core policies reduced them to "political actors" who had media appeal and nothing more. But that was another matter entirely.

"I want to hear your opinion not as a messenger, but as my friend, Kaorusan."

"I know who you are as both a friend and a relative, Runa-san. If you aren't giving them any money, I think the opposition must be hopeless."

"Oh my."

Intellectuals were the ones who spurred revolutions. They fanned the flames of discontent among the masses until norms were overturned. That was all fine —until their own heads were on the chopping block during the purge that followed.

"We are nobles. We also both belong to zaibatsu. Don't you see that you're being set up as the heroine on the guillotine?" Kaoru-san remarked.

"I know. That's exactly why I can't get rid of that prime minister." I grimaced as I answered her.

The prime minister was a genius politician who commanded his own faction; he didn't care about high affairs of state. The only things on his mind were the

wishes of the dreaded independents in urban areas and the natural intelligence to make them compromise, allowing him to preserve his administration. Against him, I could pretend to be a good loser and even have compromises put in place for me. But if we went up against the opposition, Kaoru-san and I would either be completely overthrown, or need to purge their party entirely. It would be a bloodbath.

"I'm warning you as my friend, Kaoru-san. Be careful about who you associate with. If you have people you can let go, I don't mind if you introduce them to me."

"I bet the Imperial Court was abuzz with talk like this during Heishoukoku's rise. Even though *he* was the one who built that court..."

Despite that, history unfolded in favor of the Minamoto clan, or rather the samurai, with the Imperial Court never to return. Still, certain families flourished, and some remained to this day. That was exactly the sort of thing we were discussing.

"All right, I'm going to go talk to the others now."

"Of course. Have a nice time."

Kaoru-san went off with Machiyoi-san and left me alone. Kaoru-san was another person I'd never seen in the game. In the absence of the connection to Keikain Nakamaro, her brother-in-law, she must've stayed away from Runa. Still, I was interested in what she'd told me—that nobles were trying to join up with the opposition party to hold on to their special privileges. Little by little, I was getting glimpses of my position in the game.

"My lady?" Tachibana Yuka, standing nearby, called me that out of habit. She hadn't been in the game either.

"You said 'my lady' again!"

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm going to step out onto the balcony and think for a little while.

Tell me if anyone arrives."

"Very well, Runa-sama."

Glasya Marsheva and Ryuu Suzune followed me out. I remembered a game character who wore her hair in a bun exactly like Ryuu Suzune did. As for Glasya, I had hazy memories of a background character with a particularly fierce, dark aura. The game version of me had definitely been approached by a Chinese faction, at the very least.

In the game, I'd probably have gone along with the nobles' plan and opposed Koizumi. But that plan was incoherent. I knew just how reckless it was, and considering their bad debts...

Suddenly, it was like a divine revelation struck me in the head, leading me to picture a terrible scenario. *Karafuto was struggling with the inefficiencies of socialism, so what's going to happen when they deal with bad debts in real life?!*

A queen bee's tea party was an opportunity to socialize with other queen bees. One could also form connections with queen bees older or younger than oneself.

"Was it all right for me to come?"

"You're welcome to join us, Senpai."

Lydia-senpai, who was a year older than me, arrived with her group of followers. She'd already been part of an independent emerging faction before my own faction was assembled. Many saw my faction as the successor to hers. Organizations gained a unifying force when they had a successor, so both our independent factions were probably rising.

"I've learned from my research that many people have been propped up in independent factions like mine, only to fall apart without a successor to take over for the next generation. I'm very lucky to have you, Keikain-san."

"I'm happy to hear that. I'll introduce you to my subordinates at this tea party." After a bit of chatting, our associates formed another circle around us. Now that I was in junior high, I was being treated more as a child with a will of her own instead of just a child. I could serve as a messenger for adults when it came to simple topics and also talk about grown-up things while using my age as a cover.

"Do you honestly believe you can force Prime Minister Koizumi out in the next election?"

"No. Nor do I care to try. Even if we managed to take over, we'd still be the minority. The office workers would chase us out."

"That's good. I figured you'd understand that, but it's still a relief to hear it straight from your own mouth."

Our country's bureaucrats were making moves that were often compared to the strategies of eastern socialist countries. What was the difference between those socialist states and Japan? Apparatchiks ran the countries overseas, while "bureaucrats" manned the helm here. That was probably the main distinction.

For example, if Japan were to become a socialist country, the people running it would be socialist party bureaucrats, not socialist party Diet members. But then the people in charge of the socialist party's financial affairs would commonly give orders that overrode those from Ministry of Finance bureaucrats. At that point, the party bureaucrats would become Ministry of Finance bureaucrats to give their own orders legitimacy. That was the normal chain of events in such countries.

However, if the party were prioritized over national organizations, party officials would become domestic officials and "lose their status," which would be a sequence of events they wanted to avoid. On top of that, if a policy failed to be implemented, national officials would often be forced to take on that responsibility, while apparatchiks got off unscathed.

Absolute power led to corruption without fail. Thus, most socialist countries were lost over time through corruption and political inefficiency. Lydia-senpai's

parents were descendants of apparatchiks who'd seen the sorry state of their homeland and sold it out to obtain their current positions.

"The mass media's going crazy saying that the opposition party could win the next election, but those office workers are all on different pages and going to collapse in the blink of an eye. Plus, they're in the middle of a power struggle. Even if they managed to win, the opposition's administration would collapse."

"What a coincidence. I was thinking the exact same thing." I couldn't have agreed more with Lydia-senpai.

The opposition party's 1990s coalition government had collapsed because of clerical workers who left the ruling party, and those who'd belonged to the opposition all along. Those clerical workers weren't just Diet members' secretaries; some were powerful political supporters. Former ruling-party Diet members, who could control bureaucrats and had the power to make policies, double-crossed the ruling party and lost the clerical workers who belonged to it. Without them, the Diet members couldn't do their jobs. The office workers had done everything—handled documents, managed schedules, processed local appeals and funds, and even worked on electoral strategies.

Then there was the majority when the opposition coalition government was in power—clerical workers on the liberal side. Anti-government activists and urban women, the core of that group, were resented for exercising justice and condemning collusion. The local appeals process broke down, and the coalition government's clerical workers didn't see eye-to-eye with others involved. They became increasingly hostile to the Diet members above them. Then the national welfare tax and the prime minister's scandal led to the administration's collapse, after which the Fellowship of Constitutional Government lured away the left-wing party and recaptured the prime minister's seat. They carried out what was required of them and gave the left-wing party, which had formed the coalition, what it wanted most, which was justice. That, and television content—something they could use before the masses.

Nowadays, the opposition party and their administrative staff were still taking

in this poison to the point that they could no longer function.

"The opposition is probably in the middle of its own self-criticism. They'll be busy playing musical chairs now that they've gotten so big, and the administrative staff needs to restructure."

"Then the most vocal members can come out on top just by chasing off their opponents. What they want most to run the government is the ability to regulate things. There's no room for people like us in there, since we can't do that."

I smiled bitterly at Lydia-senpai. It was time to pose the question I was most curious about—a missing link in this world's history. "Senpai, may I ask how far the former Northern Japan administration has eaten into the opposition party?"

Lydia-senpai smiled. "Workers of the world, unite." She chanted the famous phrase as if it were a spell.

I could glean an answer from that. As the country next to the former Soviet Union, the now-defunct Northern Japan must've placed a huge number of spies and informants on its front line—Southern Japan. They would generally have selected those who couldn't do much on their own, since that made them easier to control. My father was one of these incompetents, though I didn't like admitting it.

"They'll survive even if the country dies," Lydia said. "Their positions mean they may even lead this country someday. But do you think my father and I would follow those people after controlling and condescending to them?"

It would be gutting for her to bow her head to those incompetent people should the roles reverse now. Lydia-senpai's family had picked the right time to sell out their country and walk away with the benefits, but if the opposition party won now, they might well be immediately destroyed.

"If you can say that, couldn't you also say I'd never forgive the former Northern Japanese government for driving my father to his death?" The mood between us grew icy, but we both kept our smiles up. Lydia-senpai wasn't foolish enough to let this destroy our relationship. We both had to smile, hold hands, and dig our feet into the ground if we wanted to survive in this world.

"Even if we were born in the same country, we probably would've still been friends," she told me.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Senpai."

I thought our conversation would end there, but Lydia-senpai spoke again. She looked amused; apparently, she meant her next words as a joke. "Do you know how my old homeland tracks down people willing to help them in this country?"

"I don't. How do they do that?"

She revealed the answer with a mischievous smile. "They look for people who love historical dramas. Especially TV shows about shoguns and vice-shoguns who punish evildoers. Fans of those never fail to hit the mark."

That was all she had to say. Ah, I see. That's a good way to find idiots with blind faith in justice.

The tea party was now midway finished, and people easier to talk to had started arriving.

"I'm here for the party, Runa-oneesama!"

"Welcome, Mio-chan. Have a nice time. Let me introduce you to Shisuka Lydia-senpai."

"Nice to meet you."

"I'm Amane Mio, the elementary school student council treasurer. Thank you for always helping Runa-oneesama."

Amane Mio-chan bowed her head. I'd heard that she was a queen bee too now; she even had her friends with her. Now the emerging independent faction would last three generations at the very least.

"Ah, Mio-chan's here!"

Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan, who'd also known Mio-chan since kindergarten, rushed over to us. Their friends Kaoru-san, Sanae-san, and Shiori-san joined them. Parties like this were a good way to expand one's group of friends.

While I had clear enemies and allies, Mio-chan possessed a wide-reaching friend network. She was the oil that made her class—no, the whole academy—run smoothly. She treated everyone the same, a warm ray of light to students bound by noble or zaibatsu family relationships. I was really glad I had a connection with her.

"Thanks for inviting us, Keikain-san."

"Whoa... It's a real tea party... Am I out of place here?"

"Welcome. We've been friends since elementary, so please go ahead and enjoy yourselves."

Takahashi Akiko-san and Kurimori Shizuka-san had joined our circle. Those two came from ordinary families and seemed hesitant to attend an event like this, but I was grateful to have them there.

"…."

""

What's this? A dispute had broken out near the entrance. I left our pleasant chat and found Kushunnai Nanami arguing with Kanna Mizuki.

"What's going on?"

"Huh?! My lady!"

"Good day, Keikain-san. I came at the appointed time. Have I done something wrong?"

I glanced at Kanna Mizuki's top and saw she wasn't wearing the silver badge I'd given her. That had probably caused her argument with Kushunnai Nanami.

"Not at all. Welcome to my tea party, Kanna Mizuki-san."

Kushunnai Nanami had a terse expression, so I looked away.

Ignoring her, Kanna Mizuki told me, "It's one surprise after another at this school."

"I'm sure it is. It gets much easier once you learn to expect surprises here."

We rejoined the previous conversation, and I decided to introduce her to the group.

"This is Kanna Mizuki-san, a fortune teller from the Kanna family."

"Huh?! You're one of the famous Kanna fortune tellers?!" Asuka-chan was startled. Girls loved having their fortunes told.

"Yes, I am. I'd be delighted to tell your fortune, if you like. You can name your own price, but I already have quite a few reservations..."

As Kanna Mizuki joined our group, Hotaru-chan goggled at her. I inferred that she was eager to talk to a fellow occultist. *Ah, she noticed me looking at her and hid behind Asuka-chan. How adorable.*

Including upperclassmen and underclassmen, sixty-nine girls had attended my tea party. Fifty-nine came from my class of one hundred girls.

Afterward, I was watching my associates clean up when I remembered something. Mio-chan wasn't a character I'd seen in the game. Lydia-senpai hadn't been in the game either; still, she might've been involved in faction succession, as she was today. My faction in the game had developed based on how nobles related to the issue of Karafuto.

Was I ruined because I went against the Koizumi administration? No. That wasn't it. If my downfall was in 2008, the economic downturn must've done me in. I was actively anti-Koizumi in the game, so why didn't he stop me...?!

Suddenly, my vision blurred. I'd experienced this sensation many times. Before my eyes, a version of this tea party with fewer guests started playing out. I sat in the center, a desperate look on my face.

"This is my declaration! As the Keikain Dukedom's heir, and one of the nobles

carrying this country on their shoulders, Karafuto's state of poverty..."

I see. I was acting as heir to the Keikain Dukedom in the game. I'd become the adult Prime Minister Koizumi kept me from becoming when he scolded me.

This version of me didn't understand that. Instead, she repeated her claims. "So I'm going to turn Karafuto into a special economic zone serving as a tax haven and law haven..."

I'd finally found it. The last piece of the puzzle that laid out my downfall.

Money laundering. Karafuto had been chosen as the location, and the declining

Keikain Runa was chosen as the face in implementing the plan.

I'd even used my special privileges as a noble to create a law haven. If I succeeded, it would be a massive victory, but I'd lose everything if defeated. Teia Eiichi was selected as a potential collaborator from the financial world, Izumikawa Yuujirou because he knew politicians, and Gotou Mitsuya because his father had a handle on tax issues. But I was ruined because the plan fell apart... *No, that's not it.* The global financial crisis occurring at the same time had probably caused that final scene I saw.

I thought back to the image of myself waiting at an airport after my downfall. I probably couldn't have flown anywhere from there. I'd rather have been "sunk" by being trafficked into a red-light district bathhouse than sunk in the real ocean, although the latter was likelier. I'd bet everything I had on the venture, but had Takanashi Mizuho, the protagonist, known all that...? Probably not.

"Huh?!" Snapping back to the present, I looked down at my hand and found Hotaru-chan holding it. "Thanks."

She nodded and smiled. Then I felt another pair of eyes on me and turned to see Kanna Mizuki, who merely waved goodbye as she walked away.

"I'm all right," I said. "Let's go back to the others."

Suddenly, I felt myself almost say something else. I moved my lips, but let

them remain completely silent.

Poor Keikain Runa.

They were words no one in the room could hear.

Glossary and notes

Red Guards: From China's Cultural Revolution. Chinese residents fled to Hong Kong during the Chinese Civil War, followed by others who ran away after witnessing China's Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square Massacre. Their children and grandchildren couldn't trust the Communist Party when Hong Kong was returned to mainland China. Furthermore, most Red Guards were used and disposed of by the upper levels of the Communist Party.

A parliamentary official or vice minister: The real Koizumi administration had a crafty trick. The prime minister selected cabinet ministers himself but appointed basically anyone his faction recommended for parliamentary and vice minister positions. That made bosses and potential ministers from the Diet, as well as everyone under them, loyal to Koizumi. Their support indirectly aided his victory in the battle to privatize the postal service.

Fundraiser tickets: Usually cost anywhere from a few thousand to ten thousand yen each. All you get in return is a boring meal and the politician's book. The leftover money is added to the campaigner's electoral funds. Companies can purchase these tickets and give them to employees or acquaintances for free, so most attendees simply show up at the politician's event because they received a ticket that way.

Heishoukoku: Taira no Kiyomori.

Opposition party's 1990s coalition government: The Hosokawa administration.

Self-criticism: Refers to the United Red Army's "self-criticism," which the left

wing used to put their most vocal members in power. Anyone interested in compromise was purged. Ideally, this would've destroyed the organization, but their loud and vocal opinions made these members perfect "political actors." That would later lead to a different tragedy.

Informants: Some theories say that East Germany turned tens of thousands of West Germans into collaborators. After Germany's unification, both the United States and Russia were dragged into the fierce battle over how to deal with those people.

"Workers of the world, unite": From *The Communist Manifesto*. The original version said "Proletarians of all countries, unite!"

Historical dramas about shoguns and vice-shoguns who punish evildoers:

The Unfettered Shogun and Mito Komon. Both involve rewarding good and punishing evil. An important point is that they never solve the root of the problem whatsoever.

Law haven: A place where you can evade the law. Escaping to a country that doesn't follow international treaties with extradition laws prevents the country where the crime was committed from arresting you.



Cast of Characters

Keikain Dukedom

Keikain Runa: This story's protagonist. Reincarnated into an otome game

world as its villainess

Tachibana Ryuuji: Runa's butler

Ichijou Susumu: Keika Holdings CEO

Toudou Nagayoshi: Keika Corp's Managing Director and CEO

Angela Sullivan: Runa's secretary, former CIA agent

Okazaki Yuuichi: Young employee of Keika Holdings

Saitou Keiko: Maid and former Ginza queen of the night

Tokitou Aki: Maid

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 Ryuuji'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

Katsura Naomi: Keikain branch family member. Naoyuki's mother

Katsura Naoyuki: Member of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's integrated

development department

Runa's love interests

Teia Eiichi: Son of family that owns Teia Motor Co.

Izumikawa Yuujirou: Youngest son of major politician Izumikawa Tatsunosuke

Gotou Mitsuya: Only son of Ministry of Finance official Gotou Mitsutoshi

Keikain Runa's school friends

Kasugano Asuka: Father is a Lower House member

Kaihouin Hotaru: Comes from religious family

Amane Mio: One year younger than Runa; like a little sister to her. Father is employed by the Keikains as an art dealer

Katsuki Shiori: From a Keikan branch family. Daughter of Katsuki viscount

Machiyoi Sanae: Daughter of Machiyoi count. Asagiri Kaoru's friend

Kurimori Shizuka: From a local zaibatsu. Daughter of Kurimori family. Main bank is Keika Bank

Takahashi Akiko: Father, the director-general of the prefectural police, knew Tachibana. Practices kendo

Asagiri Kaoru: Daughter of Asagiri marquess. Older sister, Sakurako, is married to Keikain Nakamaro

Iwazaki Zaibatsu

Iwazaki Yashirou: Imperial Iwazaki Bank President. Asagiri Sakurako's grandfather

Keikain Sakurako: Keikain Nakamaro's wife. Asagiri Kaoru's older sister. Maiden name "Asagiri"

Other related parties

Ishikawa Nobumitsu: Photographer

Kanbe Souji: Professor of economics at private university

Koizumi Souichirou: Fellowship of Constitutional Government Lower House party member. Prime minister

Maefuji Shouichi: Tokyo Metropolitan Police Bureau's Public Safety Bureau's director of foreign affairs

Teia Shuuichi: Head of Teia zaibatsu. Eiichi's father

Takamiya Haruka: Imperial Gakushuukan Academy head librarian

Iwasawa Makoto: Governor of Tokyo. Author

Shirosaki Kouji: Movie director

Shisuka Lydia: Daughter of Karafuto noble Marquess Shisuka. One year Runa's senior

Kanna Mizuki: Heir to the Kanna family of fortune tellers/high-class prostitutes

Takanashi Mizuho: Protagonist of otome game *Love Where the Cherry Blossom Falls*

Runa's Associates

Kushunnai Nanami, Enbuchi Yuna, Rudaka Miu, Nozuki Misaki, Ryuu Suzune,

Yulia Molotova, Glasya Marsheva, Irina Berosova

Afterword

THANK YOU very much for purchasing this book. I'm the author, Tofuro Futsukaichi.

This volume took place from summer 2002 to roughly spring 2003.

Are you familiar with the alternate military history genre? That was a popular type of novel from the 1980s to 2000s. They were composed of stories that started with what-if scenarios. "What if the Western Army led by Ishida Mitsunari won the Battle of Sekigahara?" "What if Japan won World War II?"

As a student, I was hooked on those alternate military history stories. I spent lots of time writing them online as well. That was how I witnessed many real-time changes in Japanese sentiment regarding the United States—the final boss of alternate military history.

Japan was defeated in the Second World War, after which we were occupied and reconstructed. This country continued to follow alongside the United States through the Cold War, and its own economic prosperity, for a long time. However, anti-American sentiment continued to exist, like an underground water source invisible from above.

This story covers the time period when that anti-American sentiment finally erupted. Some felt that Wall Street had hurt us with bad debts simply because they could. Many criticized Japan's unilateral support for America during the Iraq War stemming from terrorist attacks, asking whether we were merely following in America's footsteps.

Japan's actions in that regard were partly compensation for the criticism that we'd done nothing during the Gulf War but send money. However, America didn't forget the help we gave them. They repaid us through Operation Tomodachi during the 2011 earthquake, which became the basis for current Japanese-American relations.

That's why the question "Will we help America in the Iraq War?" is such a major turning point in this book. While we weren't exactly considering starting a fight with the United States, the big question was what would happen if, like France and other European countries, we refused to cooperate and established a route to diplomatic independence. Ishihara Shintaro-shi, Tokyo's prefectural governor at the time, advocated for that route to diplomatic independence.

During her moratorium in this story, Keikain Runa takes some time off from center stage. Afterward, the adults are forced to make a decision, whether they want to or not. The real-life equivalent of the question they face would be "Why did the people of that time period choose Koizumi Junichiro over Ishihara Shintaro?"

I remember feeling that Ishihara Shintaro-shi, who was both a literary scholar and politician, became lost in the maze of literary history instead of focusing on postwar history specifically.

Finally, I'd like to thank some people.

Thank you to Let's Be Novelists-sama, where I've been telling the tale of Keikain Runa, and to my editor at Overlap Novels, who approached me about creating a book version.

I also want to give my heartfelt thanks to KEI-san, who drew this series' illustrations up to Volume 4. Thank you as well to Jaian-san, who's providing wonderful illustrations starting with this current book.

To everyone who assisted me in this volume of the novelization, you have my sincerest gratitude.

Finally, thank you from the bottom of my heart to every reader who purchased this book. I can't thank you enough.

With that, I pray we meet again in the next volume.



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