

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA
Illustration by Kantoku

12



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The Aoba Kasamatsu Route

Be... Be gentle with me...



Christmas with the Girls



The Hashima Siblings' New Year's Temple Visit

✦ The Split-Up

✦ The Ruins After Pursuing Your Dreams

✦ The Aoba Kasamatsu Route (BAD END)

✦ Going Off the Rails

✦ Mission Very Impossible

✦ Haruto and Miyako

✦ The Persuasion

✦ Yakiniku

✦ The Lost Man

✦ The Christmas Date

✦ Christmas with the Girls

✦ At Comiket (Part 2)

✦ New Year's for Jilted Siblings

✦ A Road with No Correct Answer

✦ Yuma Asks! Part 1: Novelist Nayuta Kani

✦ The Melancholy of the Girl with the Divine Ass

✦ A New Love

✦ Shiori

✦ Synthese (Rebirth)





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Yomi Hirasaka

illustration by Kantoku


NEW YORK

Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 12

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 12

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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Illustration by KANTOKU

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

A novelist seeking to devise the ultimate in little-sister characters.

CHIIHIRO HASHIMA

Itsuki's younger brother. The perfect human being.

NAYUTA KANI

A novelist prodigy 100 percent driven by her love for Itsuki.

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant.

KAIKO MIKUNIYAMA

A manga artist.

MAKINA KAIZU

A veteran novelist.

SATOSHI GODO

Editor in chief of the GF Bunko publishing label.

KIRARA YAMAGATA

Nayuta's editor.

UI AIOI

Grand-prize winner of the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

MAKOTO YANAGASE

Runner-up in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

AOBA KASAMATSU

Runner-up in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

YOSHIHIRO KISO

Honorable mention in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

SOMA MISAHA

Honorable mention in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

TADASHI KAMO

Special Judges' Selection winner in the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

MUNENORI TARUI

Director of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

TSUTOMU OSHIMA

Producer of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

MASAHIKO HIRUGANO

Screenwriter of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

KAKERU YAMADA

Production assistant of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

TAKURO NORIKURA

Audio director of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

MASAKI ASAKURA

Casting manager of the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

KASUKA SEKIGAHARA

A novelist who debuted alongside Kaizu.

HARUTO'S SISTER

Haruto's sister.

YUMA TAKASHINA

A famous actor.

The Split-Up

It was a night in early December, and in the living room of her apartment, a nude Miyako Shirakawa was doing the classic JoJo pose in order to model for some of Kaiko Mikuniyama's art. An outsider might find it a pretty strange sight, but given Kaiko's usual behavior, this bizarre artist's choice of undergarments (or nothing at all) was now a normal part of the routine. Miyako was used to it enough that the passing thoughts of *what am I even doing...?* never even occurred to her anymore.

The living-room door slowly opened, revealing Nayuta Kani as she sluggishly stumbled in. Her face was too downcast to gauge her expression well.

"Oh? Welcome back, Nayu. You're home early."

Miyako was a little surprised. It was only a few hours ago that Nayuta had cheerily bounced out to visit her boyfriend, Itsuki Hashima. He had finally wrapped up a manuscript that he'd been struggling with for quite a while, and to celebrate, he had invited her over to his place for dinner. They hadn't enjoyed a little tryst like this for quite a long time, so Nayuta made sure to wash every crevice of her body in the bath beforehand. Miyako assumed she'd at least be staying the night.

As Miyako stood there, puzzled as she retained her JoJo pose, Nayuta silently dropped her bag on the floor, threw her coat down next to it, then staggered her way into Miyako's arms, burying her head in Miyako's chest as she all but collapsed.

"Huh? Whoa! Nayu?!"

"Nayu! Can you not get in my way, please?" Kaiko called sternly, sketching with a pair of panties stretched over her head.

But Nayuta didn't even try to remove herself from Miyako.

“Nayu...?”

“...? Nayu?”

They both looked at her, confused, only to hear faint sobbing.

“...Ohhh...ohhhhh...”

“...Are you...crying? Nayu...?”

Nayuta finally lifted her head up at Miyako’s question, her face twisted in grief. Her eyes were bright red, filled with tears, her nose running all down her face.

“Wh-what’s going on, Nayu?!”

“Ohhhhh... Byaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!! Izuki... Izuki wuz zo awwwful to meee! Byaaaahhhhh!!”

She buried her face in Miyako’s bare chest once more, now loudly sobbing.

“...Why don’t I make some tea?”

Kaiko placed her sketchbook and pencil on the sofa and headed for the kitchen.



After some tea and a few moments to calm down a little bit, Miyako managed to extract the story from Nayuta. It was a complete shock.

Volume 7 of *All About My Little Sister*, as handed to Nayuta to read, was like nothing Itsuki Hashima had ever written before. It was, in a word, awful. The soul had been completely sucked out of it. This wasn’t just the quality taking a hit after a prolonged slump—it was like something vital, at the very core of Itsuki Hashima as an author, had been plucked out of it. As Nayuta put it, it was *disgusting junk, the twisted wreckage of an Itsuki Hashima novel*.

As someone who had been saved by Itsuki Hashima’s work, fallen in love with him, and become a writer just to encounter him in person, there was no way Nayuta Kani would stand for this. So she was brutally honest with him.

...What is this? This garbage?

If you're gonna make me read this soulless crap, like some AI wrote it, then you're better off not being able to write at all!!

Hearing this reaction from his lover after he'd finally managed to complete a novel after a long, painful slump infuriated Itsuki as well. They failed to reach any kind of agreement as their argument grew more and more emotional, culminating in Itsuki's proposal: *Let's split up*. She accepted.

I can't believe Itsuki and Nayuta would ever break up...

Watching the face of Nayuta—now sleeping naked with her head on Miyako's lap after all the crying and talking wore her out—Miyako didn't know how to feel. To her, Itsuki and Nayuta were a match made in heaven; they were bound to get married before too long, and she had no doubt that they'd be on wonderful terms for the rest of their lives. Seeing it come to an end so quickly was an intense shock to Miyako, even if she wasn't personally involved.

Of course, this was just a little spat that had escalated and gotten out of hand, right? The breakup seemed awfully spur-of-the-moment—maybe they'd make up in pretty short order. But even the most intimate couple Miyako knew in her life could clash on a deep level over their writing. She felt like she had a privileged view into the karma inherent to this profession.

Is Nayuta gonna be okay? And Itsuki...

As a friend—yes, only as a friend—Miyako fretted over them.

The Ruins After Pursuing Your Dreams

The day after Itsuki and Nayuta split up, Haruto Fuwa was visiting Itsuki's apartment after sunset, a bag in his hand filled with beer and snacks. He had been over at GF Bunko editorial today for a story meeting when he heard from Itsuki's editor, Toki, that he had finally wrapped Volume 7 of *All About My Little Sister*, and he had stopped by his place to celebrate.

...But there were other things he wanted to talk with him about as well. Around two weeks ago, Itsuki's stepsister, Chihiro Hashima, had confessed her love to Haruto, and he turned her down. He couldn't even turn his eyes toward her as she ran off crying. Then, a week later, he got a call from Itsuki, picked it up, and found himself talking to both him and Chihiro's father. He could feel his blood freeze that entire phone call, honestly. Chihiro would later text him to say, I'm so sorry; Dad and my brother did something so stupid. I yelled at them about it, so please forgive them... Also, if we can act like we usually do when we're together from now on, that would be great (^ ^), and Haruto replied, You have a real unique dad ha-ha-ha, but all right, that's no problem—trying to keep it as light as possible. There had been no contact since.

So Haruto wanted to complain about all of that as he'd ask how Chihiro was doing. That was the thought on his mind as he rang the doorbell, and after a few moments, Itsuki appeared.

"Hey."

".....Ahhh....."

He answered Haruto's greeting with something that was maybe a hello, maybe a sigh. He looked pale, dark shadows under his eyes, and he certainly didn't look like a writer who had just overcome his slump and made a submission a few days ago.

“...You all right? You look pretty sick.”

Haruto's plans were now out the window as he worried over Itsuki.

“Ha-ha,” came the reply with a blank smile. “Well, come on in... It's cold, so...”

“S-sure...”

Haruto helped himself in and entered the living room. There were some empty cups of instant noodles on the low *kotatsu* table, cans of beer and Strong Zero strewn across the floor alongside pages from a printout of a novel. Itsuki's apartment was kept tidy by Chihiro (and more recently Aoba Kasamatsu, a younger novelist), so Haruto had never seen it as messy as this.

“Wow, this is gross...”

He was at a loss for words.

“Is that beer, Haruto?” Itsuki asked, eyes locked on Haruto's bag.

“Y-yeah.”

“Perfect, then. I was just about out of alcohol...”

“Have you been drinking since morning or something?” Haruto asked.

Itsuki gave him a strained smile. “Not morning. Yesterday. I passed out, had nightmares, woke back up, started drinking again, passed out, woke up...”

“Are you okay with that...? You'll wreck your body.” Now Haruto was seriously worried.

“...That's fine by me...”

The self-deprecating moan made Haruto sigh, his face stern. “What happened to you? Didn't you get over your writer's block?”

“My what? Ha-ha...”

With a weak laugh, Itsuki fell back onto his bed. He stared at the ceiling for a few moments, face blank.

“I broke up with Kanikou,” he said finally.

“.....”

Haruto chewed this over for a bit before finally letting out a hysterical “You

what?!”



“I see... Yeah... That’s pretty rough...”

After getting the full story from the weak, whispering Itsuki, Haruto had little else to say to him. Itsuki had finally gotten out of that hellish slump and was ready to propose to Nayuta—but all his efforts were completely denied. She’d even said it was better back when he still couldn’t write.

It was easy for Haruto to gauge the emotional damage this had wrought. If his lover had reacted to him the same way, he might never recover. Not that he had anyone he was ready to propose to, though. Not for now anyway.

“.....So forget her..... Stupid-ass Kanikou.....damn it.....”

Haruto sympathized with Itsuki, now curled up in bed and pouting.

“...But are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“With what?”

“Just splitting with Nayu on the spur of the moment, almost. You love her, right? I mean, the shock’s ripping you apart.”

“.....”

The observation silenced Itsuki for a moment. Then he sat up in bed.

“...It’s fine,” he said, voice lowered.

“Itsuki?”

“It’s fine,” he weakly repeated. “...And yeah, it was mostly momentum...but we were never a balanced couple anyway. This genius writer, chosen to be the star of her generation... It’s a mistake for her to be with some random dude like me...”

The timidity to his voice tore Haruto’s heart apart.

...If you’re some random dude, then who am I? I drove myself this far because I didn’t want to lose to you! What do I do now?!

Resisting the urge to shout at him, Haruto balled up his hands and fought to

speaking.

“...Didn’t you want to be the protagonist?”

Itsuki gave a light chuckle. “Ha-ha... Yeah...I did think that at one point, didn’t I...? But... You know... It’s fine. I gave up on that. It wasn’t possible for me.”

The self-deprecation was nothing new, but the tone to Itsuki’s voice as he made the declaration almost seemed clear and cheerful. These weren’t the words of someone throwing it all away after leaving Nayuta. He probably meant it from the heart...

Haruto’s mind filled with despair. The strength drained from his fists.

“...I’m going home. I’ll leave some Pocari here, so quit drinking for tonight, okay?”

“.....”

No response.

Haruto stood up, took the sports drink out from his bag, and placed it on the *kotatsu*.

“Oh, right. I had an editorial meeting at the office just now...”

He looked down at Itsuki, raising his voice a bit to rile him.

“But they accepted my new project proposal. Another robot series. I’ll tackle it right after I finish the last volume of *Chevalier*.”

“...Oh? Congrats.”

The completely emotionless good wishes annoyed Haruto, but he kept the smile on his face.

“Thanks. Not that I’m one to talk, but I think it’ll definitely be more entertaining than *Chevalier*. Or I’ll *make* it more entertaining. The editorial team said they’ll give me all the support I need. We’re gonna have different artists handling the characters and mechs, and we’ll have an expert on board providing background research. This is so gonna be an anime!”

“Oh? ...Sounds like fun.”

“Yeah, it sure as hell is!”

As Haruto gloated, Itsuki raised his head a bit, squinting as if looking at something bright.

“That’s...great.”

“...!”

Haruto almost audibly gritted his teeth as he turned his back to Itsuki.

“...And I’m not gonna wait for you, you know. While you’re here standing still, I’m gonna keep moving forward.”

With those words—mirroring what he’d said a while back—he left Itsuki’s apartment. As he stepped out onto the street...

“Oh.”

...he realized he forgot to ask about Chihiro. He wound up making this unscheduled cool-kid exit, so he couldn’t exactly go back inside at this point. Haruto gave up and headed home.

The Aoba Kasamatsu Route (BAD END)

It was two days after Haruto visited Itsuki's place, and Itsuki was once again drinking away the evening.

When he'd heard that Haruto's new project was accepted, he'd felt a sense of panic for just a moment—Haruto was going to get a leg up on him again—but another moment, and it didn't matter anymore. After his friend left, Itsuki ignored his advice and immediately went to the convenience store to buy some cheap sake and get right back to it.

I don't need any more hot-blooded tales of competing against my rivals and growing as a man. I don't need to be the protagonist. I don't need to climb up to these great heights. Better for me to crawl along like a worm, keeping my head down, earning my living with these bland, harmless dime novels...

As he sat there by the *kotatsu*, he stared blankly at the wall as he thought his alcohol-clouded thoughts.

"Here you go, Big Bro."

Aoba Kasamatsu, a younger novelist, placed a steaming bowl in front of him.

"I wanted to make something easy on the stomach for now."

Inside the bowl were egg-soup noodles with green onions and spices, a lovely aroma wafting up with the steam. Aoba had thrown out the empty cans and trash that littered the floor, and the novel printout was now in a neat stack by his desk. The disaster area of an apartment was in great condition once more.

Aoba had come in about an hour ago only to be shocked by this state of affairs. She got another shock when Itsuki gave her the same news about him and Nayuta as he had given Haruto, no less self-deprecating than before. "You... did?" she meekly whispered—then, as usual, she silently cleaned the apartment and began preparing dinner. She was obviously forcing herself to remain calm,

and although Itsuki felt bad for making her so uncomfortable, he kept on drinking. The sake had diminished not just his guilt and compassion but even his sense of shame.

“Um...if you like, I can blow on your udon to cool it down.”

Aoba had noticed Itsuki listlessly staring at the noodles.

“No... It’s fine.”

He took up his chopsticks, grabbed some udon, and brought it to his mouth. It was hot...but tasty. Apart from the booze, he hadn’t eaten anything in three days except instant noodles and other snacky things, so it was his first decent meal in ages. He hadn’t thought he had any appetite, but soon he couldn’t stop himself. He slurped up the noodles, biting into the onions and drinking up the soup. It warmed the core of his body until sweat beaded on his skin. From his forehead, from his cheeks, from his neck, even from his eyes—the sweat just wouldn’t stop coming. Even his nose was running.

“...It’s so good...so *good*...”

“I’m glad,” Aoba said with a soft smile as Itsuki cried and ate. The bowl was empty in another instant, with Itsuki gratefully sighing over it. He finally felt conscious again, but now he was getting sleepy. *Let’s have just a bit more to drink, then go to bed. I bet the nightmares won’t come now.*

With a yawn, he unconsciously reached out for the canned vodka highball he was drinking.

Aoba interrupted him. “Um, Big Bro? I have something to report to you!”

“...Hmm?”

Withdrawing his hand, Itsuki turned to face Aoba, who suddenly seemed a little hesitant.

“Well, before I came here today, my editor called me into the office...and it sounds like they’re making *Student Council War* into a manga.”

“I”

Itsuki’s eyebrows rose with surprise.

The Unfortunate Siblings' Student Council War, the new series from Aoba Kasamatsu, had released its debut volume back in September; Volume 2 was due out this month. He had heard the sales on it were pretty good, but it was rare for a light novel to score a manga adaptation after just one volume. It proved that editorial expected some pretty big things from it.

“Oh... That’s great.”

Itsuki honestly thought so. He had crash-landed to Earth...but in Aoba, he saw someone with the potential to keep soaring upward.

“It sure is! And I owe all of it to you, Big Bro!”

There was a visible flush on her cheeks as she bashfully addressed him.

“...There really wasn’t *that* much I did for you. It’s all thanks to your own effort.”

“That’s not true!”

“Sure it’s true.”

“It’s not!”

“It is. I’m just a—”

“You’re wrong!”

Aoba was visibly annoyed at Itsuki’s poor-old-me game. “If you weren’t around, Big Bro, I would’ve stopped writing right then and there. I’m here today thanks to you.”

“Aoba...”

Itsuki looked troubled, and Aoba tried her hardest to placate him.

“So if it’ll make you feel better, Big Bro, I’ll do anything you want!”

“Anything...?”

...Don’t tell some drunk guy you’ll do anything for him, dumbass...

But before he could caution her, a wry grin on his face, Aoba turned bright red.

“B-but don’t get the wrong idea!”

“Oh...?”

“When I say *anything*, I’m talking about literally anything, and of course that includes s, sss, sssss-sexy stuff, like... In fact, I’m super curious about that, so if it’s okay with you, I’m all for it...that kind of thing...”

Itsuki peered intently at the flustered Aoba. Her eyes were serious, her shoulders quivering a little.

“.....Are you really serious?”

“Y-yes! I am!”

“Oh...”

Itsuki lifted his eyes toward the ceiling to avoid looking at Aoba’s face. His vision went blank for a moment, his thoughts growing vague in his mind. When he focused on Aoba again, she was still staring at him, an almost feverish expression on her face.

“...Then why don’t I take you up on that?”

Wasting no time, Itsuki stood up and grabbed Aoba by the shoulders. She closed her eyes for a moment, as if frightened, a tremble running up and down her body, but she didn’t resist him.

“Ah, B-Big Bro... *Mmph!*”

Just as she was about to say something, Aoba’s lips were taken by Itsuki’s. Their tongues intertwined, and without pulling away from her, he pushed her down on the bed. Removing his lips, he quickly took off Aoba’s clothes, while her moistened eyes were fixed on him.

“Um... If you could turn off the lights, please...”

“No.”

With that point-blank denial, he ruthlessly stripped off Aoba’s bra and panties. She tried to hide her most intimate parts with her hands, but that would not be allowed tonight.

“Oooh... I’m so embarrassed...”

She was not well-endowed, but her breasts and hips had grown into an

unmistakably feminine figure. Her arms and legs were those of a seventeen-year-old, neither child nor adult, and they made Itsuki's head spin.

After taking in the sight of the completely naked Aoba for a few moments, he began to run his tongue along her more sensitive parts, over and over, enjoying her reactions as he did. Then he took off his own clothing.

"Be... Be gentle with me..."

The request came with a mixture of fear and excitement. Then, slowly, burning with desire, Itsuki plunged himself into her.

"Ooooooh, ah...! Ahhhh...! Nnnngh...! It—it feels so...good...! M... More—go deeper in, please, Big Bro...!"

Tears welled in Aoba's eyes. It was clear she was more playing the role than anything, but her courage only made Itsuki's senses surge.

"Aoba... Aoba...!"

With every thrust, groans and the noises of exertion came from Aoba. Over time, they transformed into sweet little gasps.

"Ahhh, Big Bro... Big Bro...!"

They continued to seek each other's embrace for hours to come, and in time, they gradually fell asleep, entwined in each other's arms...

And the next day at noon, the police came to Itsuki's apartment and arrested him on suspicion of violating the Tokyo Metropolitan Ordinance on the Healthy Development of Youth, for engaging in obscene acts with a girl under the age of eighteen.

...Apparently, when Aoba came home in the morning, her family had questioned her until she revealed what had happened the previous night. They promptly called the cops. Aoba tried to protect him, testifying that everything was consensual and that she and Itsuki were in a relationship with the intention of getting married, but Itsuki denied all of it. "There's no love at all," he told the authorities. "I forced her into it in order to satisfy my desires."

So he was convicted and sentenced to prison.

As a result of this incident, all of Itsuki's novels, as well as the comics and Blu-

rays of the anime he was involved with, were recalled and placed out of print. He was banned from Gift Publishing, as well as ordered to pay a large amount to them in damages. Haruto, Miyako, Setsuna, and all his other friends and acquaintances gave up on him, and even Chihiro and Keisuke all but disowned him, stating that sex offenders would be no part of their family. Having nowhere else to go, he was prowling around the streets one night when he suddenly heard the loud, echoing sound of a horn. He turned around to find bright headlights filling his vision, and the truck that had appeared behind him turned him into mincemeat without even a moment of pain. The next thing he knew, he was standing in a strange, empty space, occupied only by him and a beautiful young girl. “I am the goddess Aquarius, and I will grant you one more chance. What? Will I give you any cheat skills? Sorry, I don’t offer those kinds of services. No, you’re going to be resurrected as a pile of horseshit in a doomed world ravaged by a bloody, horrible war between humans and demons.” A beam of brown light shot from the goddess’s hand, and like a turd circling the toilet after flushing, Itsuki was sucked into a dark void—

“Waaaaggghhh?!”

With a shudder, Itsuki opened his eyes, only to find Aoba looking down at him, concerned.

“A-are you all right, Big Bro?”

He hurriedly propped himself up, head swiveling around. It was the same old apartment, the empty bowl still on the *kotatsu* in front of him.

“Huff...huff... I almost got *isekai*’d... When did real life end and the dream begin...?”

“Um, I think it was around when you asked, *Are you serious?* And I said yes...”

Itsuki’s sudden reaction made Aoba lose some of her confidence.

“Oh...”

Apparently, his mind must have drifted off after that. Looking at the clock, he realized that it still wasn’t very long after his udon noodle dinner. It was a dream...or maybe one of those waking dreams...? Or a *premonition*, perhaps. Something warning him that if he made the wrong decision now, it’d be nothing

but trouble for him.

“You’re sweating a lot... Are you all right?”

“Y-yeah...”

Aoba presented him with a damp towel. He gladly accepted it and wiped down his face. As he did, Aoba gingerly continued.

“U-um... So, Big Bro... What should we, uh, do?”

“Huh? About what?”

“Do you want to...do it with me? Sex?”

“No! Absolutely not!!”

“You didn’t have to shout it...”

Aoba’s face clouded as Itsuki promptly answered with every atom of his body.

“Oh, um, no! It’s not like I hate you or find you unattractive or anything! It’s just...I’ll get arrested, so...”

“It’s fine if we don’t tell anyone, isn’t it?”

“That doesn’t make it okay, all right?! You need to treat yourself better than that.”

“But this *is* for me. I know how precious it is, which is why I want to give it to you, Big Bro.”

Her weirdly erotic tone of voice made Itsuki blush.

“W-wow, you’re getting pretty good with your banter...but no! And that’s the end of this conversation!”

“All riiiiight...”

Aoba pouted a bit, then looked sternly at Itsuki.

“Then if so, you should treat yourself better, too. I don’t want to see my big brother on this road to self-destruction, after all.”

“Right...,” Itsuki weakly replied, meekly nodding at the earnest admonition.



Once Aoba left, Itsuki sat back on his office chair and let out a deep sigh.

It might have been a dream, but the realization that he had done all kinds of dirty things in his mind to this girl's body filled him with pangs of self-loathing. He thought it was okay if he wasn't the protagonist. He was happy with being an average guy. But nothing like *that*. That wasn't average... That was just garbage. A Level-1 goblin in heat. Even an average guy who hadn't won the divine lottery didn't want to descend to the level of some vulgar goblin.

"...Enough wallowing in self-pity," he whispered to himself as he stood up. There were still around a dozen cans of beer in the fridge, but he emptied all of them into the sink and threw the cans in the garbage bag.

But that wasn't enough for him. He needed to become a machine—one that just kept on writing novels, shut away from desire, not distracted or lured by anything else. And to achieve that...



The next afternoon, Itsuki's editor, Kenjiro Toki, visited his apartment with a galley proof of *All About* Volume 7.

"Itsu— *Whoa...?!'*"

Seeing Itsuki at the door, Toki was shocked into silence.

"Wh-what happened to your head, Itsuki...?"

"Now we match," the writer blankly replied, listlessly watching his terrified editor.

Itsuki had fully shaved his head, and indeed, he and Toki were now a match that way. But the hair wasn't the only odd thing. He was dressed in a *kasaya*, a Buddhist monk's stole. The fabric had an odd sheen to it, so it was likely a cosplay prop, not the real thing.

"...Where did you buy that *kasaya*?"

"Akihabara."

“Oh... Wow, they really *do* sell everything in Akiba, don’t they?” Toki broke into a cold sweat. “...So why are you cosplaying as a Buddhist monk this afternoon?”

Itsuki brought his hands together and bowed to Toki. “I...,” he began, voice deadly serious, “...or should I say *this humble monk*...has cast away all worldly desires so I may focus solely on novels. I am dressed as this so I may at least begin by looking the part.”

“O-oh... Really...?”

Toki had a few comments about these sudden, bizarre antics, but he wasn’t sure where to even start, so he decided not to offer any feedback at all. Instead, he took out the galley from the paper bag in his hand.

“...Here’s your author’s copy. The schedule’s pretty tight, so can you bring this back to the office by tomorrow morning?”

“Very well. My head is incredibly cold right now, so excuse me.”

Picking up the galley, Itsuki bowed and closed the door. Toki didn’t move, still blankly standing there.

I have a feeling something unspeakably awful has happened...

Dread was only growing in Toki’s mind.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

AGE: 22

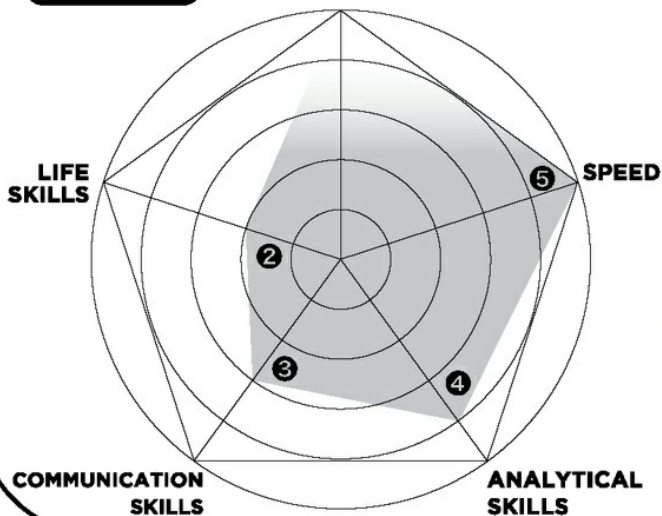
BORN: June 6

A novelist who's written nothing but little-sister novels since his debut. His flagship series, *All About My Little Sister*, became an anime hit, but after a certain incident, he fell into a terrible slump. He managed to overcome it after much adversity, but the resulting work—and his stance as a creator—has been greatly transformed.



PARAMETERS

TALENT



**THE FATE OF A MAN WHO
ONCE ASPIRED TO BE THE
PROTAGONIST**



Going Off the Rails

“Nayuuu! I just finished dinner, so you want some?”

Around the time Itsuki almost laid hands on Aoba and went on a grand reincarnation adventure, Miyako was fresh from her job and in front of Nayuta’s door, calling her for dinner. There was no response. She tried a few more times to no effect, but she could hear noises from inside.

“I’m gonna open it, okay?” she called as she did just that.

There she found every wall covered by a bed, steel shelving, a bookshelf, a desk, and so on, making the rather small bedroom look seriously cramped. Manga occupied more space on the bookshelf than novels, and the video games outnumbered them both. The metal shelving contained all kinds of game systems arranged in random order, from retro hardware older than Miyako to all the current-generation gear. There wasn’t a hint of cute decor in the place; the curtains and comforter on the bed were both solid colors. Empty plastic bottles, root beer cans, and other detritus were strewn around the floor.

In one corner of this room, Nayuta was dressed in nothing but a headset as she sat on a legless chair, playing a video game on an LCD monitor placed directly on the floor.

“Ahhhh, dammit! *Fuck! Shit! Fuck you, fucking...!* That ———! Quit following me, you ———! I know what *fucking Jap* means, you piece of shit!”

She glared at the screen, frustrated, spewing out all sorts of words that Shogakukan didn’t like in both English and Japanese. It made Miyako sweat a little.

From the speakers, she could hear what sounded like pretty heated jeering from what were probably her opponents, spiced with lots of *fucks* and *shits*. Their cursing sounded a lot more natural, though; they must’ve been from

English-speaking lands.

Nayuta was playing a third-person shooter, the type where you're using guns and knives and stuff to kill other players, and she had been playing this particular game pretty much constantly in her room in the days since she had broken up with Itsuki. A gifted gamer in general, Nayuta quickly got the hang of this one, effortlessly headshotting dudes and playing like she had an invincibility code on—but as she won more and more matches, her player rank finally started to get her matched with opponents more on her skill level. She had been losing a lot more often since then—even someone like Nayuta has trouble against the kind of people who stake their whole lives on a video game.

So, as Miyako watched, the character controlled by Nayuta (a macho military type) got plugged full of lead on a battlefield realistic enough that it could be mistaken for a video of the genuine thing. She could hear laughing through the speakers as well, along with some slangy English she couldn't quite decipher but probably meant “suck it” or the like.

“Ahhh, god *damn* it! I'm *sick* of this shitty game!!”

Tossing away the controller, Nayuta ripped off the headset, rubbed her hair with both hands, and let out a series of frustrated groans as she bit her fingernails.

“Ahhh...hrrrrnnn...frraaagggh...grrrrnnnhhh...!!”

Miyako waited a few moments, until Nayuta had sufficiently calmed down, before speaking up.

“Hey...Nayu?”

Nayuta slowly turned around. “Oh... Mya... You're back, huh...?” Her eyes were bloodshot, deep circles surrounding them.

“Nayu... Have you been playing those games since morning?”

“Since last night, to be exact...”

“You should probably be more careful. You'll wreck your body that way.”

“Weh-heh-heh... Aw, don't worry... Miku stays up all night a bunch, too, so...”

Nayuta smiled like she was high on something, her complexion indicating that

Miyako's worry was quite warranted.

"Did you eat breakfast or lunch?"

"Oh... Right, I forgot about that... But I'm fine. I'm not hungry or anything..."
She picked up her headset, trying to wrangle it around her head once more.

"Whoa, you're gonna keep playing?!"

"I can't end on a loss... I wanna kill at least a hundred of these _____
_____, or else I'll never sleep right..."

"Look, that's enough, okay?! No more games today! Come on—I have dinner ready, so..."

Miyako raised her voice a little, approaching Nayuta to force her out of the room. Then she stopped.

"...Wow, Nayuta, you kinda smell a little..."

She frowned. There was some vaguely sour aroma coming from Nayuta's head.

"I don't think you've had a bath in a while, have you?"

"...It's not like I'm going to die if I don't... Besides, even if I cleaned myself up, it's not like I have anyone to screw, so..."

"Sc... What...?!"

Nayuta's choice of words made Miyako's cheeks flush.

"Well, we have to *live* with your stinky butt, and that causes a lot of problems for us! Just go take a bath right now!"

"...All right, all right..."

Nayuta reluctantly stood up, left the room, and headed for the bath.

"I swear..."

Once she was gone, Miyako let out a heavy sigh as she picked up the cans and bottles lying around.



Twenty-four hours later, when Miyako entered Nayuta's room after preparing dinner like before, she found her roommate nude as ever, continuing with the English "fuck, fuck, *fuck!!*" performance in front of the screen. However, the sight of her bare back left Miyako speechless. Nayuta's silvery hair, once long enough to reach her waist, was now at shoulder length.

"Wh-wha—? *Whoa!* Nayu...?!"

She jogged up to her, grabbing her by the shoulders. "Mmmm," Nayuta moodily replied as she kept playing, "what's wrong, Mya? I'm kind of busy right now."

"What do you mean, what's wrong?! What happened to your hair?!"

"I went to the hairdresser today, and I got it cut."

"Why?!"

"Because it's a hassle to wash it in the bath."

"*That's* why?!"

"I used to not mind the hassle, but now I don't have any reason to put up with it." Her tone was dry as she kept her eyes on the game screen. "But now I feel so much lighter. It's really refreshing! I bet I can concentrate better."

As if to back that up, Nayuta's in-game avatar charged forward, brilliantly avoiding the opposing gunfire, and blew away a fellow player at point-blank range with his shotgun.

"*Aw, man, that's crazy!*" came the shout from the speakers.

"Ee-hee-hee... It just feels *sooooo* good when you take 'em out with a shotgun! ♥ It's like you're crushing a tomato in your hand, ah-ha-ha!"



With that happy laugh, she removed her headset and finally turned toward Miyako.

“Right. Now that I’ve done enough killing, let’s eat. I think this is gonna be the yummiest meal I’ve had in a while, ha-ha! ♥”

Miyako felt something vaguely frightening in Nayuta’s radiant smile.



The day after that, a bit before eleven in the morning, Miyako was arranging some package deliveries at the GF Bunko editorial office when Kenjiro Toki’s desk received an internal phone call. Toki himself was asleep on the floor, wrapped in a cardboard box, so Miyako picked it up for him.

“GF Bunko editorial.”

“...*Oh, is that Miyako?*” Itsuki Hashima’s voice came over the receiver.

“Huh? Itsuki? Did you need something from Mr. Toki?”

“*Yeah, I’m bringing over my author’s proof.*”

“All right. Toki’s sleeping on the floor right now, so I’ll pick it up for him.”

She hung up and left the office, only to find Itsuki (?) waiting for her at the front door.

“Thanks for...waiting...?”

“No problem. Here are the pages for Volume Seven of *All About*.”

Itsuki (?) gave the puzzled-looking Miyako the galley in its manila folder.

“Uh... Okay...” She reflexively accepted the folder before coming to her senses. “I-Itsuki! Why’re you dressed like that?!”

The panicked question was directed toward Itsuki (?), head shaved and dressed in his monk’s cosplay. Itsuki (?) clasped his hands together in prayer and bowed.

“This humble monk has cut himself off from his worldly desires and has resolved to devote himself wholeheartedly to novels from now on... Thank you for your understanding.”

Bonk!

Before she could even think about it, she had given Itsuki's bald head a loud whack.

"Ow! What're you doing?" Itsuki put a hand to his head as he protested.

"Don't give me this 'humble monk' crap, you stupid doofus. What're you doing? What are you, stupid?"

"Quit calling me stupid! ...I told you, I've cut myself off from earthly desires so I can focus solely on novels. I'm dressed like this to reflect my determination."

Miyako sighed at Itsuki's pouty reply. "I heard you broke up with Nayu...but are you sure you're okay with that?"

"Yes."

"Are you serious?!"

"Yeah," he plainly replied as Miyako raised her voice.

"...You know, Nayu's done nothing but play video games since then. She cut off most of her hair, too. It's just so weird with her—scary, even..."

"...!"

The news made Itsuki a tad upset, but he quickly reverted back to his sour frown.

"...Hmph. Like I care what that floral egg crab does."

"Can you stop being so stubborn? Just apologize and make up already."

His frown turned into a scowl. "Huh? Why do I have to apologize to a shawl crab? I didn't do anything wrong!"

"Look, I know you've got your own side to this...but if it keeps up..."

"Lay off me! Besides, this is between that southern blue crab and me! It's none of your business!"

His manner of speaking made something snap in Miyako.

"None of my business...?!"

Maybe he's right. Why am I the only one so frustrated about all this? It's just

like he said—I'm not under any obligation to meddle with them.

“Oh, really? Well, great! Go ahead! Act like some Buddhist priest all your life!”

“Fine! That’s what I wanna do! But anyway, here’s the author’s galley back, okay?”

The elevator arrived at their floor just in time for Itsuki to end the conversation, disappearing behind the closing doors.

“Ugh... You’re so damn stupid!”

As she cursed at him...

“...Who was that monk, Miyako?”

“I don’t know! He’s spouting a bunch of ridiculous BS!”

...the editorial staffer exiting the elevator wondered a bit why Miyako was so worked up.

Mission Very Impossible

A little over a week had passed since Itsuki and Nayuta's breakup.

Itsuki, head still shaved, had focused on his writing as if possessed by some kind of spirit. He had begun work on Volume 9 of *Sisterly Combat* just this month, and he was already about halfway through the first draft. As Toki put it after reading the in-progress version, "In terms of its quality as a commercial piece, there's no problem with it at all."

Miyako also asked Toki if his submission for Volume 7 of *All About*, the one that had so enraged Nayuta, was really that bad. "Certainly," he replied, "it doesn't have the insane passion of Itsuki Hashima's previous work, but it's a very well-made, complete volume." The reviewed proofs that had come back the other day upped the quality even further, catching little mistakes that even Toki and the proofreader missed. "If anything, he's improved his skill as a professional writer," Toki had said.

Although things were pretty touch and go for a while, Itsuki had escaped from his slump, more or less, and he was back to being a contributing member of society. With Nayuta, however, things were direr.

"You know, Miyako..."

"Yes?"

At the GF Bunko editorial department, Miyako was collating survey responses on her computer when Kirara Yamagata approached her, apparently pretty flustered over something. She was Nayuta Kani's editor and also the only full-time female member of GF Bunko editorial, so over time, she had become Miyako's closest friend at the office.

"I can't get ahold of Nayuta. Do you know what's up?"

"Huh?"

Nayuta had always proceeded through life at her own pace, watching deadlines zip by without a care in the world and ignoring Yamagata's calls like it was her God-given right. But since her work began to be adapted into movies, manga, and so forth, she had actively participated in meetings with all the people involved, always picking up Yamagata's calls and always meeting her deadlines.

"Is there something going on today, by any chance? With Nayu?" Miyako was already dreading the answer.

"It's a table read for the film... The staff is all in the conference room now..."

"Ohhh..."

It was extremely likely that Nayuta was either sleeping or gaming in her room.

"...Just one minute, okay?" She immediately tried Nayuta's phone. No answer. "Kirara, I'm going to pick her up from our place."

"Thank you...!" Yamagata's face was filled with a silent plea.



When Miyako reached Nayuta's bedroom, she found her roommate just as she'd expected—gaming in the nude.

"Nayu! You had a script meeting at the office today, didn't you?!"

Nayuta's reaction was sluggish, filled with lots of *uhhhs* and *ohhhs* as she slowly dragged herself upright and checked the phone she had dropped in a corner.

"...Ahhh... That was today, huh...?"

"Hurry up and get ready!" Miyako urgently commanded her.

Nayuta gave her a lethargic look. "I'm gonna pass. Actually, from now on, I'll leave everything to the director."

"What?! You know you can't do that!"

"Oh, it's all right... They're all top-notch. They'll make a great movie, whether the novelist is there for it or not."

The film adaptation of *The Golden Landscape* was being created by the same crew behind the *Silvery Landscape* movie, which was a big hit when it came out a while back. Nayuta was probably right, when push came to shove. But...

“But you can’t just throw in the towel partway through! That’s so irresponsible!”

Nayuta gave a dry chuckle. “So what? It doesn’t matter anymore. The movie... The novels...”

Her voice sounded so weak, it honestly frightened Miyako.

“What do you mean, it doesn’t matter...?”

“...I began writing novels so I could meet Itsuki. I kept writing novels so I could be with Itsuki. I worked hard at all the non-novel stuff so Itsuki would keep looking at me. So now...I don’t have any reason to work at it now.”

“Nayu...”

Miyako knew full well that Nayuta Kani’s love for Itsuki provided 100 percent of her motivation for writing and for life in general. She had no advice as Nayuta dropped another bombshell.

“I’m gonna quit writing, Mya.”



Miyako’s announcement that Nayuta Kani was retiring was a shock for everyone at GF Bunko editorial. For the time being, Yamagata told the staff gathered for the script meeting that Nayuta had to skip out today due to a sudden illness, but that was only a stopgap, and she knew it.

“...This is quite a serious issue.”

Satoshi Godo, editor-in-chief of GF Bunko, looked even more like a disgruntled yakuza gangster than usual when Yamagata and Miyako gave him the news.

“...Can you do anything about that?”

Yamagata lightly shook her head. “...I’ll try to persuade her, but to be honest, I don’t see much hope. If there’s anyone who *can* do something...”

She turned her eyes toward Miyako. Godo followed her lead.

“Um, me?”

Godo grimly nodded. “This is the greatest crisis in the history of GF Bunko. I don’t care what you have to do. Use as much money and manpower as you need—just do whatever it takes to make Kani change her mind.”

“I-I’m not sure how to answer that!”

He bowed his head deeply toward the bewildered Miyako.

“Please. The fate of GF Bunko is riding on you. Save us!”

“Please, Miyako,” Yamagata added, lowering her head as well.

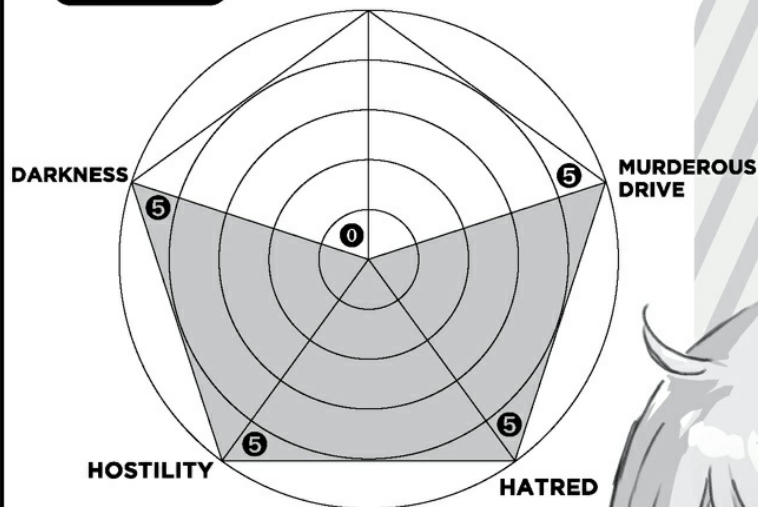
“Whoa, uh, please stop that! All right, okay? I’ll see if I can figure something out, so...”

Despite all her obvious reticence, Miyako wound up taking the job. And so began the biggest mission ever undertaken by Miyako Shirakawa, part-timer at GF Bunko...

NAYUTA KANI

PARAMETERS

WRITING DRIVE



AGE: 20

BORN: July 10

A genius novelist. Her flagship *Landscape* series has been made into a live-action film that was bound to put her even further into the spotlight—but then disaster struck.

**A DERAILED GENIUS WITH ZERO
MOTIVATION WHATSOEVER**

Haruto and Miyako

So began the greatest mission in Miyako Shirakawa's life, although she had absolutely no idea what she should *do*, in particular. She knew she needed a break, though, so she purchased a can of hot milk tea from the vending machine down the hall. She took a sip, leaning against the wall, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Hey there, Miyako." Haruto Fuwa's voice reached her from the side.

"Oh, hello there. Another editorial meeting?"

"Yeah, I just wrapped it up."

GF Bunko was proceeding with the final volume of *Chevalier of the Absolute World* in parallel with Haruto's new project, but both he and his editor, Kawabe, were brimming with enthusiasm about both, so Haruto had become a regular around the office.

"...But you look pretty tired out."

Miyako raised a corner of her lips. "Yeah, I've taken on...kind of a difficult project..."

"Difficult?" Haruto asked, puzzled.

Miyako thought for a moment. "...Fuwa, would you mind if I discussed this with you a little?"

"Huh? O-of course not!" he replied, his voice rising.



Once they were seated in a small, empty conference room, Miyako told Haruto about Nayuta's retirement announcement and her editor-in-chief boss's urgent request to do something about it. Haruto knew the basics of the

situation—Itsuki and Nayuta had split up, and Itsuki then became a monk / novel-writing machine while Nayuta barely left her room any longer—but this news was still devastating to him.

“...But, yeah, Itsuki was a hundred percent of the motivation for Naya’s writing, so...I guess I could have expected this...” Haruto snorted a bit. “So if you want her to take that back, I guess you’ll have to get Naya and Itsuki back together.”

“I guess so,” Miyako replied, irresolute. “But things couldn’t be worse between them right now... Like, I don’t see how they’d approach each other again.”

“Ahhh, right...” Haruto recalled the impression Itsuki had given him, and he scowled. “Considering how good things were going before, once it falls apart like this, it’s gonna take time to build it back up, huh?”

“I’m sure you’re right.” Miyako nodded. “And also...”

“Also what?”

She frowned in frustration. “...The idea of repairing this relationship just so we can have Naya keep writing... I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

Haruto looked somewhat thrown by this. “Huh? You mean...” He began to panic a little. “You mean you’re gonna use this chance to, you know, go after Itsuki?!”

“Huh?”

Now it was Miyako at a loss. “What?!” she yelped. “No! I don’t think about Itsuki that way at all anymore!”

“Oh... Okay...”

“Ugh,” she muttered, surprised at how relieved Haruto seemed about it. “But what I’m saying is... Being in love, you know, is a really private matter. Whether they get together or break up, it’s a real heart-to-heart clash between them—and in this case, this is the result, right? It just seems dirty—or, like, super rude to them—to intervene just because it’ll be trouble for our company... I’m not sure an editor has the right to do something like that.”

“I see,” Haruto said, softly nodding as he considered Miyako’s words carefully. “That *would* be unpleasant for them, yeah. Especially Itsuki. It’d basically be telling him that he’s a tool to keep Nayu from retiring.”

“Exactly.”

“...But as the EIC said, if Nayu stops writing now, it’ll put the whole publisher through a ton of trouble. And not just Gift Publishing but the companies involved in this whole media campaign, the bookstores, the readers... Even writers like me on the same imprint. It really *is* a concern.”

“I know that, definitely... So if I could wave a magic wand, I’d like Nayu to restart her writing career without Itsuki.”

“But how?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking for advice...”

“Oh.” There was a brief silence before Haruto continued. “Why don’t you try persuading her a little...or just asking, really?”

“Huh?”

The casual tone of the suggestion threw Miyako a little.

“I mean, Nayu’s case is pretty different from Itsuki’s. It’s not that she *can’t* write; it’s that she *won’t*.”

“Oh...”

It hadn’t occurred to Miyako. In her mind, she thought that Nayuta’s retirement was a similar problem to Itsuki’s slump—but unlike Itsuki, who couldn’t write if he tried, Nayuta’s decision to shut off all activity was entirely her own. If so, instead of trying to play games with her, it was better to just be honest and try to convince her to withdraw the announcement. That felt like the right approach.

“Maybe I was thinking about this too hard, Fuwa.”

“Yeah,” Haruto replied with a light smile.

“Okay, I’ll try persuading Nayu right now! Thanks very much for your advice, Fuwa.”

“Well, glad I was able to help.” Haruto laughed as Miyako hurriedly stood back up. “Oh, by the way, just to confirm...”

“Yes?”

Haruto made an effort to look casual as he asked the question.

“You said earlier that you don’t think of Itsuki that way anymore...but does that mean you have no feelings for him at all?”

“...!”

Miyako froze for a moment, unable to reply. Then she smiled.

“Yep. None at all.”

“Ah.”

A relieved smile crossed Haruto’s face.

“Because I’m still in love with you, by the way.”

“That—that’s kind of sudden!”

Haruto gave this flustered reaction a more serious smile. “I mean, you’re so occupied with this job and your future career... I gotta play myself up a little now and again, or else you’ll totally forget about me.”

“I—I won’t forget you, no... But yeah, I think my head might be pretty full of that for now...”

Miyako’s voice awkwardly trailed off. It wasn’t a good idea at all to ignore her feelings for Itsuki, or for Haruto, even. She knew that, but instead of facing up to it, she was throwing herself into her busy yet exciting job here, as well as her new path post-graduation. Realizing this made her realize all over again that this wasn’t any good at all for her.

The Persuasion

After receiving Haruto's advice, Miyako returned to her apartment and promptly went to Nayuta's room.

She was still naked and absorbed in an online game—but instead of some ultrarealistic shooter from the West, she was playing a cutesy fighter filled with popular kiddie characters. As Miyako came in, Nayuta had just wrapped up a battle, smiling and snickering at the victory screen.

"Looks like you're having a good time, Nayu."

"Hee-hee-hee..." Nayuta kept her eyes on the screen. "That's ten in a row. There's a lot of little kids on at this time of the day...so I mess around with them, you know? Tease them a little. Then I whip their asses. Just imagining those little brats fuming on the other side of the screen makes me so happy."

"Why are you being so dark about this cute game?!"

Miyako's voice then went a measure more timid.

"...Hey, Nayu? Did you really mean it when you said you'll quit writing?"

"I sure did!" she promptly chirped, pausing her gameplay but not bothering to turn around.

"Can you maybe take that back?"

"Uh-uh!" she said, still not facing the screen.

"Oh, don't be like thaaaat..." Miyako tried to match Nayuta's singsong tone.

"Awww, c'mon..."

"Don't say thaaat, okay? Pleeeeease?" Miyako chuckled as she approached Nayuta, peering at her from the side. "Because if you don't write, it's trouble for all of—"

She was rendered speechless. Despite Nayuta's childlike tone, she wasn't smiling. No expression registered on her face at all.

"No," Nayuta flatly stated, turning toward Miyako. "I'm not writing."

"...!"

Sensing she was losing ground, Miyako summoned her most serious expression and looked directly into Nayuta's eyes head-on.

"Listen, Nayu. There's a lot of people who need your novels. There's the editorial department, the movie people—and most of all, the readers, all waiting for your novels. So please. Please don't say you're going to stop."

"It doesn't matter."

That was all it took to dismiss Miyako.

"It—it doesn't matter...?!"

"I've never written a novel once for an editor, or a movie director, or a reader, or anything like that."

"That... That can't be true!"

Miyako found herself losing her temper, her eyes burning hot from the inside. "You don't get it, Nayu! You don't understand how hard it is to be sought after... To be needed by someone. And you don't know how wonderful it is, and how happy it can make you!"

Miyako, who had been struggling to find a permanent job until just a few days ago, was acutely aware of the pain of being denied—and the joys of being needed. That was why what Nayuta said cut so deeply into her heart, as if being told that everything she valued the most was worthless. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"But who I want to need me," Nayuta coldly replied, "isn't some rando I don't even care about."

"...!"

Nayuta gave the staring Miyako a self-effacing grin. "That's how it is with you, Mya. It's always 'everyone' this and 'someone' that."

“Huh?”

“What about you, Mya?”

“Me...?”

Nayuta seemed to be looking right through Miyako now. “Do *you* need my novels, Mya?”

“Well, of—”

Of course, she tried to reply. But she couldn’t.

The very first Nayuta Kani novel that Miyako had read was a birthday present that Nayuta had written just for her. It was an erotic novel—pornographic, really—but she was nonetheless quickly drawn into its world, totally absorbed until the end and every time she read it thereafter. When she began working at GF Bunko, she also read the whole *Landscape* series, since she’d figured not reading the label’s flagship title would be irresponsible. It was just as absorbing, sucking you in and never letting go, and each volume constantly fascinated her.

Miyako truly loved Nayuta Kani’s novels. She could assure anyone of that. But did she *need* them? That was harder to answer. Her work had a lot of incredibly ardent fans—“fanboys” if you wanted to be negative, “believers” if you wanted to be positive—people for whom reading Nayuta’s work provided their whole reason for going on living. Miyako’s feelings certainly weren’t that strong. And since she had never written a novel, she never struggled with how much of an exceptional talent Nayuta was, the way Itsuki and other creators had. She had never aspired to be a writer because of Nayuta, the way Aoba Kasamatsu did, and she had never given up the pen after Nayuta’s talent beat her down, the way Kirara Yamagata did.

Nayuta the person was one thing...but no, Nayuta’s novels weren’t *that* important to Miyako’s life. That was the only conclusion she could make. And yes, she was working part-time at GF Bunko, but she’d be at another publisher in a few more months. Even if the *Landscape* series shuddered to a halt and Gift Publishing took a major hit to their bottom line, it wasn’t going to affect her life all that much.

“I’m sorry, Mya...but you’re just not reaching me right now.”

“...”

The note of sadness in her words stabbed at Miyako’s heart. Miyako was here trying to persuade her because Godo and Yamagata had asked her to—it was just work for her. Any earnestness on her part was purely on the surface. There was no heart in it. It felt to her like Nayuta saw through all of that—and now she was assailing the flimsiness of her message, the superficiality of her heart.

“Mya, there’s an online event about to start in this other game, so can you leave me alone for now?”

“.....”

She silently heeded the orders and left Nayuta’s room.



The next day, a little after seven in the evening, Miyako returned to the apartment to find Nayuta’s shoes missing from their usual spot by the door. Figuring she had gone to the convenience store or somewhere, Miyako cooked up dinner and called Kaiko to the table. Nayuta still wasn’t back.

“Hey, Kaiko, do you know where Nayuta went?”

“No,” she replied.

Miyako texted Nayuta, What’s up? Dinner’s ready, but it was neither replied to nor even read. So the two of them ate together. Another hour passed, and Nayuta still hadn’t returned. The message remained unread.

I wonder where Nayuta went...?

Even before this retreat into the world of online gaming, Nayuta never went out very much. If she did, it was to the local convenience store, the supermarket, the game store, the bookstore, Itsuki’s apartment, Gift Publishing, and maybe the hair salon. There was no way she was at Itsuki’s place or Gift Publishing, and she had just cut off most of her hair the other day. She *did* visit her parents over in Kanagawa about once a month, so she might be at their house—but she had never gone back home without telling Miyako or Kaiko before. *If you’re staying overnight somewhere else, let us know*—that was the rule they’d established when they became roommates.

“This is really late for her, isn’t it...?”

Miyako, helping out Kaiko with underwear-model duties again, glanced at the clock. It was already half past ten.

“...Aren’t you worrying too much?” Kaiko stopped sketching a moment. “Nayu’s a grown woman now. Maybe she’s drinking by herself at a bar somewhere.”

Miyako wasn’t sure how to address this.

“That’s why I’m so worried! If she winds up getting blackout drunk at who-knows-where...!”

“She can hold her drink pretty well. I think she’ll be fine, but...”

“Well, whether she’s drunk or not, it’s not safe for her to go wandering the streets alone at night! Look, give me one sec, okay?”

Unable to contain herself any longer, Miyako paused the modeling session and picked up her phone from the table. Checking her messages first, she saw that her earlier text was still unread. Switching to voice, she called Nayuta. A few seconds later, she heard a jingle play. It was Nayuta’s ringtone...from inside her room.

Hurriedly opening the door, Miyako spotted Nayuta’s phone on her bed, lighting up and jauntily jingling away. Nayuta herself was, naturally, not around.

“She left her phone here...! Nayu, where did you go...?” Miyako felt ready to cry.

“Should we call the police...?”

“If she’s just a little late coming back,” Kaiko calmly replied, “I doubt they’d take you too seriously. Not unless we had some kind of other evidence...”

“Evidence?! Like what?!”

“Huh? Well, like, if she had issues with a stalker before, or if she’d been acting strangely, or whatever?”

Miyako’s eyes widened. “She’s been acting *really* strangely! She cut off all her hair, she’s yelling at her video games all day, and yesterday...we kind of got in a

little argument...”

It was Miyako who had quickly trudged out of Nayuta’s room after failing spectacularly to change her mind, but maybe the experience hurt Nayuta’s feelings, too. And hearing all Miyako’s thoughtless comments when her heart was already in a fragile state... Maybe the shock from that was far more than Miyako had imagined. She was estranged from her lover, wounded by her trusted friend... The more Miyako thought about it, the worse a direction her imagination went.

“We really should call the police...”

“Please, Mya, calm down. I think we should check with Nayu’s family first... and then Mr. Hashima, too, just in case.”

Despite Kaiko’s reassurances, Miyako’s anxiety was growing by the moment. But just then, there was a *click* at the front door. Miyako leaped for the living room, only to find Nayuta coming in. She was wearing a newsboy hat, a padded jacket, and pants instead of her usual skirt, making her look fairly boyish. Two large bags were hanging from her hands.

“Nayu!!” Miyako ran up to Nayuta, and Nayuta’s eyes went wide.

“Um, hello? Mya?”

“Where have you *been* this late? *Ugh!*”

Nayuta gave Miyako’s outburst a dubious look. “Just the arcade...” She lifted the bags in her hands a little.

“The arcade?”

Miyako looked at the bags. They had the logo of some video arcade on them, and they were filled to the brim with an assortment of stuffed animals.

“Nya-ha-ha! I totally emptied out one of the crane-game cabinets.” Nayuta proudly smiled to herself. “It’s easy enough to win one prize but a lot harder if you want to complete the entire series. Oh, I don’t need any of these, really, so if there’s one you want—”

“You stupid idiot!”

Miyako hugged Nayuta, cutting her off. It surprised Nayuta enough that she

dropped the bags, spilling plushies across the floor.

“M-Mya...?”

“You were out this late, and you never called me! What were you *thinking*, you idiot?”

“This late? It’s not even eleven yet...”

“It’s *very* late!”

“I... I’m sorry,” Nayuta said without much remorse.

“Besides,” continued Miyako, “you’ve been holed up in your room this whole time, and now you’re going to the *arcade* out of nowhere?!”

“Um... Just for a change of pace...”

“Well, I was worried about you... I was really worried about you...! I thought I hurt you really badly yesterday, and, and if something happened to you, Nayu... I... I was just... *Oooh...!*”

Miyako’s tears spilled onto the back of Nayuta’s neck.

“You were that worried over me...?”

Nayuta’s own eyes slowly began to tear up.

“I... I thought I went too far yesterday, too... I was anxious about whether I made you hate me and stuff, so playing games in my room didn’t make me feel any better, so...”

“How could I ever hate you, you idiot?!” Miyako hugged Nayuta even tighter.

“I—I mean, I’m putting you through this trouble, Mya. I’m lashing out at you; I’m bothering you so much...”

“No, I’m the one trying to force things on you. I wasn’t considering you at all... I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“Ohhh, Myaaa...!” Nayuta hugged Miyako back, sobbing. “M-Myaaa! I love you! I love you sooo much!”

“I love you, too, Nayu...! I’m so glad you’re okay... You can play all the games you want. You don’t have to write novels. Just... Just don’t go away without

telling me, okay...?”

“Okay! Okay...! I’ll keep playing games forever... I’ll never work for the rest of my life... And I’ll always be by your side, Mya...”

“Nayu! Nayuuu...!”

“Mya... Mya...!”

They hugged each other hard, then let go, gazing at each other through teary eyes. Then their faces approached again...

“Oh, if this is going straight into sex, do you mind if I sketch it a little?”

The sound of Kaiko, sketchbook in hand, made Miyako hurriedly separate herself from Nayuta. “W-we’re not doing *that*!” she said, her face red.

Nayuta turned toward her, a little flushed. “Well, *I* want to have sex with you, Mya...”

“S-stop acting so stupid! ...You haven’t eaten yet, right? I put dinner in the fridge, so hurry up and eat.”

“Okaaay,” Nayuta replied with slight disappointment on her face. Then her voice turned sweeter. “After dinner, do you think we could take a bath together? We haven’t done that in a while.”

“Sure.”

“Woo-hoo! Also, uh, can I sleep with you tonight?”

“...As long as you don’t do anything weird.”

“Can I lick you?”

“No.”

“Can I suck on your tits?”

“Well, we can talk about that...”



“Yaaaay! 🎵” Nayuta gave her a childlike grin, then walked toward the living room.

“...Phew... I’m so glad... I really am...”

Kaiko overheard Miyako talking to herself.

“...You’re almost acting like her mother, Mya.”

There was no heartfelt warmth to the observation. The tone was sheer exasperation.

Regardless, Miyako’s “mission impossible” to make Nayuta withdraw her announcement turned out to be just that. “I couldn’t do it,” she told Godo the next day, “and for that matter, I don’t think it’s right to ignore her feelings and force her to write. I think we’ll just have to wait and hope she’ll write again someday.” Godo gave her a withering scowl, and that was that.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

When you're washing yourself in the bath, which body part do you start with?



The question asker didn't specify who this was meant for, so we picked a few at random. Me, the shoulders.

My cock!



My cock, too, I guess...



My head.



My back.



My old scars.



[Yakiniku](#)

Just as Nayuta Kani was poaching vast herds of stuffed animals at the arcade, a new story was about to begin at the hands of Tadashi Kamo, author of *Karuma the Lawyer* and a man riding high as a promising new GF Bunko star, hot on the heels of Nayuta and Itsuki Hashima. He was in a high-class *yakiniku* barbecue restaurant in Tokyo, having some beer and enjoying himself as he chatted with the companion sitting opposite him.

“Phewww! Ahhh, thank you so much again for your help! I really owe you one!”

Makina Kaizu, his partner at the table, took a sip of his oolong tea. “It was just a referral,” he said nonchalantly, “but I’m glad it worked out.”

After scoring a hit with *Karuma the Lawyer*—his first novel and winner of a New Writers Contest prize—the formerly jobless Kamo had found himself suddenly flush with cash. But thanks to wildly overindulging on discretionary spending, he’d ended up in kind of a tight spot, unsure whether he could cover the following year’s income tax or not. So Kaizu introduced him to ace tax accountant Ashley Ono, and thanks to her, Kamo somehow found a way out of his financial problems.

Now, Kamo was treating Kaizu to *yakiniku* to thank him. Kaizu had a catchphrase he used around rookie novelists at publisher parties a lot—“Once you make it big, treat me to somewhere fancy, please”—but strangely, he had never gotten a free meal from any young writer before now. Sometimes one would get drunk enough at a booze fest to say, “Oh, I’ll cover ya tonight,” only to conveniently forget by the end of the evening. That’s how he figured this outing would work as well, but...

“Uh, by the way, Mr. Kaizu...”

The two of them had gone through about half the meat they ordered when Kamo suddenly put down his chopsticks, speaking reverently to Kaizu.

“Mm? What is it?” Kaizu asked, dipping his carefully grilled meat into some sauce.

“Do—do you think Miss Ono has a boyfriend or anything?!”

“.....”

Kaizu looked over at Kamo, his face somber. Kamo’s face was redder than usual but just as serious as he looked back at Kaizu.

“...She shouldn’t, no...”

“Wow, really?!” Kamo nearly shouted at the news.

“Kamo, do you have a...thing for Ashley?”

“Y-yeah, I do.”

“Pretty funny choice there...”

Kamo looked surprised at Kaizu’s sincere assessment. “Oh? What do you mean? She’s beautiful, and you *know* how good she is at her job. It’s a miracle she’s not spoken for yet!”

“Oh, really? You... You think?”

“I sure do!” Kamo insisted to his quizzical friend. “She’s the goddess...sorry, the *angel* who saved me!”

“A thirty-four-year-old angel, huh?”

“And the fact she’s older than me and still such a knockout is just incredible! Ahhh, Ashley... My Eternal Fallen Angel of Forever Love...”

“*Fallen...?*”

Kaizu could barely believe what he was seeing, as the smitten Kamo began to lose his ability to form coherent sentences.

“Oh! Right! Also, Mr. Kaizu...!”

“Yeah?”

“I think I’m going to ask Miss Ono out on a date!”

“Oh yeah?”

“You know her pretty well, right, Mr. Kaizu? So maybe, uh...”

“...You want me to tell you what she likes and stuff?”

Kamo leaned forward, nodding briskly. Kaizu had *thought* he was being a little insistent, demanding he take him out for *yakiniku* in exchange for introducing that tax accountant, but apparently this was the real motive behind it.

“.....”

Kaizu studied him again. Here was Tadashi Kamo, age twenty-nine, a full-time writer who had made his debut last year but was unemployed before that. He was single, medium build and height; his posture wasn’t great, but it was improving, probably thanks to the confidence from being a bestselling novelist. His sense for creating interesting stories and characters was something not only Kaizu but Haruto and Godo also acknowledged—but even more praiseworthy was how, in order to revise the rather poorly written novel he submitted to the contest, he pored over the editorial notes and some other novels in the genre. In the end, he had honed his own work to a level of perfection completely unrecognizable from the original.

His ability to sincerely take advice from others, his perseverance in the face of such a vast amount of material to go over, and his skill in properly applying everything he absorbed into his own writing—those were all vital qualities for a writer, and even beyond *Karuma the Lawyer*, they were bound to help him in everything he produced. He was kind of lacking in common sense, likely due to his long stint of joblessness, but that would work itself out. He might get carried away a lot, but he wasn’t a bad person, and deep down, he had serious drive.

...There’s no doubt that he’s got a promising future ahead as a writer. At least, way more than I do.

“...All right.”

And so Kaizu told Kamo all about Ashley’s likes, dislikes, and hobbies, as much as he knew about each. All, that is, except for her relationship with Kasuka Sekigahara and how she still hadn’t let go of her after all this time.

“Well, thank you so much, Mr. Kaizu! You’ve given me a lot of useful

information, and I'm gonna use it to do this *right!*"

Kamo was all but running out of breath as he spoke.

"Yeah? ...Well, I hope you make her happy."

Kaizu was sincere when he said it. Then he waved at the waitstaff and ordered three extra servings of the restaurant's most expensive cut of meat, along with another beer. This was the first time a young writer had ever covered Kaizu for dinner, and he wasn't about to waste this opportunity.

The Lost Man

On a day in mid-December, tax accountant Ashley Ono was invited by Tadashi Kamo to go out for dinner as a thank-you for all her help. To her, he was just one of her many clients, and the payment he gave her was all the thanks she really needed—but he suggested they go to a certain *izakaya* with a reputation for good food. It wasn't really the kind of place a woman would venture into alone, especially one who looked like Ashley. It wasn't too expensive, and so Ashley agreed, figuring she could have a drink or two and head off.

That weekend, she and Kamo met up and drank at the *izakaya*. They didn't massively hit it off conversation-wise, but the sake selection was excellent, and the dishes were just as good as she'd heard, so she was happy.

On the way back, he invited her out again—"I got some free movie tickets from the editorial department," he explained, "so would you like to join me?" It was a gory low-budget horror film, the exact sort Ashley enjoyed; she'd had her eye on it but wasn't quite interested enough to see it at the theater. She'd planned to rent it later on, but—hey—if it was free tickets, why not? One of those movies.

So she said yes, and two days later, after watching the film together, Kamo said, "Hey, while we're out..." and invited her to dinner at a steakhouse. Having a nice, rare steak seemed oddly fitting after watching such a bloody gorefest, so that turned out to be just the right choice for Ashley (although Kamo honestly didn't have much of an appetite).

After they were done, he had yet another invite—"I know this bar nearby that I really like, but would you like to join me?" Ashley had had some wine at the steakhouse, but that didn't feel like quite enough for her, so she accepted the invite. Thus they went to a sake bar with a nice, relaxed atmosphere and a wide variety of snacks, including cream cheese marinated in miso and a large

assortment of fresh fish. If it was closer to Ashley's home, she could picture herself being a regular there.

While enjoying the delicious sake and snacks, Ashley took a look at Kamo's face...only to find that he was glancing back at her, a little nervous. When their eyes met, she reddened.

"Oh, um, this sake is really good!"

"....."

She had already guessed this at the *izakaya* the day before yesterday, but now she was certain that Kamo was interested in her. Between that *izakaya*, his choice of dinner and movie today, and this sake bar, everything fit Ashley's tastes to a T. As dates went, it was nearly a perfect ten.

...Oh my god, we share so much in common! And Christmas is coming up soon, too... Maybe we should start going out for real! ♥

No, Ashley wasn't oblivious enough to have thoughts like that. Someone must have tipped him off. And apart from her part-time helper, Chihiro Hashima, there was only one person who knew her tastes and personality this well—a man she had known for a long time. And since there couldn't have been any connection between Chihiro and Kamo, the list of suspects inevitably dropped to just one.

The moment Kaizu's face popped into her head, it felt like the sake on her tongue suddenly turned into raw alcohol. She could just imagine all the "sage advice" he'd given Kamo—"Don't bother with a fancy restaurant or five-star movie first thing. You need that *exact* level where Ashley's more likely to casually take the offer"—and it made her nothing short of furious.

"Oh, um, Miss Ono!"

Unaware of Ashley's inner thoughts, Kamo raised his voice, as if coming to a resolution about something. And, just as expected, it was a request to become a more formal couple—which Ashley politely declined. And so the new story of Tadashi Kamo, rising star of GF Bunko, failed to take off.



The next evening, Ashley invited Kaizu to her favorite bar, nearby her tax office. He showed up only after her third cup of sake.

“You’re late,” she said, grimacing.

“No, I’m right on time.”

Kaizu checked the time again as he sat at the bar. It was five minutes before they had agreed to meet up, and Ashley had been sitting there drinking for an hour now. He ordered a Chivas Regal on the rocks, and Ashley waited until the glass was in front of him before speaking up again.

“So I went on a date with Kamo yesterday.”

“Yeah?” Kaizu lapped at the whiskey with his tongue. “How’d it go?”

“...It was fun. Thanks to the suggestions someone gave him, no doubt.”

“Oh? Well, great,” he replied, without a trace of regret. “...He’s a really good find. He’s got an anime in the works, and he’ll definitely be taking in at least ten million yen a year for the next few. He’s got real talent, too, and guts—I don’t think he’ll be a one-hit wonder in this field. I wouldn’t let him go entirely, at least—”

“Too late,” Ashley interrupted.

“Huh?”

“I said no to him.”

Kaizu gave her a confused look. “You said no...? Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Ashley did her best to hide her annoyance at Kaizu’s genuine surprise. “I don’t know. I guess I just didn’t like him for whatever reason.”

“And that’s it...?”

Kaizu was all but rolling his eyes as Ashley tossed back the rest of her cup and glanced sideways at him.

“But enough about that. What about you, Makina?”

“...Me?”

“Do you really have the time to help someone else with their love life? You’re old enough to know better than that, aren’t you? Do you ever think about... marriage and so on?”

Kaizu gave her a little grin. “Well, I’m not looking to, so...”

This threw Ashley.

“It... It’s a little too early to give up, isn’t it? I mean, maybe you’re as adrift and helpless as a dead tree in the desert, but there still might be someone on this earth silly enough to fall in love with a doofus like you, isn’t there?”

“Can you stop dissing me out of nowhere?” Kaizu grunted, eyes half closed. “...It’s not like I’m giving up on marriage because I’m never gonna be popular with girls.”

“I *really* don’t think you’ll ever be that, no.”

“Quit interrupting me with rude comments.” The crestfallen Kaizu took a drink of whiskey.

“So why, then?”

“.....” He stared into his glass for a moment, then sighed. “...When Kasuka passed away...”

“...!” Ashley gasped.

“...At her funeral, I swore it to myself. I swore I’d keep on living in this world, writing my chintzy little novels for the rest of my life. I might be this mediocre writer without a shred of talent—no big blockbuster, no masterpiece that’d change anyone’s life—but living along like I am has allowed all my talented, sensitive young writer friends to say, ‘Hey, I *can* live like that. I don’t need to take everything so damn seriously.’ You know?”

Kaizu’s perspective was news to Ashley. But:

“That’s what you vowed? Or resolved or whatever? Your beliefs? Well, I get it...but what’s that have to do with giving up on marriage?”

Kaizu gave this a self-mocking chuckle.

“Think about it. All these people with so much more talent than me are making their debut, one after the other—and most of them flicker out in the blink of an eye. It’s been four years now since Kasuka went away...and I’m still keeping myself fed, at least, but there’s no guarantee I’ll keep that up going forward. In fact, maybe they’ll find me dead on a park bench in a few years. It’s a risky life—more a really slow way of dying, I suppose—and I can’t have anyone else getting involved with it.”

It was a fierce sort of will, nothing “casual” or “carefree” about it. A pilgrim ready to martyr himself for the sake of his beliefs. A man ready to keep walking down this dark, forbidding path, one with no foreseeable future and probably no salvation at the end of it.

“You’re... You’re so dumb,” Ashley muttered.

“Yeah.” Kaizu chuckled.

“So dumb. So, so dumb.” Ashley’s vision was blurred with tears.

“You don’t have to keep saying it.”

“I’ll say it all I want, dumbass. Why do you need to live like that, Makina? Throwing away all your happiness?”

She was right. Kaizu looked concerned.

“If you’re asking me whether it has to be me and no one else... Well, maybe not. I’m not the chosen protagonist or anything.” He took a drink. “...But, in a way, that’s what I took from her. And even if I tell myself that to stay happy... I’m gonna stick with this. I’m gonna be an ordinary man... And no genius can do that.”

“You can try and make it sound as cool as you want. You’re still a dumbass.”

Ashley glared at Kaizu.

“You should marry me.”

Kaizu, caught off guard, opened his eyes wide. He stared straight at Ashley, questioning her sanity, and she stared right back, her face turning red.

“N-no, wait a sec. How’d we get from that to *this*?”

Ashley kept her eyes on the confused Kaizu. “So you’re taking on this mission from Kasuka to cling to this industry as an average writer until you die? Because if so, about the only person willing to put up with such a stupid way of life until the very end is me, pretty much, isn’t it?”

“No, but you don’t have to *be* with me... Besides, Ashley, do you even like me?”

Ashley turned away from Kaizu’s question. “D-don’t get the wrong idea. I don’t like you one bit.”

But after that cheap line:

“I really don’t like you at all...but you’re about the only person I’d be willing to go all the way to hell with.”

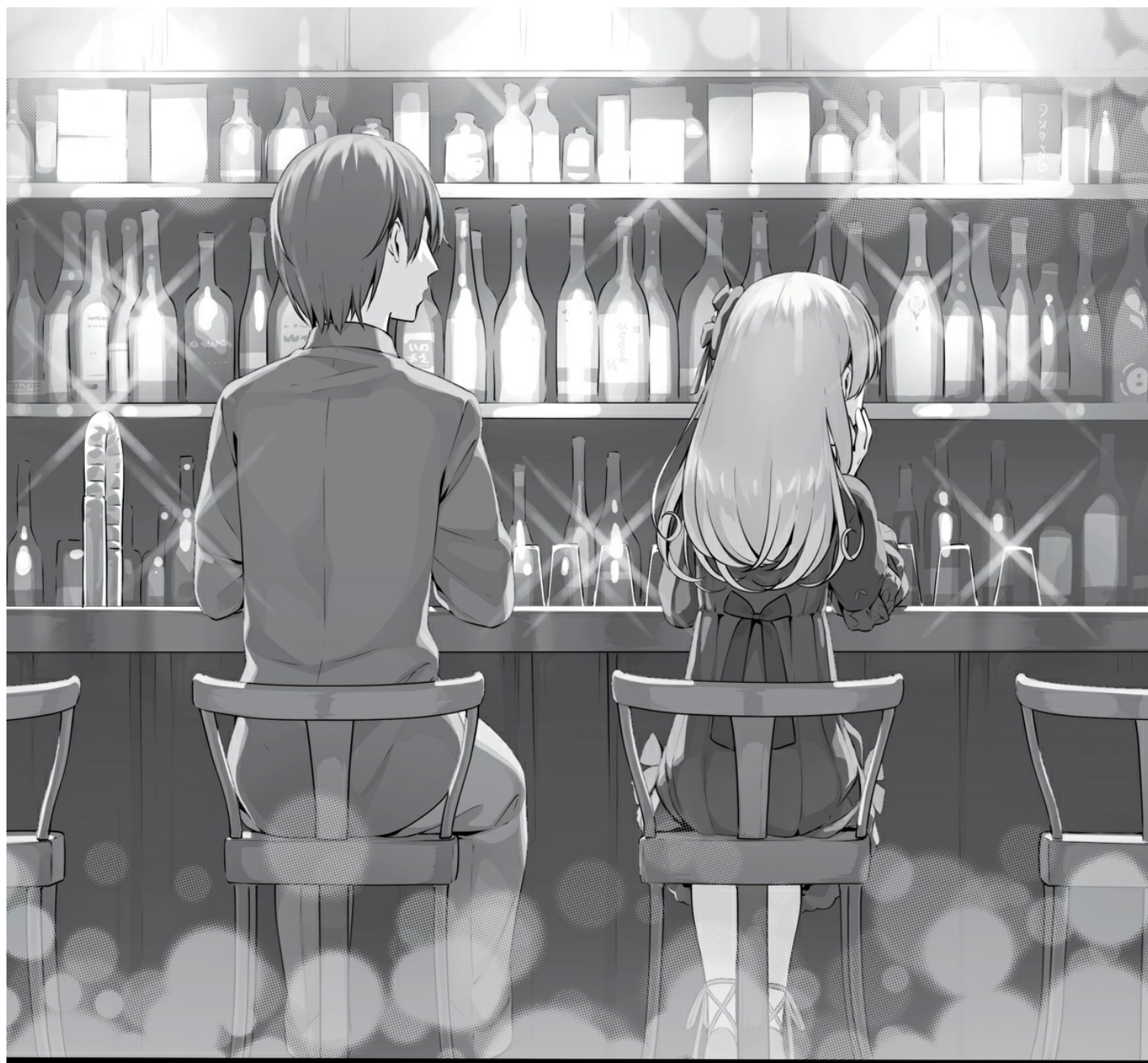
Kaizu stared at Ashley for a moment, dumbfounded and transfixed.

“...You’re a pretty big dumbass, too.”

“*Pfft.*” Ashley sighed. “Well, you better be ready for me, Makina. If you wanna hang out with a crackerjack tax accountant like me, I’m not gonna let you die on that park bench *that* easily. In fact, even if you don’t publish another book for ten years or so, I’ll come up with the perfect survival plan for you.”

“...!”

She gave him a smile like an evil witch. Now Kaizu’s face was red as he turned away from her gaze.



“...Well, if you ever run out of love for me, you can ditch me right there and then.”

The sardonic tone might have been masking embarrassment.

“You know me, don’t you? You know I’m the type of girl who’s ready to go all out for a relationship...once she’s in it.”

“You’re dragging me down already...”

“At least say I’m dragging you down with love.”

And so Ashley Ono and Makina Kaizu—two people whose fates had been irrevocably changed by Kasuka Sekigahara—were brought together.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Ashley, what do you think is the thing to keep in mind as a professional?



It's to tackle things early, I suppose. If you're short on time, your work tends to get sloppy, and other work starts to pile up, creating this hole you can never get out of.

That's a wonderful thing to say, but can't you bring that credo more into your personal life?



QUESTION

When was the first time Ashley tried one of her toys?



...Kasuka brought one a while after we started being a couple... That's an encounter I'll never forget...

The Christmas Date

The night of December 24, Christmas Eve, Haruto was eating a holiday-exclusive dinner while watching the beautiful nightscape out the window...with Itsuki Hashima.

...Why am I here?

Despite his misgivings, he took a picture of the pasta exquisitely arranged on the glittering plate before him, then dug in with a fork. The scent of truffles, lavishly sprinkled over more than half the dish, tickled his nostrils, the rich sea-urchin cream sauce spreading sheer happiness across his tongue.

“This is incredibly good, but there’s not nearly enough of it... I want more.” Itsuki, sitting across from him, had a very similar opinion.

“But if they give you a big portion, it wouldn’t be so Instagram-worthy, would it?”

Haruto had eaten all of it in three bites.

They were in a high-end restaurant on the top floor of a skyscraper, every seat occupied, and most of the diners were lovers, married couples, or something in between. It was yesterday evening when Itsuki invited him out to dinner on the night of the 24th; Haruto felt a little awkward, given they hadn’t seen each other since the big breakup, but had no plans and wanted to check up on his friend anyway. He definitely wasn’t expecting a place *this* magnificent.

Apparently, Itsuki had made this reservation a long time ago, forgotten about it, then received a call yesterday from the restaurant to confirm it. This was a prix-fixe dinner that he’d have to pay in full for if he canceled, so he called up Haruto in a rush. Although Haruto normally took good care of his appearance, he had come in pretty casual clothing, running the risk of getting booted out due to the dress code or whatnot. Itsuki, in his suit, was safe there, but the total

lack of hair on his head served to emphasize his round, infant-like face. It was an extremely odd mismatch.

Regardless, you don't get a chance for a full-course meal at a fancy restaurant every day, especially a Christmas-exclusive special menu. So Haruto decided to savor the meal to the fullest and take photos in case he could use them in his novels.

The pasta was followed by a variety of dishes that looked and tasted wonderful, all arranged ever so stylishly on haute tableware, complemented by the crazy-good champagne recommended by the sommelier. Soon, the main dish arrived—young game hen and foie gras pie in a White Christmas sauce.

"Oh, hey, Itsuki, can you make the peace sign over your plate one sec?"

"Uh...?"

Itsuki followed the request, holding his hand over the plate, and Haruto took a picture, making sure his own hand was in the shot, too. It was promptly uploaded to Twitter.

Big Xmas date with the bf Itsuki Hashima at [restaurant name]!! ♥ This Christmas-exclusive dinner is so awesome (*^_^*)

The frequency of his personal tweets had plummeted since the *Chevalier* anime aired, but...well, it was Christmas and all, so Haruto decided to have a bit of fun. Thinking little more of it, he pressed the "Tweet" button, put his phone down, and picked his knife and fork back up.



"Ooooh, that was so good! So good...but I didn't think we'd break fifty thousand yen per person..."

Finished with dinner and out of the building, Haruto's face tightened. He might be a "going places" kind of writer, but an unexpected outlay of 50,000 yen would hit anyone in the stomach.

"...I coulda paid for you. I *did* invite you out of nowhere and all. I don't need to buy a Christmas gift anymore, so I have the money..."

Haruto wryly smiled at Itsuki. “You think I want one of my old male work friends to treat me to a Christmas dinner? Come on.”

“Yeah, fair,” Itsuki said, grinning back.

During the meal, Haruto chatted with him about many things. Itsuki revealed that he had cut out drinking, kept his head shaved, and was still moving along with his writing. Work was going extremely smoothly for him, apparently, and for the time being, he had no intention of getting back together with Nayuta. Haruto also asked how Chihiro was doing. She was down for quite a while after getting spurned, it seemed, but the experience had also inadvertently helped her patch things up between Itsuki and his father, which meant she was feeling better and currently focused on her studying.

After that, Haruto talked about the closing volume of *Chevalier of the Absolute World*, along with his new work, and Itsuki listened with great interest. He still didn’t know how the breakup with Nayuta would change Itsuki’s life, but at least he was trying his hardest to move on from it. That, at least, was worth spending 50,000 yen to make sure of—or that’s what he forced himself to believe anyway.

Thinking over this, Haruto distractedly took out his phone and checked his Twitter.

“Oh?”

The dinner photo he’d posted a bit ago already had ten or so replies.

Wow, so you were seriously seeing Hashima! What a great couple!

“Hmm...?”

This reply came from a female fan of his, one who always reacted to any tweets that suggested Haruto was gay. She wasn’t alone.

I’m sorry I poked fun at you about it before. I hope you guys have a wonderful Christmas!

“Hmm? Hmmm...??”

These diehard fangirls—the type who’d usually freak out and post replies like “Squeeeeeee!!” and “(͡° ͜ʖ ͡°) ٩ gaaaaay” and “Finally! Sheesh!!!!” were now much

more serious with their tone.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, it’s this...” With just a little trepidation, Haruto showed his phone screen to Itsuki.

“Oh, they *totally* think it’s real.”

“What?! Why?!”

Itsuki listlessly explained matters as Haruto gaped at him. Perhaps Haruto couldn’t be blamed, unfamiliar as he was with Christmas dinners and other classic “date” events, but the restaurant they’d just enjoyed was extremely famous, with an incredibly long wait (usually several months) to match. If you wanted to get in on Christmas Eve, it was iffy if you could get a reservation even a full year in advance. After last Christmas, where Itsuki went through the embarrassment of wandering around on the 24 with no reservations, Itsuki researched popular “destination” restaurants for the holiday and managed to snag a spot for the following Christmas Eve.

In other words, this wasn’t the kind of place where “actin’ gay on Twitter” would be taken as playful shit-posting. Nobody was going to reserve a year in advance and pay 50,000 yen just to make a throwaway Twitter joke—okay, maybe *someone* would, but light-novel scenesters knew that Haruto Fuwa wasn’t that kind of show-off-y “anything for likes” type.

So now Haruto Fuwa and Itsuki Hashima were in a serious relationship—that’s exactly what his tweet declared to the world, and that’s exactly what all his female fans thought. The announcement had already been retweeted more than a hundred times, and this romantic revelation was making waves not only on Twitter but across the “Haruto Fuwa and Itsuki Hashima” threads on the anonymous forums. It may only be a matter of time before the story got picked up by a light novel–oriented news site.

“Oh, oh, ohhhh... Wh-what should I do...? What should I do?!”

He thought about tweeting out a correction to clear things up...but if he wanted to explain why he was at this restaurant on Christmas Eve, he’d have to reveal some pretty intimate details about Itsuki’s love life. It was Haruto who

had caused this mess, and he didn't want to drag Itsuki's personal issues into it.

So he agonized over it for a little while, then turned to Itsuki, hands clasped in prayer.

"...You think you maybe wanna be my boyfriend?"

"No!"

In the end, despite Haruto's passionate pleadings, they ultimately decided to leave it up and not comment about it further, in hopes that it'd fade away with time. And when Haruto got back home, he'd have to deal with his sister bringing this up and demanding why he had canceled his plans with *her* at the last minute for it (not that they had made any), but that's another story...

Christmas with the Girls

In the midst of Itsuki's fancy-restaurant date, a group of single girls was having a little Christmas party of their own. There were five of them—Miyako Shirakawa, Nayuta Kani, Kaiko Mikuniyama, Ui Aioi, and Aoba Kasamatsu—and the location was the living room of the apartment Kaiko and her friends shared. Nayuta had suggested holding the party here, and Miyako was the one who invited Ui and Aoba. They had thought about inviting Chihiro for a while but ultimately opted against it, figuring she'd be busy with exam prep.

They had all brought along food and drink—booze, fried chicken, roast beef, cake, Aoba's classic potato salad and terrine, and a large pizza. This was a girls' night in, a place for everyone to kick back and relax, so calories weren't a concern.

"Nya-ha-ha! Ohhh, what fun..."

Nayuta hugged Miyako, burying her face in her chest like a baby. She had grown unusually attached to her ever since Miyako gave up on convincing Nayuta to write again. They took baths together, and when Nayuta went to sleep, she slept in Miyako's bed. Whenever Miyako was at home, she always wanted to play something with her, and when they went out shopping, she usually had an arm around her. Post-breakup, the darker side of Nayuta's personality had all but disappeared; now she had a puppy-dog attachment—and Miyako, for her part, indulged it, unable to find the cruelty within her to tell her off.

"Mya! Mya! Ahhh...! ♥" Nayuta opened her mouth, begging for food.

"Say ahhh," Miyako replied, giving her a forkful of terrine.

"Hee-hee-hee! Okay, back at ya! ♥" She scooped up some potato salad and brought it to Miyako's mouth.

“You guys sure are close.”

“Hee-hee! They’re almost like sisters.”

Aoba and Ui seemed charmed by the sight. Kaiko rewarded them with a disgusted sigh and drank the sparkling wine from her glass.

Despite that—or because of it—the party continued to rev up, with plenty of food, drink, and games for all. Then...

“Wha...? Whaaat?!” Ui yelped out loud, staring at her phone.

“What’s wrong?”

“L-look...!”

Ui showed Miyako her phone. On it was Haruto Fuwa’s Twitter feed, showing a tweet and photo along the lines of “I’m on a Christmas date with the bf Itsuki Hashima.”

“Wow, that’s a super-famous restaurant, isn’t it? That’s so nice. Like, what’re those two doing together on Christmas Eve?” Miyako couldn’t help but laugh.

But Ui seemed sincerely agitated. “I-it’s not funny, Shirakawa! How could Haruto be hooking up with a guy...?”

“Ha-ha... Calm down. You know this is just a joke.”

“But this restaurant’s notorious for being impossible to get a reservation for! Would you go to a place like this on Christmas Eve just as a joke?!”

“Oh...? B-but...”

...But he said he still loves me just the other day...

The realization made Miyako blush.

“I... Itsuki on a Christmas date with Prince Manwhore...?” Nayuta stared at the phone...then gave a shudder.

“Does it bother you, Nayu?”

She quickly shook her head. “N-no! Not really! It’s none of my business anymore!”

It was clearly an act, a feeble attempt at defiance, and it made Miyako smile.

“Well, maybe the shock of losing you caused him to switch teams, huh?” said Aoba. “I think that’s pretty possible, actually. In fact, I asked him just the other day if he wanted to have sex, and he immediately turned me down...”

Aoba was being awfully casual with some disturbing news there. Nobody had any idea why, but her eyes were sleepily half closed, her face flushed, and her body was swaying in her seat. There was an empty can of *chuhai* lying near her that looked like regular juice at first glance, but its relevance to Aoba’s current state was a total unknown.

“Wh-whoa, Aoba! What do you mean by that?!”

Aoba gave the suddenly concerned Miyako a sleepy look. “Like I said, the shock from losing his lover brought him to the other side.”

“Not that! I—I mean about the, er, sex...”

“Well, he’s my big bro, right? And he was all depressed with a broken heart, and I wanted to cheer him up a little, so I told him I’d have sex or do anything else he wanted, but he said no.”

“A-Aoba! Take better care of yourself, girl!” Miyako was blushing.

“But I *do* want the experience soon, you know? I’m still a little nervous about it, but if it’s with my big bro, I figured it’d be okay.”

Aoba raised an eyebrow at the lecture.

“...You little thief... I *knew* I should’ve taken care of you...” Nayuta’s cold voice was full to the brim with murderous intentions.

But Aoba didn’t let it faze her. “Well, you’ve already broken up with him, right, Kani? He’s free to have sex with anybody he wants to, isn’t he?”

“Fnnngh?! Rrrgh... You, y-you, you, you’re, you’re r-r-right, but...!”

Unable to fight back, Nayuta’s face began to twitch worrisomely. Then: “Hmm... I get it. Hashima’s free right now, yeah? Maybe I should try to give him an invite, too...”

This was Kaiko, and both Miyako and Nayuta gave her looks of horror.

“M-Miku?! What are you talking about?!”

“K-Kaiko, *you* had a thing for Itsuki, too?!”

“No definite romantic feelings or anything,” Kaiko blithely replied, “but at the very least, he’s my favorite among all the men I know. I told him this in person when we went to Taiwan, but he’s very close to my ideal type, actually.”

“Whaaat? *That’s* your ideal type?! Are you crazy?!”

“Nya, nya-nya-nya-nya-nya-nya-nya...?!”

Miyako’s surprise was making her say some pretty rude things, while Nayuta’s panicked eyes were like saucers. Kaiko gave them a defiant smile.

“Oh, ohhh... Myaaaaa...!” Overwhelmed, Nayuta hugged Miyako.

“But wasn’t he supposed to be this Buddhist monk right now?”

“Maybe,” Aoba said, “but my big bro’s still a man.”

Miyako sighed. “...Nayu. I know this is a surprise—a massive shock, really—but I guess Itsuki’s actually pretty popular. If you’re going to be as stubborn as you are forever, he might just wind up having a night of lust with somebody here... Are you okay with that?”

“Ooooh,” Nayuta groaned in reply, clearly in a huff. “I-it’s fine... As long as I still have you, Mya...”

She buried her face in Miyako’s chest again, trying her hardest to hide it from everyone else.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Mikuniyama, what do you think of women who walk around with no bra or panties?



I think they're making a terrible mistake with their lives.

QUESTION

Do you have any favored hairstyles among the opposite sex?



If it looks good on her, I'm fine with any hairstyle.

I'm of the same opinion.



I have no preferences, either, but if I had to pick one, I think shaving your head gives you a clean, fresh feel, which is really lovely. It's easy to draw, too.

.....



At Comiket (Part 2)

It was the end of December at the Tokyo International Exhibition Center, and Miyako Shirakawa was working as a vendor at the GF Bunko booth during the winter edition of Comiket. She had first worked this massive show last winter, and she'd also attended the Summer Comiket back in August, so this was her third go-round behind the counter. It paid a better hourly wage than her office job, and she had some retail experience anyway, so it was no major challenge for her.

The problem was her clothing. At last winter's Comiket, she'd sported the outfit worn by the heroine of *Chevalier of the Absolute World* by Haruto Fuwa. It was her first cosplay experience ever (and pretty embarrassing at the time), but once she got used to it, it gave her an incredible sense of elation. At this year's summer event, she dressed up as the heroine from another GF Bunko title whose anime aired that spring—her previous cosplay was so well received that editorial had asked her to do it again. This outfit was based on a *miko* shrine maiden's uniform, at least, and so it wasn't as revealing or embarrassing as the previous one.

Today, an editor told her, "Okay, Miyako, here's your outfit!" like it was divine law and handed over the school uniform of Ichika Akatsuki, heroine of *All About My Little Sister*. It was identical to the outfit worn by the emcee during Itsuki's and Kaiko's book signing in Taiwan earlier, but they didn't have a wig on hand, so Miyako would use her regular hair. The skirt was pretty short, so even with a pair of skin-tone tights to keep warm, it wasn't the most comfortable thing in the world. And the fact she wasn't copying the original character's hair made this feel less "cosplay" and more "twenty-two-year-old wearing a high school girl's uniform," which only added to the shame.

No way do I want Itsuki to see me like this...

But Itsuki wasn't one to come to Comiket even in the best of times, so Miyako assumed she had no worries there.

So as she worked at the booth, the anxiety still not totally clear from her mind, Haruto came along with a few drinks for the crew. Leaving the counter to another editor, she joined Haruto deeper inside the booth.

"You're doing *All About* this time, huh? It looks really good on you."

Haruto certainly seemed pleased, but his face revealed a certain complexity of emotion inside.

"Well," Miyako replied, "*All About* is kind of the face of GF Bunko this year, so..."

In terms of buzz and revenue for GF, the *Landscape* film was far above *All About*, but no official cosplay had been released for that series.

"But still," she continued, "compared to the Taiwanese cosplayers I saw photos of, this seems so half-assed. I'm kind of embarrassed about it."

"Ha-ha! Well, they're pros at it, so... Personally, I'm totally fine with this... In a way, the amateurish feel kinda makes it seem hotter, actually."

"Hey, no harassing the staff!"

"Sorry," Haruto said, meekly apologizing to the bright-red Miyako. "But it *does* work with you. I'm sure Itsuki would love to see this."

"You think...?"

Miyako had her doubts about that, but Haruto gave her a determined nod. "Oh, I assure you, absolutely. I mean, most authors are happy just to see anyone cosplaying as stuff from their work. And if they're cute doing it, all the better!"

"Ooogh..."

Being told point-blank that they were cute would make anyone feel shy.

"Here, how 'bout I take a pic and send it to Itsuki? Maybe it'll cheer him up."

Miyako pondered over the suggestion. "Hmm... I think I'll pass."

If her cosplay photo would cheer up Itsuki, she wouldn't mind cooperating at

all—but this *was* embarrassing for her, and it also felt unnecessarily mean to Nayuta.

“Okay,” Haruto said with a nod. “But...yeah. Honestly, I don’t want him to see you in cosplay, either.”

The rejoinder was half whispered, with a sigh of relief. Miyako pretended not to hear it.

“By the way, Fuwa, what were you guys up to on Christmas Eve? It became a pretty big deal on the Internet.”

“Oooh...” Haruto’s face tightened. “Well, Itsuki invited me...”

“Itsuki invited you on a Christmas date?!”

“It... It wasn’t a date! He made the reservation a long time ago ’cause he wanted to take Nayu, but that wasn’t happening anymore, so he invited me instead! That’s all!”

“Really?”

“Really!”

Miyako eyed Haruto suspiciously—but in fact, she had already guessed as much before asking. She was sure that, when he’d booked that restaurant, he never imagined even for a moment that Nayuta would be out of his life by next Christmas. For all Miyako knew, maybe he planned to pop the question over dinner there.

...But imagining Itsuki’s feelings like this pained Miyako’s heart. Was that pain sympathy, or compassion, or something else at work? She avoided thinking about it too hard.



After Haruto left, right around when they had sold most of their inventory of merchandise, a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl in a kimono approached the GF Bunko booth. An older gentleman, himself in a kimono, followed behind her. Miyako assumed for a moment that it was some kind of cosplay, but the old man was familiar to her—Yoshihiro Kiso, GF Bunko author. His newest work,

Conquest of the Silver Demon, was going on sale next month, and Miyako had pitched in a bit with its cover packaging.

“Mr. Kiso! Great to see you!”

Kiso gave her a polite bow. “And you as well, Miss Shirakawa.”

“So you decided to visit Comiket?”

“Yes, I’ve only just arrived, but it certainly is quite busy.”

“Oh, if anything, it’s pretty much calmed down by now. It was really hell right after the opening, let me tell you...but did you have any *doujinshi* you wanted to buy here, Mr. Kiso?”

Kiso had won a prize in the New Writers Contest before he even knew what a light novel was, but he had been eagerly absorbing novels, manga, and anime ever since. Miyako wouldn’t be surprised at all if he decided to reach out to *doujinshi* next.

“No, I thought I’d say hello to Kantoku and thank him for the artwork in my new book.”

“Ahhh, I see.”

“Yes. So would you happen to know where Mr. Toki is?”

“He’s in the bathroom, but he should be back soon.”

As Miyako answered, she noticed that the girl who had come along with Kiso was staring right at her.

“Um, by the way, is this girl yours?”

“Hi! I’m Nadeshiko Kiso, and I’m nine years old!” the girl gleefully shouted out.

“Oh, *you’re* Nadeshiko!”

She knew that Nadeshiko hung out at Itsuki’s room whenever his grandfather needed to attend an editorial meeting, but it was the first time they had met in person. She found her exactly as adorable and angel-like as Itsuki and Aoba had described.

“I didn’t plan to bring her, but she wound up following me anyway.”

Kiso looked troubled about it, his usual stentorian atmosphere no longer present. Now he just looked like a grandpa doting on his little granddaughter, and it surprised Miyako a little.

“Well, it’s nothing but light novel publisher booths around here, so I think she’ll be all right...but there can be a lot of, um, strong content for children, so you might want to take care.”

“Yes, I understand. We’ll be leaving shortly once I track down Kantoku.”

Kiso nodded gravely at Miyako’s advice.

“Ummm...” Nadeshiko gave her a curious look. “That outfit... Is that Ichika’s from *All About My Little Sister*?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah, it is. You recognized it, huh?”

“Yeah! I learned all about the grown-up world through Itsuki!”

“Huh?! Wh-what do you mean?”

“Hee-hee!” She grinned at the shocked Miyako. It was a dark grin, one with some inner meaning to it perhaps, but she quickly returned to her usual perky self.

“So why are you dressed up as Ichika, lady?”

“Why? Ummm...”

Because my job forced me to seemed like too honest of a reply for a little girl.

“Because...I like Ichika, I guess?”

“Ohhh!” Nadeshiko’s eyes shone. “I like Ichika, too, so I wanna be like her! Where do they sell her clothes?”

“Ummm, a cosplay shop, I guess? ...Oh, but I don’t think they have children’s sizes...”

“Yeah, Ichika is in high school, so maybe not...”

The sight of the dejected little girl made Miyako panic.

“Oh, but a lot of people cosplay using clothes they make themselves.”

“They can make clothes?!” Nadeshiko’s mind had been blown.

“Y-yeah. I don’t know how to sew clothing at all, but I bet someone in editorial would know a lot about cosplay...”

“Oh, okay! ...Huh?! So if you can make your own clothes, maybe you can become a lot of other people, too? Not just Ichika?!”

“Hee-hee! Well, I suppose so.”

“Wowwww... It’s almost like magic...”

Nadeshiko’s cheeks dimpled with excitement, while Kiso seemed a little helpless behind her.

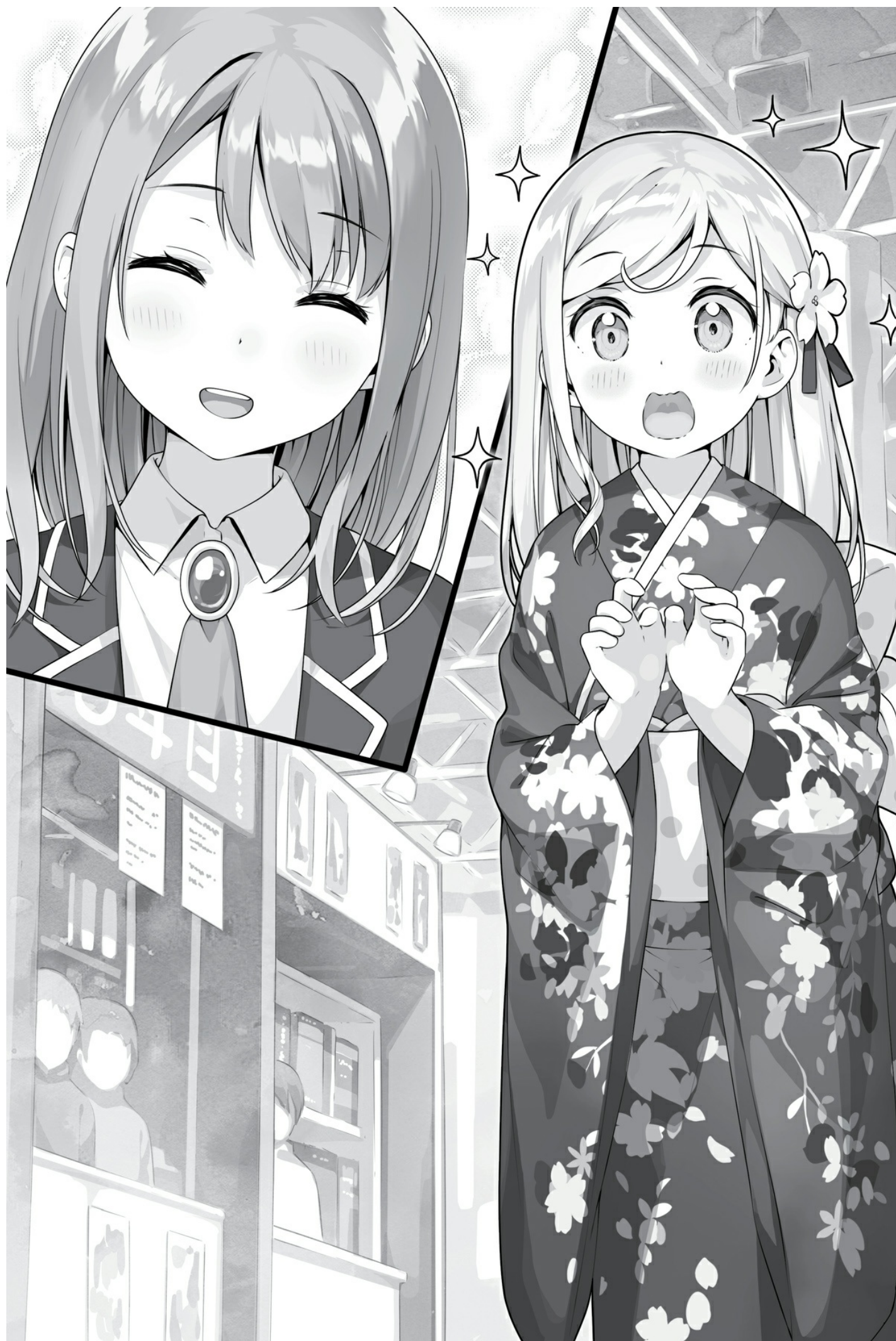
“...Looks like you’ve found something new to occupy your attention, eh, Nadeshiko?”

“Oh, yes, Grandpa! I wanna know more about this ‘cosplay’ thing!”

“You do? Well, I’ll ask an editor about it later.”

“Great!”

Watching Nadeshiko’s cheerful reply to her kindly old grandpa, Miyako couldn’t help but anxiously wonder if she had said a little too much to the child.



New Year's for Jilted Siblings

It was the early afternoon of New Year's Eve, and Itsuki Hashima was back at his family's house, after Chihiro suggested that they enjoy the big day together. He had opted for a regular outfit instead of the *kasaya* he had taken to wearing, but this was his first meeting with Chihiro since shaving his head, so she was naturally taken aback.

"Welcome ba— Whoaaaaahh! What happened to your hair? Aren't you cold?!"

"Yes," he curtly replied as he came in, trying to sound casual. "I lost my lover, kind of. Don't worry about it."

"Lost your... What?! You mean you broke up with Kani?"

He nodded after Chihiro took a second shock.

"Why?!"

"...Creative differences, maybe...?"

"Isn't that more why a band breaks up...?"

Chihiro seemed to think he was trying to be evasive, but it wasn't really a lie. It's just that it was more about novel styles instead of musical.

"...Please don't pry into it too much, okay? It's hard."

Chihiro gasped a little. "I-I'm sorry," she said, face clouding. She had endured a heartbreak of her own just the previous month, so she knew exactly how hard it could be.

Then her father, Keisuke Hashima, appeared from the living room.

"Itsuki, welcome ba— *Pfft!*"

Keisuke did a spit take the moment he saw Itsuki's head. Then he gave him a

good, long look—and then he burst out laughing, unable to hold it in any longer.

“Heh, heh, hn-hn-hn, hn-hn, *ha-ha-ha-ha!*”

“~~~~~!!”

Itsuki turned red with shame, but his father showed no mercy.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Itsuki! Why’re you lookin’ like that, huh? **Set your hair on fire?!**”

“*Prhhht!*”

Keisuke’s impeccable dad-joke timing even made Chihiro bust a gut.

“Set his... Aw, Dad, that’s so mean! *Pfffft...!*”

“Nnnghhh... Dahhh, I’m going home!” Annoyed, Itsuki started to turn around, and Chihiro hurriedly convinced him to stay.



Dinner was tempura and traditional New Year’s Eve soba noodles, both prepared by Keisuke. The noodles were made from scratch, something Keisuke had learned from a cooking class, and they were tasty with just the right level of firmness. The shrimp tempura (Itsuki’s favorite) was just as good, with an exquisite level of crispness.

“You’ve become a really good cook, Dad.”

Keisuke smiled proudly at Chihiro’s compliment. Then Natsume turned toward him, a little pouty.

“You know, if he gets any better, I won’t be able to keep up... By the way, Itsuki, can you do any cooking?”

“No, not at all.”

“Well, that’s good. If *you* were a kitchen prodigy, too, I don’t know what I’d do. Don’t start practicing over there, all right?”

“Ah, come on,” Keisuke said, rolling his eyes. “If you live alone, cooking’s a pretty useful talent to have.”

After dinner, Chihiro went back to her room for exam prep. Itsuki, turning down Keisuke's invitation to have a few drinks, went back to his old bedroom and began working as well. As he focused on his writing as usual, he could hear the temple bells out the window indicating that midnight was near.

A lot happened last year, didn't it?

His anime got broadcast, he met Aoba and Nadeshiko, he found out Chihiro's secret, he had the autograph session in Taiwan—but looking back at the year's events, the one that came vividly to him, over and over again, was Nayuta's tearstained face when he left her.

"Phew..."

He bit his lip, trying to focus on his manuscript. But once the image came to mind, it was doggedly difficult to shake. The next thing he knew, it was past midnight. New Year's greetings arrived online from Haruto, Miyako, Kaiko, Aoba, and all the rest, and Itsuki meekly replied to them. So his New Year began.



The next morning, on New Year's Day, all four members of the Hashima family enjoyed Keisuke's *ozouni* (traditional stewed rice with red bean paste) and *osechi* holiday cuisine (store-bought).

"Are you gonna be here all during New Year's, Itsuki?" Chihiro asked.

"Well, I could..."

There was no reason why he couldn't work at home, and the publisher was closed anyway, so he wouldn't have any editors to meet with.

"Oh, really?" Chihiro said, smiling even as she looked a bit shy. "Well, would you like to do the New Year's shrine visit with us all today?"

"Sure, no problem," he casually replied. "Well, your mother probably shouldn't be walking long distances right now..."

"Oh, right..."

Natsume was due in the middle of next month. Catching something from the

New Year's crowds would be a bad idea.

"I'll stay home with her," Keisuke continued. "So why don't the two of you visit the shrine together?"

"Oh," Natsume added, "and since you're here, why don't you both wear kimonos? You can use the ones Dad and I have."

"Kimonos...?" Itsuki whispered. "I dunno, that's kind of embarrassing."

But Chihiro was more than eager for it. "Why not, Itsuki? Let's wear them together!" And with those expectant eyes upon him, Itsuki finally acquiesced. "...All right."



So Itsuki and Chihiro changed into kimonos. Itsuki had on Keisuke's, an austere black model, and just like the formal attire he'd worn on Christmas Eve, it didn't suit his baby face one bit.

"Wow, you don't look good in a kimono at all..."

Itsuki blushed at his father's blunt assessment. "Oh, stop. This thing's too plain anyway."

"No, it's not," Natsume said. "It's cute. You look like a young man at his coming-of-age ceremony."

"Meaning that I look weird in it, right?" Itsuki countered, squinting.

Chihiro, meanwhile, had on her mother's kimono—one with soft, refined colors but a slightly more mature feel than what Chihiro usually sported.

"Looks good," Itsuki said.

"Y-you think?" she replied, flustered but smiling.

"Yeah," Keisuke added, "you look all grown up. Here, Itsuki, why don't we take a picture and send it to that Mr. Right we were talking to?"

"Hey, not a bad idea."

"S-stop it, Dad!" Chihiro blushed in her rage.

Meanwhile, Itsuki kept calm. "No, but if Haruto sees you right now, maybe

he'll have second thoughts, huh? He'll see you as a *girl*, not a child."

"Y-you think...? You *really* think so?"

She was giving this some serious consideration. Itsuki nodded, just as serious.

"You really are beautiful, Chihiro," Natsume added.

"Hee-hee... Am I...?" Chihiro relaxed a little. "Well... Maybe I'll have you do that for me, then..."

"Great. Let's do it."

Itsuki took his phone, and Chihiro attempted a shy smile as she straightened herself up. After taking the photo, Itsuki messaged it to Haruto with the description:

My little sister is *this* cute.

The text was immediately read, but Haruto must not have known how to reply, because it took about a minute before he sent over a sticker of an anime character saying, Nice!

"Looks like he likes it," Itsuki said, showing his screen to them. Chihiro brought her head down, still shy about it.

"Okay, wanna get going?"

"S-sure. See you guys later."

"Be careful out there."

Their parents saw them off, and soon they were walking away from the house. Just then, Itsuki's phone vibrated.

Mine isn't bad, either...but only in looks

Itsuki couldn't help but stare at the photo Haruto sent with this. It showed a hyper-beautiful girl in a kimono, bashfully looking up at the camera and absolutely *not* "average" in terms of anything. Her face was as well-developed as Chihiro's, although her breasts and waistline were curvier than Chihiro's washboard.

"Th-*that's* Haruto's sister?"

It was the first time he had ever seen Haruto's sister, but if the old, sister-crazy Itsuki had seen this shot, he would've been so envious that cracks could've formed in their friendship.

"What? Fuwa's sister? Let me see; let me see...?!"

Chihiro gave the phone a curious peek, only to be shocked by what she saw.

"...If he's living with a knockout like this, no *wonder* he doesn't see you as a girl at all, Chihiro..."

Itsuki's blurted-out comment made Chihiro's eyes glaze over.

"Ah-ha-ha... Yeah... My breasts are small, too. In fact, I'm so non-girly, nobody even noticed when I pretended to be a boy..."

"I-it's not like that," Itsuki quickly added before Chihiro could beat herself down any further. "You're girly enough! And cute enough, too! And the smaller the chest, the better a kimono looks on you!"

"...Greeeeeat."

"Th-think about it the other way... We should be *glad* this is Haruto's sister! At least there's zero chance of him and *this* girl coming together! Think positive—you've got this strong rival who's been eliminated from the very start!"

"Yeah... Right, yeah...um... Certainly, if this girl weren't his sister, I'd never stand a chance..."

If Haruto's sister had overheard this conversation, it would've seriously hurt her. But Itsuki and Chihiro had no way of knowing that.



Despite having their hearts broken just as they set off, the two of them arrived at their intended shrine. It was about a fifteen-minute walk from the Hashima residence, and every year when he was young, his family—him, Keisuke, and Itsuki's mother—would come there to pay their respects on New Year's Day. It wasn't a very large shrine, but there was a line forming on the approach to it, and Itsuki and Chihiro joined it at the end.

After about twenty minutes, it was their turn to pray at the altar. They stood

next to each other, bowing and praying, and each of them threw a five-yen coin into the money box for good luck. Ring the bell, bow twice, clap twice—the usual routine.

As he prayed, Itsuki wished for Chihiro to pass the exam for her first choice of school, for Natsume to have a safe childbirth, and for his family to remain healthy. He didn't wish anything for himself, nor did he swear to do anything next year.

After one final bow, he waited for Chihiro to finish up before leaving the shrine with her.

"What did you wish for, Itsuki?"

"Well, for you to get into the school of your choice, for Mom to have a safe delivery, and for the family to stay healthy."

Chihiro gave him a shy smile. "Oh... Thank you."

"How about you, Chihiro?"

"Pretty much the same as you...but I also wished for a..." She blushed. "A successful love life. Oh, wait, let's draw our fortunes over there!"

Aching to change the subject, Chihiro turned her attention elsewhere. But Itsuki just smiled uncomfortably.

"I don't really want my fortune..."

"No? Why not?"

"...I had a really good fortune at my last New Year's shrine visit, but then the *All About* anime news leaked out that night, so I swore I'd never trust my fortune again. I think the paper said I'd have the best luck in love, too..."

Chihiro looked at the embittered Itsuki a bit awkwardly. "Um... In that case, let's go buy a lucky charm. For Mom and Dad, too."

"All right."

With Itsuki's agreement, the pair headed for the shrine office. "I'll pay for them, so buy whatever you want."

"Really? Thanks." Chihiro began making her choices.

“First off, we need one for your education.”

“Right. Then a safe birth and then one for the family and one to ward off sickness, maybe?”

“You don’t want one for love?”

“...If you don’t mind,” Chihiro said, shyly choosing a love charm. “What about you, Itsuki? You want any? For prosperity in business or success...in matchmaking...”

“...Traffic safety would be nice.”

“Oh...”

Chihiro gave a concerned look to Itsuki, who smiled and picked an amulet at random, as if trying to swallow his pain.

A Road with No Correct Answer

Mid-January rolled around and, with it, the GF Bunko releases for the month.

Volume 7 of Itsuki Hashima's *All About My Little Sister*, originally scheduled for last October, was finally out on shelves after three months of delays. It didn't get as much press as it would've right after the anime's run ended, but it still sold well, and already there was a lot of feedback on the Net.

Toki and Miyako, trawling around for reviews, found the results pretty positive, especially from readers who had discovered the series via the anime —“it's easier to identify with the protagonists,” “the author does a really good job foreshadowing and delivering on it,” “with a lot of the unpleasantness gone, it's a real good piece of work. Keep it up, and I think I can follow it going forward,” and so on. Even among fans from before the anime, or pre-*All About* Itsuki Hashima diehards, although there were a few reviews along the lines of, “The series is always great, but is it me, or is the hero not as insane as he usually is?” or “The unrelenting madness of Hashima's books is rounded off a fair bit, which is a pity,” even they generally gave it positive scores.

Miyako herself decided to read *All About* Volume 7 after dinner, picking it up from the bookstore after work. Editorial had received their comp copies a week ago, and Miyako could've taken one if she asked Toki for it, but she had a policy about buying Itsuki's books with her own money, so she held out until the release.

Nayuta looked pretty pained to see it in her hands, but she just started playing something on her handheld system instead, stealing occasional glances at her.

Hmm... This is actually decently good. Like, maybe even better than before...

Her take, after making it a fair ways in, was pretty much the same as the

masses. Itsuki's previous work had been so frantic that the reader had to keep up, but that feeling had faded away. It was just fun to read now. Just like Toki said, it was a much higher-quality piece of commercial work than before. To put it bluntly, she couldn't agree with Nayuta's *disgusting garbage* assessment at all.

But if I told the truth to Nayu, I know it'll upset her... If she asks me about it after I'm done, I don't know what I'll say to her...

As she read on, a bit troubled by the thought, Kaiko came into the living room from her bedroom. She was done with work for now, as indicated by the lack of panties over her head.

"Oh, you're reading the new *All About*?" she said, eyes turned toward Miyako's hands.

"Yeah. Have you read it yet, Kaiko?"

"Mm-hmm. Right after I got my comp copy."

Shipping those out was part-timer work, so Miyako had actually sent Kaiko Volume 7 to her own home address last week.

"So...how'd you like it?"

She glanced at Nayuta as she hesitantly asked the question.

"It was pretty good," she softly replied.

"What?! Whaaaaaaat? *Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!*" Nayuta's eyes shot open, and she screamed at them, her voice a mixture of exasperation, despair, and rage.

"What, Nayu?" Kaiko asked, calm and unruffled as she turned toward her.

"Miku, do you seriously think Volume Seven was good?"

"Yes. I really thought so."

Nayuta let out a long, exaggerated sigh of despair from the heart. "...Miku, I thought you'd be different from the anime-first rabble. I thought you really *got* Itsuki's work. But now... I can't believe you're willing to accept that machine-written garbage... And *you're* the one drawing the manga version?!"

"H-hey! That's out of line, Nayu."

Miyako stepped up to caution Nayuta, who was freely spitting out her scorn without a care in the world. She looked at Kaiko, who seemed calm as ever as she regarded Nayuta.

“You know, calling it *machine-written* might actually be the perfect way of putting it. Volume Seven’s definitely more of a calculated story. It’s not at all like the passionate writing we’ve seen from Hashima before.”

“...So you *do* see the difference,” Nayuta said.

“Of course.” Kaiko nodded. “I love Hashima’s work, from *Sister of the Apocalypse* all the way up to *All About* Volume Six—those books so obsessed with little sisters to the point of madness. But it’s also undeniable that I thought Volume Seven was good, too, in its own way.”

“Are you serious?! Then how could someone who’s loved his work since he debuted ever allow something like this to happen?! This kind of irrevocably altered *thing*... I’ll *never* stand for it!”

Nayuta’s expression had segued from pain to sorrow.

“I respect all talented, passionate creators,” Kaiko said, speaking clearly, “but I also respect the so-called ‘architect’ type—the sort who weave their work with exacting precision and calculation without letting their personal emotions seep in. There’s no absolute single answer for how a creator should work. If Hashima decided to abandon his traditional ways and re-create himself as an architect, then I respect his decision.”

Hearing Kaiko’s assessment, Nayuta made fists with both her hands, her lips quivering.

“Then you’re... You’re no *real* fan at all! If your favorite author’s going down the wrong path, isn’t it showing your love to say that it’s wrong?!”

“Of course,” she quietly replied, opting not to refute this. “I think it’s just fine for there to be fans who take that stance. But...”

Suddenly, Kaiko’s face turned grim. Nayuta took a step back before her sharp gaze.

“As a fan...or as a reader, everyone is allowed to take their own stance. But as

a creator myself, there is one thing I can absolutely declare to be true, no matter who or what it is.”

“Wh-what’s that?”

“It’s... It’s that a creator who *creates* something, no matter how shoddy it is, is ten billion times more respectable than a creator who doesn’t create anything. Or even *try* to!”

“...!”

Nayuta’s face tightened.

“A novelist who doesn’t write is just a machine for making poop! Maybe you think that Hashima is trash, but at least he’s still creating. He didn’t get all sullen, withdraw from public life, and finally declare that he’d quit writing forever and devote himself to making poop all day! Not like *you* did! Right now, Nayu, you have no right to criticize Hashima!”

“Dah—*hnnngh*...!”

Nayuta’s face turned red with rage. She gritted her teeth.

“Whoa, Kaiko, aren’t you going too far? Calm down a little...” Miyako attempted to mediate, to no avail.

Kaiko kept up the torrent of blame.

“You’re just pushing *your* idea of an ideal creator on Hashima, while you throw the expectations of your fans in the garbage and act like nothing’s amiss? How can you *do* that?! Why do *you* get to be the only victim here?! How long are you going to selfishly run from reality like this? Quit behaving like a spoiled child already!!”

“~~~~~!”

In the face of this raging torrent, Nayuta’s complexion shifted through every shade of red and finally settled on white.



To Kaiko—who had worked in secret, overcome countless trials against Itsuki, Puriketsu, and her own father to reach her current position, and even now was drawing every day to push herself further in her career—Nayuta’s words and actions post-breakup were just too much to stomach.

“Grrrrnh... Hrrnnngh... Urrrgghghh... Grrrrnnnhhhh... Grnnnkhhh... Agggggh, gnnnh... graaahhh...hrraaahhh, grrrr...gnnnhhhh... Gaaaa... **Graaahhhh!!**”

Trembling, snarling, making a hundred different faces, Nayuta suddenly stood up and screamed. Glaring vengefully at Kaiko’s face, she stormed back into her bedroom.

“Oh, you’re running?!” Kaiko called, but Nayuta shouted back without turning around:

“I’m going to write a novel!!”

Miyako opened her eyes wide, and Kaiko’s lips curved ever so faintly. And as Nayuta put a hand on her doorknob, back still turned:

“This is the first time...that any idiot has made me this angry... If I write a novel with these feelings...don’t blame me for what comes out... I’m going to throw all the readers waiting for my work down into an abyss of despair. If this leads to any deaths, it’s all *your* fault, okay?!”

“Okay. I’d love to see that. If I can help you create a masterpiece that breaks people that badly, I couldn’t be happier.”

Glancing back at the provoking Kaiko for just one moment, Nayuta entered her bedroom and slammed the door shut. In another few moments, they could hear random screaming along the lines of, “Arrrgh!” and “Hrrnnngh!” and “Nnrrrg!” and so on.

“...Uh..... Nayu’s starting to write...?”

“It looks that way,” Kaiko bluntly told the dumbfounded Miyako.

She had forgotten about it, since Kaiko was usually gentle and (outside of work mode) a model rich girl, but come to think of it, she had a fury within her—one that she freely threw against her opponents, whether they were story creators or big-name novelists.

Recalling this, she gave Kaiko a reproachful look.

“Well, maybe this is all for the better...but is that really any way to talk to her?”

Miyako was beside herself. Maybe Nayuta really *would* disappear this time. But Kaiko gave her a troubled little smile.

“Your kindness is your greatest virtue, Mya...but kindness only fixes everything in the world of harem comedies.”

Now it was Miyako’s turn to be stunned.

“Mya, I don’t think I want my editor to be a kind, motherly type who’ll spoil me and affirm everything I say to her.”

The words cut sharply into Miyako’s heart. She had been too afraid of hurting Nayuta more than she already was, too afraid of losing her, so she indulged her instead and never really tried to confront her.

Before, at the Branch Hill interview, she was asked what kind of editor she wanted to be, and she replied, “One who could cry with her writers.” The ideal editor, she said, was one who’d always be there for the writers, who’d grieve and worry with writers as much as they did—and then they’d stand up and move forward together. But just being there for a writer wasn’t good enough. When a writer is hurt enough to collapse, it’s not enough to sit there and cry with them—sometimes, you have to grab an arm and force them up, even if they hate you for it.

An editor is neither the writer’s parent nor their friend. Maybe you could balance being an editor with being a friend or family member...but if you care so much for a writer that you’re willing to accept them not being a writer any longer, then maybe you really can’t call yourself an editor. Miyako’s expression clouded—the answer she finally thought she’d found began to waver in her mind once more.

“I’m still no good at this...”

“The way you get so seriously troubled whenever this happens is your second virtue, Mya.”

Kaiko softly smiled at her.

Yuma Asks! Part 1: Novelist Nayuta Kani

The news that Nayuta had withdrawn her retirement announcement and started writing again brightened the atmosphere across the entire GF Bunko editorial department.

“Thank you, Shirakawa... You really *are* a great archangel, spreading good luck across GF Bunko...!”

“No, it was Kaiko, not me...”

Miyako tried to correct Godo’s exaggerated praise but to no avail.

“Listen up, everyone! We’re having a New Year’s Party slash victory celebration tonight! It’s the first big win of the year, and we gotta party it up!”

“Woooo!” “Sweet, boss!” “Great job, Miyako!” “Mi-ya!” “Mi-ya!” “Mi-ya!” “Mi-ya!” “Mi-ya!”

Miyako had no choice but to endure the chanting of the entire editorial department, audible even on other floors, with a look of tense embarrassment.

Regardless, now that she was back in action, Nayuta Kani attended a script meeting for the movie three days after. Once it ended, as Nayuta and Yamagata discussed their future schedules in the conference room, a nervous-looking young man ventured inside.

“Um, it’s good to meet you, Miss Kani! I, um, my name is Ikeda, and I work in editorial for *Leonardo Monthly*! I’m a huge fan of your books!”

Leonardo was an informational magazine from Gift Publishing, covering a wide range of entertainment from novels to manga, movies, TV, anime, music, games, and so on. They had featured Nayuta’s *Landscape* series several times, and while Nayuta threw all requests for article checks in Yamagata’s direction, she at least remembered the name of the magazine.

Ikeda's pitch was this: *Leonardo* would soon be kicking off a column where the actor Yuma Takashina would talk with a celebrity who'd piqued his interest. Yuma Takashina was a megastar, having worked in the business since his child-acting days, and through all the movies and TV series he'd appeared in over the years, he was now called the best young actor in Japan. He had done lots of interviews and TV features about his work before, but this was the first time he'd be taking the initiative on his own project—and to commemorate this, Yuma wanted to kick off the series with author Nayuta Kani as his first interview.

Yuma Takashina was also the lead actor in the *Silvery Landscape* movie; he and Nayuta had met briefly before the start of filming. Hearing about how he devoted all his free time to perfecting his roles and training himself, Nayuta had taken a liking to him—a surprise, considering she thought that “every hot actor must be a total hornball.” He did a great job in his *Silvery Landscape* role, grasping it at an astoundingly deep level and acting it out with everything he had.

He wanted to conduct the interview in three days. They had hoped to do it earlier, but they couldn't contact Nayuta at all, so they had just about given up on her. Ikeda pretty much flew up to this room when he'd heard she was around, in one final desperation move.

Certainly, Nayuta wasn't necessarily reluctant to see Yuma again, but:

“An interview...? I'm not very good at talking...”

“Please! This is Yuma's personal request! And I know these are just my own feelings, but this is actually the first time I've launched my own series for this magazine...and whenever I feel like I'm about to lose my mind at work, I've always read your work to spur me on. That's why I'd love to have you be our first guest as well! If there's anything I can do to help you out, I will, so please...!”

All the insistence and vigorous head-bowing made Nayuta worry she'd give in shortly. She still tried to hold out—but just then, Kaiko's face flashed back into her mind.

—*Quit behaving like a spoiled child already!!*

“Grrr...!”

Just remembering that moment still made her angry. That girl, saying whatever she wanted, not giving a single crap about other people’s feelings...!

“Miss Kani...?” Ikeda gave Nayuta a curious look as her brows arched downward.

“Oh, nothing.”

...If she could show people that she could handle this kind of non-novel work, maybe Kaiko would see Nayuta as a respectable member of society again.

“...Um. Is it okay if I don’t show my face?”

“Oh, um, yes! Of course!”

“All right. I’ll do it, then.”

“...! Th-thank you very much! I’m so happy you said yes! I’ll go tell Yuma right away!”

“What on earth brought *that* on...?!”

As overjoyed as Ikeda was, Yamagata was just as shocked that Nayuta actually agreed.

...I’m gonna get back at that panty manga artist. Wait’ll she sees this!

Nayuta firmly believed that she had to teach Kaiko a lesson or two. She’d lured Itsuki into the sordid realm of lingerie fetishism, she had gone on a trip abroad with Itsuki just because she was handling the manga for his work, she’d called Itsuki her “ideal type,” she stripped down Miyako all the time and said it was “for her manga”, and she prattled on constantly as if *she* understood Itsuki Hashima, the writer, better than Nayuta did.

If she was the first person Yuma Takashina interviewed, it’d be a feather in her cap. She was going to dominate Kaiko—not just in terms of her work but in social status, too—and then she’d know just how much lower she ranked. So the interview was underway, with nobody but Nayuta realizing the prurient motivations behind it.



Three days later, at two in the afternoon, Nayuta arrived at the Gift Publishing building with the novelty horse mask she usually wore for photoshoots. Yamagata escorted her to the reception room where the interview would take place, a gaudy, luxurious chamber that looked good in photos and was often used for interviews and entertaining important guests. Her partner for this interview was already there.

“Good to see you again, Miss Kani.”

Yuma Takashina stood up from the sofa and greeted her, his voice clear and cheerful. He was twenty years old, the same age as Nayuta, and his build was average. He didn’t have pop idol–style good looks; instead, he had a well-developed but still somehow endearing face that exuded friendliness. Anyone would call him handsome, but if he was in a lineup of professional idols or pop singers, he’d be dead-on average. Despite that, though, he had an overwhelming sense of presence. Every move, no matter how trivial or inconsequential, drew people’s attention. He had a mysterious power that way—an “aura” was the best way to put it.

“...Y-you too.”

The atmosphere was unfamiliar to her...but not necessarily unlikable. Nayuta gave him a bow.

They were joined in the room by Ikeda from *Leonardo* editorial, Yuma’s manager, and a photographer. After some quick introductions, Nayuta sat down on the sofa across from Yuma.

“Now, apologies for making requests so early on, but I don’t have a lot of time to work with, so do you mind if we go straight to the discussion?”

“Sure,” Yuma said as he took out a tape recorder, “that’s fine.”

“Okay... I’m ready when you are.”

Yuma pressed “Record” and put the recorder on the middle of the table. Then he gave Nayuta a soft smile and a bow.

“First off, Miss Kani, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I really thought you’d be the best person for this first installment, so I all but pleaded with Mr. Ikeda to find you.”

“Ah... Why me?”

Nayuta couldn't help but ask. She had been wondering that since Ikeda burst into the conference room three days ago.

“Well, the whole reason I thought about taking this project in the first place was because of you, Miss Kani.”

“Oh...?”

“I'm a little embarrassed to say this, but with my projects, I'm usually so preoccupied with creating the role I've been assigned that, whenever I'm reading scripts or novels, I only really pay attention to my own character. But *The Silvery Landscape* was the first book I read where I really got absorbed in the stories of characters besides my own. After we wrapped shooting on the film, I read all the other books in the *Landscape* series, and I got so fascinated by the lives of all the characters in them. It really made me want to meet with and talk to a lot of other people about their lives—people outside my own work. That's the reason why I decided to embark on this interview project, and that's why I wanted to talk to you first, since you inspired me to take this interest in other walks of life. So today, I'd really like to find out what kind of person you are, this person who so vividly depicts the lives of so many fascinating people.”

“Wow, you're making me nervous...”

Being spoken of in such passionate terms made Nayuta's face flush. She smiled a bit, looking tense.

“...That's a great honor and everything, but I don't think I can live up to your expectations.”

“How do you mean?”

“I'm really not that deep of a person...”

This wasn't mere modesty. It came from the heart.

“I was mostly a shut-in during my high school years, so I don't have as much life experience as most people. I've never had a part-time job or anything, and I can count my friends on my fingers, pretty much. As for my family... Well, my

father's Russian, which may be a little unusual, but otherwise it's a normal family. So when people tell me that the way I portray characters is so deep and realistic, I'm not sure I get it, so to speak..."

Nayuta had been uncomfortable with this ever since her debut. Readers and critics called her a "writer of humanity," "possessing so much reality," "her characters seeming truly alive," and so on and so forth, but she herself had no real sense of this at all. She never thought too deeply about the lives of her characters. These sentences formed themselves in her mind, and she just typed them out. When people said that her characters were so realistic, all she could think was, *Really?*

The only people in her life she could honestly say she "knew well" were Itsuki, Miyako, and then her parents, pretty much. There was no way, she thought, that someone born from her mind could be "deep enough to seem truly alive."

Yuma looked surprised hearing this.

"Oh, you don't think? But I think it's true that all the characters in the *Landscape* series are really realistic."

"They say that, yes, but I'm just writing from my imagination, so..."

Nayuta gave Yuma a troubled look as he continued.

"You said you don't have much real-life experience...but what about things that aren't real?"

"Hmm?"

"For example, novels or manga or movies..."

"...Well, I did have a lot of free time, so I read a bunch of books, and there'd be days where I'd be gaming the whole time."

"And to you, would that be as much of a 'living experience' as a so-called 'real' one?"

"Well, when I say *books*, it's pretty much all light novels and manga. And with games, it's mostly retro games, you know? Old-school graphics and everything."

Nayuta smirked at this. But Yuma remained earnest.

“Myself, I’ve been acting since I was a child, so I haven’t experienced much of a so-called ‘normal’ life, either—playing with friends after school, studying for exams together, that kind of thing. I was enrolled in a regular high school, but I hardly attended classes in person at all. But it was also my job sometimes to play the role of an ordinary student. That and, you know, I’ve played a cop, a scientist, a murderer, a samurai, a psychic, someone with just a few days to live... A lot of different things. But none of them have been real experiences.”

“It’d be pretty rough if they were.”

“Right,” Yuma said with a laugh. “So to me, I don’t think you necessarily need real-life experience to create a realistic character.”

“...Oh?”

Nayuta was intrigued by Yuma’s words. These observations, coming from an actor who had played lots of very different roles to high acclaim, sounded very persuasive to her.

“When I prepare for a role, I carefully read through the dialogue and actions of the character I’m playing in the script or source material...but not much of that stuff explains the background behind *why* the character said this or did that. With those elements, I try to imagine my own background for the character, for my own satisfaction, before I ask the director or author for the ‘right’ answer. Of course, my interpretation is wrong a lot of the time...but I think it helps me get closer to the role I’m playing.”

“Ahhh...” Nayuta was genuinely impressed. “You know, I often imagine the backstories of characters, too, when they’re not spelled out for you. Like, the guy from *Spelunker*’s personal life or what kind of turtle Bowser Jr.’s mother is and stuff.”

“I think I can become a character by really focusing on that one person, but I think you do that, too, Miss Kani, and on a regular basis. You depict all the characters as your own alter egos, in a way, not as these created characters out of nowhere. I think that’s why the characters in the *Landscape* series all have these completely different personalities and backgrounds, yet they seem to be equally as realistic.”

“Ohhh...”

Nayuta let out an admiring sigh, as if Yuma was talking about someone else. It didn't *feel* like she was doing anything that amazing. But if you see all your characters as yourself—whether high school students, elementary students, teachers, old people, men, women—then it makes sense that you could freely write about them for days on end. Readers and industry people had thrown the word *talent* around a lot when talking about her. Nayuta never really thought about the concept much, but now, for the first time, she felt she was touching the true nature of it.

“Ahhh...” Nayuta took another deep breath. “Haaaaaah...”

She looked straight into Yuma's eyes.

He was the same age as her but so much more analytical about everything. It's what you'd expect, after all, from a first-class actor who played so many characters from such a young age.

As she continued to respectfully stare at him:

“Um, Miss Kani?” Yuma turned away, blushing a bit.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I've never really thought too deeply about myself, so I was just admiring your wisdom, Mr. Takashina.”

“No, I mean, this is just my own imagination, so... My apologies if it was a little rude.”

“No, not at all. I was glad for it.”



She gave him a frank smile. Yuma opened his mouth halfway, as if fascinated by her for a moment.



Their conversation continued in this lively fashion, extending on for another hour past the sixty minutes originally scheduled. It was the first time Nayuta ever talked so much about her own work, even in private.

“Well, this has turned out to be a wonderfully deep conversation! This is gonna be a must-read article, not just for Takashina fans but Kani’s as well. Can we get one final word from the both of you?”

Yuma had other work shortly, so his manager urged him to wrap it up. Ikeda obliged.

“Well, I’m really looking forward to Miss Kani’s new work. Oh, also, it’s a real pity that I can’t be in the movie sequel. Do you think there’s a way I could maybe make a cameo in *The Golden Landscape*? I’ll do it for free!”

He meant it as a joke. Every self-contained *Landscape* novel featured a different set of characters, so Yuma’s role wouldn’t appear in any other film.

“Well, they take place in a unified world, so maybe he could appear as a passerby or something. That wouldn’t be a problem. But if it’s you, Mr. Takashina, you have this aura that might make you stand out too much, huh...? I’ll talk to the director about it, but don’t hold your breath.”

Nayuta, now totally at ease, gave Yuma a suitable rejoinder to wrap up the interview. She watched as Yuma left the reception room, hurried along by his manager.

Then Yuma turned around with some regret on his face. “Thank you very much for today, Miss Kani. It was a pleasure to hear so many valuable things from you.”

“Oh, this is the most fun I’ve had in a while, too. Let’s meet again, if we ever get the chance.”

She meant the first sentence to be sincere and the second as mere social

politeness. But both of them made Yuma's face light up.

"Can we? I'd love to!"

"Oh, um, sure."

He whipped out his phone. "If you like, could we exchange contact info?! I'll send you a message."

Yuma was blushing like a naive little boy, not at all the movie star he was, and Nayuta readily agreed to his offer. Next to them, the manager stared as if he couldn't believe any of this.



That night, when Miyako, Nayuta, and Kaiko were having dinner together: "How was your interview today, Nayu?"

Miyako had been worrying about it ever since she found out. She wondered how Nayuta, who could be painfully shy, would handle being interviewed by such a well-known celebrity.

"It went wonderfully, of course. As a full-fledged *professional*, I talked all about my work style and so on." Nayuta gave Kaiko a smug look.

"If he got that out of you, he must've been a really good listener."

She frowned. "Mm... You make it sound like it went well entirely because of him."

"Am I wrong?"

"...Well, maybe there was some of that aspect, but I *can* talk like a writer, you know."

"Hee-hee! You can?" Kaiko gave a lukewarm laugh that Nayuta found off-putting.

"That sure is nice, though. I wish I could see Yuma Takashina in the flesh. After the interview, Kirara was going on and on and bragging to me like a little girl."

"Are you a fan of his, Mya?"

"Sure, I like him a lot. He's in my favorite drama, and he's a really good actor,

too. You know him, don't you, Kaiko?"

"The only TV I watch is lingerie commercials."

"How do you avoid everything else...?"

Miyako squinted at Kaiko as she took out her phone and did a photo search.

"Oh, it's this person...? Maybe I've seen him before? I'm not sure. It's not like he's super hot, is he?"

"No, he may not look all that special in photos, but when he's acting, he's amazing."

"Cool just when he moves, huh? Sounds like the Turn A Gundam to me."

"I'm not sure what that comparison means..."

"Well," a much more jocular Nayuta said, "want me to invite you next time, Mya?"

"Huh? You're seeing him again?"

"Nothing's decided yet, but he said he'll contact me soon. We exchanged account info."

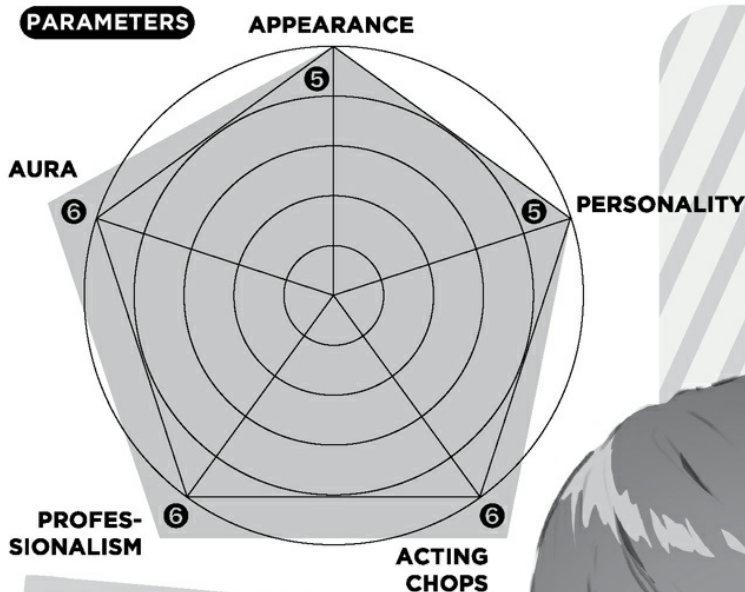
"You did?!" Miyako's voice rose a notch. "You basically got Yuma Takashina's number?! That's amazing... My college friends would die of envy if I told them..." Then her face went serious. "But are you okay? Celebrities like him... I bet they play around a lot..."

"Oh, Takashina isn't that type of person," Nayuta assured her, sounding a tad miffed. "He really likes my books a bunch, and he's read them really in-depth, so I think we've still got a lot to talk about."

Miyako and Kaiko each gave Nayuta a look. How could Nayuta ever act so offended and defensive about any man besides Itsuki? For Nayuta Kani, whose entire world once revolved around Itsuki Hashima, this was a sea change—not a bad thing at all but still something Miyako found difficult to swallow.

YUMA TAKASHINA

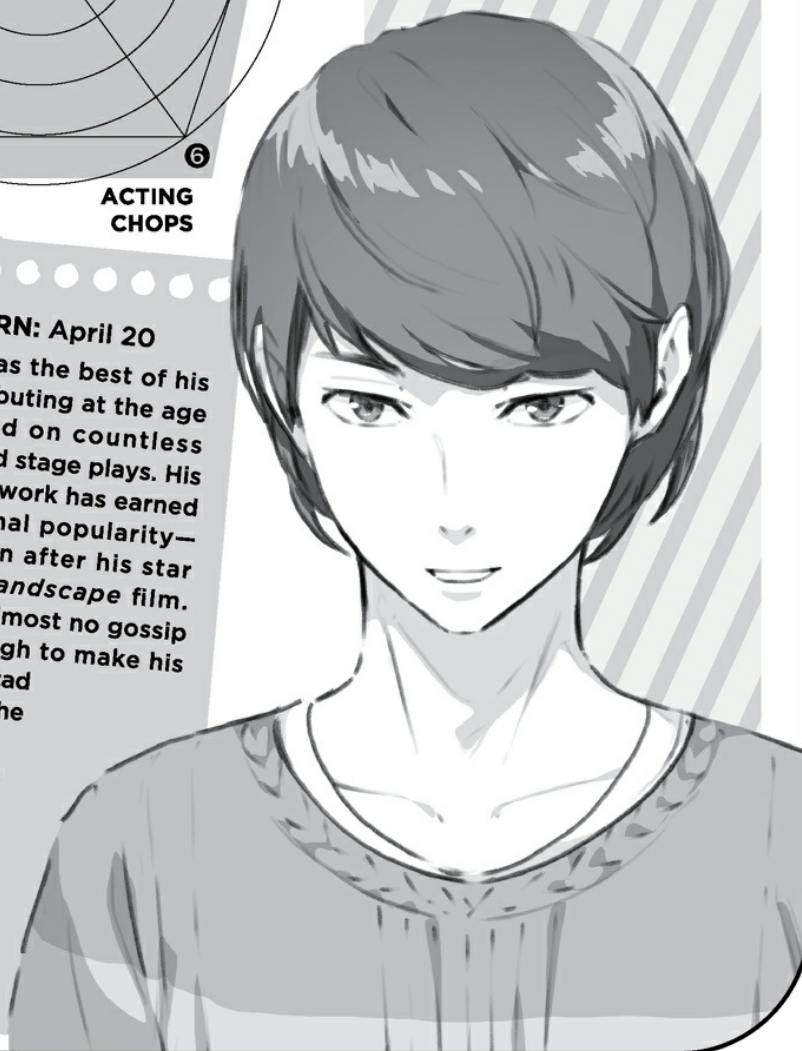
PARAMETERS



AGE: 20

BORN: April 20

An actor renowned as the best of his generation. After debuting at the age of four, he's worked on countless movies, TV shows, and stage plays. His stoic approach to his work has earned him cross-generational popularity—which has only grown after his star turn in the *Silvery Landscape* film. Despite that, there's almost no gossip about him at all—enough to make his manager and agency a tad worried. The only thing he doesn't like is bananas (eating huge amounts to gain weight resulted in some mental trauma).



THE PERFECT PROTAGONIST, CHOSEN BY THE TIMES

The Melancholy of the Girl with the Divine Ass

It was a Saturday in late January, a week after Japan's main standardized national college entry exam, and Chihiro was back in Ashley Ono's office to say hello and tidy up a bit. Ashley had been kind enough to let Chihiro prioritize her exam prep over her part-time job, so this was the first time she'd reported for duty in around two months. Her office was one thing, but Ashley's personal space next to it would look like a cyclone hit it even when Chihiro came in weekly to clean, so just imagining what it must look like after two months gave her a scary sort of thrill.

So it was with great enthusiasm that she opened the door to the Ono Tax Accounting Office, carrying a bag with her cleaning stuff and an apron. There, she quickly spotted Ashley, lazing around in sweats and a pair of glasses.

"Happy New Year, Ashley."

"Yeah, you too. Here's to another year, huh?"

Ashley's voice seemed softer than usual as she greeted her.

"You look like you're in a pretty chipper mood, Ashley. Did something good happen?"

Ashley gave her a slightly panicked expression. "Do I? W-well, um, I suppose so, yes...but how'd your entry exam go, Chihiro?"

"Oh, um, really well actually, thanks."

"That's good. But the real work's still just beginning for you, huh? Too early to let up yet."

"For sure. I'm probably not gonna be able to come back for a while again, so I'll be sure to give this place a deep clean today."

"Hee-hee! Thank you."

Putting on her apron, Chihiro opened the back door leading to the living room. And of course, just as she imagined, it was an utter pigsty—

“Huh...?!”

Actually, it wasn't. In fact, the room was perfectly tidy, not a single empty bottle or chip bag lying on the floor. She thought for a moment that Ashley just stuffed the closets and kitchen cabinets with trash instead, but when she checked, she found all of them neatly organized.

“Why is it so *clean* in here?!” she couldn't help but ask.

“H-hey, even I clean sometimes.”

“But there's no way you can keep it *this* clean, Ashley!”

“Wow, Chihiro, who do you think I am, huh?”

Chihiro hurriedly checked the other rooms while Ashley gave her a look. The bedroom, the bath and toilet—everything was in tip-top shape.

“No way...”

She found herself shrugging in front of the bathroom sink, a bit disappointed. Keisuke had been doing an excellent job keeping their family house clean, and Aoba was doing a similarly thorough job over at Itsuki's place, so she was looking forward to a nice, extended cleaning session to take her mind off her exams.

“What happened to the messy, sloppy, lazy, incorrigible Ashley I used to know...?”

“You know I can clean for myself if I want to,” Ashley said reproachfully.

“But why did you *want* to out of nowhere, is what I'm asking...”

Then Chihiro noticed the toothbrush holder on one corner of the sink. There were two brushes in it.

“Two toothbrushes...?” Chihiro muttered.

“Ah...” Ashley panicked a little. Now Chihiro was starting to get the gist.

“Ashley, do you have a new...lover?”

“...Yes,” Ashley said, blushing a bit as she nodded.

“Well, congratulations on that!”

Chihiro was honestly happy for her, despite the surprise. She was always talking about how much she wanted a guy in her life, and to Chihiro, the idea of Ashley having someone to prop up the shambles that were her private life was cause for a sigh of relief.

“Um, may I ask if it’s Kaizu, maybe?”

She had asked Ashley about her relationship with Kaizu before. They had seemed pretty close at the cherry-blossom party last spring, and he got a taxi for her after she drank herself into a stupor. But Ashley described him simply as *just an old acquaintance*. But this time:

“...Well, yes.” Ashley nodded.

“Oooh. So you’re finally being honest about it, huh?”

“Don’t paint me to be this *tsundere* stereotype. I really didn’t think anything of Makina at all. It just kind of worked out this way, is all!”

The way Ashley stuck her nose up in the air as she said this made her every bit the *tsundere* stereotype she claimed not to be.

“Awww, that’s cute, Ashley...”

Chihiro’s warm smile only made Ashley’s face redder.

“B-but what about *you*, Chihiro? You’re gonna graduate from high school soon—do you have anyone in your life?”

Chihiro’s face darkened.

“...Chihiro?”

“...I asked someone to be my boyfriend a little while ago, but he turned me down.”

“...Ohhh...”

Ashley awkwardly looked away. The euphoria, after all, still hadn’t faded much.

“I’m amazed there’s a guy out there who’d reject you, though.”

“...Well, it’s not really any wonder. He never even considered me as a girl before, so...”

“This guy—it’s not someone from school? One of Itsuki’s friends?”

Ashley could surmise that much. Chihiro had hid her sex only from Itsuki’s social group, so when she said he didn’t “consider” her as a girl, she probably meant that he literally didn’t know she *was* a girl.

“...Haruto, maybe?”

Got it in one—Chihiro nodded and blushed.

“Wow... Haruto, huh? Hmm... Hee-hee-hee... You’ve got good taste, don’t you?”

Chihiro pouted at the grinning Ashley. “S-stop laughing at me!”

“Ah, I’m sorry. But I think you and Haruto would be a really good match.”

“You think so?!”

“Oh, yes. You’re both so serious-minded, and it seems to me like you have a lot in common.”

“Yeah! I totally agree!” Chihiro’s eyes lit up...but quickly clouded once more. “...But anyway, Fuwa has someone else he likes; he never saw me as a girl, and he’s got an incredibly cute little sister, too...”

“Don’t worry,” Ashley said, trying to cheer her up. “When you get down to it, Haruto’s just a horny young man. Get him in the sack once, and I’m sure he’ll come begging for you.”

“The, the *sack*...?” Chihiro blushed. “F-Fuwa’s not like *that*! Not him!”

“You don’t think? Because *I* think that if you catch him alone and walk into the room naked, he’ll turn into a slaving beast...”

“I-I’m not gonna do *that*! Besides, it’s not like he’d enjoy seeing me naked...”

Her eyes went down to her flat chest. Despair cascaded over her.

“It’s a lot more than breasts that make a woman attractive, you know. You’ve

got a lot of appeal, I think. You could beat out those big-boobed bimbos any day of the year.”

“It’s more than breasts...?”

Suddenly, the face of Setsuna Ena flashed across her mind. As he so indelicately put it, Chihiro’s rear end was a *once-in-a-millennium* masterpiece. She had dismissed that as the delusional ravings of a sex offender, but then again, he turned out to be Puriketsu, one of the greatest illustration virtuosos of his generation. With his aesthetic sense, maybe that was actually worth believing in.

Yes...maybe if I show my butt to Haruto, he’ll finally start seeing me as a girl...

...Wait, no! I’m not some freak!

She promptly dispelled the idea from her mind.

“B-by the way, what would you describe as *your* appeals, Ashley?”

Ashley gave her a lustful smile. “Hee-hee! Well...it’s my mouth.”

“Your mouth...?”

Chihiro looked at Ashley’s mouth. It was small, with thin lips, but it didn’t seem all that terribly different from anyone else’s to her. She had never really considered what made a “good” or “bad” mouth in the first place.

“Not my mouth itself, I mean, but...you know, the technique, including the tongue and stuff. Makina said he could never get it up around me in a million years, but in just a few seconds, he was putty in my hands...”

“Um...?”

Chihiro raised an eyebrow, not quite keeping up with this. Given that this was Ashley Ono she was here with, it was safe to assume she was talking about something sexy...but she had no idea what a mouth had to do with all that. Probably more than just kissing, but...

“Hee-hee-hee! But maybe,” Ashley teased, “that kind of talk’s still a little early for you.”

I pay attention in health class and everything. I do real well on the tests. But

maybe there are some things you just can't learn about in a classroom... That "vibrator," for example. I may need to study up more if I want to polish my feminine charms. Maybe I should borrow some books or games from Itsuki...?

Now Chihiro was seriously debating it.



After finishing what little cleaning needed to be done and cooking several days' worth of meals for Ashley, Chihiro left the office. She then went to the train station so she could drop by Itsuki's apartment for the first time in a while.

As she walked up to the building, a young man with garishly dyed hair crossed her path.

"Oh, hey there, Chihiro!"

Setsuna Ena jogged up to her, beaming. Chihiro had mainly thought of him as a creepy deviant—he *had* pulled her pants down the first time they met, after all—but now that they were better acquainted with each other, Chihiro was no longer scurrying away from him on sight.

"Boy, it's been a long time, huh? By the way, can I look at your ass?!"

If the conversation was going straight to this, maybe she should have scurried away after all.

"I'm not gonna show it to you. Ever."

"I'll pay you!"

"No."

"No...? Awww, too bad."

Chihiro's instant rejection made Setsuna relent surprisingly fast. Maybe it was her imagination, but he seemed a little distraught over something else.

"...Do you have a work meeting or something today, Setsuna?"

"Yeah, more or less. I've been offered to do the art for Yanagase's new series, but I'm kind of waiting to give a reply."

"How come?"

“Well, you know, I’ve been doing some thinking...”

“Thinking? You actually think sometimes, Setsuna...?”

Setsuna snickered at Chihiro’s sincere surprise. “You probably think I live entirely off instinct, don’tcha? No thoughts in my mind at all.”

“That’s right.”

“Awww, mean...” Setsuna laughed, then let out a little sigh. “But this is the second, you know, after *SILLIES*, when I had a series get canceled due to low sales. It’s kind of a huge shock.”

The Goddess Must Be Punished! series, written by Makoto Yanagase, would be wrapping up its run with Volume 5 next month. Volume 1 was a pretty good seller, thanks in no small part to Setsuna’s illustrations, but the story was themed around fetish content that, quite frankly, not a lot of readers could keep up with. Of course, there was always going to be a certain hard-core fan base for any “unique” genre like that, so *Goddess* did make it up to Volume 5, but the publisher decided that they couldn’t keep it going any longer past that.

“Well, I don’t think that’s *your* fault, Setsuna...”

This wasn’t a show of concern—she was just stating facts. In the light novel business, things like the cover art and packaging do play a major role in getting readers to try Volume 1 of a series, but after that, the actual story content is the most important factor. If Volume 1 sells well but the numbers start tanking in later volumes, it shows that the story didn’t have the power to make readers keep making purchases. (Of course, *SILLIES* got canceled mostly because of the writer going out of control and self-imploding; Setsuna was more of a victim than a perpetrator with that one.)

“Yeah, that’s what KenKen told me and all...but I still think that if there was more power to my art...if I had this crazy charm that’d get people to buy books just for the illustrations, I can’t help but think we could’ve kept it going longer.”

Setsuna humbly shrugged to himself. When push came to shove, Chihiro thought, he really *was* dedicated to his art. That’s why he didn’t hesitate to strip the pants off a stranger to grow as an artist. As the victim, Chihiro wasn’t particularly happy about that, but even she had to appreciate his dedication—

but not enough to show her ass.

Then she recalled what had happened at Ashley's office earlier.

You've got a lot of appeal, I think. You could beat out those big-boobed bimbos any day of the year.

"Hey, can I ask you a question? Do you really think my butt is that...good of a butt?" The question made Chihiro blush as she asked it.

"Of course!" Setsuna instantly replied. "The most divine ass of the past millennium!"

"...Well," she continued, trying to hold back her embarrassment, "what exactly, like, makes it so much better than other people's butts?"

Setsuna thought for a moment. "...If I'm going to explain that, we need to talk a little about asses in general first."

"Okay..."

"So human beings are the only creatures that have real asses...or, like, the kind of nice, round, plump ones that I love."

"Uh-huh..."

Chihiro awkwardly tried to remain an active participant in this conversation. It was tough.

"So as humans evolved and came to walk upright on two legs, they developed certain muscles that resulted in their rear ends naturally filling out like that—that real nice, round, peach-like shape. A straight-up 'peach' ass is kind of a bonus that comes with the legs on a woman's figure."

"I see..."

Certainly, four-legged animals like dogs and cows didn't have asses as big and round as people did—and they were too hidden by fur and tails to stand out much anyway.

"So only humans, who lost their hair and tail in the process of evolution, have these nice, plump asses. Something that doesn't really *have* to be so beautiful but just kind of evolved as a nice bonus on top of everything else! And when

you think about it, don't you think that's super amazing?! The ass on a person is the most purely *beautiful* part of the whole body! The greatest work of art found on the entire human body is right at the ass!"

Only human beings have a God. And in much the same way, only they have something of such pure beauty, not born out of necessity for some purpose. And that was why Setsuna Ena, the artist, loved butts so much. It was an unexpectedly logical explanation, and Chihiro was both surprised and a little impressed by it.

"...All right. I certainly see why you like butts so much, Setsuna...but what's so special about mine?"

"Like I just said," Setsuna began, "an ass can't really work if it's all by itself. It has to be framed by the legs, the hips, and the rest of the body in this really delicate balance, or it'll never be a truly beautiful ass."

"Uh-huh..."

"So along those lines, you've got the most divine...most perfect balance going. You've got two slender legs, bearing just the right amount of muscle and fat to showcase the perfect curve. Plus, your upper body has no excess fat on it, which perfectly complements the ass. You have to understand, Chihiro, your whole body was born to show off this nice, round ass. Like, I could even say that your ass *is* your body, if you get me?"

"Will you stop exaggerating like that, you perv?!" Chihiro resisted the urge to kick him in the nuts and walk away.

"Why are you angry with me? I'm praising you!"

Chihiro heaved a sigh, as Setsuna was apparently serious. He was describing her as some kind of walking ass, but to him, he must've wanted to just give Chihiro's rear end the compliments it deserved.

"Haaah... Well, thank you."

"Huh?! So you're gonna show me your ass?!"

"No, all right?!"

"Oh..."

Disappointment filled Setsuna's face.

"And, I mean, if you have all the observational skills that you clearly do, can't you visualize a butt from the legs or body or whatever without actually having to see it?"

"Sure, I can do that...but it's just an image. Not the real thing."

"You can...?" Chihiro rolled her eyes. "But your job isn't to sketch real-life butts, right? You're drawing illustrations of butts that are even more amazing than anything in real life. And I don't really understand how great my butt is, but if you actually saw it, wouldn't that be detrimental to your imagination skills? Like, they say that the *Venus de Milo* looks so beautiful because her missing arms force the viewer into imagining a beauty beyond anything in reality."

"...!" Setsuna's eyes widened. "That never occurred to me..."

Chihiro was just saying what popped into her mind; there was no deep thought behind it, but something about it must've rung true with Setsuna.

"Like the *Venus de Milo*... I've only seen half of your ass, but that actually gets me closer to the ideal one...? There's still a chance that I can conceive an even better ass than the ass of the millennium? Like, the super-godly ass of *ten* millenniums...?!"

"Um... Yeah. Sounds right to me."

"Ohhh... Now I get it... I *get* it!"

Chihiro felt like she could see a new gleam in Setsuna's eyes—shining as strong as a ripe, plump ass. Then she watched as Setsuna began walking in a circle around her, eyes constantly transfixed on her body.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to imagine your ass, so I'm making a 3-D model of your naked body in my mind."

"Y-you freak!"

Chihiro blushed as she covered her breasts and rear with her arms.

“I see it... I’m starting to see it!”



“Can you *not* see it, please?!”

But Chihiro’s protests fell on deaf ears. Setsuna was breathing quicker now.

“Nice, nice...! This is just the best body ever...! I love how there’s no excess to it at all, except for your ass! It’s like your boobs and stuff don’t even exist!”

“D-don’t exist...? You imagine my body and then you say *that*? That’s pretty rude.”

“Wait... I’m getting it... Here it comes...!! Whooooaaahhh! Wow, I, uh, I think I’ve really broken out of my shell now! I gotta get back home and start drawing!”

“Do you...?”

“Thanks a bunch, Chihiro! Whenever I finally draw the ultimate ass I’m picturing in my mind, you’re gonna be the first person I show it to—trust me! Then we can see how your actual ass compares!”

“Absolutely not!”

“Anyway, have a good one, Chihiro! Bye!”

Chihiro gave Setsuna a thousand-yard stare as he happily walked away. Having a naked 3-D model of her in his mind was kind of regrettable, but hopefully this meant he would stop being so persistent in the pursuit of her ass.

Regaining her composure, Chihiro began walking toward Itsuki’s apartment again. Her mind wandered back to the topic of her ass, after all the praise Setsuna had just given it.

Is my butt really that amazing, though...?

Could it become a major source of appeal for her, comparable to boobs on other women? Setsuna was a dangerous sexual deviant, yes, but he was also undeniably a real artist. If her butt could drive him to be so insistent about its qualities, maybe she should have some more confidence in it...?

She felt an urge to confirm it for herself, so she took out her phone and sent Haruto a message.

Fuwa, do you like butts?

The “Read” icon popped up next to the text immediately, but it took a while for a response to come back. Five or so minutes later, Haruto finally answered.

I’m not sure what inspired this, Chihiro, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to try adopting some kind of quirky new personality like that.

...But no, I’m not that interested in butts. I like boobs.

The honest word of caution, paired with an equally honest reply, made Chihiro tear up a little bit.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What does Chihiro do to relax besides
make Gundam models?



.....Make Zoids models.....

QUESTION

What's Chihiro's favorite video game?



.....Armored Core.....

QUESTION

What do you think's the most important
thing you need in cooking?



Skill. Cooking is a science.

Love!



A New Love

It was February 3, the night of the Setsubun holiday that heralded the beginning of spring in the old Japanese calendar. Miyako, Nayuta, and Kaiko were enjoying a dinner of holiday-themed *futomaki* sushi rolls, now on sale for half price at the grocery store, cut up for convenience's sake instead of eaten as is in the traditional way. There was a gaudy, seafood-filled *futomaki*, one with fried shrimp, one with eel, and a couple that were wrapped with meat or egg instead of seaweed. They also had a Setsubun-themed cake roll for dessert.

"I think the whole 'tradition' of *futomaki* for Setsubun is pretty ridiculous, but it *is* nice to try all these novelty varieties this time of year. This fried shrimp roll really ought to be an all-year offering."

The sight of Nayuta stuffing her mouth with a full fried-shrimp roll like a hamster made Miyako laugh.

"You really like shrimp, don't you, Nayu? Was that always true for you?"

"I always kind of liked them..." Nayuta's face clouded a bit. "...but it was mainly my ex who made them a favorite for me. He liked shrimp, so his sister made a lot of dishes with shrimp in them for him, and I ended up a fan."

"Nayu..."

Miyako felt a pang of sadness at Nayuta's choice of saying *my ex* and *him* instead of Itsuki's name. It had already been nearly two months since their breakup. Was it really going to end like this...?

Suddenly, Nayuta's phone went off. It was the notification sound from the LINE social network, and Nayuta picked it up while still wielding a giant *futomaki* roll in her right hand.

"That's bad manners," admonished Miyako.

Nayuta checked the screen. “Oh... It’s from Mr. Takashina.”

“What?!”

“He says, ‘I have some free time in my schedule, so how about dinner on the night of the eleventh?’”

“Wait, he asked you out on a date...?!”

Nayuta grinned at the panicking Miyako. “I think you’re too romantic for your own good, Mya. He’s just inviting me to dinner because he has some free time, no?”

“No, no, no, no, no. This is Yuma Takashina! He’s got to have an absolutely packed schedule. If he’s taking precious time to ask you out, that’s really saying something, you know?”

“Hmm... You think so?” Nayuta seemed dubious.

“So are you gonna go, or...?”

“Oh, I might as well. I have no plans, so...”

“You’re going?! Really?! A date with Yuma Takashina?!”

“I *told* you, it’s not a date. Probably.” Nayuta’s voice hardened a little. “And besides, even if Mr. Takashina does feel that way, it’s not really a problem for me. I wanna start considering a new relationship sometime soon.”

“...Are you serious?”

“Well...who knows?”

Miyako raised an eyebrow at Nayuta’s smiling evasion. But:

“Are you being her mom again, Mya?” Kaiko, who had been chewing on a *futomaki* this whole time, suddenly spoke up.

“Ugh...”

Miyako fell silent. Nayuta *was* a grown woman, and Miyako had no right to gripe about the company she kept.

“...Well, if you’re interested in going, why don’t you? But when you do, can you share your location info on your phone with me? And don’t let him take

you to a second place after the first one. And be back by midnight... No, eleven.”

“You’re so being her mom,” an exasperated Kaiko said.



At seven p.m. on February 11, Nayuta went into the restaurant where she was due to meet Yuma Takashina. It was on the first floor of a three-story building in a quiet residential area, and there was no sign out front, so Nayuta actually passed by it once before discovering it. Its interior was Japanese-style, with a nice, relaxed atmosphere but none of the stuffiness of a “high-class” restaurant.

She gave Takashina’s name to a member of the staff dressed in a traditional *samue* and was led into a room—apparently all the tables were private. Yuma was already there, standing up and greeting Nayuta when she came in.

“Thank you for coming! I’m glad you were able to make it.”

“No, no, thank you for inviting me.”

She sat across from Yuma. The room had a sunken *kotatsu*-style table, which Nayuta appreciated. She never liked kneeling on the floor much.

“Was it hard for you to find this place?”

“Yeah,” Nayuta honestly replied. “I passed right by it once.”

“Sorry about that,” Yuma said, looking apologetic. “I wish I could’ve met you somewhere first, so I could show you inside. Or maybe take a cab to pick you up?”

“Oh no, you don’t need to worry that much... But if you’re walking around outside, do you get noticed by fans and stuff?”

Yuma grinned a little. “Well, I use a mask and sunglasses to hide my face...but yeah, sometimes I still get noticed anyway.”

“Wow. Must be tough, being famous.”

“Nah, well, in my line of work, you *want* people to remember your face, so...”

A waiter brought in some hand towels and menus. “Thank you very much,” Yuma said as he opened up his menu.

“Would you like to have something to drink first?”

“Oh, right,” Yuma told the waiter, a bit flustered as he tried finding the drinks section.

“I think this is the drinks menu,” Nayuta said, another menu in her hands.

“Ahhh, I see. What would you like to drink, Miss Kani?”

Nayuta scanned the list. There was an extensive sake section, as befits a Japanese restaurant, but the menu also featured a good selection of wine, beer, whiskey, and cocktails.

“I’ll have a Vedett, please.”

Vedett Extra White was a Belgian beer with a uniquely fruity, refreshing taste. It was also low in alcohol, and while Nayuta tended to prefer her beer a bit stronger and richer, this would be perfect for the first round.

“Um, Vedett? What’s that?”

“It’s a beer. From Belgium.”

“Oh, I see. I’ll have one, too, then—oh wait, actually, can I look at the drinks menu after all?”

“Not a fan of beer, maybe?” Nayuta asked as she handed it over.

“Well, I haven’t really had much of it in the first place, but it just seems so bitter to me...”

“Ah, well, Vedett isn’t very bitter at all.”

“It’s not? ...All right, I think I will have that Vedett, then. Sorry.” Yuma still seemed a bit suspicious of it. After the waiter left, he turned back toward the food menu.

“So what’s good at this restaurant?” Nayuta asked.

“This is actually the first time for me, too, but the guy at the agency who told me about it said it has really good shrimp and seafood.”

“Shrimp! I love shrimp.”

Yuma smiled at the sudden urgency to Nayuta’s voice.

“You mentioned that in the afterword to *The Pale Landscape*.”

“Oh... I did?”

Nayuta’s deadline-ignoring style meant that she usually wrote afterwords in a big hurry, just typing anything that was on her mind at the moment, and she never remembered any of them afterward.

“Right. I think you wrote, ‘My pen name means “crab,” but lately I’ve been loving shrimp a lot more than crab.’”

“Ohhh, I think I maybe remember that a little... Did you choose this place because I like shrimp?”

“Well, sort of. I love all kinds of seafood, too, so it works out well for both of us.”

Then the beer arrived, along with a small appetizer of *nikogori*, or jellied fish with shrimp and lotus root. After they ordered a few dishes that seemed suitable for family-style dining, they lightly clinked their glasses in a toast.

“...?! Wow, you’re right! It’s not bitter... It’s so deliciously refreshing.” The first sip of Vedett was clearly a surprise for Yuma.

“Right, isn’t it?”

Nayuta enjoyed her own glass, glad that he liked her suggestion. Then it occurred to her that maybe Miyako was right—maybe this *was* a date. When Yuma had asked her out in that text, she really did think that the invite was just for a quick meal to kill some free time...but looking at this place, it was more of a neighborhood hidden gem. Yuma must’ve gone out of his way to find this location, one that suited Nayuta’s tastes while offering them both privacy. He seemed to be pretty unfamiliar with things during the ordering process; maybe he didn’t eat out much in the first place.

It definitely didn’t *feel* like an “I just happened to have some free time open up” kind of thing—and once Nayuta realized that, she began to feel nervous. She glanced at Yuma’s face. Their eyes met, and she quickly darted hers away

and had another sip of beer.

“Something wrong?” Yuma asked, eyebrows arched.

“N-no... You know, this *nikogori* is really good. If they’re offering this as their baseline appetizer, they’re pretty high-level.”

She took up a mouthful, trying to change the subject. It really was quite good, the condensed umami flavor melting across her tongue. Other dishes began to arrive in as well. This restaurant seemed to take a creative approach to Japanese, so every dish was arranged for maximum style points. The effort was largely lost on Nayuta, who quickly snapped up large portions of the carpaccio-style salmon and fried freshwater shrimp and put them on her plate.

“Do you like it?” Yuma asked nervously.

“Yes, it’s really great.”

“Oh, I’m glad,” he said, relieved. “I don’t eat out very much at all, so I don’t really know many good restaurants...”

“Ahhh, you don’t?”

“Yeah, sometimes I go out to eat with the crew and my costars after filming, but...I’m not exactly proud of this, but this is actually the first time I’ve ever made a reservation at a restaurant myself.”

“Right, right, I hardly eat out at all lately, too...”

“Oh? What do you usually enjoy having?”

“Well, whatever my friend cooks for me, or whatever looks good at the grocery deli.”

Yuma’s eyebrows twitched a bit. “...Um, you live with someone?”

“I have two roommates. Both women, in an apartment.”

“Oh, roommates? Sounds like fun.”

Nayuta watched relief spread across Yuma’s face. Now she was even surer of it—he had a thing for her.

“What’s your diet like, Mr. Takashina?”

“Well, there’s this service that delivers meals on a daily basis, so I use that, basically. I can do stuff like request more protein when I need to bulk up for a role.”

“It has to be hard to adjust your body like that for work.”

“Ah, it’s usually nothing that drastic, so it’s actually pretty easy. But one time, I lost about twenty pounds so I could play a terminal patient in one movie, then three months later, I gained forty after I took a role as a football player. *That* was pretty hellish.”

“Forty pounds?! Is that even possible?”

“Yeah... I sure don’t wanna do it again, but it *was* possible. It’s actually harder for me to gain weight than lose it, so I was just eating and working out pretty much all day, every day. I was fighting nausea the entire time, too. And then I had to lose the muscle tone for my next role, and *that* was a real pain as well...”

“Wowww...”

It sounded like absolute murder to Nayuta. She didn’t think she could ever attempt that. Yuma must’ve taken her expression to be disgust, because he hurried to assuage her.

“But the series I’m filming now is about a normal college student, so I don’t have to worry much about my diet, which I’m really happy about. I’m ready to eat all I want today!”

Yuma cheerfully chuckled as he took a few pieces from the minced Wagyu beef that just got delivered to the table and dug in. Nayuta followed his lead.

“If I could ask, Mr. Takashina, how can you do that? Like, be so stoic about working hard like you do? Have you ever thought about quitting?”

Living on a restricted diet, unable to walk around in broad daylight without hiding your face... No matter how much praise or money she received, Nayuta couldn’t imagine wanting to live like that.

“Hmm...” Yuma thought for a moment, face serious. “...It’s definitely not the easiest, but I’ve never thought about quitting acting, no.”

“Why not?”

“Well... I just love acting. That’s about it.”

“Because you love it...? That’s enough to let you keep going?”

“I don’t think I could keep it going for any other reason, no. At least, not me.”
Yuma seemed pretty sure about it.

“Well... Hypothetically speaking, you know? Um, what would you do if there was some big, life-altering event that made you suddenly hate working as an actor?”

“Hypothetically?” Yuma looked a little unsure. “If I started hating acting... I think I’d probably retire pretty quickly.”

“Ahhh, right?”

“Hmm?”

“If you hate something you used to love, and you’ve lost your love and your passion and your pride in your work, it’s terrible to just cling to your job like some machine. There’s no point to it!” Nayuta’s sudden onrush threw Yuma a little. But then he smiled.

“I wouldn’t know...but if there’s somebody out there clinging to their job after losing their love and passion and pride for it...I’m sure they must have an even more important reason for that than love, passion, or pride, you know?”

“...A more important reason...”

—*Who do you think...?*

The image of Itsuki, saddened and desperate from that day, flashed back into her mind. It felt like her heart was being stabbed with thorns.

“...You know, whenever I saw somebody with clearly no passion, just putting in the minimum amount of quality needed in their work, that used to really frustrate me. Like, *why are they even doing this?* and so on. And of course I understand intellectually that there’s a lot more to life than work...but I’ve loved acting ever since I was a kid, and my acting work was all I ever had, so I couldn’t really feel it in my heart.”

After that bit of rambling, Yuma smiled at Nayuta. His face was a bit red.

“But just recently, for the first time, I’ve found something that I like outside of work.”

“...You have?”

“Yes.”

Nayuta felt Yuma’s earnest eyes upon her. She didn’t flinch away from them.

“Miss Kani, I think I love you. Would you like to be my girlfriend?”

“I’m sorry.”

The reply came immediately, and not without some sincere sorrow. She didn’t ask, “Why me?” No answer to that question would change her mind—and besides, she had the impression that Yuma’s senses were close to hers. Seeing this guy falling in love with someone just because of the personality he sensed in their work, confessing his feelings to them as soon as they met... It was like looking at herself from the past. If she had met certain people in a different order, maybe she would’ve fallen in love with Yuma. But that’s not what happened.

“Oh...” Sadness spread over Yuma’s face at the quick denial.

“I’m really happy that you feel that way, Mr. Takashina, but there’s somebody else I like.”

“...Yeah. I see.”

After a small, discouraged sigh, Yuma smiled back at her.

“But if you don’t mind my asking, what kind of person are they? As a reader, I’m really curious about what your own love life is like.”

Yuma tried his best to sound jovial about it. Nayuta had to respect that.

“Well... To put it bluntly, he’s kind of out there.”

“Out there?”

“Yeah. Pretty much...well, *really* a mess. He’s sloppy, he can barely keep himself supported, he makes his sister and other people in his life take care of him... Well, you could say that about me, too, but still...”

“...”

Yuma waited for her to continue, a soft glow in his eyes. Nayuta chuckled a bit. Then the words began to pour out.

“...He’s not particularly handsome at all, and he’s short, too... He’s got some real personality issues, acting like he’s a big shot one moment and getting all pouty and hung up the next. Honestly, I don’t think he’d beat you out in pretty much anything, Mr. Takashina. *Maybe* in novel writing, but now what he’s producing is a bunch of hot garbage, so...”

She puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

Yuma smiled in response. “But you still love him?”

“Yes.”

Nayuta nodded, smiling, coming dangerously close to crying.

“I love him. I really do. No matter how terrible he is, he’s the greatest hero in the world to me. The only one in the world I truly love. No matter how hard I try to hate him, no matter how hard I try to forget him, I just can’t. I love him with every bit of my soul. And I can’t imagine a future with anyone else.”

When she was done speaking, Nayuta felt her face heat up. Talking like this to someone she had literally spurned a minute ago—it was beyond insensitive. But for some reason, Yuma’s eyes were practically shining. He was genuinely moved.

“Getting to hear so much passionate love from you like this, Miss Kani... It’s simply incredible.”

“No, um, if, if you could maybe pretend you didn’t hear that...”

“Loving someone with your entire soul... I can only hope I fall in love hard enough someday that I can say that, too.”

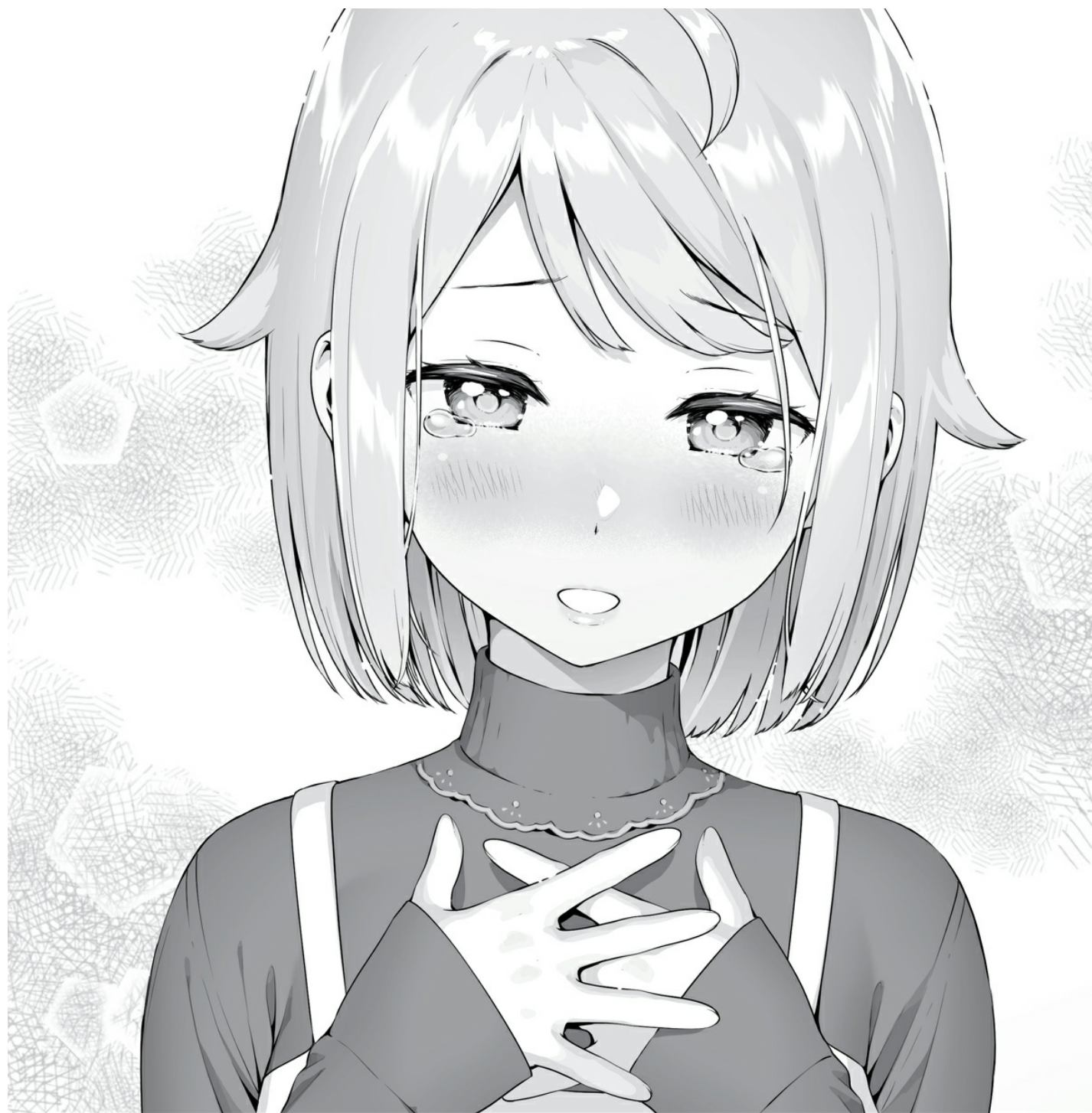
“D-don’t repeat it!”

Yuma smiled warmly at Nayuta as she burned with embarrassment.



Around the same time, Miyako Shirakawa, just back at the apartment from her job, sent Itsuki a message.

Maybe I'm meddling, but I'll tell you anyway. Naya's on a date with another guy right now



The message was read and replied to at once.

Uh-huh

“What do you mean, *uh-huh*?”

She assumed it was tearing him up inside as she kept typing.

It's Yuma Takashina, the actor

It took a while to receive a reply this time.

OK

...Yep. He's upset.

Miyako pressed on, asking him, Do you care?

I don't have time to right now

...He's saying that something's more concerning to him than the fact Naya is dating a celebrity?! Will you stop being so stubborn already?!

But before Miyako could type out a furious reply, she got another message.

I'm at the hospital. My sister's gonna be born soon

“Whaaat?!” Miyako shouted.

Shiori

It was around three in the afternoon on February 11 when Natsume Hashima went into labor. Keisuke took her to the hospital, where he planned to accompany her through the entire childbirth. It'd likely mean an overnight stay, so he brought a change of clothes and so on.

Chihiro stayed at home in the meantime. When Natsume went to the hospital, she offered to join them, but her mother said, "It's my second delivery, and the labor rooms are too small anyway. Your father will be enough. Just keep up with your studies, okay?" Offered little other choice, she spread out her study textbooks across her room, but naturally was too worried about Mom to be able to focus at all.

I hope Mom is all right. I wonder when the baby will be born... Giving birth has to be so difficult... If something happens to her...

Being home alone began to overwhelm her with anxiety. She paced around the room, too nervous to concentrate on anything, when she heard the front door open. Assuming Keisuke had forgotten something, she left her room and looked downstairs, only to find Itsuki there.

"Itsuki!" She jogged down the stairs to greet him.

"Hey," Itsuki said with a wave of the hand. She had told him that Natsume's contractions had started and that she'd probably give birth today, but he only replied "Okay" to that, so she didn't expect him to come home.

"Um... Everything going all right?"

"Oh, yeah," Chihiro replied. "I got a call from Dad, and he said that the exam and hospital admission stuff are all squared away."

"No, I mean, are you all right? Because you look kind of pale to me."

“Oh, um, do I...?”

“Yeah.” Itsuki nodded.

“I *am* pretty worried about Mom... It’s really hard to give birth, isn’t it?”

“That’s what they say. I don’t know much about it, but from what I’ve seen in *Kounodori: Dr. Stork*...”

“Yeah, right? I hope she’s okay...”

“But supposedly your second child goes a lot more smoothly than the first. Plus, she’s got Dad there, so I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“It might be her second, but that was eighteen years ago, wasn’t it? She’s thirty-six now...”

“Well, yeah...but there’s no point fretting about it here, okay? We’ll just have to wait and trust that it’ll work out.” The advice almost seemed more for Itsuki’s own sake than Chihiro’s; he was definitely worried.

“Right, yeah...” Chihiro still sounded anxious.

Itsuki tried to be calm for her. “Here, why don’t we play a game to take our minds off it?”

“Huh? Oh... Yeah, let’s do that.”

She’d never get any studying done like this, so Chihiro went along with Itsuki’s suggestion. They had a PlayStation 3 in the house, purchased by Itsuki back when he was in high school, but there was only one controller, so they couldn’t play anything together. Beyond that, they had a shogi set, Othello, Monopoly, Donjara (a kid’s version of mah-jongg), and a set of playing cards.

For now, they opted for Monopoly, taking the dusty box down from the bookshelf and playing it in the living room. Monopoly’s a well-known game, of course, beloved the world over for many years—but when you only have two players, there’s no room for negotiation, which is kind of the heart and soul of the game. It pretty much becomes a game of luck, because dice rolls are about the only thing that matters—and for Itsuki and Chihiro, both familiar with lots of famous board games, it wasn’t enough excitement at all. But they kept playing the game, as unsatisfying as it was, as if it were their job or something.

For them, the fun of the game was secondary to the need to turn off their brains and kill time.

After a few rounds of Monopoly, Chihiro made dinner at about seven in the evening, Itsuki staring at the phone lying on the table and hoping his father would call it. They chewed their meal in silence—and then Itsuki’s and Chihiro’s phones both vibrated at the same time.

““!!””

Keisuke had sent a message to their family group. They both quickly accessed it.

The doctor says she’ll begin delivery soon.

“Soon...”

Itsuki and Chihiro gave each other looks, nervous expressions on their faces.

“How long is *soon*, though?”

“I dunno.”

Both of them had repeatedly read articles online about the process of childbirth. For first-time mothers, the process between the onset of labor and full cervix dilation took ten to twelve hours; that became four to six hours for subsequent deliveries, although it apparently varied a lot from person to person. Once delivery began, Keisuke would stay by Natsume’s bedside the whole time, so he wouldn’t be making further contact until the baby was born. The delivery itself took two to three hours for first-time moms, sixty to ninety minutes for others, but again, there was a lot of variation. So maybe the baby would come in an hour, maybe three or so...but either way, their only choice was to sit around and wait for word until it was all over.

The two of them kept looking at the clock over dinner, fidgety and nervous.

“D-do you want something to drink, Itsuki?”

Itsuki considered the idea. A little alcohol *would* help him calm down, but...

“No, I’m good.”

He shook his head. Chihiro was just as anxious as he was. It wouldn’t be fair

for only him to get a little relief.

But then a message arrived on Itsuki's phone from Miyako.

Maybe I'm meddling, but I'll tell you anyway. Nayu's on a date with another guy right now

"Wha...?!" he yelped.

Chihiro gave Itsuki an anxious look. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing."

I don't care who Nayuta dates. It's none of my business anymore, so...

So he sent back a curt uh-huh, but the reply was even more surprising: It's Yuma Takashina, the actor.

"Huh...?!"

Kanikou's dating that famous actor? What the hell? That makes no sense!

The surprise and shock were hard for him to parse. Was Miyako playing a joke on him? No, she wasn't the type to tell crazy lies like that. But Yuma Takashina? The megastar who got first billing in the *Silvery Landscape* film? Back before Itsuki and Nayuta became an official couple, he remembered her praising him after getting to meet him at a movie conference and how jealous that made him. He only knew about Yuma via other people, but Itsuki honestly respected the incredible professionalism he brought to his work—and from the bottom of his heart, he thought his performance in *The Silvery Landscape* was astounding.

...If there's anybody in modern Japan you could call a "protagonist," Yuma Takashina has to be one of them.

Few other men would be as qualified to stand beside Nayuta Kani, the genius smiled upon by the god of novels, every bit a protagonist for the times. And even if she and Yuma fell in love...well, he had given up on being a fellow protagonist. They were broken up. He didn't have any right to be envious of that.

Rrrngh...!

He gritted his teeth hard enough to grind them down. Chihiro was getting

worried now.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Itsuki? You don’t look so good.”

“I-it’s nothing. I just put too much chili oil on my gyoza dumplings.” Itsuki tried his best to lie, his face scrunched up.

After a deep breath, he texted, OK back. Do you care? came the reply.

Of course I freakin’ do!

He resisted the urge to scream it out but managed to keep quiet and type, I don’t have time to right now instead, followed by, I’m at the hospital. My sister’s gonna be born soon. That ought to keep Miyako from distracting him unnecessarily for now.

The hospital bit was a lie, but I really don’t have the time for this, so...

What he needed to fret about was his family, not his ex.

After doing the post-meal dishes, Itsuki and Chihiro began playing cards—but once again, neither of them could concentrate. They’d mess up the rules or drop cards on the floor, and it was nothing but a massive slog.

“Wanna watch a movie?” Itsuki suggested, realizing that it was no longer possible to kill time with games. Chihiro nodded back. “What do you wanna watch?” he asked his sister, opening up his laptop so he could load a subscription service.

“What do you have?”

“Well, all kinds of stuff. Anime, Japanese films, foreign films...”

“...Any porn?”

“Huh?!”

“I—I was just joking!” Chihiro said, flailing as her brother stared in shock.

“Oh... You were joking...?”

“Y-yeah... Oh, um, is there any Gundam on there?”

“Yeah, uh, they have pretty much the whole TV series and I think all the movies, too.”

Chihiro pondered a moment. “Okay, let’s watch the *Gundam 00* movie.”

“Sure.”

Itsuki clicked a few buttons, and in another moment, *Mobile Suit Gundam 00 the Movie: A Wakening of the Trailblazer* was streaming away. They had both seen it before, but between the tense story development, dense human drama, and powerful battle scenes, they were quickly drawn in.

Once it was over and “Qualia” was playing over the closing credits, Itsuki’s and Chihiro’s phones vibrated in unison again.

““!!””

It was 10:53 p.m., and Keisuke had only a brief message.

She’s born. Mom and her are both fine.

Itsuki and Chihiro stood from their chairs and looked at each other. Tears welled up in Chihiro’s eyes, and Itsuki tried to form a smile with his lips but was too shaky to pull it off.

“She’s born...? Really?”

“Y-yeah... She—she did it... She did it, Itsuki!!”

Chihiro rejoiced, while Itsuki was barely able to speak.

“Yeah... Yeah, she really did...!” He hugged Chihiro, unable to contain himself.

“We have a little sister now, Itsuki! Both of us!”

“Yeah... A little sister for the two of us...!”

After repeating *little sister* to each other, dwelling on the term, they separated, calmer and a little self-conscious.

“Heh-heh-heh...”

“Ha-ha...”

And so, with embarrassed smiles on their faces, they both savored the joy of the moment.



The next morning, at nine a.m., Itsuki and Chihiro visited Natsume's hospital. After checking in, they nervously walked toward her private room. Itsuki knocked, and they heard Keisuke say "Come in" beyond.

So they slowly entered, and there they found Natsume lying propped up in bed, her baby wrapped in cloth in her arms. Keisuke was on a chair next to her.

"There you are," Natsume said, softly smiling. "Both of you."

Itsuki felt even more self-conscious now.

"Here we are, Mom."

"I'm so glad to see you two. Here, look at your new sister's face."

"Yeah, um... Sure."

Itsuki and Chihiro approached the bed, taking a closer look at the baby. Her eyes were closed; she was sleeping peacefully.

"She's so cute," an enrapt Chihiro said softly, so as not to wake her up.

"Yeah..." Itsuki wholeheartedly agreed with her. Just the sight of this child made him want to smile.

"Hee-hee! Here's your big brother and sister." Natsume softly rocked the child, who remained asleep. Her small hands twitched.

"C-can I touch her?" Chihiro asked.

"Be gentle, okay? Don't wake her up."

Chihiro gently touched her sister's cheek with her index finger. "So soft...and warm, too."

Itsuki followed her lead, carefully touching the baby's cheek. He felt something soft, like a marshmallow, along with the heat of life itself.

"Um, by the way, M-Mom, what's her name?"

"Well, about that, Itsuki..." Keisuke answered the question before Natsume could.

"Oh?"

"We wanted you to think of a name for her."

“What?!” he exclaimed, then closed his mouth in a panic. Fortunately, his sister didn’t wake up.

“...What did you say?” he whispered to Keisuke.

“I want you to think of a name for her,” Keisuke plainly replied. “I want something with the kind of style a first-rate novelist can provide, that matches modern sensibilities, that’s unique without being off-the-wall, that everybody can call her with warm kindness, and that she’ll be happy living with for the rest of her life. Something truly great!”

“Huhhh...?!”

The out-of-nowhere request made Itsuki’s brain shut off. He turned toward Natsume for assistance.

“We tried to think of a name...but we couldn’t decide on anything. So I talked to your father, and this is what we decided. We wanted you to think of one instead.”

“Huhhhh...?”

“I know you can do it,” Chihiro added, ignoring the increasingly troubled look on Itsuki’s face. “Give our new sister the best name you can!”

“Not you, too...”

Seeing his entire family watching him expectantly almost made him cry.

“All right...”

He sighed, resigning himself to this. Studying the baby, he cranked up his brain and began to think.

It’s okay. I can do it.

There was nothing at all first-rate about his style, but over the seven years he had been writing novels, he had come up with hundreds of names for characters, including many for projects that never got off the ground. Squeezing one more out of his brain would be easy.

The way he named his casts varied from book to book. Sometimes he would come up with generically cool or cute names; sometimes he’d only decide after

seeing the illustrator's designs for his characters; sometimes he'd use name-based divination to come up with auspicious names for the main cast; sometimes he'd restrict himself to using names based off numbers or animals; sometimes he'd borrow names from historical figures; sometimes he'd use an online name generator; sometimes he'd consult lists of popular baby names or names from foreign countries...

In his mind, he cycled through all the countless character names he had come up with, along with countless new ones.

"HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM... MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMNNNGGHHH...!"

He grumbled to himself as he stared at his sister, thinking hard enough to give himself a fever.

"...Now, let me say, we're not asking you for one right this minute, so..."

Itsuki stared blankly at his father. "Huh?"

"You can spend a few days on it if you like. Just as long as we meet the deadline for submitting the birth certificate."

"Really? Wow, I was nervous for a second..."

Itsuki breathed a sigh of relief. The pressure was off, but it was both inconvenient and a little cruel for her to go nameless for too long. He wanted to gift her a good name as quickly as he could. So he looked around the room...and then he noticed some paperbacks on the bay window.

"Hmm...?"

The colors of the spines looked familiar to him, so he walked up to the set. Just as he thought, they were all novels by Itsuki Hashima—*All About My Little Sister*, *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, and *Sisterly Combat*, Volumes 1 through 3 of each.

"Wh-why do you have my books here...?!"

"Well, I had a lot of down time at the hospital," Keisuke said. "I needed some books to pass the time."

"Did they have to be *my* books?" Itsuki awkwardly asked. Books about loving your little sister (sometimes pretty damn erotically) didn't seem like real

appropriate material for the OB/GYN ward.

Then he noticed a bookmark tucked into one of the paperbacks. It was a Japanese type called a *shiori*, made from traditional *washi* paper, with a flat white string tied to one end. Keisuke must've been using it.

“Shiori...”

With a flash of inspiration, the name left Itsuki's lips.

“What?” Natsume said.

Itsuki looked back at her, Keisuke, Chihiro, and his brand-new sister.

“How about Shiori? As in a bookmark.”

Shiori. A bookmark. Something that'll wait for you if you're a little tired out from exploring your story, letting you take a break and pick things up later. Could she be that kind of presence for this family? It'd be great if she could. That was how he felt, at least.

“Shiori... I like it. I think it's a really good name!” Chihiro was the first to agree with him.

“I think so, too,” Natsume said. “It's got a gentle, cute kind of sound to it.”

“Shiori... Shiori, huh? Well, why not?”

Keisuke nodded his satisfaction. Itsuki exhaled, glad that it was a unanimous vote, as Natsume gently whispered into the ear of Shiori Hashima in her arms.

“Shiori... Your name is Shiori Hashima. Isn't that a nice name? Your big brother thought it up for you.”

“Shiori... Hee-hee... Shiori... It's cute...”

Chihiro gently stroked Shiori's cheek with a fingertip, saying her name over and over again.

“Heh... Shiori, huh...?”

And Keisuke, gazing at his wife and daughter, smiled softly, ruminating on the name of his newest family member. Itsuki noticed that his eyes were tearing up—and then he felt his own start to burn.

Keisuke Hashima.

Natsume Hashima.

Chihiro Hashima.

Shiori Hashima.

The scene of this happy, contented family burned itself into Itsuki's eyes, penetrating deep into his heart. He could feel his emotions take over.

—I want to create a family like this with someone someday.

And there was only one *someone* in the world he could think of.



Synthese (Rebirth)

“I’ll go get something to drink,” Itsuki told his family as he left the room and pulled out his phone. Unlike a fair number of hospitals in Japan, there were no restrictions on texting or accessing the Internet from your phone, although you had to turn off your ringer.

Loading the LINE app, Itsuki typed out a message to Miyako. It was a short one, but it took a while to input with his slightly shaky fingers, and it took even more courage to press the “Send” button.

So what happened after the actor date you told me about yesterday?

About three minutes later (although it seemed like more than an hour to him), Miyako replied.

She told me he wanted her to be his girlfriend, but she said no.

Like, having Yuma Takashina say that to you! It hardly seems real at all.

If I was editing a book with that scene in it, I’d reject it immediately.

“Phewwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww...”

As soon as he read the first sentence, Itsuki let out an enormous sigh of relief. The rest of the message didn’t even register in his mind.

Then Miyako sent another text.

But was the baby born okay?

Yeah. Her name is Shiori, he replied. Miyako replied with a “congrats” sticker, and Itsuki gave her a “thank you” one back.

So. What’re you going to do about Nayu?

Miyako was cutting straight to the chase.

You’ll see

It was a short text, but it must have gotten its point across, because Miyako didn't reply.

Putting the phone in his pocket, Itsuki purchased three bottles of barley tea from the vending machine and went back to the Hashima room. He handed them around, explaining that he'd be leaving soon. Chihiro and Natsume gave him surprised looks.

"You're leaving already, Itsuki?"

"Yeah. I got something I need to do in a hurry now."

"Oh?" said Keisuke. "Well, good luck."

Itsuki nodded back. His father was using the same calm, flat tone of voice as always, but somehow it sounded gentler to him now.

Then he turned toward Shiori and smiled. "...Shiori? Listen, your brother has something he's got to do right now, so I'm heading out. I'll be back to see you real soon, so be well, okay?"

He touched Shiori's hand with his fingertips. She softly squeezed back, still asleep, as if to cheer him on. It made him feel like he was tapped into infinite power. He smiled fiercely, determined and bold.

"Well... I'll see you!"

And so he began walking, to get this story moving again.



He took a taxi back to his parents' house from the hospital, asking the driver to wait for him while he quickly picked up his computer, and then he went back to his apartment.

The moment he made it home, he took off his coat, put his computer on the desk, and started a new file in his word processor. Right then and there, he began to write a novel—not *All About My Little Sister* or *Sisterly Combat* but a new one. There was no title; this wasn't meant for publication anyway, so it didn't need one. It would be written not for an undetermined crowd of readers but for one single person. He had never done anything like this before, not since

he began writing novels to submit to contests.

This novel was a semiautobiographical love story about a young writer who falls in love with a genius novelist younger than him. Through various scenes and scenarios, the writer outlines just how much he loves the heroine in excruciatingly passionate prose. He didn't mean for this novel to make him the protagonist again; he wasn't looking to make money off it. This was a love letter under the skin of a novel, written for exactly one woman.

It was a love that was opened by a novel—and lost by another. What he needed to bring that love back wasn't words, or kisses, or whatever. It was a novel. It could only be a novel.

So he wrote on, with a fervor that could be easily misidentified as insanity, but he didn't hesitate to revise his work when he saw some text that was badly written or unnatural from an impartial perspective. He had the soul of an artist and the skill of an architect. That initial impulse to dream of being a protagonist, and the meticulous control honed by the experience he'd gained as a professional writer—especially with the more mechanical work he spent the past two months doing.

It was these two elements he was combining, two elements crucial to becoming a successful novelist, and Itsuki Hashima was doing so at an extremely high level. With his current lack of talent and experience, such a feat would've been impossible. But thanks to a cheat ability that could only be used to write this novel, he was able to make it happen. A miraculous power, one that surpasses even a hundred years of effort and natural talent—the thing they call “love.” Love was what smoothed out his jagged, combating passions and skills, forcibly mixing them together and making him reach heights beyond his current abilities.

Now it was making him continue to write, hardly sparing any time to sleep or even eat. He would feed his brain nutrition drinks and glucose tablets, kill his drowsiness with black coffee and hot showers, and when he was too tired to move his hands properly, he'd have some instant noodles or energy bars and take a nap. He had told Aoba, who usually came in to clean and cook for him, that he'd be staying at his parents' place until his mother left the hospital, so she was gone. His eyes were bloodshot, dark circles forming under them.

[illegible]

And then, five days later, in the evening of February 17, Itsuki finally finished the novel.

Suppressing his impatience, he then carefully read it over from the beginning, correcting typos and errors, expanding the text here and there, and finally printing it out when he was happy with the results.

—Hurry up... Hurry up...!

Seeing the printer cough up one page at a time was boundlessly frustrating to watch. But he waited on, and when all 122 pages were ready, Itsuki left the room with the bundle of paper safe in his arms. He realized once he was outside that he'd forgotten his coat, but he didn't care.

It was a little before eight in the evening, a cold February night, and tonight the wind was blowing hard enough to steal away all his body heat. But he hugged his manuscript like a mother protecting her child, staggering his way through the dark streets. He was headed for the apartment building where Nayuta and her friends lived.

Despite the obvious wobble to his step, he somehow made it to the building entrance...only to be shocked by a new revelation. He had dropped her off at the front door here after dates, but he had never gone up to her place...and thus he didn't know her apartment number. He had left his phone at his place, so he couldn't call to ask.

—*So I gotta go back...?*

He felt ready to collapse, but as he turned around with all the strength he could muster in his legs:

“Ah... Itsuki?! What’s wrong?!”

Miyako, fresh off work, was in front of him, and she looked like a goddess in his eyes.

“You stopped texting me after you said *you’ll see*; you don’t answer your calls... I was so worried! ...Itsuki?!”

As Miyako approached him to chew him out, Itsuki all but crashed into her, pushing the manuscript into her arms.

“Huh? Whoa! What’s this?!”

Her eyes darted between the stack of papers and Itsuki.

“Give this...to Kanikou for me...”

“Um, o-okay. Fine, but... Itsuki, you look awful! And why’re you out walking around like that? Are you that stupid?!”

“Yeah... I guess I am...” He gave her a weak, self-effacing smile as she sighed in anger.

“*Haaahhh...* Well, all right, come on up to our place. I want you to hand this to her yourself.”

Miyako shoved the manuscript back his way and inserted her key into the auto-locking front door.



So he joined Miyako upstairs, and when they reached the living room through the hallway, Nayuta opened her door and came out—completely naked, of course, since this was her home and all.

“Hey there, Mya—”

She froze in shock when she saw Itsuki. And even before he could instinctively react to Nayuta’s nudeness, he almost burst into tears at the sight of her face. It

had been too long, and although her hair was shorter, he didn't even notice.

"Kanikou," he said, trying to hold the tears back, and a smile appeared on Nayuta's face.

"Itsuki...why...?"

"I wrote a novel."

"A novel?"

"Yeah... I wrote it just for you. So read it. Please...read it. Please."

Itsuki, head bowed, offered a bundle of papers to Nayuta, like a boy confessing his love to a girl—well, not "like" it, because that's exactly what it was. Nayuta, despite her confusion, took it hesitantly.

"...All right. I'll read it."

And once he'd heard her reply:

"Thank...you..."

Itsuki wavered a bit, then collapsed against the living room sofa.

"Itsuki?!"

"Whoa, are you okay? Itsuki!"

Summoning the last of his energy, he smiled at the frantic Nayuta and Miyako.

"Sorry... Let me sleep until you're done..."

Before he could even finish the sentence, his vision went dark.



With one drip, then another, Itsuki was awoken by the feeling of water droplets against his cheek.

—*Rain...*?

But it seemed strangely warm for rain. Finding it odd, he slowly opened his eyes, only to find Nayuta's face right there. He was on the living room sofa, with his head in Nayuta's now-clothed lap. She was reading a novel printed on copier

paper, face flushed and tears streaming down.

She didn't seem to notice that his eyes were open, so he decided to close them again and wait for her to finish the novel. She was pretty close to the final events, it looked like—and, indeed, she needed just a little more time to be done.

Once he was sure that all the papers were safely to the side:

“...Did you finish?”

Nayuta didn't seem too flustered at Itsuki suddenly speaking up. She looked down at his face with reddened, tear-stained eyes and nodded.

“Ah...”

He lifted his head off her thighs, then stood up from the sofa, lightly turning his neck and shoulders around.

“Um, so...what did you think?”

Itsuki looked at her and asked for her verdict—on this love letter tens of thousands of words long, written just for her. The reply was one word long.

“...Amazing.”

The word made Itsuki's eyes burn. The tears he had been holding back suddenly began to flow.

“Oh... Good.”

Nayuta gave a big smile to Itsuki as she cried.

“Yes. It was just incredible. Absolutely the best out of all your work so far, Itsuki.”

“I wrote that novel just for you. It'd be pointless otherwise.” Itsuki tried his best to smile boldly for her, rubbing the tears away. “It's everything I feel for you right now.”

“Yes...and I accept.”

Nayuta gave him a little smile, wiping away her own tears. He looked straight into her eyes, trying to find the right words for his confession.

“I want you to be my main heroine one more time.”

“What are you talking about, Itsuki?”

Nayuta smiled mischievously, stood up, and gave him a warm, powerful hug.

“You’ve always been, and always will be, my protagonist, Itsuki.”

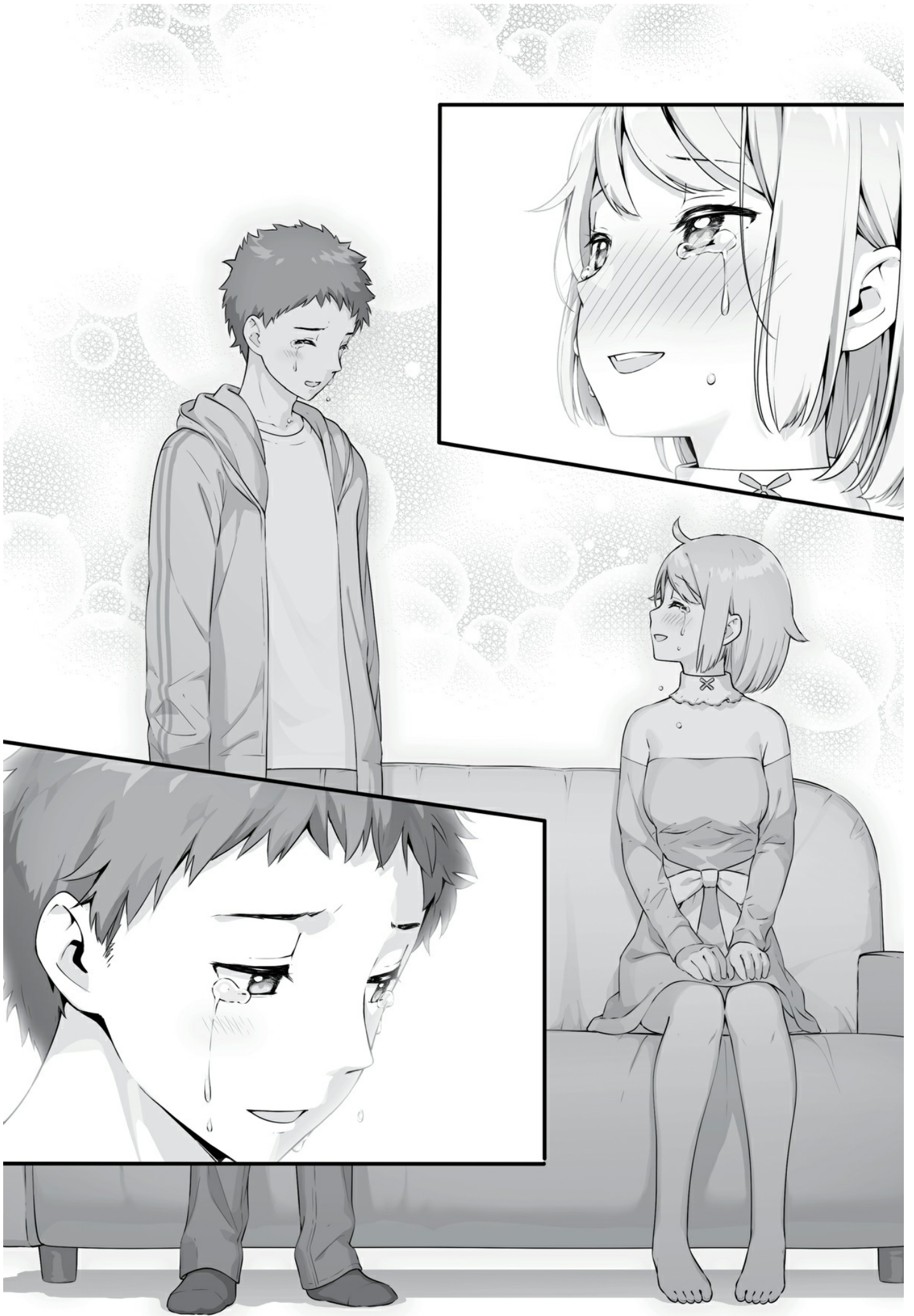
“Kanikou...!”

“Itsuki...”

They separated, and then their faces approached each other for a kiss. Then another, then another, and then their tongues touched—

“Ah-*hem*! Can you continue that at a hotel or something?”

Itsuki turned around to find Kaiko standing there, eyes fixated on the couple. Miyako was crying next to her. The two of them were so completely absorbed in their world that they hadn’t noticed, but Kaiko and Miyako had been there the whole time while Nayuta read the novel with Itsuki’s head on her lap.



“S-sorry... I know no men were allowed in here.” Nayuta gave her audience a shy smile.

Itsuki joined her. “Yeah, sorry. I’m gonna go home and sleep. I still feel exhausted...”

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow, then, so make sure you get lots of rest so you’re ready for *anything*.”

“Oh... Uh, go easy on me.”

Itsuki broke out in a cold sweat, his fear levels nearly at their limit.

Miyako, blushing a bit at this, turned toward the manuscript on the sofa.

“Was it that good, Naya? The novel?”

“Yes! It was really, really awesome! I’m soaking wet after being filled with Itsuki’s wet, hot, overpowering love! Just *reading* it almost got me pregnant!”

“...Oh... Hey, is it okay if I read it, too?”

Itsuki seemed uncomfortable at this request. “...You can if you want, but I think it’s gonna read like a piece of crap to anyone besides Kanikou.”

“No, it won’t! It’s the greatest love story of the century!” Nayuta almost snorted the words out. Then she chuckled at herself. “...But I’m not all that sure about the bit at the end with the handsome actor who makes a pass at the heroine.”

“Oh, would that be based on Yuma Takashina?”

“...” Itsuki silently blushed and looked away.

“Mr. Takashina isn’t all chintzy like that, and he’s definitely not a garbage playboy with a revolving door of lovers, and it’s not like my heart was all distressed over whether to pick him or Itsuki, and the part where the protagonist beats the handsome guy up during a date is unnecessarily verbose and distracting. I was too absorbed to let it bother me during the reading, but now that I look back, that scene was way too cheap and convenient, so I think there’s room for improvement there.”

“You punched him out during a date...? You’ve never even met Yuma

Takashina.”

Miyako rolled her eyes at Nayuta’s description.

“This... This work’s a personal novel, yeah, but it’s also first-class entertainment! Any professional writer is gonna make some adjustments, all right?!”

Itsuki fired back, still blushing. But even he wasn’t oblivious. Having a Mr. Perfect–style rival character involved with the heroine suddenly turning out to be a creep, or dying of an incurable disease, or abruptly going abroad to study was something that just didn’t happen in real life. The world turns every day without caring about what would be convenient for you, and if you brood over it for so long that you lose the one you love, it’s completely your fault.

That’s why Itsuki thought that this ending—where the heroine still waited for him even after they had a breakup—truly was like a miracle. He knew he’d never have a miracle like that again in his life...and that’s why he couldn’t ever let go of it. *This* time, he was going to carry on the grand tale with him as the protagonist until the day he died.

“Some adaptations? You call *that* adaptation?” Nayuta smiled, chiding him.

“Ngh... I-I’m going home!”

“Oh, wait, Itsuki, I’ll walk you out,” Nayuta said, chasing after him. Miyako, watching on, sighed.

“So in the end,” muttered Kaiko, “they buried the hatchet, huh? Talk about getting worked up over nothing. What a bothersome couple.”

“You said it.”

Miyako grinned, while Kaiko had more sympathy on her face.

“...But you don’t have any regrets, Mya? You wasted your last chance of becoming Hashima’s main heroine...and you even helped Nayu regain her spot.”

“Nope,” Miyako replied, a confident smile on her face. “I like Nayu with Itsuki, and I like Itsuki with Nayu. I didn’t try to get in between them—and I tried to get them back together—because that’s exactly what I wanted.”

Kaiko gave Miyako a gentle smile. “You really enjoy putting yourself through

hardship, huh?”

“Maybe. But that’s just who I am.” Miyako returned the smile, then stretched out a bit. “But it’s really nice, isn’t it? Being in love. Maybe I oughtta get myself a boyfriend soon, too.”

She tried to make it sound light and flippant...but then Kaiko raised her arms up and began swinging at the air, as if shadowboxing.

“...? What’re you doing, Kaiko?”

“Just pretending to be Fuwa training hard to get ya.”

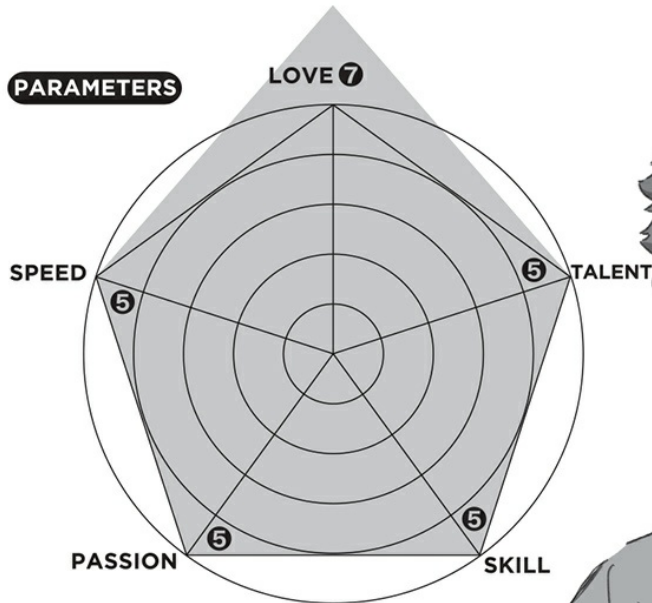
“Heyyy!”

Miyako blushed at Kaiko, whose smile was almost blinding. And with that, an old protagonist resurrected himself—and the curtain finally closed on one couple’s love story. Now it was time for a new story—one starring the protagonist Miyako Shirakawa.

(End)

ITSUKI HASHIMA

PARAMETERS



AGE: 22

BORN: June 6

A novelist who fused his newly rediscovered initial passion with the craftsmanlike skills he's built over the years to write a love letter for one lone woman.

THE PROTAGONIST

Afterword

In the preview from the last volume, I wrote that “Miyako the archangel” will be swooping in to save Itsuki and Nayuta, but that was a lie. Sorry. Miyako’s still in the middle of her own growth, so having her solving complex problems related to not only love, but the stance a creator must take and the relationship between writer and reader, was asking a little too much from her, so it turned out like this instead. Kaiko’s definitely the MVP this time around, isn’t she? Kaiko’s got big boobs, a good personality, real chops as a creator, and she definitely had it in her to take on a main-heroine role...but why is she wearing a pair of panties on her head...? Anyway, this volume marks the end of Itsuki Hashima’s redemption arc, which began back in Volume 10. Hopefully you enjoyed it.

This was mentioned in the story text, but I’ll emphasize it one more time here—I don’t think that someone like Itsuki at the end of Volume 11, producing books like a machine without letting their own emotions get involved, is a “wrong” or “inferior” approach at all. In fact, I think that any writer who can actually do that in real life is pretty amazing. In the feedback for Volume 11, I saw a lot of people say that “Itsuki never did get out of his slump at all,” but he’s actually fully overcome it by the end of that volume. It’s just that the way he did it wasn’t at all to Nayuta’s liking. In terms of Itsuki and Nayuta’s love story, the choice Itsuki made in Volume 11 definitely was the wrong one—but in the eyes of the publisher, and all the many readers in the *Sister’s All You Need* world who don’t know what’s up with Itsuki, his change was actually welcome news. You can’t define a single rule to determine whether a passionate novel bursting with the author’s emotions will win or lose against one calculated to entertain as many readers as possible. (In my experience, the latter often ends up better received.) This brings up a good question: Who’s happier, an author who has fun writing whatever his emotions lead him to but can’t sell his work

for Jack or someone who sees novel writing strictly as work, produces bestsellers, and lives life high on the hog? As someone who writes what he wants and gets to see it accepted by lots of readers, I really feel blessed these days, but honestly, I'd rather get married already.

I've kind of lost track of what I was talking about, so let's change the subject.

Perhaps a lot of you picked up on this from the "climax" the story has been rising to lately, but we plan to wrap up *A Sister's All You Need*. two volumes from now, in Volume 14. We *plan* to anyway...but I already have the final scene plotted out, so as long as I don't massively screw up the pacing in the meantime, that's when it *should* end, probably.

We've got Chihiro becoming a college student, Miyako joining grown-up society, Haruto launching a new series, Itsuki and Nayuta taking a new step forward, Nadeshiko getting exposed to the world of cosplay—and I sincerely hope you'll be around to see all their stories to the end. Myself, I'm not too frantic right now—I'm playing games, traveling, and actually having a pretty chill time up to the end of this series (except for Miyako-related matters).

* Question Corner

[Q] On page twenty-eight of Volume 11, you write that Miyako saw Itsuki act out a love confession scene in the nude, but wasn't that Nayuta?

[A] Dahhhh! Sorry! In the anime (which I also wrote the scripts for), Miyako joined her in that scene, so I got my memories mixed up there. In the novel continuity, let's just say that Miyako saw Itsuki up to similar antics on some other day, okay...?

[Q] Are you ever going to illustrate Haruto's sister in the novels?

[A] Haruto's sister looks like the most powerfully cute *tsundere* little sister you can possibly imagine. She looks different between the anime and manga versions, so feel free to let your imagination run wild with her.

[Q] In the game Too Many Sisters., when you play card #18 (creep with panties on her head) as a rumor card, isn't there any more elegant in-game way to describe the effect besides "reverse the ranks"?

[A] "The sister's more on the hunkier side!" works for me.

【Q】 What happened to the Life of a Light Novelist board game going on sale?

【A】 You can probably figure out what.

【Q】 What are the good and bad points of life as a writer compared to having an average office job?

【A】 The good part is being able to use your time any way you want. You can go on vacations whenever, catch a movie on a weekday afternoon, you name it. The bad part is that you're pretty much responsible for every single thing in your life—not just the quality of your work but scheduling, taxes, health checkups, *etc.* You have to keep on top of all of that. You also pretty much never run into new people. I so want to get married.

【Q】 Any advice for aspiring writers?

【A】 If you want to get married, I'd advise you to find a partner before you debut. This is extremely important advice; they should really include it in the guidelines for new-author contests.

【Q】 If I become a novelist under the Gagaga label, will I get to meet you?

【A】 I don't go to Shogakukan's parties too often, so there's a pretty good chance you won't. I do go to Kadokawa's parties, though, so maybe try submitting your work to MF Bunko J's contest.

Chihiro's continued her run as the number one top-voted character in the reader surveys. Itsuki is second, while Nayuta is third; they both went through some major physical and mental changes this volume, so what'll happen to them now...? I have to say, though, I love how cute Nayuta looks with her short hair. Thank you very much, Kantoku. Who are we gonna give a makeover to next?

Regardless, see all of you in Volume 13.

Yomi Hirasaka

Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist

Early February 2019

Afterword

This is Kantoku, the series illustrator. I'm sure those of you who just finished reading this volume are feeling the same way I am. I'm so happy. Things really built up beautifully, as they should, given that this volume wraps up one of the story's main themes, and it was great fun to illustrate.

Nayuta and Itsuki both had makeovers in this volume, but somehow, they were also way easy for me to draw. I kind of wanted to depict Itsuki's hair slowly growing back like it did.

There were a lot of scenes I wanted to draw in this volume. It's kind of an odd thing to say, maybe, but I really want to see this in mangaform. There were a lot of scenes that would work well as manga pages, and the number of cut-in panels in this volume's illustrations is definitely larger than usual.

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