

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

13

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku



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13.





“My name is
Haruhiko
Matsuo,
and I’m
Chihiro’s
boyfriend.
Nice to
meet you.”

Introductions





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A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 13

Yomi Hirasaka

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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by Yomi HIRASAKA

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

New editor at Branch Hill. Born 4/29.

CHIIRO HASHIMA

A college student. Born 9/6.

HARUTO FUWA

A novelist. Born 9/16.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

A novelist. Born 6/6.

NAYUTA KANI

A novelist. Born 7/10.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant. Born 10/10.

MAKINA KAIZU

A novelist. Born 7/28.

KAIKO MIKUNIYAMA

A manga artist. Born 3/28

SETSUNA ENA

An illustrator. Born 11/3.

NADESHIKO KISO

A grade schooler. Born 11/21.

AOBA KASAMATSU

A novelist. Born 10/2.

UI AIOI

A novelist. Born 8/5.

YOSHIHIRO KISO

A novelist. Born 8/13.

TADASHI KAMO

A novelist. Born 6/30.

MAKOTO YANAGASE

A novelist. Born 5/30.

KENJIRO TOKI

Editor at GF Bunko. Born 10/15.

SATOSHI GODO

Editor in chief at GF Bunko. Born 9/23.

KIRARA YAMAGATA

Editor at GF Bunko. Born 6/19.

KASUKA SEKIGAHARA

A novelist. Born 12/12.

AYANE MITAHORA

Editor at Branch Hill. Born 4/17.

NOBUNAGA SHIROGAMINE

President of Branch Hill. Born 6/23.

KEISUKE HASHIMA

Itsuki's father. Born 8/20.

NATSUME HASHIMA

Chihiro's mother. Born 5/11.

SHIORI HASHIMA

Itsuki and Chihiro's sister. Born 2/11.

YUMA TAKASHINA

An actor. Born 4/20.

HARUTO'S SISTER

Haruto's sister.

STEAK TSUKEMONO

A web novelist. Born 9/2.

The Graduation Trip

One day in mid-March, Chihiro Hashima—who had just graduated high school and successfully gotten into the college of engineering at her first-choice, top-tier university—was on a trip with her school friends to the Nagashima Resort in Mie Prefecture. It was one of the largest tourist complexes in the entire Tokai section of Japan, featuring one of the nation’s biggest hot-springs resorts, an amusement park, an outlet mall, and many hotels. Being only three hours from Tokyo’s main rail station via bullet train or direct bus, it was a popular destination for graduation trips of all sorts, and Chihiro and her friends were accompanied by crowds of other students their age.

After a fun day at Nagashima Spa Land (an amusement park known as one of the best places for roller coasters in western Japan), they all went to the nearby Yuami-no-shima hot springs to recover. This facility was extremely well equipped with both indoor and outdoor baths, the former including several types of jet baths, fizzy carbonated baths, even tingly “electric baths” to help you relax your entire body. Outside, the open-air baths took their inspiration from the natural beauty of Toyama’s Kurobe Gorge (for the men’s facilities) and Aomori Prefecture’s Oirase Stream (for the women’s), allowing visitors to kick back and relax in the most beautiful of settings.

Given the all-natural springs powering the open bath, there can often be a fair amount of distance between one to another. Plus, it’s a given that you’d do so naked for the most part. The idea of walking outdoors with nothing on met with some resistance in Chihiro’s mind at first, but once she tried it, she found walking with her fellow nude friends, along a mountain stream and surrounded by a breathtaking forest, to be remarkably liberating. The slightly chilly March breeze felt refreshing on her body after leaving a hot, cheek-flushing bath. She began to understand why her brother’s girlfriend loved to go around nude all the time—but then reminded herself that she *shouldn’t* try to understand that.

Sure did feel good, though...

Aside from Chihiro's personal conflict here, nothing particularly important happened on this trip, so please enjoy the following outdoor nude scene, drawn in a most tasteful manner from our illustrator, Kantoku. →



Miyako Shirakawa, Rookie Editor

Branch Hill Ltd. had been established about two years ago by an editor at a major publishing house known for his business acumen. At the moment, their publishing lineup mainly consisted of new (and rereleased) works from authors who had previous relationships with the president; they also handled management work for authors and collaborated with other firms on the development of assorted visual media. Their head count was currently around forty people, five of whom were new hires this year.

Among them was Miyako Shirakawa, and at her first day on the job in early April, she arrived at ten in the morning. She was reporting to a forty-year-old four-story building; the first floor housed a coffee shop run by the landlord as a hobby, and the Branch Hill offices occupied the others.

There was no formal new-hire orientation, so Miyako went straight to her assigned department on her first day—the “General Entertainment Editorial Department” on the third floor. Branch Hill didn’t dedicate staff to any single label; instead, this department handled all company publications, including novels, manga, artbooks, and general-purpose magazines.

Taking the elevator to the third floor and using her key card to open a nearby metal door, she found a room a bit under five hundred square feet in size. It was partitioned into several blocks, a few office desks lined up in each one. Not too many people were there—like GF’s editorial department (and that of many other publishers), it was a rolling schedule, and you could report whenever you wanted as long as your work got done.

Ummm... So what should I do?

A bit puzzled, Miyako began by introducing herself to the people nearby.

“Hello, uh, my name’s Miyako Shirakawa, and I’m starting my job here today!

Great to meet you all!”

She raised her voice high enough to reach the entire room. The employees there looked up from their computers, turning their attention to her. One of them, a young woman, got up from her seat and came over.

“Ahhh, I’ve been waiting for you, newbie.”

She was a friendly-looking woman in her mid-twenties, attractive in a cute way. The ID hanging from her neck read, *Ayane Mitahora, General Entertainment Editorial*, and she addressed Miyako with an affable tone of voice.

“I’m Mitahora, and I’ve been assigned to be your mentor while you get up to speed.”

“Oh, great! Thank you very much!”

Miyako bowed nervously at the first “boss” she’d ever had in her life.

“There’s no need to be so formal,” Ayane lightly replied. “We’re not that far removed age-wise. But let me show you to your seat first.”

She brought Miyako to the desk adjacent to the one where she had been sitting. It was steel, and both it and the office chair tucked under it were empty. Miyako had never received an exclusive space to herself at Gift Publishing, so having this little personal oasis at her new job was oddly moving.

“So, Shirakawa,” said Ayane as she sat down, “I’m going to have you support me for the time being while you learn how your job works. Is there anything you’d like to ask me before we dive in?”

“Ah, um...” Miyako looked around the room. “How many people work in this editorial department total?”

“Well, with you joining us, that makes twelve. Three are mostly devoted to manga, but the rest of us do pretty much everything. That being said, me and four others are focused on light novels right now, so I guess you’ll be joining our team first.”

“All right. So, um, are any other new hires joining me?”

“Well, we have more people joining editorial this fiscal year, but they’re all

coming on from other publishers, so they're hitting the ground running."

"So I'm the only one coming fresh out of college?"

"Yeah. There are some other college hires joining us, too, but they're in Okinawa, so..."

"Huh? Okinawa?" Miyako was surprised to hear they were so far away.

"Right. Besides this building, we have a sales office in Okinawa."

"In...Okinawa?"

"Yeah. Real estate is super cheap down there, and you can do a lot of the work anywhere as long as you have Internet access, so... Right now we've got our support center and web administration in Okinawa, along with a real big warehouse."

"I see..."

So there are companies like this, too...?

It was impressive to Miyako...but the fact that she was the only new person in this office made her a tad uneasy. It must've showed on her face, because Ayane gave her an encouraging smile.

"But it's all right! If you have any problems, I'll lend you an ear, okay? Can't lend much more than that, but still!"

"Ha-ha-ha..."

Miyako smiled back. Not having any fellow college grads made her anxious, but at least her boss seemed easy to talk to.

"Ummm, come to think of it, Shirakawa, you used to work part-time for another publisher, didn't you?"

"R-right, yes."

"Which one? Did they do light novels?"

Miyako had mentioned on her résumé that she had worked part-time for a publisher but hadn't dived into much more detail than that. If she touted how much GF Bunko's editors liked her and how closely she knew people like Nayuta, Itsuki, Haruto, and Kaiko, maybe that would've made her job hunt

easier—but then, she reasoned, it'd be like she got her job through her connections rather than really earning it for herself.

“Yeah, GF Bunko.”

“GF?! Oh wow, GF!”

This excited Ayane much more than Miyako had anticipated.

“That’s not bad, is it?”

“Oh no, it’s just that I know someone who writes for GF.”

“Really? Who’s that?”

“Itsuki Hashima. You know, *All About My Little Sister*? It had an anime version a bit ago.”

“Huh?!” Now Miyako was just as shocked.

“Oh, have you met him before?”

“Yeah...”

A lot more than “met,” but regardless.

“Itsu—er, Hashima went to my college for a little while. In fact, he kind of started the domino chain that led to my job at GF editorial.”

“Whoa, neat! Sure is a small world sometimes, isn’t it? Were you dating Itsuki, by any chance?”

“N-no, not at all! We’re just friends!” Miyako insisted, blushing at Ayane’s interrogation. *Wait, she’s on a first-name basis with him, too?* “...Um, what kind of relationship did *you* have with Itsuki, Miss Mitahora?”

“Well, to tell the truth, he was kind of *my* inspiration to become an editor, too.”

“He was?!”

Ayane squinted as she reminisced, ignoring Miyako’s shock.

“My mother worked as a housekeeper for Itsuki’s family, so that’s how we met. He lent me this light novel, and long story short, that was how I wound up entering this business.”

“W-wow...”

Miyako had mixed feelings about this. This woman had met Itsuki, encountered light novels through him, and now she was an editor. The idea that someone else had followed this same path—especially someone older than her, and so beautiful—was unbelievable. She had already completely, totally, utterly blown off any romantic feelings for Itsuki, but even so, this made her reflect a little. Maybe it just hurt to be confronted by the fact that her life wasn’t so one-of-a-kind after all, no matter what path she took.

But ever since she’d read a certain novel some time ago, one thought had been growing stronger in Miyako’s mind. It was—

“Oh, by the way, speaking of GF Bunko, have you ever met Nayuta Kani?” Ayane changed the subject, unaware of Miyako’s inner thoughts. Again, “met” wasn’t the half of it.

“Yes, I have.”

“Ohhhh? Wow, neat!”

Now Ayane was tensed up again, albeit in a different way from when she had been talking about Itsuki. This time, she seemed honestly envious.

“...Are you a fan of hers, too, Miss Mitahora? The *Landscape* series and all?”

“Of course! She’s my favorite author!”

“R-really?”

Nayuta had tons of dedicated fans in the publishing industry, not least of which was Kirara Yamagata, her editor at GF Bunko. Ayane must’ve been another one of them.

“I’d love to work with her someday, but GF keeps such a tight lid on her that I can’t even get in contact. But I bet that’s true even if I was an editor over there, huh?”

“Y-yeah, I suppose so, ha-ha-ha...”

It was a dry laugh.

If I told her I was rooming with Nayuta right now, how would she react then?

“Hey, so what’s Kani like?! I know she really *is* a young woman like how she’s presented, and not a guy or an alias for some veteran writer like the rumors say—but even in the industry, nobody really knows anything more than that.”

“Well, um...”

She didn’t know how much to tell her—and besides, Miyako was reluctant to harness her knowledge of Nayuta to curry favor with her new boss.

“Well, she’s a very cute girl. Really cute.” A pause. “But hey, how about we start talking about my duties here?”



The first order of business was to teach Miyako editorial work so she could provide support to Ayane...but since the basic job description wasn’t much different from her previous part-time work, Miyako handled it all with ease. “I was a little worried, since you’re my first hire out of college,” remarked a pleased Ayane. “But you’re proving pretty useful right off the bat!”

She was also guiding Miyako through the ins and outs of writing business e-mails and proposals, among other tasks that weren’t in her part-time experience. The most important of them was prep work for launching a new imprint. At the moment, Branch Hill was working to launch a new light novel publishing label, and Ayane Mitahora was serving as project leader.

The most important aspect of launching any new imprint is to find work to publish. Right now, the editorial department—including Ayane, as well as Shirogamine, the president—was sending out feelers, especially to the writers they’d already known from before. But finding new series was apparently proving an uphill battle so far.

If a new imprint wanted to make its presence felt in this industry, it wasn’t just a matter of having a large stable of content producers—the quality of their work was also very important. Due to this, Branch Hill was chiefly soliciting authors with a certain amount of experience, but they could often be busy doing other series, and the companies publishing those series could often be very possessive of their assets. User-submitted novel sites like syosetu.com, Kakuyomu, and AlphaPolis were another potential angle, but with the recent

boom in web novels getting official print publications, most of the really popular series had already gotten offers from other companies, and it was hard to find web novel writers willing to go for a new publishing label with zero track record to speak of.

“So if you like, Shirakawa, I want you to try searching for good web novels that haven’t gotten offers from anywhere else yet. If you have contacts with GF Bunko writers you can leverage, I’d love to hear about that, too. Just don’t try approaching people who’ve just made their debut with them or veterans who’ve been writing for them a long time. That usually leads to trouble!”

That rundown made Miyako think of one writer: Soma Misaka. He had won a prize at the GF Bunko New Writers Contest, but he had disappointing sales with his debut work and a bad relationship with his assigned editor. This had driven him to start pitching his work to other publishers, which made GF Bunko opt to disown him entirely. Miyako could still remember what he’d told her when he went out the door: *I hope I can create a book with you sometime.*

I wonder what he’s up to these days?

She mulled the question as she focused on her assigned work. Then, at five in the afternoon, Ayane said she could check out for the day. She had a meeting coming up, it turned out, so Miyako went home by herself.

Back at the apartment, she found Nayuta and Kaiko waiting; they had gotten some food delivered in order to hold a little “congrats on your first day of work” party. Miyako, to tell the truth, didn’t exactly have a tough first day. It didn’t really feel at all like she was suddenly a mature, adult member of society. After all, she hadn’t done much that she didn’t do part-time earlier.

...If I asked Nayu to join this new imprint, would she write for it?

The answer would probably be an eager yes. And Miyako was sure it’d send Ayane and her new colleagues to the moon, much to the bitter resentment of Godo and Yamagata over at Gift Publishing. So Miyako gulped down her beer, resisting the urge to set off a drama bomb like the light novel world had never seen before.

Nobunaga Shirogamine

A week had passed since Miyako joined Branch Hill. Her days were spent much as they were back at GF Bunko—she provided support for Ayane’s work, occasionally sat in on meetings with writers, and spent her spare time browsing web novels for potential diamonds in the rough.

As she began to relax and settle into her new position:

“Hey, Miyako, are you busy tonight?” Ayane blurted out of nowhere as she looked at her phone screen.

“Tonight? I didn’t have any plans, no.”

“How about we go out for dinner, then? Kind of a welcome-party sort of thing.”

“Huh? But we already had one.”

The welcome party, attended by members of the editorial team, had been held three days ago at a nearby *izakaya*. Members of the General Entertainment Editorial Department actually didn’t interact with one another all that much, since they handled such different work duties. It was proving rare to see everybody in the office at the same time; in fact, some editors hardly ever reported to their desks at all. There was a wide diversity of ages and nationalities and little sense of all-in-it-together kinship among them.

Perhaps thanks to this, the welcome-aboard event didn’t take on the wild-frat-party vibe observed in many of GF Bunko editorial’s outings—everyone drank at their own pace instead, casually chatting with one another. *This must be how grown-ups socialize*, an impressed Miyako thought, even as she kind of missed the debauchery she’d seen over at GF.

“Hee-hee! This is a *different* welcome party.”

“...? Well, all right, then.”

Miyako nodded, confused, as Ayane just gave her a playful smile.



A little past seven in the evening, Ayane took Miyako to a small *yakitori* restaurant close by the office. Almost every seat was occupied, and the savory aromas whetted her appetite.

“I have a reservation under Mitahora,” Ayane told the staff, and in a moment, they were shown to a private room in the back. Someone else was already there, a slender man in glasses and a long-sleeve Hawaiian shirt. He was around thirty years old, with a somewhat impish smile on his neatly composed face.

Oh, is this...?

It was the man who had interviewed Miyako for her job at Branch Hill. He’d had on a business suit at the time, so he was making quite a different impression now, but their exchange was still deeply etched in Miyako’s memory. She remembered his face well; there was no mistaking it.

“Good evening,” said Ayane, greeting him with a casual tone.

“Good evening,” he said back, then turned toward the perplexed Miyako. “And good to see you again, Miyako Shirakawa. Do you remember me?”

“Oh, um, yes. From the interview...”

“This is our president, Miyako.” Ayane said it so informally that it took a few moments for Miyako to react.

“.....The president? Wait, you’re the president?!”

“Yes, I am,” the man said, smiling at the wide-eyed Miyako as if he found this incredibly funny. “Nobunaga Shiogamine, president of Branch Hill. I’m glad to have you on the team, Miyako Shirakawa.”

“Y-yes, sir! The pleasure’s all mine!”

Miyako knew both Nobunaga Shiogamine’s name and reputation from the editors at GF Bunko. He had originally worked in sales for a major publishing house when he got transferred to editorial for its rapidly fizzling light novel

label. In a virtual instant, he had turned the place around, reviving it with a string of hit titles and becoming its savior. He could have easily become its next editor in chief, but he suddenly resigned two years ago to start Branch Hill, his own firm. Other so-called “name-brand” editors existed, but unlike them, he preferred staying away from the spotlight, not bothering with any kind of social media presence. As a result, even though he had a towering reputation in the business, few people knew his actual face or personality—although all kinds of rumors were going around.

Miyako froze up in surprised anxiety. She had no idea that the president himself had interviewed her.

“So how about we place an order? What do you want to drink?”

“Um, oolong tea,” Miyako replied.

Ayane tapped the order into the tablet at the side of the table, and in a minute or two, the drinks arrived. Ayane had gone with a Calpico-flavored whiskey sour, Shirogamine picking a whiskey highball.

“Well, here’s to you joining our outfit, Shirakawa.”

The three of them clinked their glasses. Shirogamine took a sip of his drink.

“So, are you getting used to the job?”

“Oh yes, Ayane’s been very helpful to me...”

“No, no, Miyako’s super talented! I guess GF really taught her a lot, so I’ve hardly had to coach her on anything else at all. She’s contributing right from the outset. The best new hire I could’ve hoped for!”

Ayane’s praise embarrassed Miyako.

“Oh no, I...”

“Let me tell you, when I was new to this place, I was pretty much worthless. You’re really amazing, Miyako.”

“Yeah, you were a big dunce back then, weren’t you?” Shirogamine teased, his face serene.

Ayane frowned. “Well, yeah, I know I was, but I don’t like it when the big boss

tells me that! I mean, I think *any* new hire would be pretty lost with training that unhinged! If things had gone any other way, I might've easily quit, you know. I'm using the bad example *you* set as I mentor Miyako right now."

"Ah, very good. I'm glad to hear your experience back then is helping you." Shirogamine neatly brushed off Ayane's complaining.

"Um, so the president mentored you, Ayane?"

"That's right." She nodded. "But that was at the last company."

"The last company?"

"Yeah, I was hired on from college by the company our president used to work at. It was *soooo* hard! Like, every day I thought I might kill him eventually."

Shirogamine smiled. "Well, that was just before I was about to go independent. I was kind of in a hurry to at least get the new hires up to speed before I quit."

"Well, maybe, but putting a total rookie in charge of ■■■■ was totally wild!"

The title Ayane mentioned was a series Shirogamine had overseen at his last company, a major hit that was adapted into an anime, a game, and several other things. Its author, however, was notorious for being a "handful," to put it mildly, and even Miyako was aware of his reputation.

"I'll never forget that hell, even if I wanted to... The first job I ever got assigned to was to pick up a manuscript for ■■■■, which is like the most difficult mission I could possibly have been given. I had to travel all over Japan to track down that bum—Mr. ■■, I mean. And I had to do almost everything by myself, from discussing revisions and illustrations to completing the manuscript. I got it all done just before the drop-dead deadline, so I had to go apologize to the printing house. And I was so full of other work that my body and mind were pretty much shredded, and then *this* guy here calls me to an *izakaya* near the office at three in the morning. I figured he was gonna buy me a drink to congratulate me, but do you know the first thing he said to me? He said, *I don't think you realize what editorial work really is*. And lemme tell you, that was the breaking point. I was just bawling! Right in front of everyone at the *izakaya*, I was carrying on and screaming, like, *What the hell makes you think I haven't*

realized it yet?!"

"I also remember you shouting something like, *I'm gonna kill you, you four-eyed monster!*"

"Yeah, and I meant that one hundred percent, too. If I had any physical strength left to strangle you back then, I would've done it for sure."

"Well, glad I survived that, then."

"And *I'm* glad I didn't become a felon."

Miyako could only paint on a tense grin as her boss and the president made this deadly exchange, all smiles.

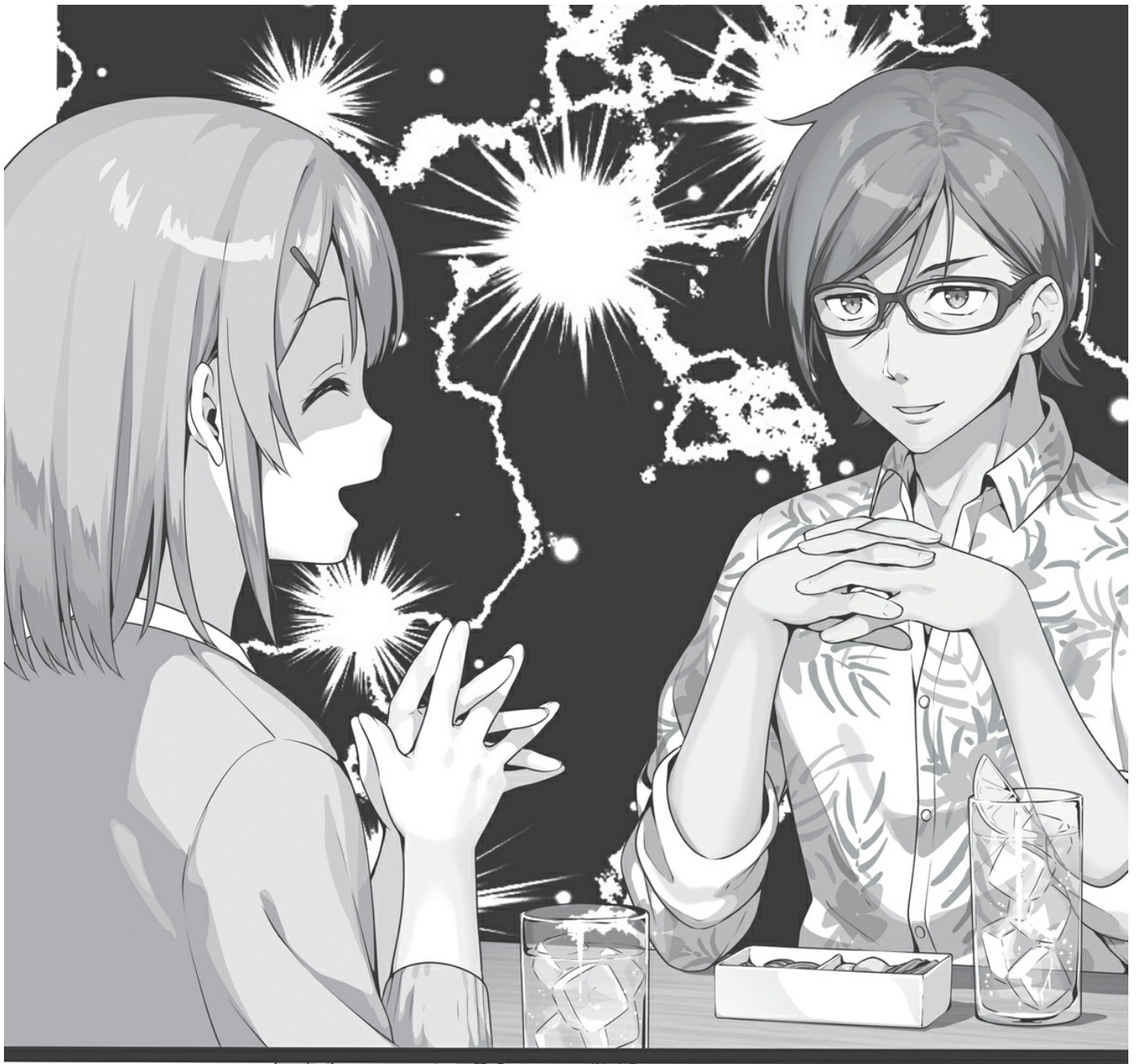
Then Ayane sighed.

"But, well, that whole experience definitely helped support the person I am today, much to my chagrin. Any normal job I could take right now, I'm sure it'd be way too boring for me."

"Is that why you moved to Branch Hill?" Miyako asked.

"Yeah, something like that." Ayane nodded back. "I worked at my old company for about a year, and one day, the president here made this incredibly enthusiastic offer to me."

"Right, I had a really good employee who had to quit because of family reasons, so I needed to fill the position with an experienced editor fast. It'd be too much trouble for me if I headhunted a veteran from somewhere else, but I figured taking some dunce who hadn't even been there for a year wouldn't damage my old company too much. It was a win-win."



“Wait, *that* was why you asked me to join you? I never heard that before!” Ayane’s eyes widened.

“Well...to be honest, I didn’t think you’d actually take the offer. I didn’t really offer you a great salary.”

“I had to think it over for a while, yeah. It *was* a good fifty percent pay cut, after all. But, you know, I thought I could get involved with more interesting stuff working for you. The benefit package is actually just as good as the big publishers’, shockingly, so I figured I could make ends meet well enough.”

“Right, that’s something I was particular about when I started this firm.”

The base pay Branch Hill offered its staff was considerably lower across the line than what Gift Publishing provided, to say nothing of the publishing giant Ayane used to work for. But in terms of benefits, it offered a much better package than Gift did—or maybe Gift was just a terrible place to work, one of the two.

“Um... If I could ask, sir, why did you decide to go indie in the first place?”

The question had been bothering Miyako for a long time.

“Oh, it just kind of happened,” Shiogamine replied.

Miyako couldn’t believe her ears. “It just happened...?”

“Right. One day, I woke up, and I just kinda decided it’d be fun to start my own company.”

“Wow, really...? Um... Is that really all of it?”

“Yep.”

“And not because you always dreamed of starting a firm, or because you couldn’t do the work you wanted at a big publishing house, or because internal politics drove you out...?”

“No, nothing like that at all.”

“At... At all?”

“No. I had good relationships with everyone at my job, with the exception of Mitahora wanting to kill me.”

Ayane grinned at this. “You said the exact same thing when you quit, didn’t you, boss? And the company really tried to talk you out of it. Like, didn’t they offer to double your salary if you stayed on?”

“Right, I expected they’d want to hold on to me, so I hid the fact that I planned to start my own business until the very last minute.”

“It was chaos across editorial, too. I had a ton of writers asking me what was going on.”

“Yeah, sorry for all the trouble,” Shirogamine said without a hint of apology.

“Well,” Miyako said, “does Branch Hill have...I don’t know, some kind of mission? Or goal, or ideals, or something?”

“Ideals...? Well, there are and there aren’t, I’d say.”

Miyako frowned at the mysterious answer. “Um, what do you mean?”

“My thoughts have always been pretty simple—I want to do fun, interesting things. But if I just wanted to do what I wanted by myself, why go through the trouble of forming a company and recruiting other people, right? I had enough freedom to do that at my previous company anyway... It’s just that I want Branch Hill to be a firm where every employee can do what they find to be fun. Of course, we need to make a profit as a company, but still—I like watching interesting people doing interesting things up close. That’s my hobby these days.”

“Y-your hobby...?”

“That’s how I started my current project,” Ayane chimed in. “We’re not creating a new imprint because of company policy or whatever—it’s just because I said I wanted to try it.”

“Really?!” a surprised Miyako replied.

“Yep.” Shirogamine nodded. “I mean, I saw no reason why we couldn’t just keep publishing light novels as part of our overall publishing division, instead of venturing into a light novel–specific imprint.”

“Well, don’t you want to win it all? In the light novel industry, that is? To achieve that, we need a paperback label to serve as our brand.”

Miyako gave Ayane an astonished look. She seemed so matter-of-fact with these outrageous ambitions.

Shirogamine, meanwhile, gave Miyako a smile that was difficult to read. “During your interview, Shirakawa, you said you wanted to be an editor who can cry alongside her writers.”

“That’s right, yes.”

“Do you still feel that way now?”

Miyako thought about it for a moment. “...Basically, yes.”

When Nayuta had stopped writing completely, the experience taught her that simply standing by your writers wasn’t enough. Still, that desire on her part remained strong.

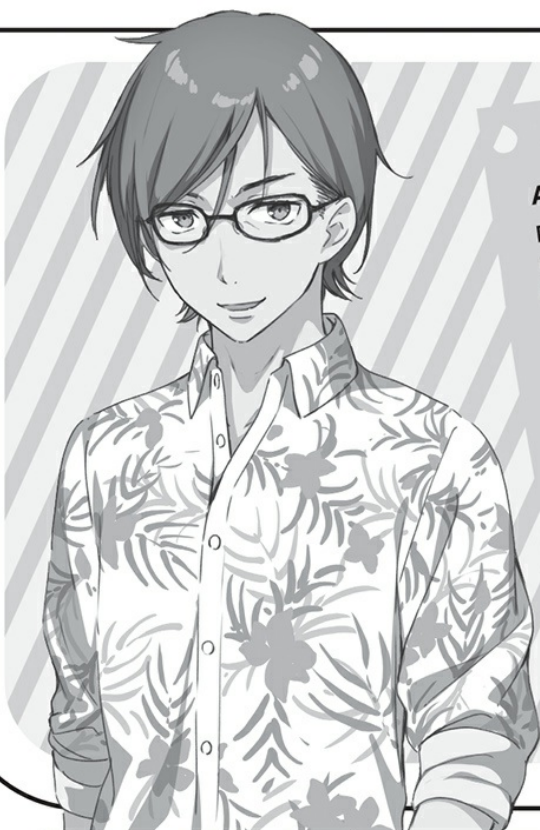
“Then go ahead. *Be* that kind of editor. And I hope you’ll find this company the ideal place to become the ideal editor in your mind.”

The words made Miyako’s heart flutter. Here was a company where she was free to pursue her own ideals, where all her inexperienced blue-sky ideas were affirmed. There was no shoehorning her into becoming *this* kind of editor or having to learn someone else’s “right” way to work.

But aiming for ideals without having someone else as a guide required a firm will. *I’m still lost in a sea of doubt. Am I really qualified to do that?*

Shirogamine and Ayane looked on at the pensive Miyako, warm smiles on both their faces.

NOBUNAGA SHIROGAMINE



AGE: 33

BORN: June 23

President of Branch Hill Ltd. Joined a large publisher's sales department before transferring to light novel editorial, where he became known as a capable editor before suddenly quitting to establish Branch Hill. A dedicated, talented worker with a gift for finding people's skills and making the most of them. His bold yet unfocused nature often leads to trouble for others.

AYANE MITAHORA

AGE: 24

BORN: April 17

Editor at Branch Hill. Dreaming of becoming a light novel editor, she studied hard and graduated from a first-rate college. From there, she joined a large publisher, only to shift to Branch Hill after her former boss Shirogamine invited her on. She's now leading a project to establish a new light novel imprint. A born communicator, her natural brightness and attention to detail help her break the ice with anybody.



Wordwolf

On a Sunday evening in late April, five people—Itsuki Hashima, Nayuta Kani, Miyako Shirakawa, Haruto Fuwa, and Chihiro Hashima—were gathered at Itsuki’s apartment. Chihiro’s home-cooked dinner spread was on the table, accompanied by several types of Belgian beer.

“It’s been a while since we were all together like this,” Haruto said as he sipped his beer. He was right. Between work, job hunting, and higher education, everyone was a lot busier than they used to be. It was Haruto who had suggested they all meet up to celebrate Chihiro’s college admission and Miyako’s new job; with Miyako joining Branch Hill and no longer stopping by Gift Publishing, he feared they’d fall out of touch with one another if he didn’t.

“Used to your job yet, Miyako?” Haruto asked.

Miyako nodded. “Used to it...? Well, it’s really not that different from my part-time job. I haven’t even been assigned an author yet.”

“They’re starting a new imprint, aren’t they?” Itsuki said. He had shaved off all his hair at one point, but four months later, it was back to normal. The cosplay monk outfit was now back in a closet or box or somewhere.

“Yeah...but how’d you know?”

As far as Miyako knew, Itsuki wasn’t included among the writers Ayane and her colleagues were calling on for the new imprint. She’d never mentioned it to Nayuta or Kaiko, either.

“Oh, I heard from an acquaintance,” Itsuki said, looking a bit sheepish.

“An acquaintance? Was it Ayane, maybe?”

“...Yeah. You get along with her?”

“Well, she’s pretty much my mentor, so... But you keep in touch with her?”

“Mm... Is another woman rearing her ugly head, Itsuki?”

Nayuta interrupted them. Her hair was just as short now as when she cut off nearly all of it a bit ago—she liked how much lighter it felt, so she stuck with it.

“No! I just ran into her when I went back to my parents’ house a bit ago! I did get a business card from her, but I haven’t talked to her since.”

Itsuki looked a bit flustered. Neither Miyako nor Nayuta suspected that Itsuki had an interest in any other woman by this point, but judging by his attitude, clearly he had something on his mind about Ayane.

“Man, Branch Hill’s new imprint, huh? If I had Miyako editing for me, I’d definitely write for them, too,” Haruto said. He sounded half serious.

“I’ll write, too, if you’re in charge of me, Mya.”

Miyako chuckled a bit at Nayuta. She was all but positive she’d say yes if she asked her, so she hadn’t told her anything about the new label yet.

“Well, if I pulled you and Fuwa away, I’m sure Mr. Godo would kill me, so... Oh, and speaking of which, congratulations on your new series, Fuwa. It looks like it’s going really well.”

“Thanks.”

Chevalier of the Absolute World—Haruto’s first series that had been successful enough to score an anime adaptation—had published its final volume in February. The following month, GF Bunko published Volume 1 of his new series. Titled *Leviathan Revive*, it was a robot-battle story set in outer space; two illustrators were handling character and mech art respectively, and they’d even brought on an outside expert to assist with the story background. GF Bunko had put a lot of money into the launch effort, which even included TV commercials, and thanks to that, sales were extremely strong, with the first reprint ordered on day one. The book was also well received by readers; just like the last series, the eye-catching characters, developed story, and well-crafted world attracted attention from science fiction fans as well.

“I really enjoyed *Revive* a lot,” Chihiro said. She had recently begun growing her hair longer, keeping it straight instead of tying it up in the back. It made for a much more mature look than before, which threw Haruto a bit. They hadn’t

seen each other since Chihiro confessed her feelings to him last year. They had kept in touch via their phones, but ever since her sister, Shiori, was born, Chihiro had rarely come to the apartment. Itsuki was now visiting his parents' place all the time to see Shiori, so there was no need to.

"Ah... Yeah. Thank you, Chihiro," said Haruto. "You're a really kind girl."

"...!" Chihiro's face opened up in surprise.

"What?"

Chihiro blushed a bit. "Um... It's the first time you've called me a girl, Haruto."

"W-was it?"

"Yes," she replied with conviction. Haruto had had trouble thinking of her that way at first, after all the time he'd known her as a boy—but after she changed her hairstyle and clothing (and got much prettier in the process), it was only natural for him to make the mental transition. Apparently, it was a very special moment for Chihiro.

Even Miyako could pick up on this a little. *Oh? Wait, does Chi have some feelings for Fuwa...?* She thought that only because she didn't know Chihiro had already made a move and gotten shot down.

"S-so yeah, how's college going?" Haruto asked, steering the chat away from this awkward territory.

"Oh, right. I'm only a freshman, so I'm focusing on gen ed right now, but I'm having a lot of fun learning all these new things."

"You *like* studying? You amaze me..." Itsuki looked impressed.

"Well," Miyako said, "*you* were busy writing novels the whole time instead of paying attention in class."

"He was already a professional writer by then," Chihiro pointed out. "That's a lot more impressive to me."

"That might be a valid point," she agreed with a laugh. "When I was a freshman, all I really did was just kinda go to classes. I didn't even like studying as much as Chi here."

“Ah, everybody’s like that their first year,” replied Haruto, defending her.

“I guess so, yeah...”

It was true that she thought of herself as at least a fair bit better than she had been back then. She had found a dream—to become an editor—and she got hired by a publisher, but there was still a bit of hesitation in her heart that hadn’t fully disappeared.

“Did you join any clubs?” Haruto asked.

“Oh, um, yeah, I joined a tabletop role-playing game club.”

“Really?!” Haruto exclaimed back. He had been part of a TTRPG club in college, too, and although it had collapsed in his sophomore year, he was still a big fan of them. Those weekly sessions did a lot to train him as a writer.

“Did you have a game session yet?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you play?”

“Call of Cthulhu and Arianrhod.”

“Oh, nice!”

Chihiro smiled at the suddenly very engaged Haruto. “They’re a lot more complicated than the games we played here, though, which surprised me. It took about two hours just to make a character.”

“Ha-ha... Well, I kept it really simple, so...”

The TTRPG the five of them had played was an original game Haruto created mainly to help the beginners among them get familiar with the genre. Along those lines, the player characters were rearranged versions of premade types. The game was kept simple by design, although it was pretty rough around the edges. As game master, Haruto had to secretly fudge the dice a few times to keep the players happy and entertained while ensuring the game somehow worked.

“So, did you have fun?”

“Yes! It’s the first club or extracurricular I’ve ever tried, so it’s a really novel

experience.”

“Between studying and club activities, you’re sure enjoying college life, aren’t you?”

Nayuta looked a little envious of her. She had dropped out of high school after getting bullied in her first year, and although she had absolutely no regrets about her school days, seeing Chihiro enjoy her own academics so purely was impressive to her.

“Do you have any boyfriends yet, by the way?” Nayuta asked.

Chihiro blushed. “I—I can’t do that!”

“I’m sure you could have as many as you want, though. Although it doesn’t matter how popular you are if you can’t get the person you love to look back at you.”

“Ngh...” Chihiro’s face scrunched up at the casual observation.

“Yep... Love sure is wonderful. Isn’t it, Itsuki?”

“D-don’t drag *me* into this!”

Nayuta began clinging to Itsuki. It flustered him, but not enough to try shaking her off.

“Well,” Chihiro whispered, looking at them, “I want it someday, too, but...” She took a glance at Haruto. He moved his eyes away from hers.

Mm, it must be true. Chi is into Fuwa... But is Fuwa not aware of it?

Watching Chihiro and Haruto look at each other made Miyako’s heart warm up a little.

“B-by the way, how’s the baby? Getting bigger now?”

It was a blatant attempt to change the subject, but it still made Chihiro’s face light up.

“Yes! She can talk now!”

“What? That was kinda fast, wasn’t it?”

Haruto’s eyebrows shot up, and Miyako and Nayuta were just as surprised.

Shiori Hashima, Itsuki and Chihiro's sister, was only born back on February 11, and none of them had heard of babies talking at less than three months old.

"If you count 'ahh' and 'ooh' as talking," Itsuki coldly quipped, "then yeah, she's talking lots."

"But I know Shi understands what I say! She likes it when I talk to her!"

"Yeah, sometimes it *does* feel like we're communicating with each other in a way...but that's my little sister for you, huh?"

Itsuki grinned as he thought of Shiori. Chihiro followed his lead.

"And she's so cute when she smiles, and cute when she sleeps, and even cute when she cries! ♥ Shi totally *has* to be an angel, doesn't she?!"

"No doubt about it. Shiori is a true-blue angel."

"...Weren't you calling Nadeshiko an angel just a moment ago?" Miyako asked, glaring at Itsuki.

"Mm, yeah, Nadeshiko's an angel in her own way, but our Shiori's a *real* angel, so..."

"Right? Shi is just the cutest of them all."

Itsuki revealed not a hint of hesitation, with Chihiro offering her full agreement.

Watching this pair of totally smitten siblings made Haruto laugh a bit. "Well, I can see how a newborn sister must look really cute to you guys...but how long do you think that'll last?"

"Forever! How long do you think?"

"Exactly! Shiori is our eternal angel!"

Haruto smiled wickedly at the Hashimas, both offended by these foreboding words. "If you say the same thing ten years from now," he added, "you deserve all the praise I can give you."

"Do you have any pictures?" Miyako asked.

"Oh, of course! And lots of videos, too! Want to see them? Of course you do!" Chihiro pulled out her phone and began to show Miyako her now-extensive

gallery.

“Awww, she’s so cute! It’s so true, isn’t it? Now I can see why you call her an angel...” The adorable Shiori made Miyako smile broadly. “Here, Naya, you take a look, too. She’s super cute.”

“That’s okay,” Naya replied with a smile. “Itsuki’s already showed me a lot, so I’m good.”

The two of them had managed to reconcile, but Itsuki was now spending at least half of every week at his family’s house, and even during dates, he wouldn’t stop showing Naya pictures and videos of his sister at every opportunity. It was frustrating, almost like someone had taken her boyfriend away from her, but she was accepting of it. He had an obligation to look after a newborn sister—and besides, she’d become Naya’s sister-in-law soon enough.



As they continued to eat and drink, regaling one another about recent events and listening to the Hashimas boast about their younger sister, they pretty much went through everything laid out on the table.

Swigging the beer left in his glass, Haruto let out a satiated sigh. “Well, I’m pretty full, so why don’t we play a quick game of something?”

“Oh, sure.”

“I’m up for it.”

“Nice.”

“How about it?”

Chihiro, Miyako, Itsuki, and Naya all agreed. They had missed moments like these.

“So what’ll we play?” Itsuki asked. “Hopefully something that doesn’t involve a lot of pieces...”

“I think I know the perfect one. It’s called Wordwolf, and all you need is a pen and paper.”

“Wordwolf?” Chihiro asked Haruto.

“Yeah, it’s a Werewolf-type game where you’re trying to hide your identity. Basically, the game master gives a certain word to the players. They all receive the same word except for one person, who receives a different one instead. That makes them the wordwolf, and then players have to talk among themselves and guess who the wordwolf is. Also, keep in mind, the wordwolf has no idea whether their word is the same as everyone else’s or not.”

“So they don’t know if they’re the wordwolf?”

“Exactly. So after the conversation is over, everyone points at who they think is the wordwolf at the same time. If the person who gets the most votes really is the wordwolf, the other players—or the villagers—win, and if they’re wrong, the wordwolf wins. But even if the wordwolf gets the most votes, if they can guess what the other players’ word is, they can win that way, too.”

“So we need to keep the conversation going so that the wordwolf can’t guess what the subject really is?”

“You got it.” Haruto nodded.

“Hmm... Sounds kinda hard...”

“I bet,” Nayuta said. “Not exactly your specialty, huh, Mya?”

“Who decides which two words we use?” Itsuki asked.

“Well, there’s an app for that, but how about we just come up with our own? One of us will serve as game master and think of two words, and they’ll write them down on paper and hand them out—but the master can’t know who has which word, either. I’ll be the master to start, so Itsuki, can I borrow a pen, some printer paper, and a pair of scissors?”

“Sure.”

Haruto cut a piece of paper into ten pieces, writing a word on four of them—three for the villagers, one for the wordwolf.

“Okay, all set.”

Folding each slip in half, he handed them off to the other four at random.

“Now, players, look at your word and make sure nobody else sees yours.”

The four of them each unfolded their slips of paper.

“Hmm...”

“Oh...”

“Aha...”

“Mmmm...”

“Now it’s time to talk among yourselves and try to find the wordwolf. You have a three-minute time limit, and then we’ll vote on who we think it is.”

Haruto brought up a timer on his phone. “Ready...and go.”

“Um, okay, so... Do you guys like this thing?” Chihiro was first to speak.

“Oh, I love it, of course,” Nayuta said.

“I do, too,” Miyako added.

“And so do I,” said Itsuki.

“Hmm... So you all like it? Well, I like it, too, of course. Oh, by the way, Fuwa, we’re allowed to tell lies, right?”

“Yeah,” Haruto said to Nayuta, “you can say anything you want. The wordwolf’s free to lie if they think it’ll protect their identity.”

“All right,” Chihiro said. “...So, um, what is it that all of you like about this thing?”

“Well, why don’t you tell us first, Chi?” replied Nayuta.

“Me? Well, me, it’s...the taste, I guess.”

Chihiro was understandably hesitant. If she was the wordwolf and the other players weren’t given a “food” word, that’d expose her in one shot.

“Right, yes, it *is* quite tasty,” said Nayuta.

“Yeah, I like the taste, too.”

“Me too.”

Miyako and Itsuki followed Nayuta’s lead.

“Hmm,” Itsuki continued, “it sounds like we’re all in agreement that it’s tasty. By the way, what’s your favorite way to eat this? Me...I like it in a soup.”

“Huh, really?” Chihiro asked, a bit thrown.

“Yeah, to be honest about it.” Itsuki nodded back. “What about you?”

“Well, I think it’s good in any kind of dish, but I like it better when it’s cooked over a fire.”

“I think it’s best raw,” Nayuta said.

“Mm, I’m more into it fried?” ventured Miyako.

The four of them all had to ruminate over their answers, pondering who was in the majority and who wasn’t. By the way, the two words in play were *shrimp* and *crab*—the latter being the wordwolf’s word. And based on what he’d heard so far, Haruto already had a hunch who it was.

“Itsuki,” Chihiro said, “how much would you say you like this?”

“How much? What do you mean?”

“Like, in terms of ranking it... Number one or number two...”

“Hmm... Well... You could say I like it the best, or maybe you could say that I don’t...”

“Why’re you being so vague?” Miyako wondered.

“I’ll just say that this is number one for me,” Nayuta said.

“I’d say I like it just a normal amount?”

“Yeah, I agree with Miyako.”

Once Miyako and Chihiro had their say, the phone’s alarm went off. Three minutes had gone by.

“Okay,” Haruto said as he stopped it, “the debate is over. Everyone, on the count of three, point at who you think the wordwolf is. One, two, three!”

In an instant, everyone’s arms were out. Itsuki was pointing at Nayuta, and everyone else was pointing at Itsuki.

“Three votes for Itsuki. Now, let’s see if he really is the wordwolf. Itsuki, show

us your paper.”

“...Sure.”

Itsuki unfolded it and placed it on the table. It said *crab*.

“Yep, all three of you guessed right. Itsuki was the wordwolf!”

“Woo-hoo!”

The three villagers cheered their good fortune.

“But hang on a minute,” interrupted Haruto. “If Itsuki can guess the word all three of you had, the wordwolf can still win.”

“Oh, right...!”

Itsuki smiled confidently at the impatient Chihiro. “Hee-hee-hee... Looks like I’ll have the last laugh after all. The villagers’ word can be none other than *shrimp*!”

He couldn’t have been more right, as the other three tossed their paper slips on the table.

“Well done. So the wordwolf wins this round, and all the villagers were eaten!”

“When Nayu said it was number one for her,” a disappointed Miyako said, “I wanted to wince. I was convinced she was one of us, but I thought the wordwolf might’ve figured it out then, too.”

“I’m sorry... I should’ve been more careful.”

Everybody around the table knew that Nayuta’s favorite food in the world was shrimp.

“Well,” Itsuki replied, “Miyako’s comment gave me a big hint, too.”

“Oh?”

“You said you liked it best fried, right? Nobody likes crab fried, so that convinced me you had a different word from mine.”

“Hey, it’s not totally unthinkable! Don’t forget about crab rangoon! And some people like tempura crab the best, too!”

“Yeah, and that came after Itsuki said he liked it in a soup, and I was sure it was him, too...” Chihiro sighed. “By the way, what did you mean by *maybe I like it the best, maybe I don’t*? You like shrimp best, too, don’t you?”

“My favorite *food* is shrimp, yeah, but...”

Itsuki flashed a somewhat embarrassed glance at Nayuta, whose last name sounded like *crab* in Japanese.

“Oh! Oh, that...” Chihiro blushed, understanding what he meant, while Nayuta smiled shyly.

“Weh-heh-heh...”

“Right, great,” Haruto said with a smile. “Okay, next round!”

“Who’ll be the next game master?”

“Oh, do you mind if I try it?” Miyako asked.

Haruto gave her four slips and a pen.

“Hmm, what to go with...?”

She looked around the room, thinking for a while, before writing down her words. When the papers were passed out, the timer began.

Chihiro was first to speak up again.

“Um... This is real tasty, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“Uh...”

Itsuki, Nayuta, and Haruto all gave her surprised looks. Chihiro, sensing the danger, hurriedly tried to play damage control.

“Ah, I mean, everyone has their own preferences, of course!”

“I don’t think flavor has anything to do with it...,” Itsuki said.

“I think we’ve already got our wordwolf,” observed Nayuta.

“We could probably just vote now, huh?” offered Haruto. “We don’t want to

keep talking if it might give hints to the wordwolf.”

Itsuki and Nayuta agreed to this—and so, without waiting for the timer, they all pointed en masse at Chihiro.

“Oof...”

Chihiro reluctantly revealed her word. Her slip had *ramen* written on it.

“Yep,” Miyako the game master said, “Chi’s definitely the one.”

“Now,” added Haruto, “what do you think the villagers’ word was?”

“I have no idea... Is it something that all of you think tastes bad? Vegetable juice or something?”

“Incorrect. And so the wordwolf was hanged at the gallows!”

With Haruto’s declaration, the villagers revealed their words. All three slips read *light novels*.

“That’s not even a food!” protested Chihiro.

Haruto snickered back at her. “Yeah, sometimes people try to root out the wordwolf immediately from the start like that. But maybe that wasn’t the best word pair to pick.”

“Oh?” Miyako said.

“If the two words have too little to do with each other, that puts the wordwolf at too much of a disadvantage. It’s better if the subjects are in the same genre or have a lot of stuff in common.”

“Oh, I see... Sorry, Chi.”

“No, no problem,” Chihiro replied with a soft smile.

“Okay, can I make up the next pair?”

Nayuta stood up, taking the pen and paper. She needed only a few moments to write her slips and pass them out.

“Huh...?”

“Oh...”

“Huhhh?”

“...Hmmmmmm...”

Itsuki, Miyako, Chihiro, and Haruto all looked puzzled at their words. The first three had received the word *sex*, while Haruto’s word was *sumo*, making him the wordwolf.

“All right.” Nayuta beamed as she set the timer. “Time for all of you to talk about it.”

Itsuki went first, albeit hesitantly. “Well, have you guys ever...um...done this before?”

“N-no!”

“No, I haven’t...”

Chihiro (sex) and Miyako (sex) both blushed a little.

“Me either,” Haruto (sumo) added. “Never in real life.”

“No? Yeah, I’ll bet...but I’ll just tell you guys that I have.”

I know, Miyako and Chihiro thought as Itsuki shyly spoke. Haruto (a virgin) accepted this well enough. Growing up as a boy, he assumed Itsuki must’ve played sumo with kids during recess at *some* point in life.

“By the way...I like manga about this. I collect the volumes and stuff,” offered Haruto (sumo).

“Pfft!” Miyako (sex) cracked up.

You’re starting with that admission, Fuwa...?!

She knew Haruto was a dyed-in-the-wool *otaku*, so it wasn’t exactly a big surprise. But nonetheless, the three people on the *sex* side were dumbfounded. Who was brazen enough to just step up and say, ***I like collecting porn manga?***

Haruto, of course, was referring to sumo-oriented manga like *Hinomaru Sumo* and *Bachibachi*—featuring a lot of sweaty, passionate scenes, maybe, but not erotic at all.

“Yeah, I guess I...read this manga, too, sometimes,” Itsuki (sex) said. “Some of them are really worthy of being called masterpieces, even.”

“Oh, I... I haven’t, um, *not* read any before,” Miyako (sex) added.

“I—I don’t know much about them, either...but I’m a little interested, I think!”

Chihiro (sex) had to drum up a lot of nerve to say that much. Even she was aware of her lack of knowledge in sexual matters—but she wanted to learn at least a little for whenever she got a lover and started to engage in that sort of stuff.

“Oh, really? You’re interested, Chihiro?” Haruto’s eyebrows rose with delight.

To Chihiro, this was someone she cared a lot about asking if she was interested in sex. She immediately reddened.

“Y-yes...” She nodded.

“Ah... Really, Chi?” a surprised Miyako asked.

“W-well, what about you, Miyako? You aren’t interested in the subject at all?”

“Huh?! Well, I... It’s not like I’m *not* interested, but...”

“Really?! You too, Miyako?!” Haruto was now raising his voice. “Wow. Well, maybe I could lend you some of my recommendations later?”

“Huh?!”

“Wh-what are you *talking* about?!”

“What are you trying to get my sister to read?!”

Haruto looked doubtfully at Miyako, Chihiro, and Itsuki.

“No, I mean, my favorite manga picks—ah...”

Finally, Haruto realized something wasn’t quite right between him and the others. But the same was true for the sex crew.

“...This definitely makes Fuwa look like a wordwolf to me. Wait, but then, Chi...”

“Chihiro...?”

Itsuki and Miyako looked at her, and the question in their eyes was apparent: *You’re interested in sex?* Chihiro’s face grew red as she turned her head down. An awkward silence began, only to be broken by the phone alarm.

“O-okay, time for the votes— *Pfffttth!*”

Nayuta the game master stopped the alarm, finally freed after three minutes of holding back laughter at this total failure to communicate. Haruto, as expected, received all the votes and had to reveal his word first.

“Ahhhh!” exclaimed the sex crew in unison.

“That’s right. Prince Manwhore was the wordwolf. Now, what do you think the villagers’ word was?”

“...Well, it can only be one thing, right?Sex?” Haruto answered softly, looking a little embarrassed.

“You got it! And so the wordwolf comes back from behind!”



“Wooo,” Haruto sarcastically replied. Then he glanced at Chihiro. She was still blushing, tears forming in her eyes.

“Ummm,” he said, unsure how to continue, “by the way, is anyone here interested in sumo manga? Because I could lend you some to try.”

“Uh, yes,” Chihiro said in a muffled whisper. “Yes, please.”

“G-great! I’ll be the next game master, then!” Itsuki half shouted, desperate to change the mood, and began to furiously write out his paper slips.

“Okay, here you are.”

He passed them out at random, the other four players dutifully reading their words. Haruto, Nayuta, and Chihiro received the words *big sister*; Miyako’s wordwolf term was *big brother*.

...Big sister, huh? Itsuki wrote those, so the other word has to be little sister.

...Big sister? Knowing my Itsuki, the other term must be little sister.

...Big sister... Well, I doubt my brother would’ve paired this with anything but little sister.

...Big brother? ...Yeah, well, it’s still Itsuki writing this, so the other one must be little sister.

The moment they saw their words, they all thought the same thing. The only question was who the wordwolf was.

“Right,” Itsuki said as he set the timer, “you may begin.”

All four of them were convinced what the *other* word was, so they started by probing one another with vague terms.

“Let’s see... This sure is popular, isn’t it?” Haruto went first.

Chihiro soon followed. “Yes, it certainly can be popular.”

“And that popularity is pretty reliable.”

“Right, it shows up in light novels a lot, too.”

Nayuta and Miyako continued, while all four of them nodded at one another.

“By the way,” Haruto said, “do you guys like this?”

“I do,” Chihiro said.

“I actually do a lot,” Nayuta said.

“I... I guess I’m pretty normal with it,” Miyako said.

Hearing this made Haruto conclude that *little sister* was the majority word this time around. So he dared to veer off the beaten path.

“Yeah... To be honest, I’m not really into the idea.”

Haruto was into big-sister characters. But if he said he liked his word, it’d reveal that he was carrying something besides *little sister*. Everybody knew, after all, that Haruto had a little sister who troubled him a lot.

With that lie, the other three began to get a very wrong idea about things:

- Chihiro (who has a real-life little sister she adores) → likes them.
- Nayuta (who adores a little-sister-oriented novelist) → likes them.
- Miyako (who has talked about how she doesn’t really understand the little-sister trope) → pretty normal with it.
- Haruto (who whines about his real-life little sister a lot) → not really into the idea.

Put it all together, and it suggested to everyone simultaneously that the villagers’ word was *little sister*—and *they*, every one of them, were the wordwolf.

“Right, yeah, there’s an anime this season starring one of these, isn’t there?” It was Miyako who said it, attempting to make people think she carried *little sister*.

“It’s a very typical subject for Itsuki, isn’t it?”

“You know, I’ve only just recently realized how wonderful it is.”

“Apparently it’s a popular subject in China, too.”

Nayuta, Chihiro, and Haruto followed suit with the discussion of *little sisters*, emphatically agreeing with one another at every opportunity.

“You know...I wonder if the wordwolf knows what the subject is by now?”

Haruto, convinced both that he was the wordwolf and that he had perfectly disguised it, pretended to act a little worried.

“Right? They’re in total stealth mode right now...”

Nayuta, convinced both that she was the wordwolf and that she had perfectly disguised it, pretended to act just as worried.

“Hmm... Maybe we got too into specifics...”

“That might not be good...”

Miyako and Chihiro, convinced both that they were the wordwolf and that they had perfectly disguised it, also feigned puzzlement as they chuckled internally.

They carried on with their brazen lies (“Well, now what?” and “What should we do now?” and “We’re at an impasse, aren’t we?”) as they waited for time to expire.

Beep, beep, beep...

The three-minute alarm went off. Itsuki stopped it.

“Ahhh, I’ve lost this one...”

“What a defeat...”

Haruto and Chihiro both lamented their fates.

“Okay, time to vote. Point at who you think is the wordwolf. One, two, three!”

At Itsuki’s signal, all four pointed more or less randomly at someone else, everyone all but assured they were the wordwolf. Haruto pointed at Miyako, Nayuta at Haruto, Chihiro at Nayuta, and Miyako at Haruto.

“Okay, with two votes, Haruto is our wordwolf candidate for now.”

“There’s nothing remotely wordwolfy about me,” Haruto breezily replied.
“See?”

“““Huhhh?!””””

Seeing the term *big sister* on Haruto’s slip, Nayuta, Chihiro, and Miyako all looked shocked. They were absolutely sure it would read *little sister*. Haruto,

meanwhile, could hardly guess why he got this reaction. What were they so surprised about?

...Ah, well. Just guess the villager word, and I win this—

“Sorry, guys, but Haruto was a villager.”

“Wh-what?!” Haruto sounded almost frantic at game master Itsuki’s revelation.

“Now,” he continued, “everybody reveal their words!”

Nayuta, Chihiro, and Miyako unfolded their slips, and all four players checked one another’s words.

“Ah...?!”

Nayuta, Chihiro, and Haruto were stunned at the term on Miyako’s slip.

“B-big *brother*...?!”

“Miyako was the wordwolf...?”

Itsuki grinned as Nayuta and Haruto bemoaned their fate.

“And so the winner is the wordwolf, Miyako. She’s eaten all the villagers alive. The end!”

“Oh... I won?”

Even the winner was stunned, unable to wrap her head around this unexpected victory.

“I swear,” Itsuki said, shaking his head. “All four of you thought you were wordwolves, and you’re all talking and trying to act like villagers! I had no idea who the wordwolf was.”

“Wow... What a farce that was...” Haruto hung his head low.

“I thought for sure,” Chihiro said, “that everyone but me had the words *little sister*.”

“Why *didn’t* you use that as a word?!” an accusatory Nayuta said.

Itsuki looked troubled by this. “Well, it’s your fault for assuming I would write that.”

“Well, it’s *you*, Itsuki.”

“Yeah, it’s you.”

“I know my brother, yeah.”

“Right.”

Itsuki’s eyebrows wrinkled up. “Look, I’m not gonna let myself be synonymous with little sisters forever. My new work isn’t a little-sister story at all.”

“Your new work? You got something approved?”

Itsuki nodded at Haruto. “Yeah.”

As he wrote his current series *All About My Little Sister* and *Sisterly Combat*, Itsuki had been constantly thinking about a new project but had long been unable to come to a decision. Last month, however, he finally got a project approved, along with the basic plot outline. He’d begin writing on it once he wrapped up the volumes of *All About* and *Sisterly Combat* he was working on.

“...Itsuki’s *not* writing a sister series?”

Miyako looked a little distressed by it. Itsuki boldly smiled back.

“I can’t write little sisters as heroines anymore...but I can still write lots of non-sisters, and I can make ’em all incredibly charming, too. Just sit back and watch the new, evolved neo-me.”

The novel he had written strictly for Nayuta two months ago had helped Itsuki catch a glimpse of new frontiers...but in the end, he gave up on the idea of pouring his former passions into a novel about liking one’s little sister romantically.

Fortunately for him, the latest *All About My Little Sister* volume—the one he had written based on cold, robotic calculation—was received positively by many readers, so he decided to use his newfound craftsmanlike writing manner to see *All About* and *Sisterly Combat* to their respective ends. He had told Nayuta about this, and her reply was, *In that case, I’m gonna drop those two. I look forward to your next series.* Losing such an avid reader stung, but Itsuki still didn’t think that the calculated-craftsman approach was wrong or inferior; he was sure the experience gained from taking this style was necessary to climb to

the next level.

“I hope your next series is a success. Like mine.” Haruto was being oddly feisty today.

“Pfft.” Itsuki gave him a brazen grin. “Once it comes out, it’ll overtake *Leviathan* in an instant.”

“Go ahead and try,” Haruto said—lightly, but still with a fire deep in his eyes.



They went through a few more rounds of Wordwolf (Chihiro used the terms *Gundam* and *Evangelion* when it was her turn), then played several other casual games before calling it a night. Nayuta was going to stay over, so Haruto, Miyako, and Chihiro all left together.

“Hey, Chi?” Miyako asked, soft enough so that only Chihiro could hear. They were both walking a little ahead of Haruto.

“Yes?” Chihiro rather stiffly replied.

“...Do you like Fuwa?”

“Yes, I do. I said so to him, and he rejected me.” Chihiro’s firmness intimidated Miyako a little.

“If I had to guess...you haven’t wholly given up yet, have you?”

“...No,” she replied, giving Miyako a contentious look.

“Wow... That’s great.”

The words just popped out of her mouth. Even after being rejected, she still hadn’t given up. She was still trying her luck.

Nayuta, Chihiro, Haruto... They’re all really amazing. Like heroes from a story. And maybe all the uncharacteristic things Chihiro has said recently—like that whole I’m interested in sex thing—was one way she was pleading her case to him.

“Really great,” muttered Miyako with sincere respect.

But Chihiro pouted. “...You’re taking it awfully well, Miyako.”

“Huh? I’m sorry... I didn’t mean it like that...”

“...I don’t want to lose here,” she said softly. It was modest, very much fitting with her, but it was all but a declaration of war on Miyako.

Chihiro began walking more quickly, separating away from Miyako. It gave her a sense of déjà vu; she had seen this before.

But it’s Chi this time...

Ui Aioi had regarded her as a rival once. It was a rather one-sided situation, and it made her feel very awkward. She and Ui had been virtually strangers to each other back then, but Chihiro was different. She was Itsuki’s sister but also her own close friend.

What did she mean by I don’t want to lose, anyway? Is everyone who gets rejected a loser? If the love winds up bearing fruit, is that unconditionally a great victory to celebrate? There are things you can gain from a broken heart, and happiness can be found in ways that don’t involve being united with the one you love. But when love gets involved, why is everyone so willing to turn against their friends?

“I’m not sure how easy it is for me,” Miyako said, too softly for anyone to hear. Chihiro, of all people, was irritating her, and she hated herself for it. It’s not that she had zero feelings for Haruto at all or that she didn’t want to have a relationship with him. But there’s love and friendship, love and work, love and dreams. Miyako didn’t know which was more important to the majority of people in the world, but at least right now, love wasn’t number one on the list for her.

For now, she wanted to become a full-fledged editor. She wanted to be someone.

She wanted to be the protagonist.

Two months ago, Miyako had gotten a chance to read the novel Itsuki had written exclusively for Nayuta.

“Hey, is it okay if I read it, too?”

“...You can if you want, but I think it’s gonna read like a piece of crap to

anyone besides Kanikou.”

That was Itsuki’s opinion, but when Miyako read it, she couldn’t agree with him at all. It was certainly a love letter to Nayuta—a passionate one, too—but at the same time, it was an excellent novel about a young man who deals with his mother’s death, heartbreak, family friction, setbacks, defeats, and pangs of inferiority, all as he grows into someone worthy of being a protagonist.

It had struck a chord deep in Miyako’s heart. It was the best of Itsuki’s work... In fact, nothing Miyako had been exposed to before had pierced into her heart at this level. From the moment she had read this novel—it didn’t even have a title—the craving within her to become the protagonist began to take palpable shape. People have a way of infecting others with their feelings through their stories—and little did Itsuki know that thanks to the novel he wrote, a new protagonist had already been born.

BOOK PROPOSAL *LEVIATHAN REVIVE*

STORY: HARUTO FUWA

ILLUSTRATIONS: GASSHOU, AMAGO OHTANI (MECH DESIGN)

VOLUME 1 ON SALE NOW.

■SYNOPSIS

In a convincing near-future world (approx. 100 years from now?), mankind has advanced into space through really well-thought-out technology that I can't go into detail about yet. Then, following some really convincing reason, a space war breaks out, and the cast, through some turn of events, boards super-realistic humanoid mobile weapons and duke it out!

■SETTING

Going through the vast story backdrop Haruto's molded for this tale with the help of an expert in the field is impossible in this small space! It's too bad, because there's really a lot of neat stuff in here!

■CHARACTERS

Raimei Snowfield

The hero, a nineteen-year-old who's popular, cool, but also likable. The cool cast member names are due to important story elements at the core of the tale.

Byakuya Goldlight

The heroine, a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl who stands against Raimei several times as an ace enemy pilot. She's actually the daughter of the enemy's now-dead commander, and she holds a grudge against the current leaders for assassinating him. She's hiding this, however, and posing as a soldier. Basically, it's Char dressed as a girl.

Mystery Man

A mysterious figure who gives Raimei a mysterious mobile weapon. He poses as a future version of Raimei who's traveled through time to reach his past self, but this is just a front. The explosive truth will be revealed around Volume 5-ish, so it's a secret for now.

Seimei Thousandarms

The hero's commanding officer. Very talented but dies in Volume 1.
A Yang Wenli-type character.

Goka Flesvelgh

The enemy's boss. Basically what you get if you combined Emperor Reinhard with Supreme Leader Dessler and divided by three.

Writer Reincarnation

Miyako was at her editor desk on an early-May afternoon, reading a web novel on her computer.

She and the fellow members of the Ayane Mitahora–led light novel team were scouring the Internet daily for novels that hadn’t been picked up by other publishers, trying to find stuff for their new imprint. Miyako herself had spent much of the first week in May—the “Golden Week” of national holidays in Japan—reading web novels.

These online works were, as a rule, written by nonprofessionals, so the quality was an incredibly mixed bag—but many of them were higher level than a lot of the stuff you see published. The one Miyako was currently reading was an insider tip from Haruto during their recent gathering at Itsuki’s place. As he put it, it was the one non-picked-up series that had grabbed his attention the most at the moment. And yes, there were a lot of typos and grammar mistakes, but between the lively characters and a story that quickly drew Miyako in, it was clear why Haruto raved about it. The author obviously had a great time writing this—that much easily came across, and it made a good impression on her.

“Whatcha reading, Miyako?” Ayane leaned in from the next desk over, peeking at her screen.

“It’s a novel called *The Hero, Chased Away from His Nation, Becomes a Dark Knight and Lives a Life of Freedom*.”

“Oh yeah, I heard that’s building a fan base right now. You like it?”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

Then Ayane frowned a bit. “Sadly,” she said, “Mr. Seto from our office approached the author about publishing, but he got turned down.”

It was a disappointment for Miyako.

“Oh, really...? So did someone else pick it up after all?”

“It doesn’t look that way, actually. Apparently, this author’s turned down all the offers he’s received. He doesn’t want it published anywhere.”

“Wow. Why is that?” Miyako wondered.

Being published meant receiving royalties, along with illustrations from a professional artist. It’d open the series to a wider audience, and really, there were no downsides to think of.

“I don’t know, but oftentimes you see a web novel come out in book form, the sales are too poor to continue with it, the author loses motivation, and then they ghost the web novel without giving it an ending. And if it sells, well, some authors don’t like that because it just adds more noise to their lives.”

“Ahhh... So not everybody publishing fiction online wants to go pro with it.”

“That’s right,” Ayane said. “But then again, no harm sending him another offer, too. You never know.”

“All right! I’ll try approaching this guy again!”

Ayane smiled a bit as an audibly excited Miyako raised her voice. She would no doubt be shot down in a hurry, but again, this was part of the training process for newbie editors. Miyako didn’t give it much more thought than that.

After reading the web novel up to a good stopping point, Miyako decided to e-mail the contact address listed on the author’s profile. The writer’s name was “Steak Tsukemono”—it was pretty common for web novel authors to go with pseudonyms that didn’t even try to sound like actual people names.

Dear Steak Tsukemono:

My apologies for the unannounced contact. My name is Miyako Shirakawa, and I’m a member of the General Entertainment Editorial Department at Branch Hill Ltd. I’m contacting you regarding your work *The Hero, Chased Away from His* [...]

She wrote up the business e-mail—all sincere and earnest—and sent it over. She received a response from Steak Tsukemono later that evening.

Thank you for contacting me. I would like to give all due consideration

to your offer. Would we be able to meet in person to discuss this?

Miyako audibly exclaimed, “Huh?!” when she read it.

“What’s up?” Ayane looked at her screen and then: “What? No way!”

She was just as shocked.

“Why’d he suddenly change his mind like that...? Well, either way, great job, Miyako!”

“Y-yeah...”

Despite her puzzlement, Miyako quickly replied, and before long the meeting with Steak Tsukemono was arranged.



Three days later, Miyako was waiting for Steak Tsukemono at a certain Tokyo coffee shop in the early evening. Ayane had another meeting, so she was handling this solo. Meeting with writers had been part of her job at GF Bunko (including those outside of Itsuki’s friend circle), but this was the first time she’d meet up alone with one she didn’t know at all.

Steak Tsukemono wasn’t there right on time, but after Miyako waited another five or so minutes:

“Sorry, my last class at school dragged on a little bit.”

“No, that’s fine— Huh?”

She turned toward the person approaching her and made a startling discovery.

He was a thin, wispy boy in a school uniform, his face well-defined, handsome—and familiar.

“Misaka...!”

It was Soma Misaka, award winner at the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest, and he was clearly a little shy about all this.

“Hee-hee... Good to see you again, Miss Shirakawa.”

“Um, so you’re...?”

“Yes, I’m Steak Tsukemono.”

Soma got even shier and whispery when he said his pen name. Miyako refrained from asking why he’d chosen a pseudonym that embarrassed him too much to say out loud.

“Um, well, again, I’m Shirakawa...of Branch Hill. Good to see you here.”

She stood up and handed her business card to Soma, aka Steak Tsukemono.

“...I was surprised to get an e-mail from you, Miss Shirakawa. You work for Branch Hill now?”

After sitting down and ordering coffee from the counter, Steak Tsukemono stared at her business card.

“That’s right. I was pretty shocked, too. I didn’t think *you*, of all people, were Steak Tsukemono... Um, can I ask why you chose the name Steak Tsukemono?”

The question made Steak Tsukemono blush. “The day I created my account, there was this cooking show on TV where they were making something by that name... I just went with it, because it’s not like I’d be calling myself that in real life anyway...”



“I see.” Miyako chuckled.

“If *this* was gonna happen, I should’ve devoted some more time to my pen name.”

She was about to ask why he didn’t just stick with Soma Misaka but stopped herself. If you get picked up by a real publisher, posting your work to the Internet tends to be frowned upon. That, and people knowing that he won an award, only to get both canceled after one volume and blacklisted from GF Bunko entirely, provided him no benefit anyway.

“Well, you know, Nayuta Kani said she chose her pen name because she happened to have crab for dinner that night, so I think you’re just fine.”

“You think so? Well, if I got mine the same way Miss Kani did, I’m kinda glad to hear that.” Steak Tsukemono smiled.

Then Miyako asked what he had been up to. He was now seventeen years old, in his final year of high school. After GF Bunko banned him, he’d stopped writing for a while and gone back to normal school life, but once fellow award winner Aoba Kasamatsu’s second series turned out to be a hit, he got inspired to write again and began submitting chapters to a web novel site. Haruto and the other judges said that he *showed too much obvious influence from other authors and needed more originality*. But, for better or for worse, the way his own desires and influences from his favorite work showed up in his writing meshed well with the general trend of web novels, and that earned him popularity.

So he promptly received offers from several companies to make the jump to “real” books, but he turned them all down.

“Gift Publishing even sent me an offer, but I trashed that one immediately.”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Considering his feelings, that was pretty understandable.

“But you’re potentially more interested in a book deal with us?”

Steak Tsukemono smiled at the pensive question. “I am. You’d be my editor, right, Miss Shirakawa?”

“Uh...?” Miyako was at a loss to answer.

“...Or not?” Steak Tsukemono gave her a doubtful look.

“Ah, ummm, I’d definitely like to be your editor, but I’m still new to the job, so it’s not entirely up to me... Besides, I have yet to be assigned any author at all, so... Are you sure that you’d want me, though?”

“If you’re not going to be my editor, then I’m not accepting the offer.”

Steak Tsukemono’s crystal clear stance made her admittedly anxious. But:

“I hope I can create a book with you sometime.”

He really meant what he’d said back then, and Miyako felt so happy and honored. She wanted to live up to his expectations, no matter what it took.

“I understand. In that case, Mr. Tsukemono, I’ll talk to my boss about having me edit for you!”

“Thank you,” Steak Tsukemono replied, his face lighting up at the words. “... And I’m still kind of embarrassed about using my pseudonym in real life, so can we use my real last name instead? It’s Izumi.”



“Sure, no problem.”

Back at the office, Miyako asked Ayane about being Steak Tsukemono’s editor. Her boss readily agreed to it.

“Are you sure?”

“He told you he wouldn’t say yes unless you committed, right? You don’t have much choice, then.”

“Yeah, that’s true...”

“Besides, you’ve been with us a month now. I was thinking it’s about time we get you assigned to someone.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I was originally gonna have you take over one of my writers who doesn’t cause me much trouble...but if this one personally requested you, then

oh well. I'm not completely anxiety-free about it, but..."

"Right..."

Ayane, noting Miyako's clouded expression, vigorously shook her head. "No, not that. I'm not worried about you. I'm worried about Steak Tsukemono."

She had told Ayane about Steak Tsukemono's roots as Soma Misaka, a writer who'd already made his pro debut elsewhere. Taking on someone who already got booted from another well-known publisher was a dark spot on anyone's résumé, so Ayane had every right to be concerned.

"I think we'll be okay on that front. He lost his chance with GF because of a few disputes he had with his editor, and...you know, some other crossed wires and stuff. I think he's a good guy overall."

"Mm-hmm..."

Ayane still looked a bit apprehensive about it. But:

"Well, I'll trust you on this, Miyako. Good luck on your first assignment!"

"Thank you!" Miyako briskly replied, attempting to shake off the gloominess.

Princess of the Nerds

As Miyako was taking on her first novelist, Chihiro was becoming the princess of the nerds who frequented her university's tabletop RPG club.

Thanks to the influence of things like live plays posted on video sites, the female TTRPG-playing population was rising...but the male-female ratio in the scene was still heavily unbalanced. In the club Chihiro had joined, she was the only woman out of fifteen members—and a lot of them were engineering students, a trend that was now all but tradition in the club.

She was one of the cutest students at school, she got along well with people, she was quick-witted, she was into TTRPGs (a somewhat minor nerd community in Japan), she occasionally brought in homemade baked goods, and she could hold her own in conversations about *Gundam* and robots. If someone from another school's TTRPG group heard this, they'd probably say, *So you've finally lost the ability to tell the difference between games and reality?*—but to a nerdy TTRPG-loving college student, she was an ideal to strive for.

So it was only natural that Chihiro found herself in the good graces of almost everybody in the group. At the start of the sessions every week, there'd be a scramble (unbeknownst to Chihiro) over which group she'd be a member of, and the game masters began making Chihiro's enjoyment top priority in the story scenarios they wrote. But even members of a group like this knew how delicate personal relationships could be—and they knew that if one of them tried to date her, it could spell doom for the entire club. And so an unwritten rule—"no claiming her first"—took effect.

But:

"Hey, Hashima, are you dating anyone right now?"

It was a sophomore named Itonuki who finally dared to break the unwritten

rule. He was a handsome young man with dyed blond hair and a party-boy vibe, but his somewhat timid, reclusive tendencies told everyone that he was just a geek who had given himself a fashion makeover before college. He got a girlfriend not long after his first semester started, but it ended almost as quickly as it began.

Either way, Itonuki's brash advance caused a stir among the other members in the room.

Well, Chihiro thought, *it's finally here*. She was fully aware by now that a few club members liked her. If she said no to Itonuki, there was no doubt he'd ask her out next—and turning him down was bound to leave a lasting sense of discomfort. Even worse, it could lead to other club members trying to follow in Itonuki's footsteps.

She enjoyed TTRPGs, the members were all nice people—and most of all, it was the first time in her life that Chihiro had joined a group purely for the sake of her own hobbies. She didn't want this whole thing to fall apart because of her. So, despite her worries that it was unfair, Chihiro lied.

"Oh yeah, I've been seeing someone for about three years now."

She gave it her best poker face, as if this was solid fact.

"Ahhh, you have...?" Itonuki couldn't hide his shock, but he quickly went back into playboy mode. "So, uh, what's he like? Does he go to school here?"

Itonuki was in the school of engineering like Chihiro, but he had never seen her walking around with anyone who looked like a boyfriend. Maybe, he rather wishfully thought, she was lying to him.

"No," Chihiro plainly replied.

"Ah... So where's he from?"

Chihiro tried to maintain her poker face to get through this. But she couldn't keep her cheeks from warming up.

"Um, he's not in college. He's about twenty-four, I think...?"

"Twenty-four...!"

The words were met with astonishment from Itonuki and the other club

members secretly listening in. To all of them—generally introverted men who did nothing but study through all of middle and high school—this was a major shock across the board. They were mentally prepared for the possibility that Chihiro had a guy, but none of them imagined that she was dating a working man six years her elder. Here was this nice, mild-mannered, sweet young girl, doing God knows what with this mature man. Women really *were* scary. Like a different species.

Itonuki was just as shocked as the rest of the room, but he still retained some of his calmness.

“Oh? Well, if you’ve been dating for three years, that means you were fifteen when you started...and he was twenty-one...?”

The other men gave Chihiro quizzical looks.

Uh-ohhhhhh...

She never should’ve been proud enough to add that extra lie about *three years*. Fifteen years old would still put her in middle school in the Japanese system. And maybe perceptions were a little different in the *otaku* sphere, but in the rest of the world, an adult man dating a fifteen-year-old girl was a pedophile.

“I—I forced him into dating me! He was really gentlemanly about it and all the whole time, so we didn’t do anything weird!”

“Mmmm...”

Itonuki groaned, a concerned look on his face. The hushed whispers of “he must be a pedo, huh?” and so forth made Chihiro’s face heat up.

“No, he’s really a nice guy! If you met him, you’d see what I mean!”

“*Can* we meet him, then?”

This wasn’t Itonuki who asked but rather Takagi, the senior-year club chairman.

“If he’s as amazing as you say he is, I’d like to see him...just for educational purposes, you know.”

“Oh, I wanna see him, too!” Itonuki said.

“Uh... Ummm... I—I don’t want to take up your time, though...”

“I’m sorry,” Takagi said as Chihiro desperately tried to explain her way out of this, “but I need to put my foot down. As a fellow member of our club—a *fellow member*, that’s all—I’m just worried, you see.”

“Right! Yeah! We’re worried! That weird perv—”

Itonuki stopped himself before proceeding onward. But it was too late.

“He’s *not* a freaky pervert! All right! I’ll let you see him, okay?!”

And so, in a fit of rage, Chihiro neatly painted herself into a corner.



...Are you that stupid?

Chihiro had texted Haruto I need some advice from you, gave him the whole story, and ended it with, So can you pretend to be my boyfriend in front of everyone?

The rather succinct response was her reward for it.

It landed some pretty hefty damage on her, but she countered with a sticker of a toony animal crying with the word *WAAAAH* above it. Guess not, huh? she continued. I’m sorry. But then:

If it’s just once...

“I”

Are you sure?! she replied. Haruto answered it with an anime character saying, *Whatever!*

They then switched to voice chat to discuss how they’d pretend to be lovers—how they’d met, how they wound up dating, *etc.*

“*Man, I never thought I’d be doing rom-com manga stuff like pretending to be your boyfriend...*” Haruto chuckled at Chihiro.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind if it wasn’t pretending, but...”

“*I kind of do!*”

The audible consternation made Chihiro's heart ache a bit, but she laughed back. "Oh, right, I forgot something important."

"What's that?"

"What I should call you. If we're lovers, I think we need to act more familiar with each other."

"Ah, true."

"So what would you like me to call you?"

"Ummm..." Haruto thought for a moment. *"How about senpai or something? Familiar but not too familiar, and I am older than you. Nayu uses that sometimes, too."*

"You're supposed to never have gone to school with me, so that would be kind of weird."

"Oh, right..."

Haruto, the story went, was Chihiro's elder brother's friend from college, and they came to know each other when he stopped by her place. It wasn't all that terribly removed from reality, actually.

Chihiro blushed a bit. "Um... Could I maybe use your first name? Like, Haruhiko?"

For the club introduction, they decided to use his real name, Haruhiko Matsuo, instead of his pen name and hide his writing career in general. If word that he was dating a college student six years younger than him got on social media, it'd most likely have a net negative effect on the image of Haruto Fuwa, writer.

"...!"

The first-name gambit seemed to notably upset Haruto, even over the phone.

"It...it's weird to go on a first-name basis out of nowhere. I hardly get called my real name by anybody outside of my family..."

"Maybe not, then? Okay... How about a nickname like Haru?"

"L-let's go with Haruhiko!"

Chihiro smiled at the panic in his voice. “All right...Haruhiko.”

“Wh-what about you, Chihiro?! Not much need to change it, I guess?”

“I’d prefer that we did, if possible.”

“Hmm... How about Chi, then?”

“.....!”

The moment Haruto called her that, Chihiro’s face caught on fire.

“A-actually, I’d prefer we didn’t, thanks!”

She felt like her head would explode if he called her that one too many times.

“O-okay. I’ll call you Chihiro like usual.”

“Sounds good, thanks.”

“Sure... So are we all good now?”

“Oh... We should be, yes. Yes.”

“All right. Have a good night.”

“You too. Um... Again, thank you very much. I know this is such a crazy thing to ask...”

Haruto wryly smiled at this.

“Well, if the fate of the club’s at stake, I can’t say no to that.”

“What?”

“Nah, nothing important. Anyway, I’ll see you then, okay, Chihiro?”

“Okay...Haruhiko.”

The smile remained on Chihiro’s face even after the call ended.

“Haruhiko... Hee-hee-hee... Haruhiko... Hee-hee-hee-hee...”

She fell back on her bed, flapping her legs around in sheer excitement. Her brother, Ashley, Nayuta, Ui, Miyako—all of them called him by his pen name. Only she got to use his real one...and his *first* name, too. It felt like such a special feeling, and she couldn’t contain her excitement.

Her scream when she realized her bedroom door was open and her mother

(holding her sister) was staring at her and grinning ear to ear—came five seconds later.



A few days later, Chihiro led Haruto to her university's TTRPG clubroom. It was an open campus, and he was free to wander around as a non-student, so he took the opportunity to grab some reference photos of the grounds on the way.

They were going to a multipurpose room that served as the TTRPG clubroom for two days out of the week; different clubs occupied it the other five. They couldn't leave any personal belongings there thanks to that, so the members had to bring in whatever they'd be using each session. It was a similar story at the RPG club Haruto had joined in his own school years; college clubs that didn't participate in some kind of inter-school competition usually couldn't score a dedicated room.

"This is it."

"Okay."

Chihiro opened the door. Haruto entered, a bit nervous. A good ten or so male students were there, all looking right at him.

"Um, Hashima, is that...?" Itonuki was first to speak, his face a bit tense.

"Yes, um, this is the man I'm seeing."

Despite how shy she was, she immediately set off a firestorm of whispered commentary.

"He's such a hottie."

"I *knew* he'd be good-looking."

"Ugh, better-looking than me for sure..."

"My name is Haruhiko Matsuo," he said as he internally laughed at them all, "and I'm Chihiro's boyfriend. Nice to meet you." Then he capped it off with a good-natured, pretty-boy smile.

"All right, Haruhiko. Have a seat over there."

“Sure.”

Chihiro and Haruto sat side by side as Takagi the president and Itonuki sat opposite them, the others on their feet surrounding the group.

“So, um, Mr. Matsuo?” Takagi said.

“Yes?” he said back, his carefree expression still on there. It made the chairman flinch a bit.

“Um...are you really dating Hashima here?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Hee-hee-hee...”

Chihiro let a bashful smile spread across her lips. It made Haruto uneasy. *She remembers that this is just a ruse, right?*

“Well, um, it appears that you two are pretty far away in age...?”

“Yeah, six years. But being six years apart isn’t *that* unusual for a couple, is it? Did you see on the news how that one celebrity couple got married even though they’re over ten years apart?”

“Well, yes, maybe...but you don’t hear that happening among students very much...!”

“Besides,” interjected Itonuki, “haven’t you been dating Hashima since she was fifteen years old? That’s dangerous, isn’t it?!”

Yeah, no shit, Haruto thought to himself. This student had a real good point. But the show must go on.

“I had similar thoughts at first, certainly. But as we got to know each other, I realized that she was a fine woman, every bit the equal of any other adult. It was really her pushing me to go out with her at first, but now I’m madly in love with her.”

His defense was delivered in a pretty flat voice, mainly because he was reciting this verbatim from their script, but Itonuki and the others didn’t seem to care much. Chihiro, meanwhile, was spellbound, her cheeks blushing. He couldn’t help but wonder if she’d forgotten this was all just a front.

“B-but anyway, I really do love Chihiro sincerely. And I truly believe that as long as there’s love, a difference in age doesn’t matter.”

It was a lie, and Haruto was plenty embarrassed about it, but he said it anyway. The force of his performance left his audience a bit taken aback.

“I... I can certainly tell that your feelings are true, Mr. Matsuo. Are you planning to marry Miss Hashima in the future, then?”

“M-marr...?!”

Chihiro, realizing Haruto was too flabbergasted to reply, stepped in with a smile.

“Yes, of course! Right, Haruhiko?”

“Yahhh, um, yeah,” he replied, his face tightening. “That’s the intention.”

A small uproar erupted in the clubroom. If they were already engaged, clearly they had to give this up for good. There was just no way to wiggle in. But only Itonuki kept persisting.

“By the way, Mr. Matsuo, what do you do for a living?”

“Huh?”

“Like, if you’re gonna get married, that’s gonna take some financial resources, won’t it? I’m just wondering if you’re good on that front.”

“...Ah, right. Well, I have a pretty typical desk job, but I think I have enough resources to keep Chihiro out of harm’s way.”

Haruto gave this as relaxed an expression as he could. But:

“Well, Miss Hashima said you worked for a big foreign company.”

“Oh, ah, yeah... I guess it’s a pretty big one, yes.”

“If you have a desk job, they don’t mind you coming in here on a weekday afternoon?”

Haruto tensed up a bit. Both he and Chihiro had completely forgotten the quite basic fact that “normal” grown-ups work on the weekdays.

“I...I took the day off, of course.”

“...You took time off just to come here?” Takagi asked, eyebrow raised.

“Hee-hee... Well, if my beloved is asking me the favor, it’s no big deal to me.”

It set him on edge to even say it, but the smoke screen didn’t quite clear the doubt from Takagi’s and Itonuki’s eyes.

“...By the way, can I ask the name of your company?”

“Ahhh, I’m gonna have to refrain from answering that one. We don’t have anything to hide, of course, but, you know, I don’t want the company to know quite yet.”

“All right. Then could you tell us exactly what kind of work you do?”

Takagi now looked quite suspicious. Haruto, meanwhile, was at a loss to answer. According to their discussions, he was working for a foreign firm and made ten million yen a year, but they never fleshed out his exact job description. For Haruto, who had never so much as applied for a job in his life, the only occupation that he could answer intrusive questions about the nature of was light novel editor, pretty much.

A foreign-owned light novel publisher... Does anything like that exist?

While Haruto continued to stew:

“It’s in publishing! Right, Haruhiko?”

“Ah, um, yeah.”

He had no choice but to match his story with hers.

“What kind of publishing is it?”

“L-light novels and stuff!”

Chihiro, her brain about to short out, gave that answer without considering any of the consequences.

“A big foreign firm producing light novels...?”

One of the other club members wasn’t so sure about that. TTRPGs and light novels often attracted the same *otaku* audience, so the people here would likely know a lot about them. If they kept going along these lines, Haruto reasoned, it’d completely unravel on them before long.

“...Chihiro,” he gently told her, “I don’t think we can go on with this.”

“Haruhikooo,” she replied, looking close to tears.

“...So you’re lying when you said you’re an elite at a foreign company?” Takagi said.

“Ha-ha! Yeah, to tell the truth,” he casually replied.

“Okay, so are you unemployed, then?” Itonuki asked point-blank. “Or maybe just doing side hustles?”

Haruto didn’t have much problem going with that, but then someone was likely to say, *No unemployed man is worth Chihiro’s attention*, blah blah blah. No, the best way to convince them enough to give up was to state the truth. A title like “professional writer” ought to be effective enough against students, he reasoned, and if he had to, he didn’t mind revealing his annual income.

“Well, being a writer is kind of the ultimate freelance position, so I suppose you could call it a *hustle*, yeah.”

“Haruhiko?!”

Chihiro’s eyes grew several sizes as Haruto broke the news in his standard lighthearted tone.

“Oh, are you a writer, Mr. Matsuo?”

“More or less.”

This triggered another minor furor among the group.

“Wow. Do you sell a lot?” Once again, Itonuki cut straight to the heart of matters.

Haruto grinned back. “Oh, pretty well, I’d say.”

The guy who’d asked about a foreign company selling novels earlier looked curious about this.

“Um, what’s your pen name?!”

“...Well, you probably haven’t heard of it, but it’s Haruto Fuwa.”

This wasn’t Haruto being modest or self-deprecating. It was the simple reality

of it. In the world of light novels, people became fans of series and characters, not authors. Even if a work gets made into an anime, the author would often not even be remembered at all. Some novelists could acquire a fixed fan base if they had a unique enough style, but Haruto wasn't that type...or he didn't consider himself to be anyway.

"Oh, from *Chevalier of the Absolute World*?" Itonuki's voice rose a notch.

"?!" Haruto's eyebrows shot up in astonishment. "Uh... You know it?"

"Wh-what? Are you really Haruto Fuwa?"

"Um... Yes. Really."

"I, um, I—I purchased every volume of *Chevalier*! I bought the new *Leviathan Revive*, too! It was totally awesome!"

Itonuki was a whole other person now, his eyes shining with excitement. Haruto wasn't sure what to do with this.

And Itonuki wasn't the only one who'd read it, either—other people were adding their own commentary. "Hey, I read that, too" and "I'm looking forward to how *Revive* turns out" and "I watched the *Chevalier* anime"...

"S-seriously? Why?" Haruto was more confused than gratified. "Did you tell them about this, Chihiro?"

"N-no..."

He looked at Chihiro. She shook her head, seeming just as confused and bewildered.

"I don't read many light novels," the completely straight-faced Takagi said, "but I read *Leviathan Revive* because it was recommended for science fiction fans. It was very exciting. The world setting's really intricate."

"W-well, I'm glad to hear you say that."

"The way you describe mechs was unique in *Chevalier*, too, but *Revive* is on a whole different level!"

Itonuki's nose was twitching with excitement. The party-boy character was completely gone now; he was embracing his core nerd again.

“Did you work out the whole setting by yourself?” Takagi asked.

“I have an expert supervising the whole thing, but the ideas themselves are all mine, yes.”

“Wow, that’s impressive...! I’ve been exploring bio-nanomachines in my study group, but I found the setup behind the Leviathan System to be really fascinating.”

“Oh, really? Then I’d like to talk to you, actually. I’m having a little trouble with the setting for the second volume I’m writing right now...”

Haruto leaped at Takagi’s words, the other members of the TTRPG group joining in the conversation.

Chihiro, who had yet to take any specialized classes as a freshman, could barely keep up with it. Before long, Haruto and the others were chatting about all sorts of things, leaving Chihiro in the dust—and soon the talk turned from *Revive* to other robot anime and science fiction. Chihiro was a pretty good model maker, but she had watched only a few series in the *Gundam* library and didn’t know much about other robot franchises, so she was way out of her element.

This must’ve been what Aoba felt like when they went out to see Haruto and Kaizu, only to have the three of us talk about Gundam models all night...

Chihiro mulled the thought as she looked at everyone else, her face sullen.



So Haruto and the male RPG nerds talked for about an hour. They completely opened up to one another, exchanging contact info and even promising to have a TTRPG session sometime. Haruto was elated to make friends with the elite engineering students in this group, from Chairman Takagi on down—they’d be a huge boon to *Revive* going forward, and he couldn’t have been happier.

“Man, I really appreciate your inviting me over now, Chihiro.”

“You’re welcome,” she droned as Haruto smiled at her on the way back from the university.

Haruto chuckled, realizing she was miffed. "Sorry, sorry. I just never run into so many people I hit it off with at once like that, even at writers' parties. I got kind of carried away."

"It's all right. I'm the one who forced you into that anyway."

Haruto turned his gentle eyes on the resentful Chihiro. "But that's a real nice group you have. I can understand why you don't want to destroy it."

"Yeah..." She nodded a bit.

"...I don't know if Itsuki ever told you or not, but the TTRPG club in my college fell apart because of relationship drama."

"Oh...?"

Chihiro was never told. It surprised her.

"And I was actually partly to blame for it, too. My club had a ton of guys and one woman who was older than we were. She wound up approaching me, and I said no to her. And I don't know if she just got spiteful or what, but she started making passes at every other member of the club. It pretty much blew up all our friendships, and the club didn't last long after that."

"Oh no..."

The realness of the tale made Chihiro blush. Then it dawned on her.

"Wait, Haruhiko, did you agree to play along with this because...?"

"Yeahhh," he said, grinning a little. "It's no fun seeing a club break up...and I didn't want you to go through the same thing I did, Chihiro."

"Wow, um... I don't know... Thank you very much." She wasn't able to find quite the right words, but she thanked him, at least.

"But really," Haruto said, his voice stern, "I think you should tell everyone else in there the truth."

"Huh? But..."

"As long as you're not dating lots of them at once, I don't think your club's gonna fall apart that easily. And yeah, there might be some awkward times here and there...but I think you and them will work it out and have fun playing

again... Assuming you want that, of course, and you're willing to put in the effort for it."

"...Well, what if it stays awkward for the long term?"

Haruto smiled at the timid question. "Well," he replied, "then why not quit? You can always play with us. And instead of my original game, we can try something a lot more hard-core."

"..."

Something about Haruto's breezy tone made Chihiro uncomfortable.

"And, like, really...!" Haruto raised his voice.

"Y-yes?"

"Talking with everyone in your club made me think of something. Like, no matter how you slice it, it wasn't *my* fault my club collapsed, you know? It's all the fault of that stupid lady who started hitting on the rest of the club after I dumped her—and those dumbasses who said yes to her, too! And the chairman at the time kept saying, *Oh, it's all your fault*, but god, talk about shunting the blame! Ugh, it makes me so angry! But I can assure you, it was definitely not my fault!"

"Um, Haruhiko...?"

The sudden outburst left Chihiro thoroughly confused.

Then Haruto let out a sad smile. "I'm sorry. I guess, to all those people, their love lives were a lot more important than the club. That's all there really was to it..."

"..."

"So you know, Chihiro, you don't have to lie about being taken just to avoid ruining other relationships. If a community can only sustain itself by putting all the burden on one person's shoulders, then it's doomed to fail from the start. It takes the wishes and efforts of everyone involved to keep it protected. That's what I think."

"...!" Chihiro's heart ached. "But..."

“Mm?”

“But if I tell the truth and it doesn’t work out... I’m scared of that. It might turn into a big deal, like it did with my brother...”

Not to put too fine a point on it, but when Chihiro came out about actually being a girl, that stopped her brother Itsuki’s novel-writing career cold. To her, it seemed better to stick to the lie than break someone’s heart and cause trouble for so many others again.

“But Itsuki recovered, didn’t he?” Haruto cheerfully replied. “And he’s even better than before.”

“Yeah, but that’s just how it happened to turn out. When I think about if Itsuki became permanently unable to write...”

“Look, even if he didn’t recover—that’s his problem, not yours. Telling the truth might hurt some people, and it might cause trouble for others. But there’s no avoiding that. Do you have to be responsible for the lives of every single person you come to know? That’s a little...crazy, isn’t it?”

The harshness of the statement shocked Chihiro.

“Besides,” he continued, “I think you’re a lot more attractive now, with your little mix-ups like this, than back when you were pretending to be this perfect superman of a little brother.”

“!”

“I—I mean as a human being!” he quickly added, once he realized how wide-eyed Chihiro was.

“As a human being?” Chihiro said, looking a bit unhappy. Then she smiled a little. “Then I’ll tell everyone at the club I was lying about dating you, Haruhiko.”

“That’s perfectly fine.” Haruto nodded, making Chihiro blush a bit.

“But...”

“Mm?”

“This has reminded me that even if it’s not true now...I want it to be someday. Really.”

“...!” The eye contact shook Haruto a bit.

“I really do still love you, Haruhiko. Would you like to be my real boyfriend?”

“Ahhh, um, I really am sorry. I just can’t.” Despite his flushed, anxious face, the response came all too quickly.

“That’s too bad,” Chihiro said lightly, tears in her eyes. “I’m falling more and more in love with you, but you’re still not stepping up for me. It’s so mean.”

“Y-yeah... Sorry.”

He sounded honestly apologetic about it.

Chihiro smirked back at him. “But I’m free not to give up still, aren’t I?”

“Huh?”

Chihiro wiped away a tear, snickering. “For now, I’m gonna keep calling you Haruhiko, all right? I’ve gotten used to it, so I’m not going to go back.”

“Huhhh?”

Then Chihiro briskly set off, leaving Haruto dazed. And the thought on his mind as he watched her go: *Women really are scary. Like a different species...*

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Did Itsuki throw out his monk cosplay?



No, I still have it around.

We use it sometimes. “Before I’m a priest...I’m a *man*, too.”



Don’t tell them that!

QUESTION

I write novels, too, but I always have trouble getting started. If the novelists have any tips, I’d love to hear them.



That’s what I’d like to know. A lot of pros find starting to be the hardest part of the whole thing. Especially if your work’s a set of short stories; that just means more “first sentences” you gotta come up with.

You could always start with writing the time and place or start with the scenes you want to write first? Ideally, you can find an approach that works best for you.



The Doofuses

A few days after Haruto's visit to Chihiro's college, in the late afternoon, Itsuki returned to his parents' house to find his little sister attempting to breastfeed his little sister in the living room.

"Ooh, that tickles a little! ♥ Geez, Shi! ♥"

Chihiro had her clothes up and her sports bra off as she held the baby to her chest.

...Maybe I'm just tired...

Itsuki, assuming the issue was with his eyes and brain, shook his head lightly, then looked again. But it was definitely Chihiro having Shiori nurse on her.

"Hee-hee-hee! Does that taste good?"

"...Chihiro?"

When he finally, fearfully called out to her from the side, Chihiro's eyes opened wide.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh?!"

With a scream, she turned her body around, baby in her arms, hiding her breast from her brother's gaze.

"I-Itsuki! If you're home, tell me!"

"...I sent a message to our group."

They had a group chat set up for their family—Itsuki, Chihiro, Keisuke, and Natsume—and Itsuki always sent a message before coming back home.



“But enough about that. Can...you give milk?”

“Of course not!”

“Waaaaaaahhh!”

Shiori, surprised by Chihiro’s red-faced shouting, began to cry.

“Ah! I’m sorry, Shi!”

In a hurry, she pulled her clothes down, and the two of them worked together to soothe the baby.

“Okay, it’s almost time for Mom to come home, and I have to get ready for dinner! Watch Shi for me, Itsuki!”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Itsuki stopped Chihiro before she could escape to the kitchen after putting Shiori back in her crib.

“...Why were you having Shiori nurse on you?”

Putting it into words like this again, Itsuki was almost dizzy with how abnormal this was. Was him regaining his sanity causing Chihiro to go insane in his place? If they were on both sides of a scale, he really wanted to hop off it.

Chihiro’s face was as red as always. “Shi... Shi said she wanted milk...”

“No, she didn’t! And if she wanted something, it sure wasn’t your tits! We *have* milk and bottles!”

“B-but even if there’s no milk, Shi looks so happy when she’s nursing!”

“That’s crazy...”

The doubt was clear in Itsuki’s eyes.

“No, it’s true! Whenever she cries, she calms down if you give her something to put her mouth on!”

“Really...? The way you’re saying it, this isn’t the first time, either? What made you think of doing that in the first place...?”

“I...” Chihiro hadn’t gotten any less red. “I just thought... If I could have Shi

nurse on them, it might make them bigger...like Mom's."

It was true that Natsume's breasts had grown larger than before, but that's a common phenomenon during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Nursing any old breasts by itself wouldn't make them bigger, of course. Chihiro must have known that...

"Chihiro... Are you that tormented over them...?"

"Stop it! You're just making it more miserable for me!"

Now there was almost compassion in Itsuki's eyes as Chihiro tearfully yelled at him. Meanwhile, Shiori start to cry again.

"Ahhh! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you."

"C'mon, Shiori, don't cry. *Bleh bleh bleh!* Peekaboo!"

Chihiro and Itsuki quickly came to her side. But she didn't seem ready to stop crying anytime soon.

"In that case...!"

Suddenly, Itsuki tore off his own shirt.

"I-Itsuki! What are you doing?"

"She stops if she's got boobs to suck on, right?"

Itsuki wiped his own nipples with a towel from the sink, then held Shiori close to one.

"That's really not going to work, Itsuki!"

But Shiori stopped crying. And as soon as she noticed it in front of her eyes, she began nursing her big brother's nipple.

"...?! Whoa, she really did stop crying..."

Chihiro had been telling the truth all along. And despite the lack of milk, Shiori was happily continuing to nurse away.

"...Is it the taste? Does she like the taste of nipples?"

She stared on, a vacant look in her eyes.

"You're fine with any kind of breasts, Shi? Or does this mean mine are..."

basically the same as men's...?"

"...But having my sister do this, I get a strange kind of... ♥ I don't know, excitement? Is this my motherly instincts? Or... Ah! ♥"

Now Itsuki was in a state of trembling heaven. Chihiro had a tense smile on her face. Maybe they were a ridiculously devoted big brother and sister—or maybe they were just a pair of total doofuses.

My First Assignment

Miyako had now been the editor for Soma Misaka, aka Steak Tsukemono, real name Sota Izumi, for around two weeks. Her proposal—a book version of *The Hero, Chased Away from His Nation, Becomes a Dark Knight and Lives a Life of Freedom*, the web novel Izumi currently had going online—was approved at the next editorial meeting without issue, and now they were having another meetup to discuss the book adaptation in detail.

So Miyako and Izumi met that evening at the same coffee shop as the other day. It was on the outskirts of Tokyo, a long distance from Branch Hill HQ; Izumi was in his last year of high school, and it was apparently nearby here.

“Good evening, Miss Shirakawa.”

“Good evening!”

Izumi arrived almost exactly on time for this meeting. Once he placed his order:

“So, um, as I mentioned in the e-mail, I’m now officially your editor. I look forward to working with you!”

“Oh, great. Thanks very much.” Izumi seemed in a good mood about that.

“So let’s get right down to business, okay? If possible, I’d like to publish Volume One of *Dark Knight* as part of our new imprint’s launch lineup.”

“Wow, sounds like a big responsibility,” Izumi said, looking eager for it. And he was right. The first titles are always going to garner a lot of attention; the feedback from them, not to mention the sales, would have no small impact on the entire future of the label.

“What other books are launching alongside this one?”

“Let me think...”

Miyako went over the rest of the lineup so far. It encompassed five titles overall—two new series by veteran authors who'd worked for many publishers, a one-off book from an A-level writer who mainly worked for a rival, and another new series from a mid-tier author who'd been in the business for five years.

"Huh. Those are some pretty famous names, aren't they?"

Izumi seemed a little out of his element here. Maybe he had heard the names but never read any of them.

"Oh, but I think your series will be a top highlight among them, Mr. Izumi."

That was a more or less direct quote from Ayane back at their editorial meeting. Not even Miyako knew much about the other launch series.

"Wow, really? Hee-hee... That's quite an honor."

Izumi smiled, clearly enjoying this.

"So the imprint will officially launch in September, and we're planning to announce it next month. That's when we'll be revealing the titles and authors in our launch lineup. Are you all right with having your series announced then?"

"Of course." Izumi nodded.

"Okay, then how about we start discussing exactly what'll be in Volume One when it comes out in September?"

"Sure!"

Miyako smiled at the answer. Izumi had already written and uploaded several volumes' worth of material on the web novel site he used, so quantity certainly wasn't a problem. What she wanted to discuss was where Volume 1 should end, how they'd brush things up from the web novel text, whether to keep the current title or adopt a new one, and so on.

"All right, so first..."

"I'd love to have Gasshou illustrate this!"

Izumi spoke up before Miyako could get underway. "Oh?" she replied.

"Gasshou draws really cool male characters," the excited Izumi continued.

“And I think he can design really neat armor and stuff like that, too!”

“Right...”

Miyako knew Gasshou the illustrator as well. He was popular in his field, currently doing artwork for Haruto Fuwa’s new series *Leviathan Revive*—and as Izumi pointed out, he was known for his male character art and clothing designs. However, Haruto had told her at the previous game night that recruiting Gasshou was *really tough schedule-wise*.

“I’m worried, though, that Gasshou’s schedule might be, you know, too filled up for this time period...”

Izumi looked disappointed for a moment, but he bounced back fast.

“Ahhh, well, Puriketsu or Kantoku would be nice, too.”

These were both extremely popular illustrators, heavily sought after by a wealth of publishers and game developers.

“Mmmmm...”

As Miyako struggled for an answer, Izumi name-dropped several more illustrators—all well-known enough that Miyako had heard of them. She was fully aware, of course, of how important the complete package of art and illustrations was to a light novel, so she wasn’t opposed to the idea of a known talent signing on for this. But still...

“Let’s see, who else...”

“M-Mr. Izumi, before you go on...!”

Miyako stopped Izumi before he could read any more names off the list he had pre-written in his phone’s note app.

“Oh?”

“We can discuss potential art candidates later on, but for this evening, I’d like to talk about the story content of Volume One, if we could...”

This brought a curious look to Izumi’s face.

“...? Don’t we already have enough text to work with?”

“Oh, certainly, yes, but it’s more about how we can polish this up and so on.”

“Ah...”

“The ideal length for a paperback volume like this is generally around three hundred pages, but if we just reformatted the web novel text and put it into book format, Volume One’s not going to end on a very interesting stopping point, if you see what I mean. So I was wondering if you’d be willing to revise the text a bit so it’ll be more satisfying to the reader as a complete volume.”

“Ahhh, right, it’s important that readers have a good experience with the volume they pick up...”

Izumi seemed to have accepted the request, even if he wasn’t completely satisfied, and so they began discussing revisions to be made.



“All right, so for now, if you could get started on the revisions we discussed for me, that’d be really wonderful.”

“Okay.”

After about an hour of discussion with Izumi, Miyako departed the coffee shop and returned to the office.

“Hey there,” Ayane said as Miyako took her seat. “How’d meeting with Steak Tsukemono go?”

“Mm... Well, all right, I think.”

“Something bad happen?” Ayane asked, wondering about Miyako’s muted reply. So Miyako explained that Izumi’s first priority for the meeting was scoring one of his preferred illustrators for the series.

“Ahhh, I see. Well, yeah, some authors have really strong wishes for the illustrators they get paired with.”

“How do you think I should respond? I’d like to fulfill his wishes if I could, but...”

“Well, the editor always has the final say on who gets picked, but if you’re with the writer on that topic, Miyako, then that sounds fine to me. So what candidates did Mr. Tsukemono bring up?”

“Um...”

She listed the names for Ayane, who laughed.

“Ha-ha-ha... A lot of big names, huh? Definitely, they’re all popular among the younger audience. If any of them say yes to this, that pretty much guarantees solid sales. But at the same time, you sometimes see authors who request big names who’re pretty clearly not the right fit for their work.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ll try giving an offer to Gasshou anyway.”

“Sure thing. Just make sure you have a list of other candidates if he doesn’t work out.”

“Right, right.”

So Miyako immediately wrote out a proposal in the contact form on Gasshou’s website. Then she searched the Net for the other illustrators Izumi had mentioned, compared their portfolios to see if they’d fit *Dark Knight*, and worked out who to prioritize over whom. After that, she e-mailed Izumi.

Thank you very much for taking time out to see me today. I look forward to receiving your revisions before long!

Regarding the illustrators we discussed at the meeting, I’ve gone ahead and made contact with Gasshou. If he’s not available, I’m planning to make offers to ■■, ■■, and ■■, in order.

After sending that, Miyako browsed around the Internet some more, thinking about who to ask if nobody on the current list worked out. Then she received a reply from Izumi.

Thank you very much! I’m glad to hear it! And I’ll do my best on the revisions, too!

Miyako chuckled at the high-spirited e-mail. *Hopefully*, she thought, *we can get an illustrator without too much trouble.*



In short, they didn’t.

Late that night, Gasshou sent an e-mail back stating that he wasn’t able to

accept new work at this time because he was focusing his efforts on another project—Haruto’s *Revive*, no doubt.

Disappointed, Miyako immediately sent an offer out to the next candidate. But that one apologized and said his schedule was full, and the next one said that “I’d like to say yes to you, but a September publishing date will be too tight for me.” In the end, all the illustrators on her list turned her down.

“Well, they’re all A-tier artists,” Ayane said to cheer her up. “You can’t do much about that. And you have other candidates in mind, right?”

“Y-yes.”

So Miyako composed an e-mail to Izumi. In it, she explained that all the initial candidates weren’t going to happen, so what about these people instead? She offered three candidates, none of whom had light novel experience; two had contributed art to mobile games, while one had no professional experience but *did* publish a portfolio with really great fantasy work, from buildings to monsters. All of them, Miyako thought, would be a good match for *Dark Knight*.

But Izumi’s reply was along the lines of, “They all look good to me, but I’m not necessarily sure about going with someone who’s not a known name. What do you think of ■■ or ■■?” Both of the names belonged to famous illustrators who had worked on character designs for popular RPGs and so forth—talented, for sure, and a good match for this series.

But:

“Ahhh, neither of those will work.”

The response came from Ayane immediately after Miyako brought it up.

“No? Why not?”

“They’re both full-time salaried employees at game companies, so they’re not allowed to take freelance work. In fact, at my old company, I sent ■■ a job offer without realizing that, and the game company made a *huge* stink to the editorial team about it.”

“Ahhh... So not all illustrators are freelancers, huh?”

“Exactly. Well, there are some exceptions where people who belong to a

company can take on a project...but that requires special contracts and stuff, and as a small publisher, we'd like to avoid the trouble if we can."

"All right. I'll tell Izumi about that. Better look for more candidates..." Miyako sighed a little.

"I think the guys *you* picked were pretty good, Miyako."

"Yeah, but Izumi doesn't seem to want them..."

"Miyako," Ayane reproachfully said, "it's not the editor's job to cater to the writer's every whim."

Miyako was taken aback a little.

"Like I said before, it's down to the editor to make the final decision on an illustrator. Now, of course, it's important that the author's on board with this, but... Like, Mr. Tsukemono didn't say that he disliked your candidates' work, did he? Maybe you should try persuading him a little."

"Mm, maybe... Well, I'll discuss it with Mr. Izumi either way."

She immediately sent another e-mail to him—Your two suggestions won't work out, so would you mind considering the three I proposed again? They don't have a big title to their name yet, but that's why they're likely to put a lot of effort into *Dark Knight*, and they'll make a new and fresh impression on readers.

Izumi's reply:

If that's your opinion, Miss Shirakawa, I'll sign on for it. In that case, my first choice would be Hebomeshi.

With a sigh of relief, Miyako dashed off a thank-you reply, then sent an offer to Hebomeshi, his first choice. The illustrator sent the okay the next day, and with that, they somehow found a way to get *Dark Knight* illustrated.

Facing Change

Itsuki had chosen this day in late May to visit Gift Publishing for an editorial meeting. Taking the elevator down to the fourth floor, he found a crowd of people in the lobby. They all had ID lanyards around their necks, so they must've been employees, but they were all waving their arms and swaying around excitedly. There was also a stereo on a table playing the opening theme of *Lyrical Nanoha*—but the singer in the middle of this crowd sure wasn't Nana Mizuki.

“...?”

Curious, Itsuki approached the crowd. There he spotted his editor Kenjiro Toki, waving around and cheering with the rest of the rabble.

“Wh-what are you doing...?!”

Even more confused, Itsuki looked where everyone else was—only to find Nadeshiko Kiso, cosplaying as Fate Testarossa, singing for the crowd. Both Nadeshiko and Fate were grade-schoolers with blond hair, so she was a perfect fit for this, and both the costume and its accessories were high quality in make. It's a terrible pity that copyright issues forbid us from showing an illustration of this.

The grown-ups around Nadeshiko were completely enraptured as she sang her heart out in her cute li'l voice and swung around a toy battle-ax.

“Hellooooo?”

Itsuki approached Toki, lightly tapping his arm to grab his attention.

“NA-DE-SHI-KO! NA-DE-SHI-KO! *Lovely, my angel*, NA-DE-SHI-KO— Huh? Oh, it's you, Itsuki? Huh. Time for our meeting already?”

There was a hint of regret in Toki's voice as he wiped the sweat from his

brow.

“...What the hell is going on?” Itsuki asked once they were away from the crowd.

“What’s it look like?” Toki calmly replied. “It’s Nadeshiko’s mini concert.”

“...Why is Nadeshiko holding a mini concert in the company lobby?”

“Well, since Shirakawa left, it’s kind of taken the fire out of the editorial department—but then came Nadeshiko to the rescue. Our little angel has been bumping around the office while you’re not at home to watch her, and she’s become a favorite of the whole company, not just GF Bunko editorial.”

Previously, whenever Yoshihiro Kiso was at the office for a meeting, he’d have Itsuki babysit his granddaughter Nadeshiko at his apartment. But since Itsuki had been gone attending to his new sister so much lately, Nadeshiko hadn’t visited his place for a while.

“Since when did that happen...? And is that the editor in chief, too...?”

The most excited audience member, jumping up and down in the front row, was editor in chief Satoshi Godo. He had glow sticks in both hands, his thick voice thundering, “Yeah! Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah! Lovely NADESHIKO! Angel NADESHIKO! *Wooooooooooooooooo!*” and so forth as he did his nerdy little dance.

“The boss, you know—he cherished Shirakawa like his own daughter. The hole in his heart must be bigger than anyone else’s.”

“So he’s banishing his loneliness with costumed schoolchildren? And, like, why the cosplay?”

“Nadeshiko took an interest in it at the last Winter Comiket, actually. I gave her an outfit from storage, and she was really excited to wear it, so lately employees have been getting other outfits for her. Here, check this out.”

Toki grabbed his phone and showed off a series of Nadeshiko photos. There she was, cosplaying as all kinds of people from anime based off GF Bunko or *Comic Gifted* series, ranging from the old standards like maids and shrine keepers to costumes not available at retail and presumably handmade by

someone. A few of these characters were even dressed in volleyball shorts—swimsuit bottoms, basically.

“...And Mr. Kiso is okay with this?”

If her grandfather Yoshihiro Kiso saw this, Itsuki worried that he'd grab a samurai sword and go on a rampage.

“Mr. Kiso is perfectly fine with it, apparently, as long as it makes Nadeshiko happy. He did say heads would roll if anything got on the Internet, but...”

“He sure does spoil her, doesn't he...? Is he here, by the way?”

“Nah, it's just Nadeshiko today. We don't get enough of her if she only comes when Mr. Kiso has a meeting, so she's giving us weekly morale boosts now. The company's handling all the transport, of course.”

“Morale boosts...? And you're not getting in trouble for making fools of yourselves at the office every week?”

“No worries there, trust me.” Toki pointed at the editor in chief.

“Hmm?”

“The company president's right next to the boss.”

“...Really?”

Indeed, after taking a closer look, the middle-aged man dancing along with Godo was none other than Yoshifumi Gizan, president of Gift Publishing.

Itsuki began to seriously wonder if this company was circling the drain.

In the midst of this, the mini concert wrapped up, and the employees went their separate ways.

“Ahhh! Big Bro Itsuki!” Upon noticing him, Nadeshiko ran over to Itsuki, face lighting up.

“Hey. Long time no see, huh?”

“Yeah! It's been a real long time!”

Nadeshiko did a little spin on the spot as she cheerfully spoke to him.

“What did you think, Big Bro? I turned into Fate! *Haken Saber!*”

“Aw, cute.” Itsuki smiled.

But Nadeshiko looked at him, a tad put out. “You know, Big Bro, you used to get way happier. You were kinda crazy.”

He chuckled, gently stroking Nadeshiko’s head. “Ha-ha! Yes, that might’ve been true for me in the past. But now I’ve got the ultimate in supercute angels—a *real* one. I’ve moved on from playing with strangers like they’re my pseudo-little sisters.”

“Playing with strangers...?”

This seemed like a shock to Nadeshiko, but Itsuki paid it no mind as he turned toward Toki.

“So can we get on with the meeting? I’ll see you later, Nadeshiko.”

Toki used his ID to open the door, and they both went into the conference room. Nadeshiko just stood there, muttering to herself.

“I didn’t know he found another girl somewhere... Big Bro Itsuki is always teaching me about feelings I don’t really understand...”



Itsuki and Toki, blissfully unaware that they’d once again had a major impact on the development of Nadeshiko’s nascent personality, began their meeting in the conference room. Toki kicked it off by looking through the thirty or so pages of story manuscript Itsuki had brought with him.

After studiously reading it, Toki gave his honest assessment. “...This is good.”

This was Chapter 1 of *L↔R Days*, Itsuki’s new work. It was a coming-of-age ensemble drama about high school students in a smaller countryside city and the people around them, depicting a set of unique characters who have fun and experience all sorts of harrowing events. The cast included several little-sister characters—not given the entire spotlight but not buried in the crowd, either—just mingling among the other protagonists to just the right degree.

This is amazing, marveled Toki, although he was prudent enough not to say it out loud.

Volume 7 of *All About My Little Sister*, written right after Itsuki got out of his slump, was quite an intricate piece of work but lacked the unfathomable passion that had been a hallmark of the series up to then. It troubled Toki—*Can we really call this an Itsuki Hashima novel?* he wondered. This was followed by Volume 9 of *Sisterly Combat*, written after he'd broken up with Nayuta and shaved his head, and that was even more precisely written. Now Toki had the sense that Itsuki had transformed entirely into a “workmanship” style of writer. Volume 8 of *All About*, written after he and Nayuta made up, was just the same way—an industrial production that was a perfect technical achievement.

But this wasn't like that. The story developed according to a fairly calculated plot, but there were also glimpses of the more outrageous aspects of the cast's personalities, the passion flowing out of them. It was, in essence, a hybrid between the pre-slump “artist” Itsuki and the post-slump “craftsman” one. Not a transformation but a graduation to the next level. Itsuki wrote this novel with new abilities that he didn't have before—he had powered himself up, in a genuine way.

“Yeah... It's good.” Toki repeated himself, looking Itsuki in the eye. “Honestly... I see no issues with it. All I can say is that I can't wait to read the second chapter.”

This unreserved praise was greeted with a little smile and a soft “okay” from Itsuki.

“...Oh? Something on your mind?”

The lack of response concerned Toki.

“No,” Itsuki said, shaking his head. “I think this is the best novel I can write right now, too, and I'm positive it's gonna be the greatest masterpiece I've ever written.”

This wasn't empty bravado. Itsuki was just confirming the facts here. It was, without a doubt, a masterpiece...by the standards of Itsuki Hashima's library anyway. But not long ago, Itsuki had created an even more impressive work—a forty-thousand-word-long love letter without a title, written exclusively for Nayuta Kani. A *true* masterpiece, one that Itsuki should never have written given his current ability.

The *L⇌R Days* chapter here was written in a desperate attempt to return to the sensations he'd felt back then—just a copy of what he saw as the ideal novel. He didn't know how long it'd take him to really reach that level, and he didn't know if he could in the first place. But he was never going to give up. Those feelings back then gave him important clues, and he'd use them to keep writing and writing and writing, and little by little he'd move forward—until someday, he was sure, he'd reach it...

“...You've really changed, Itsuki.”

“I have to if I want to move on.”

Itsuki smiled a bit at Toki's words.

“...Ah.”

The determination in Itsuki's eyes made Toki feel both happy and a little lost. He was sure that Itsuki Hashima, novelist, would continue to evolve going forward—but as his editor, Toki wasn't sure what he could do for him. Itsuki was the first writer Toki had been assigned to when he joined Gift Publishing—a newbie writer for a newbie editor—and they had walked hand in hand for six years, clashing an untold number of times. He'd continued to step up and carry out his editorial duties for *All About*, *Sisterly Combat*, and the new *L⇌R Days*. But for Itsuki, a fully matured author aiming for even greater heights, Toki wasn't sure there was anything else he could do.

Maybe, Toki began to postulate, it would take someone else, someone besides himself, to help Itsuki Hashima fly any higher.

BOOK PROPOSAL

L ⇌ R DAYS

○CONCEPT

A diverse group of young men and women in a provincial town find answers to their lives even as a cavalcade of trouble sends them reeling—to the left and to the right.

○VOLUME I SYNOPSIS

Four childhood friends have grown bored of their humdrum lives. In the ruins of an old factory where they enjoy hanging out in, they encounter a young man who's wanted for murder; on a quest to clear his name and find clues leading to the real killer. The four friends, intrigued by this man's "hero-like" qualities, decide to lend him a hand—a move that will eventually change all their fates.

○CHARACTERS

Akito Aketagawa

A second-year in high school who's grown bored with his life.
Sharp-minded and plain in dress. The actual killer.

Ichiro Ieki

A second-year in high school. Looks like a cool dude in glasses but is actually more of a martial artist.

Umetaro Uranishi

A twenty-year-old man being pursued for a murder he didn't commit.
Lives alone with his sickly little sister.

Erika Enjoji

A second-year in high school. A brainless rich girl.
Her talents include fencing and horseback riding.

Otome Ototake

A second-year in high school. A brainless otaku girl.
Her favorite book is *Fist of the North Star*.

Urara Uranishi

Umetaro's fourteen-year-old sister. Too physically weak to attend school, she uses her free time to make a fortune day-trading. Dislikes her kind but unintelligent brother.

Kasumi Kanoh

A beautiful fourteen-year-old girl detective. Became famous as a young child after inadvertently solving a murder. That initial success drove her to pose as a detective, but she's frankly not very smart.

Something Real

Once upon a time, there lived a man named Eight-Man.

Eight-Man wondered what “something real” was like, so he decided to go out on an adventure.

Then he found out that a really great wizard who lives far, far away had something real, so Eight-Man decided to visit the wizard's house.

There were really great seas, and really great rivers, and really great mountains, and it was really hard, but Eight-Man worked really hard, and then he made it to the house. Yay!

“Please give me something real,” Eight-Man said.

Then the wizard said, “I’ll give it to you if you beat up the scary dragon that lives around there.”

Then Eight-Man went out to beat the dragon.

The dragon was really strong. His HP was 50000000000000, his attack was 90000000000000000, and his defense was 7000000000000000000! He could also breathe fire and things. Also, he could breathe ice beams and stuff, too. Also, he could control lightning bolts and so on. He also had explosion magic.

“Haken Saber!”

Eight-Man used Haken Saber and gave the dragon
 999999999999999999999999999999999999 damage. The dragon died.

“Wow! He’s dead!”

“Yay!”

"Good job, Eight-Man. Not just anyone could do that."

Everyone praised Eight-Man, and he was very happy about it. Then he went to

the wizard, and he gave him the something real. Yay!

So Eight-Man was able to obtain true love, and he lived happily ever after.

But then, to his surprise, it was actually not real. Eight-Man was very surprised, but after that, he was able to find real, true love. That's great! Even though love is just an illusion.

The End

"What do you think?"

"Have you lost your mind?"

In a Gift Publishing conference room, Toki gave his frank impressions of the latest proposal from Yoshihiro Kiso, one of his assigned authors. Kiso had come to the office and said, "Please read this novel before our meeting," as he presented Toki with this handwritten piece of literature.

"This was a novel written by Nadeshiko."

"I'll get in touch at once with GAGAGA Bunko and have them publish this as the latest volume of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, as I Expected!*"

"Calm down a moment, please," Kiso replied, rebuking the sudden burst of excitement from Toki. "Three days ago, when Nadeshiko came back from visiting your office, she said out of nowhere that she wanted to write a novel. I brought her some paper, and this is what she came up with."

"Ah... What made her want to suddenly do that?"

"I'm not sure... Did anything unusual happen to her in here?"

"No, nothing out of the ordinary. She was just trying on cosplay and singing as usual."

"Hmm, I see..."

Neither of them saw anything alarming in the fact that coming to an office to hold cosplay concerts was now normal to them.

"Well, Nadeshiko's at the age where she's constantly finding something new to pique her curiosity. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

"Right. And who knows? Maybe Nadeshiko will be a professional writer

someday.”

Toki’s lighthearted comment made Kiso chuckle a bit. “By the looks of things, I think that day might be rather distant.” So, with that final bit of chitchat, they got down to discussing *Conquest of the Silver Demon*.

The Dark Knight

As Haruto browsed around Twitter while eating at Itsuki's place on a warm June evening, he saw the news about Branch Hill's latest venture.

"Oh, they finally announced Branch Hill's new imprint?"

"Ah, right, I think Mya said they'd be making the announcement today."

Nayuta, who was busy with her beer, was the first to react. She, Haruto, and Itsuki were the only three people in the apartment, and they were enjoying some preprepared food from the grocery store and a few glasses of Orval, a Belgian beer commonly seen in Japanese shops.

"Hmm..."

Itsuki picked up his own phone and went to one of his go-to entertainment news sites.

The label was simply called "Branch Hill Bunko," apparently, and the article had just a short blurb about it, so he tapped the link to the official website.

A watershed moment in light novel history—

Branch Hill Bunko debuts!

The main page had this melodramatic copy in huge letters, accompanied by some artwork from a famous illustrator.

Awfully dramatic. Branch Hill sounds like a mound of twigs or something.

Itsuki scoped out the details on the site. It listed the imprint's initial lineup of five titles, along with the names of twenty or so authors planning to write for them in the future. Some of them were pretty successful writers.

"Wow," muttered Haruto as he looked at the site on his phone, "they got

Kitakata to write for them, huh?”

“A new imprint... I wonder how it’ll turn out?”

“Well, if Shirogamine is running it, it’s got a chance, doesn’t it? They have an eye-catching lineup, too.”

The history of light novels is littered with labels that pop up only to disappear in the sands of time. Some launch so quietly that not even industry people are aware of them, then disappear just as silently. With Nobunaga Shirogamine’s name on it, Branch Hill Bunko certainly had more brand awareness than that, but whether it would succeed or not remained to be seen.

“Has Miyako told you anything, Nayu?” Haruto asked.

“Mm, well, Mya doesn’t talk much about work at home. I only just heard that she got her first author assignment the other day.”

“Oh? Who is it?”

“He had some kind of strange pen name. What was it? Beefsteak something? I think the title is about a dark knight doing something or other.”

“Whoa, Miyako’s editing *Dark Knight*?”

It was Haruto who had connected Miyako to *Dark Knight* when she asked him for web novel suggestions. Internally, he was elated to have helped her out with her job.

“Ah, right, I think this author actually made his pro debut for GF.”

“Really? Who was it?”

Nayuta raised an eyebrow at Haruto. “I forget the name. It was some new guy who got the boot.”

“He got kicked out...? Oh, you mean Soma Misaka?”

“Yeah, that’s it. I think that’s the name.”

“Whoa... So Steak Tsukemono was Misaka...?”

It was a surprise to Haruto, but Misaka finding publication elsewhere was something to celebrate. Whether Soma was partly at fault or not, watching a kid win a reward Haruto was on the judge’s panel for, only to be kicked off the

label, was personally painful for him.

Then he realized something.

“Hey... Wasn’t Misaka kind of good-looking for his age?”

“Mm, I don’t remember, but maybe he was, yeah.”

Itsuki wasn’t terribly interested. Haruto’s encounter with him at the award ceremony had been so brief that he didn’t remember Soma’s face, but his impression was that of a handsome, rosy-cheeked young man who looked good in one of those stand-up collars you see on school uniforms.

“So Miyako’s first writer is this handsome kid from high school...”

“What, are you upset about that or something?” Itsuki asked the tense-looking Haruto. “They’re just gonna be business partners.”

“Are you crazy?” Haruto snorted. “It’s so common for an author to get together with his editor! I even know some light novel authors who married them! They’re business partners, but as they work together on a project, they could find love developing...and then they’ll be the *other* kind of partner...!”

“Oh, right, isn’t Yamagata dating one of her assigned authors?” Nayuta mused.

The remark only added to Haruto’s agitation. “She is?! That’s kind of big news to me...!”

Haruto knew that Kawabe, his own editor, had a thing for his coworker Kirara Yamagata. Right now, though, he was more concerned about himself than Kawabe.

“Ahhh, this is so annoying! And here I was all relaxed because I heard Branch Hill editorial is all older dudes...”

“If the mere presence of a cute younger guy gets you this panicky, why didn’t you try pushing harder for her, huh?”

Haruto gave the exasperated Itsuki a less-than-confident frown. “I’m doing my best, too, in my own way...or I’m trying to.”

“If you keep approaching her and it doesn’t work, doesn’t that mean there’s

no hope?”

Nayuta’s acidic question dug into Haruto’s heart.

“Ughhh... You’re all mean because you don’t care about any of this...”

“Well,” she replied, “to be honest, I wouldn’t want Mya to be taken away by some game-spitting playboy, either... You might be Prince Manwhore, but you *have* to be better than this guy.”

“Wait, are you willing to help out, then?”

“Huh? No way.”

“Then don’t imply it...” Haruto sighed. If Miyako’s best friend, Nayuta, lent a hand, he couldn’t ask for a stronger ally. “Well, all right! I’ll just have to try harder on my own...!”

Taking out his phone, Haruto began typing a message to Miyako.

“Frankly,” said Nayuta by his side, “I don’t want *anyone* taking Mya away. I’ll make her happy instead, so I want her to come to me first, no matter what. Nya-ha-ha...”

She sounded like she was joking, but Itsuki couldn’t help but notice the slight blush to her cheeks.

“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.”

The conversation they had when he’d gotten back together with Nayuta flashed into Itsuki’s mind. For her, picking Itsuki over Takashina was a no-brainer...but what if it was Itsuki versus someone else?



Miyako, by the way, was currently dealing with a major headache. Just two hours ago, Izumi had sent her his revisions for Volume 1 of *Dark Knight*, so she immediately took a look at them, but...

“Uggghhh...”

After she was done, Miyako unconsciously groaned, and not in any kind of pleasurable way.

This hasn't changed at all, has it? Like, what's the deal?

The novel submitted was virtually unaltered from what had been uploaded to the web novel site. The decisions they'd made over coffee earlier—adding ups and downs to the story's development, writing a more satisfying climax for Volume 1—weren't acted upon in this manuscript at all. It wasn't a matter of trying to improve it and failing; there was no sign of *any* attempt to change.

She wanted to talk to her boss, Ayane, about it, but she had just gone drinking with the other editors to celebrate the announcement of Branch Hill Bunko. Miyako was planning to join them as soon as she finished reading this submission. So she pondered over this alone, and in time, she sent an e-mail along the lines of, *Are you sure you didn't send the wrong file? Because the one you sent isn't much different at all from the web version... Please check one more time.*

It was a fairly serious guess on her part that Izumi really did send the wrong data over. But half an hour later, this came back:

This is the correct file for Volume 1.

I've given it a lot of thought on my part, but I believe that most of the people who purchase the book edition will be those who read it online and enjoyed it. If I change the scenes and story development from what they enjoyed in the web novel, wouldn't that disappoint those people?

Also, I feel this series became popular because of the content that it has right now. Instead of making unadvised changes to it, I think it'd be best for those starting with the book version as well if we stuck to the web novel text.

"Nnngh..."

Izumi, to his credit, had a valid point. When adapting a web novel for traditional publishing, opinions often differed on how much extra revision should be made. Some publishers added new characters or made major changes to the story itself, while others literally copied and pasted the web

novel text into a book template and sent it to the printers. Both approaches had produced lots of major hits.

But still:

“At least *talk* to me about this...”

Miyako let out a deep sigh. It had been nearly a month since they first met to work out the nature of the revisions. It wasn't right for him to foist this manuscript on her without any advance warning. So, holding her irritation back, Miyako sent a reply to Izumi.

I understand your feelings, but if you wanted to change the direction we decided upon at the meeting, I wish that you had discussed this with me in advance. After reading your submission, I still think it would be better to make the discussed revisions in order to improve the quality of Volume 1. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this.

She spent a few anxious minutes waiting for Izumi to reply. Then, without warning, the phone on her desk vibrated. She picked it up and found a message from Haruto reading, Hey, if you're free the next few days, wanna grab something to eat together?

“...!”

Something to eat together. In other words, a date. It made her heart skip a beat for a moment, but now wasn't the time for that. She tapped out a short reply—Busy now. I'll touch base later—and waited for Izumi's reply once more.

Ten or so minutes later, it finally came.

“.....Huhhh?!” Miyako exclaimed to herself.

I think it would be better to publish the web novel version as is. If you insist that it needs to be revised, then I would like to pretend this book project didn't happen, please. Personally, I don't see it as a must for me to force this story into publication no matter what.

“Why's he jumping to *that*?!”

She looked up at the ceiling, leaning heavily against the back of her chair.

Is he really serious about stepping away? Dark Knight was already announced

as part of Branch Hill Bunko's launch family, and Hebomeshi, the illustrator, is already working on character designs and illustrations. There's no way he can just say "never mind" at this point.

...But are these extreme requests part of Izumi's tactics here?

Now Miyako recalled Kenjiro Toki's story of how Izumi got kicked out of the GF Bunko family.

"Well, as much as I know about that whole thing, I think Misaka's partly at fault, too."

As he put it, Izumi had had a bad relationship with his editor at GF Bunko because he fostered a habit of barking orders and ignoring constructive feedback. Looking back at that meeting, he had been bringing up illustrator requests without any prompting—and now *this* e-mail.

Could it be that Izumi is... "difficult" after all...?

She had thought—with no real evidence—that she could get along with him. Now that feeling was sorely shaken.

The book adaptation has already been announced, and Hebomeshi has begun on his work as well. I think this goes without saying, but pretending this offer never happened is not a possibility at this point, and I question how fair it is to try to force your own demands while being aware of that. It's going to be difficult to build a trusting relationship like this. Would you please reconsider revising the manuscript?

Just as she was about to press the "Send" button, doing her level best to hold back her rising frustration:

"Whoa, hang on there one second."

Ayane gently grabbed Miyako's wrist before she could move the mouse another pixel.

"Ayane? Weren't you at the party?"

"I came to check on you because you were running late. That's a pretty harsh e-mail, isn't it?" She had her eyes on Miyako's computer screen. *"Is this for Mr. Tsukemono? What happened?"*

“Um...”

Miyako explained matters to Ayane, showing their e-mail exchange so far. Ayane mulled this over for a moment.

“Well, let’s not send this, okay? I don’t want you talking about your feelings or making demands for revisions. It’s important to be as amiable as possible in e-mail communication, so for now, how about we propose an in-person meeting to talk this over?”

Her instructions left Miyako a little nonplussed. It was clearly Izumi acting out of line here, so she didn’t see much need to meet him if he’d just sing the same song in person instead. Ayane, perhaps sensing this, smiled a bit.

“In e-mails, you know, a lot of people say way too much—or too little. Why don’t you calm down a bit and reread what you wrote?”

“Ah...”

At Ayane’s suggestion, she looked back at the e-mail she was about to send. She thought she was holding back her emotions with it—but yes, her word choices definitely had a lot of venom to them.

“And sure, some people find it easiest to say what they really think over e-mail because they have trouble with that in person, so it’s not that real life is always better than online that way. With e-mail, there’s a permanent record of everything, so at least you won’t have conflict later over what was said or unsaid. But from what I can see, Mr. Tsukemono here gets a bit of a rebellious streak over e-mail, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah...”

So Miyako deleted her draft and asked Izumi for another meeting.



One week later, Miyako was back at the coffee shop near Izumi’s high school, waiting for him to show up. This time, Ayane was there with her.

“Hello there. My name’s Mitahora, and I’m the assistant editor in chief of Branch Hill Bunko.”

Ayane handed Izumi her card. The editor in chief was President Shirogamine, but since he was giving Ayane virtual free rein over this project, Ayane was the de facto leader.

“G-good to meet you... My name’s Izumi.”

Izumi had a nervous look on his face as he greeted her. There was no sign of the aggressive tone from his e-mails—he seemed like the same introverted young man Miyako knew from before.

“Now, first off, I understand that you and Shirakawa have had a misunderstanding or two over e-mail, so I’d like to apologize for the trouble before anything else.”

Ayane bowed her head as she spoke. Miyako wondered if she really needed to go that far, but since her boss was bowing, she had no choice but to follow suit.

“N-no, it wasn’t any trouble...or anything...”

Izumi was almost whispering, eyes drifting away. He looked terribly out of his depth, but Ayane gave him a smile anyway.

“So for today, I wanted to give you a chance to say whatever you liked to us, Mr. Izumi.”

“Anything? Um...”

“You know, about your disagreement with Shirakawa, your concerns about the editorial team, or anything else you like.”

“...”

Izumi shot a glance at Ayane, then Miyako. Then he turned his eyes downward. “It’s not a disagreement,” he mumbled. “But...I dunno, it’s like all editors are the same in the end.”

“Oh...? What do you mean?”

This bewildered Miyako. Izumi gave her a pouty look.

“...Well, you don’t listen to anything I say, and you’re just making me do whatever you want instead...”

“That—”

That’s what you do!

Miyako was about to counter him, but Ayane gently grabbed her hand to stop her. “What do you mean by that, Mr. Izumi?” she softly asked.

“...When we were deciding on an illustrator,” he timidly began, “you didn’t listen to any of my suggestions and just went with your own instead, didn’t you?”

“Huh?! You told me that Hebomeshi was fine!” Miyako was surprised.

Izumi seemed equally baffled. “Well, yeah, out of the three you offered me... but I really would have preferred ■■ or ■■.”

He brought up the names of the two game company employees he’d wanted earlier.

“Like I said, those two aren’t possible...”

“Why not?”

“I *told* you that—”

“Shirakawa,” Ayane interjected before she could continue, “did you maybe not explain to him why those two weren’t available?”

“...! Actually...no.”

Looking back, all she’d written in her e-mail to Izumi was, *I apologize, but neither of those is possible.*

“Mr. Izumi, ■■ and ■■ are—”

Ayane then explained in detail why they couldn’t be recruited. Izumi still didn’t seem fully satisfied with this, but he gave them a neutral “so that’s what it was...”

“Yes,” said Ayane. “That being said, it’s true that we could have at least tried to give them an offer. I apologize that it didn’t happen.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t explain myself well enough,” Miyako said.

“By the way, Mr. Izumi, when you say that all editors are the same, did you

have something similar happen before?”

Izumi’s eyes widened at Ayane’s question. “Yes,” he resentfully said.

“Like...at GF Bunko?” Miyako asked.

Izumi nodded.

They then discussed Izumi’s former editor at GF for a bit. According to Izumi, the first time he’d had an issue with that editor was when they met for the first time. Before they had really gotten to know each other, they went straight into edit discussions, and he was given a stapled handout filled with all the points that needed to be revised, along with a publishing schedule and a notice that they had contracted ■■■ to handle illustrations.

Some (not all) of these revisions were understandable, and he could accept the schedule well enough, since he didn’t know any better, but having an illustrator picked with no input from him was more than Izumi could handle. Apparently, the art style wasn’t at all to Izumi’s liking—a big minus in his mind. So he agreed to the revisions and schedule, but upon asking his editor to reconsider the artist, the reply he received was an argument: “This one’s rising up in popularity, and he definitely matches the content of this work.” Izumi kept pleading his case, but in the end, he was told, “It’s the editor’s job to pick an illustrator,” and that was that.

So Izumi’s beef with his editor began from their very first meeting. But he tried to stay optimistic. He was still a newcomer to this industry, and his editor was undoubtedly a pro, so he decided to just trust him. But the result of all that—*Maken Wars*, the debut work of Soma Misaka, revised as instructed and illustrated and packaged according to the editor’s wishes—bombed in the market.

Two weeks after the release, he got an e-mail from his editor stating that a Volume 2 would not be possible, along with a little blurb saying, “Don’t let this discourage you; let’s try again next time.” That was when Izumi’s irritation and distrust with his editor reached the boiling point. So he tried selling himself to another company without the permission of his editor, and that earned him a ban from GF.

“So why do I have to do the editor’s bidding all the time...?! This...this is *my*

work...!”

Izumi now had tears in his eyes as he vented his feelings, the raw emotions of the time perhaps coming back to him.

Miyako, learning of the circumstances that had led to their crumbled relationship, couldn't find anything to respond with. If he had a falling out with his editor because of a disagreement over who'd illustrate his debut work, then maybe he *would* see Miyako's behavior as “all editors being the same.” But she had no intention of neglecting Izumi's feedback, and she definitely didn't mean to force her own decisions on him. Besides, Miyako knew Izumi's old editor, a veteran at GF Bunko since its launch and a man who oversaw lots of authors and lots of hits. He was an honest man, one who never cut corners no matter his workload, and people respected him at his job. *Maken Wars* didn't work out well, but she never doubted for a moment that he gave this work serious dedication.

Writers and editors are supposed to both want their work to succeed. So why do they wind up at loggerheads so much?

Both Miyako and Izumi fell silent, a pall coming over the table. Ayane's cheerful voice banished it.

“Well! How about some cake?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Ayane smiled at her confused companions. “You gotta have something good to eat during an editorial meeting! Do you always stick with coffee, Miyako?”

“Um, yeah...”

“The company reimburses you for meals with writers, so you can splurge if you like! We don't have a defined upper limit or anything, but accounting yelled at us when we went to a sushi place that cost twenty thousand yen per person, so maybe stay on the south end of that.”

Ayane looked at the menu. “All right, I'll have the special fruit mille crepe, I think. How about you two?”

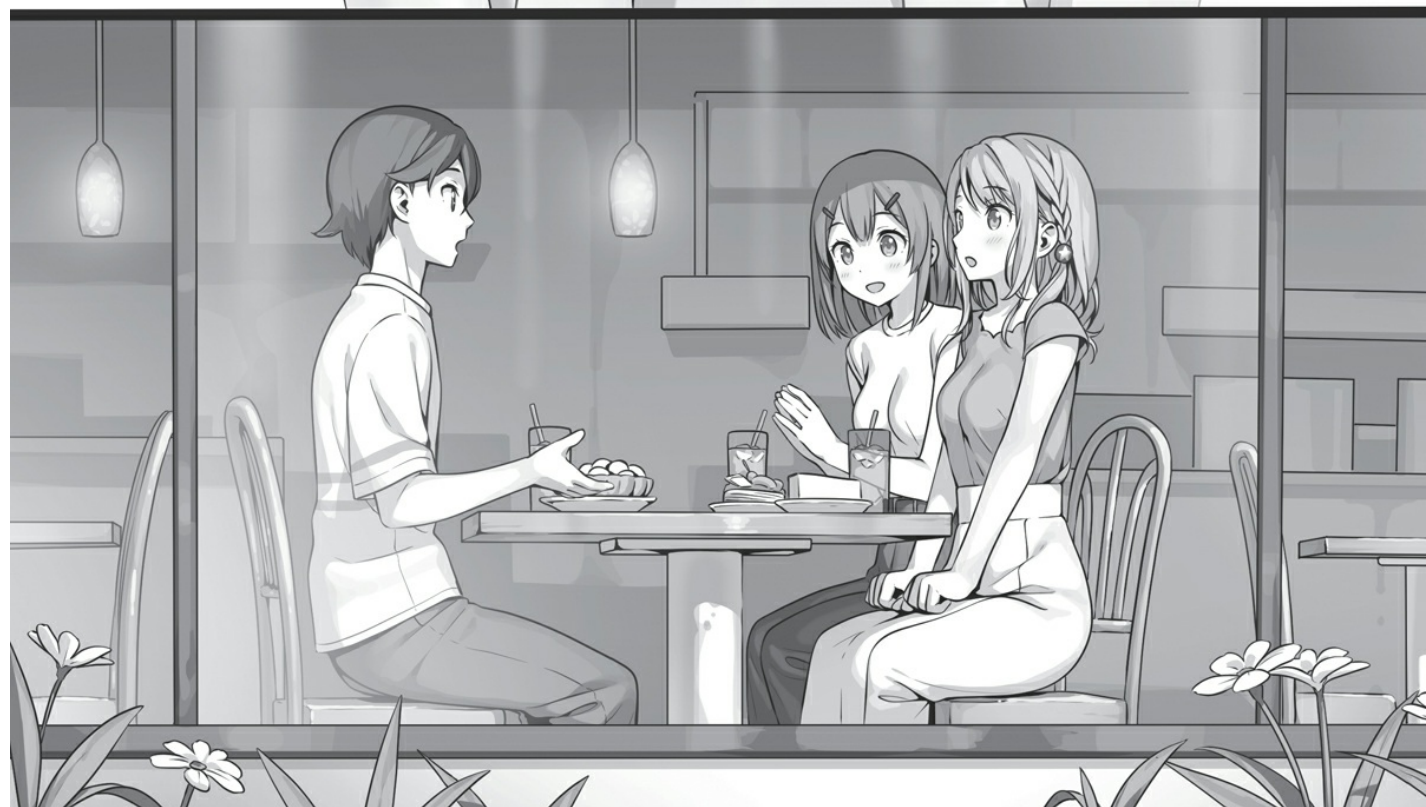
Miyako really wasn't in the mood for cake, but she played along and said, "I'll have the cheesecake."

"I'll have...the muscat tart," added Izumi, sounding pretty reluctant himself.

"By the way," Ayane said after grabbing a waitress and making the order, "what kind of works do you like, Mr. Izumi? Light novels, anime, games, whatever."

Izumi was visibly startled by the sudden friendly tone of voice. "Well...I guess *Fate* is number one for me..."

Figures, Miyako thought. She recalled how Haruto had criticized his submission to the New Writers Contest as "too obviously influenced" by *Fate*. *Makai Wars'* premise, involving heroes from history and legend coming together for a battle royale, was a bald-faced knockoff of *Fate*. *Dark Knight*, meanwhile, was more of an adventure tale, but even here, you could see some homages in the setting, the names, and the narrative style during battle action.



“A lot of teens in your generation still like *Fate*, don’t they? If we could create a franchise that long-lasting, we’d be rolling in it. By the way, how’d you get into *Fate*? The games or the anime?”

“When I was in sixth grade, I watched the *Fate/Zero* anime, and I thought it was really cool, so that’s how, mainly. Then I read the original novel, played the *stay night* game, read *Fate/Apocrypha*... You know.”

“Wow... Kind of a shock to hear that someone who watched the *Zero* anime as an elementary school kid is a professional writer now. Guess I’m not so young anymore...” Ayane let out a dry laugh at Izumi’s answer. “What else have you liked apart from *Fate* lately?”

“There’s a lot...but, like, *Overlord* and *Re:Zero*... Oh, I read the originals for both of those online, so...”

He was quick to add the second part of that. Maybe he didn’t want to look like some casual who started with the anime.

“Wow, you’re sure up on things. I didn’t get into either of those until they were published in book form.”

Izumi half smiled a bit at this cheerful praise.

Then Ayane turned toward Miyako. “What were you into when *you* were in high school?”

“Me? Um... I never read any light novels at all. I didn’t know much about manga or anime, either. Maybe I’d read a manga if they made a TV drama out of it, but that’s about it.”

“Oh? So how did you become a light novel editor?” Izumi looked curious about this.

“One of my college classmates was a professional light novelist... Well, Itsuki Hashima is his name, but... And he lent me a lot of books and games and stuff... and then a bunch of other things happened, you know...”

“I’d love to hear about those ‘other things.’ Right, Izumi?”

“Um, yes, I would.”

Ayane was grinning at her. Even Izumi was nodding along.



So the trio continued their rambling chat for about three hours. Why they wanted to become editors, why he started writing novels, their favorite works, their hobbies, things they used to be into, the clubs they were part of, love stuff...and by the time they were digging into their second slices of cake, it was nothing but friendly idle talk.

“Oh boy, it’s late. We’d better get going.”

Ayane, realizing that it was now completely dark out, led the other two out of the café. In the end, they didn’t talk at all about revising *Dark Knight*. Miyako was freaking out a bit—*why did we even meet up in the first place?*

“Thank you for coming to see us today,” Ayane said with a smile. “Let’s talk again soon, okay, Mr. Izumi?”

“Um, okay...”

Izumi blushed a little and nodded. Then he turned toward Miyako. “Um... Miss Shirakawa?”

Miyako’s face tensed up ever so slightly. “Yes?”

“I think I want to do some more work on Volume One after all...but do you think you could wait another week for me...?” he asked shyly.

“Y-yes, certainly,” Miyako stammered. “That’s fine.”

A visibly relieved Izumi replied with a guileless smile. “Thank you very much. I’ll be in touch with you.”

He bowed to Miyako and Ayane before walking away. Miyako silently watched him go, unsure of what to think.

“Well,” Ayane chirped, “I think we managed to work that out. So... Right! Wanna get some dinner? I heard there’s a good Chinese place near here.”

“No, I just had two slices of cake... But why did Izumi suddenly change his mind for us?”

“Because,” she casually replied, “he probably thought all along that some revisions would be good for the book release.”

“You think so?”

“That’s what my gut tells me. He got all huffy with his editor because he didn’t want to be at their mercy again, but once he got to know you and work things out a little, he was more willing to accept it. That’s my guess anyway.”

“...”

Miyako thought they had just wasted a few hours talking about nothing, but maybe it wasn’t such a waste after all. In fact, for Izumi and Miyako—and, by extension, for Izumi and his editor over at GF—this was probably more necessary than any editorial meeting they could’ve had.

“Now, some people don’t like authors getting *too* buddy-buddy with editors, of course. A lot of writers prefer keeping it all business. But me, I wanna get to know who I’m working with more, and I think talking about things like your favorite books is key to that. Besides, I wanna eat and drink on my company’s expense account!”

She laughed at her own joke.

But Miyako looked as muddled as always. “Um... Thank you very much.”

“Hmm?”

“If you didn’t reach out to help, Ayane, I think I would’ve ruined my relationship with Izumi. So...sorry about that. Really.”

Ayane grinned at her somber companion. “Well, it’s partly my fault for asking you to handle a teenage web novelist by yourself. They can be tough to handle even in the best of times. So don’t worry about it! Mr. Tsukemono’s a lot more sincere than I thought, too. Best of luck with him!”

“Yeah...”

Miyako nodded at her boss’s encouragement. But it was impossible not to worry about it. She was still so immature, and it ate at her terribly. She basically hadn’t been able to do anything today; it was Ayane who had solved the problem, start to finish. Working to understand and trust each other... She

hadn't cared about that in the slightest, and it made her feel pathetic enough to cry.

I'm still no good at this at all...



Splitting with Ayane at the Chinese restaurant she'd mentioned, Miyako dragged her heavy feet back to the office. There, at the entrance, she ran into Nobunaga Shirogamine, the president.

"Good evening, Shirakawa. I heard you were having trouble with one of your assignments?"

"...Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Did you fix it?"

"Y-yes, it's better now. Mostly thanks to Ayane, but..."

"You don't look too happy about it."

Miyako emphatically agreed. "It just reminded me of how immature I am still. How will I ever be an editor like Ayane...?"

"Well, you won't be, will you?"

"Huh?!"

Miyako, confused at this sudden knockdown, watched as Shirogamine gave her an inscrutable smile.

"That ability Mitahora has—to just slip right into people's business like that—I don't know any editor as good at it as she is. Kind of like Toyotomi Hideyoshi, if we're talking ancient warlords. There's really no way you could imitate someone like her."

The praise surprised Miyako.

"...Didn't you call her a dunce earlier, Mr. Shirogamine?"

"Ha-ha-ha! You think I was gonna go out of my way to headhunt a total dunce? I just don't tell her that because I don't want her getting too full of herself around me."

Miyako looked troubled at Shirogamine's total lack of remorse.

"Besides, Shirakawa, it's not like you're aiming to be exactly like Mitahora, are you?"

Miyako blinked at his words. She had always wanted to be one of a kind, impossible to replace with someone else. And now she was feeling so sorry for herself that she'd even lost sight of that.

"...You're looking more down than I thought. Why don't you head home for tonight and get some rest?"

"All right... I'll do that." She nodded weakly at the suggestion.

"Right, have a good one."

As he began to walk away:

"Ah, Mr. Shirogamine?"

"Yes?"

"...I think maybe you should be more earnest with your praise for Ayane sometimes. I don't want to say this...but I'm wondering if maybe she really *does* hate you, so..."

"Huh?"

Shirogamine's eyebrows rose. Apparently, this hadn't occurred to him.

Miyako had asked Ayane once what she thought of him while they were drinking alone. Their friendly chitchat at the *yakitori* place stoked her curiosity.

Ayane's response, eyes staring into space: "He's the number one most abusive psychopath in glasses I've ever met. I'd love to punch him someday. Also, he kind of resembles this ex who cheated on me, so just looking at him makes me puke." Miyako was convinced she meant it, too.

"It's not...like, she says that because she wants to hide how much she likes me?" he ventured.

"No."

She shook her head at Shirogamine, who looked visibly upset.

“...Oh dear.”

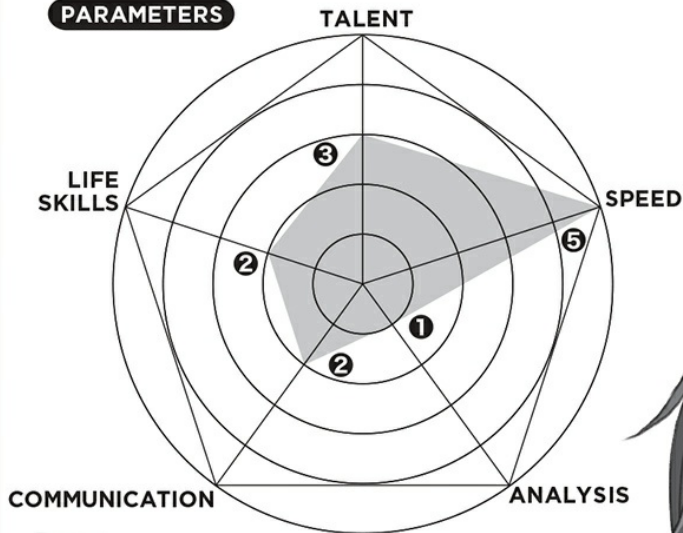
From what she could tell, Miyako began to wonder if Shirogamine actually had some special feelings for Ayane. Think about it. Nobunaga Shirogamine, ace editor; Ayane Mitahora, a brilliant rising star he values and cherishes—and there was just so much discord between them.

And if that was how they worked, how would Miyako, a half-witted newbie editor, and a bunch of twisted, quirky novelists ever find a way to work in harmony?

Now she was more nervous than ever about how she'd manage to make it in this business.

SOTA IZUMI

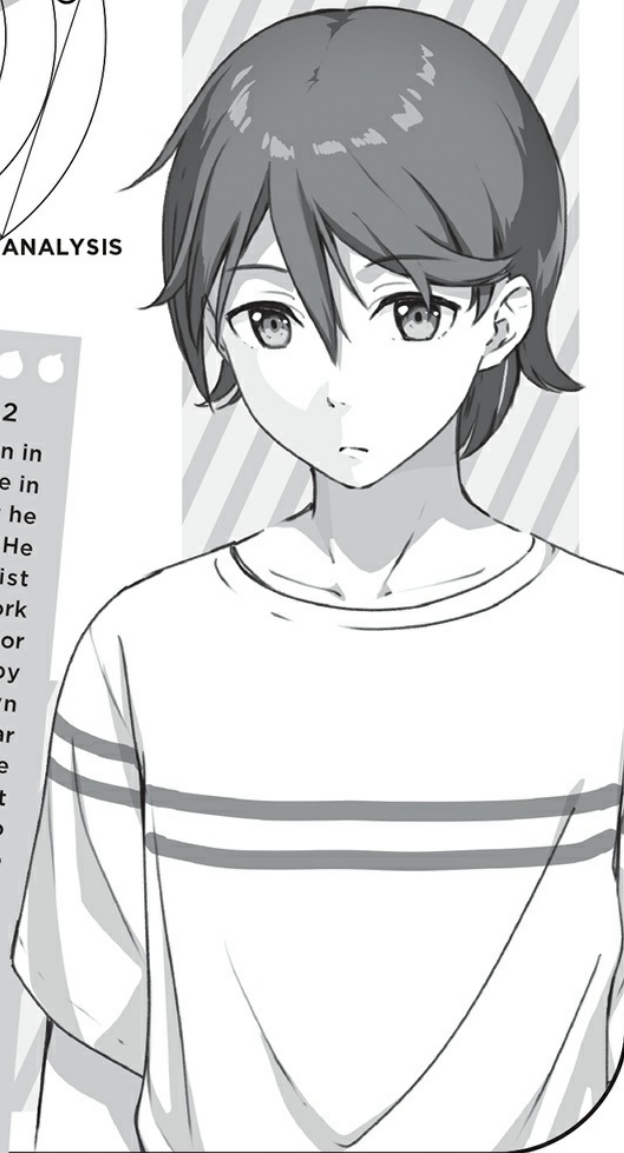
PARAMETERS



AGE: 17 **BORN:** September 2

A web novelist. His debut novel, written in the first year of high school, won a prize in the GF Bunko New Writers Contest, but he was dropped after an editorial dispute. He then became a successful web novelist under the name Steak Tsukemono, his work picked up for publication by Branch Hill. For better or worse, he's easily influenced by his favorite media and lacking in his own imagination. This makes his work unpopular in the industry and among hard-core readers, but when he catches the right trend, his stuff can explode. Indifferent to romance, he has good looks that have made several girls approach him at school, but he's turned them down, since "real" girls don't interest him. His first love was Saber from *Fate/Zero*.

Works: *Maken Wars*, *The Hero, Chased Away From His Nation*, *Becomes a Dark Knight and Lives a Life of Freedom*



THAT TIME THE PRETTY-BOY WRITER GOT THE BOOT AND WAS REBORN AS A WEB NOVELIST

I Love You

“Hi, Mya. You’re home a little early today.”

It was past seven thirty in the evening. After returning early at Shirogamine’s suggestion, Miyako was greeted by Nayuta, wearing a smile and nothing else.

“Hey, Nayu.”

“I’m about to have dinner, so I’ll make some for you, too.”

Lately, when Miyako was late coming back, Nayuta cooked dinner. “Cooking,” for her, mainly meant turning on a rice cooker, so she was just buying stuff from the grocery or convenience store, but Miyako appreciated it nonetheless.

But not tonight.

“Sorry, I had a lot of cake at this meeting, so I’m not hungry. I’m gonna use the bath for a bit.”

“Oh, really? I’ll take a bath, too, then.”

So Nayuta padded into the bathroom and flipped the switch on the hot-water heater. Miyako removed her clothes as well, and the two of them took turns washing each other until the tub was filled with warm water.

“Did today burn you out, Mya?” Nayuta asked, covered in bubbles as she rubbed her soft body against Miyako’s back.

“Huh?” Miyako asked, worried. “What makes you say that?”

“It felt like you were moaning less than usual when I rubbed your boobs.”

“I never moan at all!”

“Oh, right. Even if you’re feeling it, you hold back from making any sound, don’t you?”

With that rejoinder, Nayuta softly began working Miyako’s breasts from

behind. Miyako protested, holding herself back from moaning.

“W-wait, Nayu...! You’re acting so dirty with them...”

“Nya-ha-ha... I love it when you make dirty faces, Mya! ♥”

She gave a quick lick to Miyako’s ear. “Hyanh?!” she shrilly replied, unable to hold back.

Ever since her breakup with Itsuki last December, Nayuta had grown extremely close with Miyako—but even after they got back together, Nayuta’s excessively touchy-feely ways with her showed no signs of subsiding. Itsuki was probably devoting much more time to writing and his new sister these days, which meant less time spent with Nayuta compared to their pre-breakup days.

Miyako didn’t exactly want to be an outlet for her sexual desires, but going skin-to-skin with Nayuta naked like this didn’t feel bad to her. It felt really good, in fact. By now, usually, she’d be getting her revenge by squeezing Nayuta’s breasts and listening to her pant and beg for more—she was always weak whenever Miyako went on the attack. But:

“Look, the tub’s full. I’m going in!”

Briskly rinsing off, Miyako entered the bathtub.

“...You really *are* burned out, aren’t you, Mya?”

Nayuta, joining her, sounded concerned. Miyako grinned back at her.

“Mm, kind of... Work’s been tough lately. Everything’s coming to a head really fast with the new label.”

“Oh, really?” Nayuta replied, not digging any further. “By the way, Prince Manwhore was worried about you earlier. He was afraid some handsome writer would whisk you away.”

“Fuwa said that? Wait, was he talking about my assignment, Izumi?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

Certainly, Izumi was attractive. But he was still in high school—and most of all, he was her business partner. She hadn’t considered him as a personal love interest for even a moment.

“I swear...”

Haruto could be a handful, too, sometimes. But something about that made Miyako a little happy, she had to admit.

“He seemed pretty keen on the idea of asking you out on a date, too, but did anything happen there?”

“Huh?”

Miyako froze, not comprehending this. It made Nayuta even more curious.

“Oh? Didn’t you get a message from him? Itsuki and I were with him then. He spent, like, half an hour typing and deleting messages, and it was getting to be a downer, so Itsuki swiped the phone away and just sent something out real quick.”

“...!”

She remembered, all right.

Hey, if you’re free the next few days, wanna grab something to eat together?

The message had come a week ago, while she was all worked up answering e-mails from Izumi. She immediately replied, Busy now. I’ll touch base later but never followed up.

“I forgot... Wait, Itsuki wrote that?!”

Come to think of it, it *was* a pretty straightforward message by Haruto standards. He usually beat around the bush a lot more, and he liked listing reasons why they should hang out, such as a birthday or a new volume of his getting published.

“After all that work, you forgot Prince Manwhore’s invite? Now I feel sorry for him. Guess he doesn’t stand a chance after all...”

Nayuta looked weirdly joyful about that.

Uggghhh... I’m sorry, Fuwa... Better reply to him at once after the bath...

Internally apologizing to Haruto, Miyako found herself getting more and more depressed. She had just come back from being reminded of just how immature

she was, and this was yet another heavy blow.



Sorry I'm so late replying. What do you think about eating Saturday night?

"Whoa?!"

Haruto yelped out loud upon receiving the reply to a message he'd sent to Miyako a week ago—technically Itsuki sent it, but still.

He had been on tenterhooks for the entire week she hadn't answered him. By day three, his mindset was, *Maybe she forgot to reply, so should I maybe check? But they said she's busy at work, so I don't want to bother her. And if I prod her for a response, maybe she'll think I'm desperate and stuff, but ohhhhhh, I don't know*, and it deflated any enthusiasm he had for writing work.

But now the reply was here. And...she said yes.

...That's really a yes, right? Not some kind of detective-story fakeout? Like, this is actually implying she wants to go and not just literally asking my opinion?

He perused the short message over and over again, uneasy as ever, before concluding that it probably meant what he thought it did.

"Y-yessssssssssssssssssssss!"

"Shut up, bro!"

The moment he shouted out, his sister yelled at him from the adjacent room. This would normally enrage him, but right now, he didn't care.

He had dined with Miyako several times before, but this would be the first time they were going out just to spend time together, rather than stopping for dinner after running into each other at the publisher or whatnot. There was no reason why anyone shouldn't call this a date.

A date...with Miyako... My first one...!

"Ah... Ahhhhhh...! Ahhh, what now, what now?!"

Haruto writhed in agony, making assorted disgusting grunts and groans. His sister banged on the wall a few times, but it didn't matter to him.

Quickly, he tapped off, Saturday night is great! Anything you want to eat? The reply came just as fast: Whatever is fine.

Ahh, there it is... “Whatever”!

Haruto’s face tensed up. He had read online that women don’t use the word *whatever* like the dictionary defines it; it meant more like “Whatever [would be satisfying to me] is fine.” He’d need to think carefully over which restaurant he’d choose.

In a rush, he tried some Internet searches like “date place” and “first date dinner restaurant,” listing up all the spots that looked good to him. Should he pick a fancy French place or high-end sushi restaurant to show off his maturity and financial stability? Maybe not—if he did, Miyako would probably refuse to let him pay for her. So maybe a diner or fast food? Nah, that wasn’t really a grown-up date destination...but how about a more casual restaurant or maybe a somewhat fancier than usual *izakaya*?

“Hmmm... Ahhh, I can’t decide!” he shouted, head held in his hands. His sister banged the wall some more, but he ignored it.

After an hour or so of this, he still couldn’t make up his mind, so Haruto sent a message to Itsuki: Miyako said yes to dinner, but where do you think we should go? The response: If she likes you, anywhere is perfect; if she’s not interested, nothing is gonna work.

...Ugh, he thinks he’s so smart... That he’s above all this now...

Scowling, he sent him a sticker of a dejected-looking anime character and decided to think some more. But after a while longer, Itsuki sent another text.

...But if she said yes to you, she can’t be totally disinterested, right?

Zing!

Itsuki followed it up with a link to a restaurant review website. Haruto tapped it. It took him to a page for a restaurant called Bistro Something-or-other.

“What’s this...?”

It’s this nice hidden gem me and Kanikou found the other day. It’s all real good, the prices are decent, they got a lot of Belgian beer, the

atmosphere's nice, they have private rooms, and it's in an office area so it's not too crowded on weekends. Apparently, Miyako said she wanted to try it, too.

"Itsukiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

Haruto was so impressed with this too-perfect reference that he sent him a sticker with an anime character worshipping him as a god.

Thankful for his friend, he immediately went on the restaurant's website and made a reservation. But it wasn't fully out of friendship or goodwill that Itsuki had clued Haruto in on this. He had his own agenda, and Haruto had no way of knowing what it was yet.



Then Saturday rolled around.

Haruto arrived at the station nearest to the place a good half hour early. Miyako arrived twenty minutes later. Both were dressed on the nicer side of casual, suitable for the place they were about to visit.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Oh no, I just got here myself." Haruto smiled as he recited that trite line, hiding his nerves. "So, wanna get going?"

"Sure."

After following his phone's map through some empty alleyways for ten minutes, they arrived at the restaurant. It was in the first floor of an office building, the outer walls made of brick to evoke that old-world European feel. A handwritten sign was placed near the entrance.

"I have a reservation under Matsuo," Haruto said to the greeter. They were quickly guided to a private room in the back.

"Let us know when you decide what you'd like to order," she said as she left them.

"Your real last name is Matsuo, isn't it?" Miyako said.

Haruto nodded. "Yeah... Did I tell you that before?"

“I found out when I was writing addresses on envelopes for editorial.”

“Ohhh, right.”

Sending packages to writers with comp copies of their books and merch was a classic part-timer duty at a publisher.

“It’s a little surprising to hear your real name out of nowhere, isn’t it? Why did you choose a name like Haruto Fuwa anyway?”

“Uh...” Haruto thought a bit, then shrugged. “It just sounds cool, you know?”

“Why do you seem so unsure about it?” Miyako laughed a little.

“Ahhh, I don’t really remember how I came up with it.”

It felt to him like he had some other reason for it, but it was a really long time ago—high school, even, he thought—so he didn’t remember.

“But pen names are really just, like, whatever anyway. Nayu got hers because she had crab for dinner.”

“That’s a little *too* ‘whatever’ in my opinion, but...”

“...Hey, actually, I don’t think I’ve ever heard Nayu’s real name. Do you know it?”

“Well, we live together and all...” Miyako nodded. “It’s definitely not what I expected.”

“It’s not?”

“Like...it’s pretty normal-sounding.”

“Huh. What is it?”

“You should ask her next time.”

“All right,” he said, picking up the menu as he handed another one to Miyako. He didn’t actually care what Nayuta’s real name was; his thoughts were more along the lines of, *Okay, we got a good conversation going; is this working out okay? Or not?*

“What should I have first...?” Miyako muttered as she looked at the drink menu. Haruto focused on his own. Just as Itsuki advised, they had a wide

selection of Belgians, along with European and US beer, wine, whiskey, and more. Each entry on the list had a little line below it with a quick description like, “Sour ale 6.5% refreshing citric tartness,” which he appreciated.

“I’ll take a Delirium Tremens.”

Miyako picked a famous Belgian beer, one with a cute pink elephant on the label. It was sweet, with a nice, approachable mouthfeel that burst out into a spicy bitterness on the tongue. It was also 9 percent alcohol by volume, very much on the high side. “Delirium tremens” refers to the hallucinations seen by hard-core alcoholics, as represented by the pink elephant. To be honest, it probably wasn’t the greatest pick for one’s first drink of the evening, so Haruto thought it wise to comment. “That’s pretty strong, but is that what you want?”

“Oh yeah, I know. I had it at Itsuki’s once, and I liked it.”

“Ohhh.”

If she knew what she was ordering, it’d be rude of him to intervene. So Haruto chose his own beverage, flagged down a waiter, and ordered some drinks and appetizers. Before long, the beers were brought in, along with some pretzel sticks as an extra.

Haruto had opted for a Saison Dupont. This one used a lot of hops, so while it was refreshing, it was also very bitter and satisfying to drink. This “saison” beer style was native to Belgium, drunk by workers during farmwork in the summer, and it was perfect for this late-spring weather.

“Well, cheers.”

The two of them lightly clinked their glasses, took a sip of beer, and bit into a pretzel. The crunchy sticks, liberally sprinkled with salt, went extremely well with the beer.

“Ahhh, that’s good...” In no time at all, Miyako had half the glass finished. There was something oddly alluring about her sigh of satisfaction. “I feel like now that I’m a working adult, things like beer taste a lot better.”

“Huh, you think?” replied Haruto, quite surprised. “I’ve never really had a ‘real’ job before, so...” He smiled. “Oh, how’s your work going? I heard you’re supervising a writer now.”

Miyako gave this a dry sort of smile. “Work, huh? *Ahhh...*”

She sighed again and took another drink of beer.

“Miyako?”

“...Work is going great. Every day is so fulfilling...”

“Oh? That’s good.”

“...is something I’m not sure I’m ever gonna say again.”

“Oh...” Haruto tightened his face, embarrassed. “Um... Well, the author of *Dark Knight* was Misaka from back at GF, right? Is he giving you a lot of trouble, too?”

Miyako shook her head. “It’s not that bad, actually. I just wasn’t paying enough attention to his needs...”

She then explained everything that had happened with Sota Izumi, aka Soma Misaki, as they grazed on the fresh fish carpaccio and chicken piccata that arrived at their table.

“Mm... Well, it happens sometimes, y’know? You can’t let it bother you too much.”

It didn’t sound too comforting to Haruto, either, but that was all he had for her. These things did happen sometimes.

“You think so, huh...?”

Miyako sipped at her Leffe Radieuse—another high-ABV beer for her second pick—and sighed. Then she looked right at Haruto, her eyes bleary. “Fuwa, I wanted to ask you something tonight.”

“Y-yes?”

Haruto blushed at Miyako’s oddly impassioned gaze. Then, in an all-too-serious voice:

“What do you think writers want from their editors?”

Haruto blinked at the unexpected question. “What do writers want from their editors? You’re asking me that?”

“Yes.”

“...Why me?”

“Because most editors would say Itsuki and Toki are pretty unique cases, and Naya’s all like, *Stay out of my way and I’m cool with them*, which seems too cold to me, so...”

“Ahhh, so along those lines, you think it’d be more useful to hear about the stereotype more? Like what me and Kawabe have?” Haruto grinned.

Miyako hesitated a bit, then admitted, “Well, yes,”

“All right...”

She likely said yes to this date for work help, too. She was always so serious-minded that way, but it made Haruto feel a bit sad for her. Still, he was glad she was relying on him. It was with those mixed feelings that he considered her question.

“What do they want...? Well, I’ve never had any complaint about Kawabe, so... But like you pointed out, with *Chevalier*, we were definitely just doing business with each other, but now that we’re on to *Revive*, we’re working much more closely together. He’s helping me make appointments for interviews, collecting source material, accompanying me on bookstore visits... And actually, didn’t the editor for *Karuma the Lawyer* bring in an actual attorney and collect other material for the author to work with? So yeah, people who can dedicate themselves to a series beyond the call of duty like that...I really appreciate it.”

“I see...”

Miyako wrote, *Devotion to series beyond the call of duty* in the notebook she had out as Haruto went on.

“But, well, if every editor worked as hard as the one for *Karuma* did, there’s no way they’d have enough time to take care of everything. I don’t think it’s right for writers to demand that kind of selfless dedication, either. But at the very least, you gotta have the three basics of business communication.”

“Reporting, contacting, and discussing?”

“Yeah. Because honestly, nine times out of ten, if a writer clashes with

editorial, it's because there's a lack of that somewhere."

"Whoa, that often?!"

Haruto nodded at the incredulous Miyako. "If a writer e-mails a manuscript, always reply saying that you've received it. If possible, add a line indicating when you'll give a reply. If it looks like you can't make a deadline, reach out fast and work up a new schedule. If something goes wrong, report everything you're able to. If both editors and writers can stick to all that, I think that'll reduce a lot of the friction you see."

"Communication... Yeah, I could've prevented that incident the other day if I explained more why Izumi's preferred illustrators weren't available..."

"But we know that editors are busy people, and we know it's a pain to get contacted whenever something's on your mind. We know it's no fun to tell the truth if there's trouble brewing. But for a writer... Especially for a writer who works with just one publisher, their editor can often literally be their only contact with society at large... It can vary a lot from person to person, but generally, the longer a writer doesn't hear from their editor, the more their distrust of them rises. Exponentially, even."

"That's how it works?"

Haruto chuckled at Miyako's surprise.

"Writers, by definition, have a lot of imagination, for better or for worse—and if there's no word, they start to imagine more and more negative things. Like, if they send a manuscript and there's no response for three to seven days, I can deal with that. Any more, and I get antsy and antsy. I've experienced this myself, but having no work contact for a week just feels like forever. I get it if they're too busy to read a manuscript, but they need to tell me about that, y'know? ...But don't just whip out *I'm busy with other work*, either, because that can irritate people, too. It can easily be taken to mean *your work has less priority than my other stuff*."

"Oh? Then what should I say?"

"I dunno."

Haruto answered this perfectly natural question with a shrug.

“Everybody knows intellectually that everything has different priorities, but the way someone feels about it can be a lot different. Even outside of writing, nobody feels good about having their work not be as important as other people’s.”

“Sure...but if you can’t tell the truth like that, then what? Like, should you say you got sick or a relative passed away or something?”

He laughed at Miyako’s idea. “True, nobody’s gonna be enough of an ass to say, *I don’t care—put my work first*. But if they catch you in that lie, that’s gonna ruin their trust a lot faster than otherwise. Basically, lying to earn yourself more time is about the worst possible thing you can do. Especially now that industry people interact with one another all the time on social media. If you lie like that, you gotta assume it’ll come out at some point.”

“Of course... I don’t think lying is good, either. But really, what should I do, then...?”

“Well, the best thing to do, without a doubt, is to not take on so much work that you have to make someone wait for more than a week in the first place.”

“That’s easier said than done... I mean, nobody volunteers to take a ton of work.”

“Exactly. So realistically speaking, you need to explain exactly what this other work is that you have to prioritize. Basically, convince the other party that they really *do* need to wait a bit. Whether they put up with it depends on them, but...”

“I see... So it’s all about communication in the end...”

Miyako looked humbled.

“Yeah. And the other thing... I hear about editors who create these incredibly intricate schedules for writers, stating that the plot has to be finalized by this date, Chapter One needs to be up by this, the first draft by this, edits and revisions by this date—like they’re controlling every aspect of their writers.”

“Wow, that sounds like a band manager.”

“You’re right. It must take up a ton of work. And some writers don’t

appreciate it much, either. They picked this job because it lets them use their time freely, so why try to manage them so rigidly like that?”

“Right. I can imagine a lot of writers really don’t have the mindset for that sort of approach.”

“Indeed. It’s really tough, being an editor.”

“Oh, like it’s not *your* problem...”

“Well,” Haruto said with a smile as Miyako pouted, “I’m not an editor.”



After that, Haruto kept answering Miyako’s questions, spending a few hours talking about the issues and hardships he and his fellow writers had faced, as well as retelling anecdotes of editors with good reputations and not-so-good ones. They kept it up all the way to last call, so after splitting the bill evenly and leaving, the two of them walked along the dim streets.

“Phew. I feel a little light-headed.”

There was a loose, breezy smile on Miyako’s slightly reddened face.

“I’m amazed it’s only a little,” Haruto replied, half astonished and half exasperated. Miyako had managed to consume ten glasses of nothing but high-gravity beer. Itsuki would’ve been down for the count after half that much, and even Haruto would probably have trouble walking straight.

“Sometimes,” Miyako said with a wistful smile, “I’d like to drink so much that I lose my memory for a while. It’d be easier, maybe, if I could reset my mind and get so drunk that nothing mattered so much anymore.”

“Miyako...”

There was concern in Haruto’s mind as he watched Miyako politely bow to him.

“But anyway, Fuwa, thanks a lot for today. You were really helpful to me.”

“Well, I’m glad if I helped out, but...really, I don’t think you should let yourself obsess over it too much.”

Miyako's face hardened a bit.

"This is your first year on the job, so of course you're going to make mistakes. I messed up a lot when I was just starting out, too."

For example, that time he let an online review calling his first book "by the numbers" anger him enough to lash out at a writing-school seminar he was invited to. Then again, that wound up becoming the inspiration for Ui Aioi's writing career, so maybe it worked out well in the end. But to Haruto, it was still a painful, embarrassing mistake. His lips twitched into a tiny smile, which for some reason seemed to affect Miyako.

"...But you're so far ahead of me, you can laugh at your rookie mistakes now. They're these things from the distant past."

"Huh?"

She smiled at the confused Haruto. "Well, I'm gonna do my best to catch up with you sometime. And Itsuki, and Nayu, and Kaiko, and Ayane, too. So I hope you'll meet up with me again like this. So we can keep talking."

She smiled as strongly as she possibly could, obviously forcing it. Tears were glistening at the corners of her eyes, and his chest ached at the reminder of the disconnect between them in this moment.

He was sure she relied a lot on him. She must trust him...as a person, as an adult, and as a veteran in her industry. They'd be drinking together in the future like this, they'd be listening to each other's troubles, and they'd give each other advice, just like today. But no matter how much she trusted him, relied on him, respected him, appreciated him...

...I'm always going to remain someone she likes as a person.

Haruto could intuitively feel it.

...I don't want that.

He didn't want anything like that. He felt it so badly, it made him want to tear his heart out. Trust, respect, and appreciation wouldn't make him at all happy. Convincing himself that helping her out made him happy would be nothing but a delusion.

What...I really want...

“Ahhh, I wish I really *was* Prince Manwhore!”

“Wh—? Fuwa?! What’re you talking about?!”

As Haruto shouted to the heavens without any warning, Miyako reddened, eyes darting around. There was no one nearby, fortunately.

“Um, Fuwa...?”

She studiously looked at Haruto’s face. He wore a sad smile as he spoke haltingly.

“If I was really a womanizer like Nayu keeps saying...then I’d embrace you while you’re all depressed like this. I’d kiss you, and then I’d have the guts to take you straight to a hotel room.”

“Fuwa... Really, what’re you going on about?”

Haruto sighed as Miyako blushed, her eyes half open and staring at him.

“Like, you see it in dramas and manga all the time, right? A woman is hurt, the protagonist kisses her out of nowhere, the girl answers in kind, and then the scene shifts to a hotel room in the morning where they’re giving each other a wake-up kiss in the nude... You know.”

“Yes, I’ve seen things like that before...”

“...But sadly, I just can’t do that. People say, like, *one thing led to another*, but...what how the hell does anyone go from kissing to waking up in the morning? I just have no idea at all. I don’t know where any love hotels are around here, I don’t know how we reserve a room and access it, and if there’s someone at the front desk, he’ll know we’re there just to do it, and isn’t that super embarrassing?”

Then Haruto sighed loudly once more, ready to cry at any moment.

“But I’m *not* Prince Manwhore. I’ve never kissed anyone, much less screwed them. I’m a stupid virgin, a porn-game addict, a guy with no girlfriend his entire life...”

He gritted his teeth.

“I’m so harmless that I can’t even take advantage of a girl’s tears! And I hate it!”

“Huh...? But I think that’s one of the good things about you...”

Miyako was probably being sincere with him, he thought.

“Well, I still hate it, no matter what you think. Just like...you can’t accept yourself, no matter how much me or Nayu or Itsuki appreciate you.”

“...!”

With a gasp, Miyako’s eyes opened up. Haruto responded with a weak smile.

“...I don’t want to stay a ‘nice guy’ or ‘someone you like as a person,’ no matter how much I’m trusted and appreciated. I want you to be my girlfriend, Miyako...but since I’m not Prince Manwhore, I have no idea how this process works, so even with a golden opportunity like this, I can’t do jack. All I can do is keep parroting these words like an idiot, like I always do...”

He took a breath.

“...I love you, Miyako Shirakawa. I want us to be a couple.”

The words were weakly intoned, as if part of a prayer. Miyako, hit squarely by them, stared dumbfounded at Haruto’s face for a few moments.

“I think that I probably...love you, Fuwa. As a person, yes, but also...as a man... I think. Probably...”

Her cheeks were flush, her words just as halting as Haruto’s. It made his eyes widen with surprise and joy.

“But...right now, I’ve got my hands full just with the work in front of me. Right now, work is more important to me than love. I want to become a full-fledged editor, and I want to be on par with you, and Nayu, and Itsuki.”

“Oh...”

Haruto’s face clouded with a familiar resignation.

“So... I still have no idea when this would be, but when the time comes that I can properly accept myself...if you tell me that you still love me then...”

She softly smiled.

“Then please, let’s be a couple then.”

“Miyako...!”

He left his mouth half open, unable to continue. It made Miyako blush.

“I—I know this is really selfish of me, so don’t feel like you have to wait for me or anything! You’re free to go out with Ui, or Chi, or whoever else you want to!”

“Oh, I’ll wait! I’ll wait as long as you need!”

The words were coming out fast from both of them now. Miyako flashed him an embarrassed smile.

“So... Yeah.”

“Right. Yeah...”

Haruto nodded back, just as red. It was a somewhat humid night in late June, in a back alley of an office neighborhood without even the slightest romantic mood to it—but it was here where Haruto Fuwa and Miyako Shirakawa’s love finally developed just a little.



Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What do all the editors do on their days off?



Work.

Work.



Work.

Oh, go to the gym, go out shopping,
that kind of thing?



I like going on spur-of-the-moment solo
trips a lot.

Good thing I chose Branch Hill, maybe...



QUESTION

How do I become the protagonist of my life?



Read *A Sister's All You Need*. closely, from start
to finish, and you'll see how. Make sure you rec-
ommend it to friends and post about it on social
media, too, and you'll get an even clearer picture!

First Priority

September had now kicked off—and with it, the brand-new light novel imprint Branch Hill Bunko. *The Hero, Chased Away from His Nation, Becomes a Dark Knight and Lives a Life of Freedom*, the first book Miyako oversaw as editor, somehow managed to get done in time to join the launch lineup.

The initial response to the label was reportedly pretty strong overall, with *Dark Knight* in particular scoring a reprint within the first week of its release. The real work was only getting started, of course, but at least they were safely off the starting line, and everyone at Branch Hill from Miyako and Ayane on down was incredibly relieved.



Three days after the publisher committed to a second printing of *Dark Knight* Volume 1, Miyako took a few days off to go on a late-summer vacation with Nayuta, Itsuki, and the rest of the gang. They were going to the Nagashima Resort in Mie Prefecture, a three-to four-hour trip west of Tokyo; Chihiro told Miyako that the place ruled for her graduation trip, and they had all talked about paying a visit at one point or another, so they decided to commit to it once Miyako could take some extended time off. Having your project score a second printing is great news for any editor, and Miyako was in high spirits—even though Izumi was no longer her only writer, thanks to a spate of new assignments as of last month. She still had doubts about her job performance, as always, but with this trip, at least, she wanted to kick back and refresh herself.

So a rather large tour group—Miyako, Nayuta, Itsuki, Haruto, Chihiro, Kaiko, Ui, and Aoba—signed on for the trip. It began on a weekday, but when Miyako brought up the schedule with them, they all readily agreed to it. Light novel

authors, of course, have a lot of leeway with their schedules; Chihiro was still on summer break, Aoba got a day off from school so she could make it, and Kaiko, forever chased by deadlines, brought her work tools along.

The gang left Tokyo Station early in the morning and reached Nagashima Resort a bit past ten AM, leaving their luggage at the front desk. This was the site of one of Japan's largest amusement parks by square footage, and during the summer season, it also featured one of the nation's biggest water parks. That's where Miyako and the group decided to go first. Once they got past admission and were in the water park, they split up to change into their swimsuits.

All the women had brought two-piece bathing suits to this trip. Miyako had brought along one of the many suits Nayuta and Kaiko purchased for manga modeling purposes; it was maybe a little skimpy for her liking, but among all the erotic, provocative suits in the library, this was the most "decent" one. Nayuta, Kaiko, and Ui opted for proper, more mature designs, but the powerful presence of their breasts was unlikely to go hidden by any article of clothing at all. Aoba, meanwhile, went for a frilly top and bottom, focusing squarely on cutesiness.

Surprisingly enough, it was Chihiro who went the most daring on this front. She had on a triangle bikini, just a little bit of fabric held together by strings. Her breasts looked unusually large; she must've put in some padding.

"You wear that kind of thing, Chi...?"

The sheer surprise from Miyako made Chihiro blush. "I wanted to put up a good game here, so..., " she softly said.

A "good game" against Haruto, no doubt. But:

"Um, Chi, I hate to break it like this, but Fuwa and I—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Chihiro before Miyako made it any more awkward. "Haruhiko told me himself. But you're not going to be together with him until you're a full-fledged editor, right? So...I figured maybe I still had a chance."

Chihiro's eyes made Miyako flinch a bit, as if a gauntlet had just been thrown down before her.

"Mmmm... Well, I have no right to stop you, but..."

But, she thought, I don't see how it's too possible. She didn't think it because she felt like some unassailable champion, but if you stepped back and gauged Haruto's character, the chances of him giving up on Miyako and getting swayed by some other girl seemed impossibly low.

"Do you think I'm going too far?"

"..." Miyako averted her eyes, all but affirming it.

"I think so, too," Chihiro said with a giggle.

"Oh?"

"But honestly, it's kind of fun. I mean, I've never done anything so outwardly girly before."

Chihiro—a girl who had supported her mother from an early age, devoted herself to her family even after Natsume remarried, and even went so far as to disguise her gender around her brother and his friends—seemed sincerely joyful right now.

Maybe fighting over a guy is a pretty girly thing to do...but then again, that girliness is bound to attract a guy sometime, I think...

As silly as she found it, Miyako couldn't help but hope that the rest of Chihiro's youth was just as beautiful as she was at this moment. Well, if Chihiro's feelings for Haruto were ever being answered in kind, she couldn't exactly cheer them on, though.



Everyone was back together now, and after a quick dip in the wave pool and flowing river, they decided to go hit the waterslides. There were a ton of different types, which was why the water park was so popular...but being part of Nagashima Spa Land, a renowned treasure trove of roller coasters, most of the slides were aggressively designed for thrills and speed. If the only waterslides you knew were the wimpy ones from the local family fun center, you were in for a rude awakening. Unlike roller coasters, which at least give you seat belts and safety bars to stay safe with, waterslides throw you into the abyss practically naked—some people, in fact, love all kinds of coasters but are

too scared of waterslides to even consider them.

Itsuki Hashima was one of those.

“...I... I really can’t... I’m gonna die... I don’t get why anyone voluntarily goes down something so dangerous... Are these people suicidal or something...?”

After trying out three different waterslides, Itsuki was staggering around the paths, ready to burst into tears.

“Wait, don’t you love roller coasters?” Haruto asked, astonished. “What’s up with that?”

It was more than two years ago now, but when Itsuki, Haruto, Nayuta, and Miyako had gone to another amusement park once, the first two went on a wild tear, “conquering” every roller coaster the park had to offer.

“I like to enjoy the speed while I’m held firmly in place... Waterslides don’t work that way... I’m all sore from getting bumped around, I hit my head when my inner tube flipped on me, and I got water up my nose in the pool at the bottom... If roller coasters are a pastime for nobility, waterslides are just a test of courage for the common rabble...!”

“You’re that bad with them, huh?” Haruto audibly snickered at him. “I’m not a big fan of coasters, but these are pretty fun.”

“Itsuki! Let’s go on that really steep one next!”

Nayuta was also a waterslide girl, apparently, because she was all smiles and pointing at another one not far away.

“Nooooo, no, no, no, no!” Itsuki shook his head as strongly as he could. “I’m gonna take a break, so just go have fun for a bit, okay?”

“Oh, I think I’ll rest for a little while, too,” Miyako said. “I don’t think I’m too good with this scary stuff...”

“Me neither. If you’re taking a break, I’ll join you—”

Before Aoba could complete the thought, Nayuta grabbed her by the hand.

“Okay, Ao, let’s go on that together!”

“Huh? Kani?! Wh-what?! Um, I, I don’t think I like them too scary...”

Nayuta was too busy dragging away Aoba to take any notice.

“Ohhh noooo, you don’t want to slide down with me, Ao?”

“N-no, no, it’s nothing like that!”

“Then let’s go! I want you to get a real good taste of what hell is like today, Ao!”

“Whaaa—?!”

After Nayuta and Itsuki had broken up, Aoba had expended more than a healthy effort seducing Itsuki at his apartment. Once Nayuta learned of that at last year’s Christmas party, she began to pick on Aoba noticeably more than before.

Aoba, meanwhile, didn’t remember exactly what she had said at that party *for some reason*, so she wasn’t really sure why Nayuta was carping on her so much.

“Let’s go, too, Haruhiko!” Chihiro clung to Haruto’s right arm, cheeks blushing.

“Huh? Ch-Chihiro?!” Haruto panicked.

Ui took the opportunity to grab his left arm, too. “Hee-hee! Let’s go, Haruto.”

Ever since they came to this park, Ui had been putting a move or two on Haruto as well. She had given up on him at one point, but it looked like some of Chihiro’s audacious behavior had rubbed off on her. She had kept her makeup subdued for today, but those breasts still packed a punch, and clearly they were swaying Haruto more than Chihiro’s assault.

“Ah... Wait, Aoi! You too, Chihiro! I’ll go, all right?! Let me go!”

“Ee-hee-hee...”

“Heh-heh-heh...”

So Haruto was dragged away by the pair, a somewhat irritated Miyako watching.

“*Haruhiko*” and “*Haruto*,” huh...?

She began to wonder if she could’ve called him something friendlier like that by now. But he had always been Fuwa to her, and it’d be weird to suddenly

change that now, so...

“...You okay with that?” Itsuki asked as he watched this charade unfold.

Miyako sighed deeply. “...I *do* trust Fuwa, more or less.”

“Right.”

Then they left, looking for somewhere to sit down.

...Kaiko, by the way, went right to the restaurant after changing to start sketching up her next manga chapter, so she wasn't there.



Being part of a hot-spring resort, the water park had a number of small heated pools dotted around the property. Since they were here and all, Itsuki and Miyako headed for the nearest one and hopped in. It was quite warm inside, just hot enough that going in with a swimsuit (as opposed to in the buff) seemed to be the way to go. Also relaxing in the pool were a few families with small children, along with a couple or two who looked around college age.

Wow, this is kind of like a unisex hot spring...

Knowing what she did about Itsuki's *unique* romantic interests, Miyako didn't think he'd try anything weird, but joining a man in a public hot spring made her feel terribly self-conscious. Itsuki acted the same way, his eyes fixated on some faraway point in the sky so he wouldn't catch sight of her.

“...S-so they announced the release date for your new series?” Miyako ventured, trying to break out of this weird atmosphere.

“Y-yeah,” Itsuki replied.

GF Bunko had updated their website the other day to announce that Volume 1 of *L⇌R Days*, the latest from Itsuki, would go on sale in October, or next month. *Sisterly Combat*, which had been running for the past three years, concluded in July with the release of Volume 10, making this the perfect time to announce a new series from him.

“Did you finish writing the volume yet?”

“Well, naturally, of course. The author proofs are done, too.”

...Considering Itsuki's history of ignoring deadlines all the way up to the month of release, there was no "naturally" to this at all. Miyako refrained from pointing that out to him.

"Think it'll do well?"

"...Well, I've done everything I can for it."

"...Doesn't sound like that's all you have to say about it."

Itsuki shook his head. "No, I really do like how it turned out. It's definitely the most engaging book I've ever released. It's just that...you know, it's still so far away from my ideal."

"Mmmm..."

What Itsuki really meant by that wasn't too clear to Miyako.

So he's trying his best to press on, too, huh...?

"But it sounds like the book you edited is selling well, Miyako."

"Oh? Ah, yeah..."

Her lukewarm reaction gave Itsuki pause.

"...? Aren't you glad for that?"

"No, no, of course I am. But...it was already pretty popular as a web novel, and really, it's mostly thanks to Ayane that we got it out as a book in the first place..."



“Ayane...?” Itsuki gave a subtle scowl. “How is she as an editor anyway?”

“Oh, she’s superb. She acts all chill, but she’s super detail-oriented. People love her, authors trust her, and she happily takes on the craziest requests from people... Like, I can tell Izumi loves her a lot more than me, too, so...”

“She always did like seducing younger dudes, huh?”

“What?”

“N-never mind.”

Itsuki looked away from the confused Miyako.

“Ahhh, but how am I ever going to establish myself doing this...?”

“Well, you better. Haruto’s waiting.”

He meant to tease her with that, but Miyako blushed a bit.

“I—I mean, I’m *working* on it. Not just for Fuwa’s sake but...you know. I feel like it’s just impossible for me to turn out like Ayane, no matter what I do. I feel like editors need to find their own weapons to work with, just like writers.”

She sighed.

“...Itsuki, what do you think are my greatest strengths?”

It was a question she’d normally be way too embarrassed to ask someone point-blank, but the comfortably warm water must’ve loosened her lips a bit.

“Your strengths?”

Itsuki thought for a short moment.

“Maybe how dumb you are?”

The reply was delivered decisively.

“What? *What* did you say?!”

Itsuki reared back from the understandably perturbed Miyako. “Whoa, whoa! I didn’t mean that as criticism! I really think that’s one of your strong suits!”

“You don’t call people dumb in a *good* way,” she replied, squinting at him.

Itsuki sighed. “Do you remember back when we all met up with the *All About*

anime people?”

“Ahhh, yeah, I do.”

“I was about to let the screenwriter con me into making all these changes to the story for the series, and then you—this random part-timer—chimed in to stop him, right? You were all like, *Isn't this weird* and *Should you really leave it all to them* and *Isn't this your project* and stuff.”

“Yeah...”

The memory was a little shameful to Miyako by now. Looking back, she was speaking way out of turn there. But Itsuki smiled at her.

“But thanks to you, I kept playing a major role in the *All About* series. The way you do that—not going with the flow, letting your emotions take over, and going so far out of line—it’s helped me out, and Haruto, and Kanikou, and Kaiko, too. The way you’re just oblivious to the consequences... It’s so stupidly straightforward, you know? That’s a strength, and don’t let anyone say it’s not.”

“B-but... But I did that because I don’t really know anything about this business...”

Miyako pouted, her frustration showing on her lips.

“Exactly.”

Suddenly, Itsuki’s piercing gaze was on Miyako.

“You had a stint at GF editorial, you learned a lot about light novels and stuff so you could get a job, you read lots and lots of manga and web novels, you found work as a professional editor... You’ve got this knowledge and experience now, and, you know, maybe it’s made you a little too smart for your own good? You’re ‘knowing your place’ more these days, you’re able to go with the flow... You’ve devolved into more of a regular member of the industry, kind of.”

“Devolved...?”

The words stabbed into Miyako’s spirit like a sharpened blade. She got that part-time job; she studied; she worked; she was still a work in progress, but little by little, she was growing in her own way.

But...am I going about this the wrong way...?

Was she wilting instead of growing? Her ability to take action, thanks to being so unfamiliar with the unwritten rules of the industry, was her weapon. Had she tossed it in the trash at some point?

“But... But are you saying that was all for nothing? My experience, and all the stuff I’ve worked on...”

Her vision blurred. This was stunning her into tears.

“No,” Itsuki sharply replied.

“No?”

“Of course it’s better to have knowledge and experience than not to. I mean, I’d never want to get assigned an editor who has these rare flashes of brilliance but acts like a totally useless idiot otherwise. You *should* build that knowledge and experience and stuff...but if you ever find that it’s holding you down, keeping you from what you really wanna do, then just toss it aside. Keep barreling forward like a dumbass. Just do what you wanna do.”

“Itsuki...”

“There’s no need to hold back on that. Go ahead and figure out what the normal flow is, then ignore it all you want. Just do whatever comes to mind... Because there’s no point worrying about mistakes. It’s not like you’re gonna have this perfectly elegant life.”

The tone was matter-of-fact, almost dismissive, but there was a passion behind it that touched Miyako’s soul.

“Elegant, huh...? You’re right. Besides...I *am* dumb.”

She smiled as she mocked herself, slapping a hand up to wipe the tears from her eyes.

In that case...why don’t I talk out of place? Why don’t I just keep rushing forward? It’s been too long.

“You know, Itsuki...do you think I should do what I want? Even if it causes a ton of trouble for people? Like...even people who’ve done a lot for me, like Mr. Godo and Mr. Toki?”

“Whatever you want,” Itsuki said with a sarcastic chuckle. “But if you’re

bothering *them*, are you talkin' about trying to pick up Kanikou or something? Or maybe Haruto...? They're both top-tier GF writers. It'd cause a huge scene."

"..."

Her mind was made up. She moved around to face Itsuki straight on.

"Itsuki...Itsuki Hashima. The novel that you wrote exclusively for Nayu... Would you allow me to edit it for publication?"

"Huhhh?!"

Itsuki's eyes opened wide, his voice cracking. Miyako kept her gaze on him.

"Because the person I want to edit for the most isn't Nayuta Kani or Haruto Fuwa—it's you. Itsuki Hashima. I've felt that way ever since I read that novel. And I want to see it published so it can reach more people than just Nayu!"

"W-wait, wait, wait. That really *was* a novel meant just for Kanikou...or a love letter, really. If anyone else reads it, it's gonna look like a bunch of masturbatory garbage."

"No it won't!"

Miyako was sure of it, no matter how much Itsuki berated himself.

"I read that novel, and it had me by the heart. I love it the most out of anything you've written...or actually, out of any novel I've ever read. That novel made *me* want to become the protagonist of my story, too. And I'm sure lots and lots of people could use that novel, too."

The gravity of her tone made Itsuki stare at Miyako intently.

"...You're serious, huh?"

"Super serious."

"Mm..." He let out an exhalation. "To be honest with you...I thought about releasing it, too. It was a love letter for one person, but I threw my soul and all my skill into that novel. To me, at least, it's definitely the best thing I've ever written. And as a professional writer, it's not like I'm not curious about how the general public would receive it..."

"So then...!" Miyako's face lit up, her breath quickening.

“But I’ve got one condition!”

“Condition?”

“I sent that novel to Kanikou, so it belongs to her. You need to convince her first before you can publish it.”

“Okay... I hear you.”

“And before you publish it,” Itsuki continued, “lemme perform a round of revisions on it first. There’s actually a few big fixes I’d like to make.”

“Of—of course...but how big? What kind of fixes are we talking about?”

The novel, she thought, was easily a marketable product as it stood right now. How much room was there for large-scale changes?

“I...can’t tell you.”

“Uh... Well, can I decide on that after you make your revisions?”

“All right.” Itsuki nodded.

And so Itsuki Hashima’s forty-thousand-word, untitled love letter, written exclusively for his beloved, had its publication project underway. That...and it was also the birth of a duo who would later make a huge, indelible mark on the entire publishing industry.



Back in Tokyo after the resort trip, Miyako asked Nayuta about letting her publish the novel. She met with no resistance: “Yeah, sure thing! Like, it’s the masterpiece of the century! It’d be a huge loss to literary history if it didn’t get released!”

That’s Nayuta for you—Itsuki’s lover, and his biggest, most enthusiastic fan.

Miyako then made a beeline for the GF Bunko editorial department and asked Kenjiro Toki and Editor in Chief Godo if Branch Hill Bunko could publish one of Itsuki’s previously unreleased manuscripts.

“If Mr. Hashima agreed to it,” Godo replied despite the dour look on his face, “we don’t have any right to stop him.”

“Good luck on that,” Toki added, looking just as sad about it.

Finally, Miyako made the proposal to her peers at the next Branch Hill Bunko edit meeting. Her presentation wasn’t exactly extensive—just a really long wall of text talking about how awesome this novel was and how they’d understand once they read it—but Ayane still gave the okay nonetheless. “It sounds like fun,” she explained, “so let’s go for it!”

Thus the project was officially set in motion.



A month later, Itsuki had the second draft finished for the novel he was now calling *I Want to Be the Protagonist*, so Miyako read it at once.

The core plot was unchanged from the first draft, but there was indeed one major change. Toward the end, there was a section where the heroine was attracted to someone else after she broke up with the hero. In the first draft, this interloper was a popular actor, modeled after Yuma Takashina—an attractive guy on the surface but a womanizing brute when nobody’s looking. This personality, of course, was completely the work of Itsuki’s imagination, far removed from the real thing. Even Nayuta called this characterization “cheesy” and “self-serving,” the only criticism she had at all, and Miyako agreed with her. Still, she didn’t see it as a lethal problem—it helped set up the scene where the hero confronted this villain and punched him out, and that was too exhilaratingly entertaining to dilute at all.

But in the second draft, that handsome actor didn’t even show up in the story. He had been completely erased from existence. The heroine still grew attracted to someone else post-breakup in the story’s third act—but this time, the would-be paramour was Kei Kuroyama, a mutual female friend of theirs who appeared in the early stages of the story.

In the first draft, Kei was mostly a helpful supporting actor, appearing now and then to give the hero or heroine a hand with something, but the second gave her a lot more page time and offered much more of her internal narration. She was now a linchpin character, enough so that you could call her a third protagonist. The way she worked hard to support the wounded heroine despite

her own troubles was incredibly attractive—the reader could absolutely understand why the heroine fell for her. There was even a scene where Kei and the heroine went skin-to-skin to comfort each other. If the actor from the first draft rounded third base with the heroine, Miyako didn't think she could stomach that, but with Kei, it seemed oddly reasonable.

Once the hero and Kei began confronting each other, the result was real human drama, hearts and minds laid bare and clashing with each other—much deeper, more profound drama than some guy punching out his mean rival and saving the girl. It was a raw, sometimes painful depiction of questions that unite us all: What is love? What is happiness?

“Wow... This is incredible, Itsuki! I think this is so much better than the first draft!”

That was Miyako's first reaction after reading the manuscript in Itsuki's apartment.

“Heh... Right?” Itsuki smiled, obviously loving this.

“Ahhh...” The fever was clear in Miyako's sigh. “I can't believe Kei morphed into such an engaging character... When she first got introduced, she looked like this typical troubled girl you'd see anywhere, but she's so kind, and honest, and passionate, and...not perfect at all but just so cool to experience... I think I might empathize with Kei the most in this novel!”

“...I bet you do,” Itsuki scornfully muttered.

“Huh?”

Itsuki looked at the confused Miyako as if beholding some strange fantasy creature.

“...Didn't you pick up on it?”

“...? Pick up on what?”

“...I had a model for Kei Kuroyama.”

“Oh, you did?” Miyako replied.

Itsuki rolled his eyes. “Seriously...? You still don't realize it?”

“Itsuki?”

“The model for Kei Kuroyama, this charming woman you went on about resonating with so much... It’s you. Miyako Shirakawa.”

“Huh?” Miyako’s mouth dropped open.

“There’s a lot of fiction in this, of course...but the personality and behavior and stuff is pretty much all you. Miyako Shirakawa, from my point of view.”

Miyako’s face glowed warmly. “Wh-what?! W-wait a minute, Itsuki! There’s no way I’m this cool and honest with myself!”

“You don’t think? Well, that’s how it looks to me. And I had Kanikou read this, and the first thing she said was, *Whoa, you knew?* ...So I don’t think it’s just me, you know?”

“Uh... What did she mean by that?”

“Well, I assume she meant, *You knew that I kind of love Miyako in a romantic way, you know?*”

Itsuki’s delivery was so nonchalant, Miyako’s head spun even faster.

“Ah, wha—? *Nayu* feels that way? About me? Huhhh?!”

“You’re second to her after me, of course, but...”

Itsuki almost seemed a bit competitive about it.

Miyako flipped through the manuscript again, unable to calm her racing heart. Fragmented scenes of Kei danced before her eyes. Images of Kei laughing, crying, raging—all while looking exactly like Miyako—flashed through her brain.

“B-but I— I’ve never had sex with *Nayu* before! ...Like, things have gotten pretty *taut* between us, yeah, but we never went all the way...”

“That part’s all fiction,” Itsuki replied, squinting. “Don’t let it bother you.”

Miyako thumbed through the novel again from the start, face reddening more. “...Do I really look that way from your and *Nayu*’s point of view?”

“Yep.”

“...It’s so hard to believe...”

“Well, why don’t we have Haruto and Kaiko read it, too? Because I’ll bet you anything they’ll know who she’s based on in one guess.”

Miyako sighed a bit. “If you think so...you’re probably right, yeah.”

Troubled in love, troubled with friendships, troubled with her dreams—Kei Kuroyama held the triple crown of young neuroses, but she still kept marching on. It was such a dazzling sight that even though Miyako could feel for her, there was no way she could see herself in the character.

Still, she thought, the idea that she looked this way to somebody was oddly encouraging. The real her was a total mess—just this weak, pathetic half person—but she wanted to have at least a little confidence in herself. Besides, if all these people thought she was this cool, attractive girl, she didn’t want to reject that out of hand.

“Well, Itsuki Hashima, thank you for this excellent novel. You really are my favorite novelist.”

The words were as heartfelt as they were totally spontaneous. Itsuki turned his head away, blushing out of embarrassment.

BOOK PROPOSAL

I WANT TO BE THE PROTAGONIST

STORY: ITSUKI HASHIMA

ILLUSTRATIONS: NUKUMI

ONE-OFF VOLUME.

■SYNOPSIS

Kazuki Toriumi, a young novelist bothered by feelings of enmity toward his father and inferiority toward his half brother, falls in love with Yuna Kurabe, a girl inspired to become a writer after reading his novels. Yuna is heralded as a once-in-a-century talent, and Kazuki feels unworthy to even be in her presence—but he struggles on, hoping to become a protagonist burning just as bright as her someday.

■CHARACTERS

Kazuki Toriumi

The hero, a young, dissatisfied novelist with a closet full of hang-ups. Unlike Itsuki, he writes a lot more than little-sister novels.

Yuna Kurabe

The heroine, a young, gifted novelist.

Kei Kuroyama

Kazuki's college classmate. Honest and caring, she is adored by Yuna as well.

Satoru Toriumi

Kazuki's father. He and Kazuki have been estranged for a long while, ever since he swiftly remarried after losing his wife.

Hiro Toriumi

Kazuki's half brother, the son of the woman his father married. A perfect, superhuman type, modeled after Chihiro Hashima, but he really is a man—disguising his true gender is a little too unrealistic.

The Sky-Blue Promise

It was December 24, and Itsuki was attending a wedding reception at a hotel in Tokyo. The groom was Akira Yasaka—aka writer Makina Kaizu.

Itsuki was seated at the same table as Haruto Fuwa, Chihiro Hashima, and Tadashi Kamo, all of whom knew the bride and groom well. Satoshi Godo and Kaizu's editor were visible at another table nearby.

"Good to see you, Mr. Kamo. You were invited, too?"

"I-I'll tell you what the deal is," Kamo mumbled, face tensed up. "I asked one of my writer acquaintances to help hook me up with this girl I liked, but she totally turned me down, and now that writer's got her... I—I know you don't know what I'm talking about, but I don't know what they did to me, either... I feel like I'm going crazy... I swear I'm not here to spoil this or steal her away. No, I got a glimpse of something much scarier than any of that..."

The details weren't exactly clear, but apparently there was some kind of romantic issue among the three of them. Kaizu and Ashley sure had a some nerve inviting him to the event—but then, Kamo had to be applauded for having the mental wherewithal to actually show up.

It wasn't that big a venue, after all, and there weren't that many attendees who weren't family members—but every spare inch of wall, ceiling, windows, tables, and chairs was done up in glittering, almost Christmas-like decor, making things look very festive indeed.

"I'd like to thank all of you for taking time out from the busy end-of-year period—Christmas Eve, no less—to attend this event. I know how inconvenient the date was for a lot of you, but we chose this day for our ceremony because we truly wanted to hold it today..."

Kaizu began the bridegroom's speech with that apology. December 24, after

all, was the anniversary of the death of Kasuka Sekigahara, the dear friend of both him and Ashley. The hall space in front of the venue featured several large photos of the bride and groom, but right in the center was a picture of the two of them laughing together with Kasuka.

“So I’d like to take this moment to tell our departed friend one thing. We’re going to be happy, Kasuka. Just watch us.”

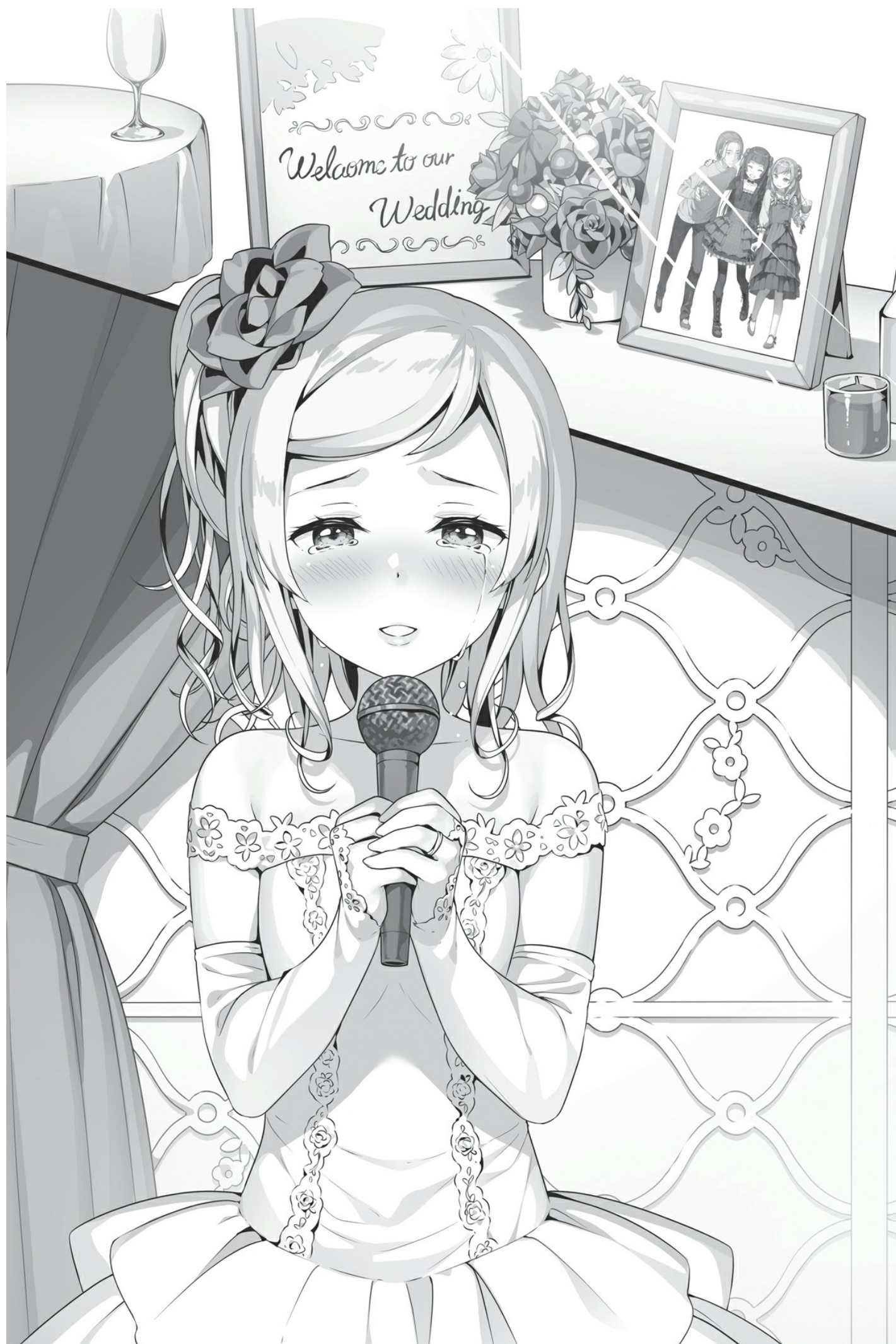
Ashley, in her wedding dress, was in tears as she said that to the audience. Itsuki doubted he’d ever forget the sight of her at that moment—not to mention the sound of Godo crying even louder than her own family.



Itsuki decided to take a taxi alone after the ceremony ended. His destination: the place he’d agreed to meet Nayuta for their Christmas date.

He was still feeling the afterglow from the ceremony as he watched the city through the window, all decked out for the holiday season—but then he received an unexpected message on his phone. It came from the account Miyako Shirakawa used on her company PC, and it stated that *I Want to Be the Protagonist* was going to get another printing. The first reprint had been announced about a week after release, so this was going to be the third printing—and it was a pretty big print run this time.

The feedback they had for the book so far was virtually universal acclaim. *Sisterly Combat* Volume 10 (released back in July), *All About My Little Sister* Volume 9 (September), even *L⇌R Days* Volume 1 (October) all got good reviews, but *I Want to Be the Protagonist* was on a whole other level. People online were saying things like, “my favorite out of any book I’ve ever read” and “best of all time” and “a masterpiece” and “this book changed my life” and “now I want to be a protagonist, too” and “I totally want to marry Kei Kuroyama” and “this is the first time I’ve read this author, but it was so good, I just bought a complete set of Itsuki Hashima’s work on Amazon” and so on. Real passion, as if they were talking about a Nayuta Kani novel, and he was receiving a lot of intense fan letters as well. He felt a little sorry for the guy who’d bought his complete library based off that one book, but oh well.



...Funny, though.

Shifting his eyes from the phone screen to the view outside, Itsuki allowed himself a little smile. After all those novels he wrote, struggling to become a protagonist and entertain as many readers as he could, it was *this* one—written for an audience of one, a love letter disguised as a novel—that was being hailed as Itsuki Hashima's greatest work. He knew that all his future novels would inevitably be compared to *I Want to Be the Protagonist*, and the thought gave him a headache. He could already imagine the jabbering idiots online slamming him as a one-hit wonder.

But...let's just be happy with this for now.

If people called him a one-hit wonder, let them. All he could do was take this story where he was the protagonist and advance it along, step by careful step, line by line, following in the footsteps of this ideal self he wanted to surpass someday.

The face reflected in the window was flashing a bold smile as the taxi reached its destination. As soon as he got out, he was spotted by Nayuta, smiling and waving at him. Itsuki gave her a light wave back as he walked toward her—taking each step carefully, underneath the clear sky.

Now the hero was walking toward the heroine.



On this day, Itsuki Hashima proposed to Kazuko Honden—the real name of Nayuta Kani. Her response... Well, you probably don't need it spelled out for you.

And then three years passed.

(End)

A
SISTER'S ALL
YOU NEED.
THE MOVIE

ON MOVIE

The
ultimate
little
sister,
banishing
all
zombies
into
the
past!

SISTERS of the Dead

STAFF

Story/Script: Yomi Hirasaka Design: Kantoku

CAST

Itsuki Hashima: Yusuke Kobayashi Chihiro Hashima: Nozomi Yamamoto
Nayuta Kani: Hisako Kanemoto Miyako Shirakawa: Ai Kakuma
Haruto Fuwa: Satoshi Hino Ashley Ono: Manami Numakura

This short story is adapted from the drama CD included with the special edition of *A Sister's All You Need*. Volume 13 in Japan. It is wholly unrelated to the main plot of the series, so please enjoy it without sweating the details too much. This story may also completely destroy any good vibes left after reading this volume's main section, so it's recommended to save this until some time after the rest of the book.



One day, Itsuki and Nayuta were out on a movie date. They picked a Hollywood blockbuster to watch, and just like the reviews said, the story and visuals were nothing short of spectacular. The big screen and extravagant sound system used by their chosen theater only added to the excitement.

"Wow, that was great, wasn't it?" Nayuta said, beaming as she stretched a bit outside the theater.

"Yeah," Itsuki replied. "I didn't think that bit at the beginning foreshadowed that other thing later... And that twist in the second half was crazy."

"The action was nice, too, wasn't it? Just all those huge, massive explosions everywhere. That was so much fun."

"Right? And when he said that thing in the middle and everything went totally nuts, that was *so* awesome!" Itsuki was visibly excited. "It sure is nice to watch a movie for a change of pace. Kinda makes me want to make one myself!"

"Doesn't it? I mean, my books *are* being made into movies, but now I wanna try something flashier, with a way bigger body count and everything. Maybe a shark film!"

"If you made a shark film, I think that'd confuse a lot of your hard-core fans." Itsuki smiled a bit.

"Oh, by the way, Itsuki, I actually received a nice gift from someone in the movie industry earlier."

"A nice gift?"

"Yeah, a video camera. It's a little old, but he said it was this professional-grade one that people in the business use."

“Wow,” Itsuki replied with interest. “Like, something you could make an indie film with?”

“Yeah. I bet they could lend us whatever else we need, too. And I think I could convince them to help with editing.”

“Whoa...! Maybe we *could* make one, huh...?”

“We sure could.”

“Huh...” He thought for a moment. “Then let’s do it!”

Nayuta smiled and nodded at his reply that was full of enthusiasm and not a lot of thought. “Let’s do it, Itsuki! Our very own original movie!”

“Right!” Itsuki nodded, then suddenly turned serious. “But at the time, we could never have imagined such a horrific incident would ever take place...”

Nayuta laughed at the trite narrative. “Quit dooming us with your voice-over, please. What kind of ‘incident’ would even take place?”

“Ha-ha-ha! True!”

“Exactly.”

They exchanged a nice chuckle over this...but at the time, they could never have imagined something like that would ever happen.



A few days later, at Itsuki’s apartment:

“And so I’d like to kick off our first movie production meeting!”

“Yaaaay!” Nayuta cheered out loud, clapping as Itsuki made the announcement.

“A movie, huh?” Miyako said. “It sounds like fun, but can we really shoot all of it ourselves?”

“Heh... What a foolish question that is, Miyako. If it gets too hairy, we can just beg the people working on Kanikou’s films, and they’ll lend a hand!”

“Wow, foisting it off from the very beginning?”

Itsuki shushed the obstinate Miyako. “Hey, it’s just an insurance policy, okay?

We'll do as much as we can by ourselves, of course."

"Hee-hee-hee... I'm glad to hear that. That's the best part of indie filmmaking, isn't it? Innovating however you can with a low budget and lack of good tech?"

Ashley seemed satisfied with that.

Haruto, sitting adjacent, glared at her. "That's great and all...but why are *you* here, Ashley?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Haruto, did you have a problem with that?"

"No, not at all..."

Haruto's face tensed up at Ashley's million-dollar smile.

"I'm sorry, Fuwa," Chihiro said apologetically. "I told her Itsuki and his friends were making a movie, and she insisted on joining in..."

"Hee-hee-hee! You can't make a film without me, no! After all, I was part of my college's film club. I even made a movie once."

"You did?" Haruto seemed honestly surprised. "Wow, maybe you really *can* help, then..."

"It's true," said Chihiro. "If you go into Ashley's bedroom, you'll find all kinds of DVDs with titles you've never heard of."

"What kind of movies do you like to watch?"

"Zombie flicks."

"Wow, you're a bad-movie lover, huh?!" Haruto exclaimed.

"Enough of that, Haruto. Calling all zombie movies bad is a sign of prejudice. Some of them are really great films."

"Well, yeah..."

Haruto recalled one particular great film he saw once, featuring a group of people struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic world infested with zombies. That, for sure, was a masterpiece.

"But yeah, admittedly, I'm mostly collecting B-grade movies...or C-grade or Z-grade..."

“Oh great. Why don’t you just stick to the good ones?”

Ashley blushed a bit at Haruto’s question. “I mean... If I watched a masterpiece or whatever, it’d probably make me cry. Me, I much prefer to put on a bad movie, open up a bottle of sake, and crack jokes at the action.”

“Well, we all have our own tastes, I suppose...”

“But don’t you think you can learn a lot more from a bad movie than a good one? And as someone with an encyclopedic knowledge of bad movies, I believe there’s a seed of a masterpiece inside me, don’t you think?”

“That does kind of sound legit,” Haruto said, a bit unconvinced. “You can certainly apply that to light novels, too.”

“Right,” said Ashley. “And we’ve got three professional writers here, so as long as the script’s good, it won’t turn out that crazy, will it?”

Ashley nodded. “Exactly. So just sit back and allow me to direct it, okay?”

“Since when was Ashley the director?” muttered Chihiro, glaring at her.

“So first off, let’s decide on a genre, shall we? I’d like to go for a zombie film, of course.”

Nayuta raised her hand. “Um, I think sharks would be better.”

“Another bad-movie fanatic, huh?” Haruto commented.

She reared back, offended. “Don’t paint me that way, please! There are masterpiece shark films, too...” Her voice trailed away. “I mean, less than I can even count!”

“Less?!”

“Hee-hee-hee... Sharks, huh...? I don’t mind that genre, either. They can be even more insane than zombie films.”

Miyako raised an eyebrow at Ashley. “Aren’t those films nothing but big sharks coming out and wreaking havoc on the beach and stuff?”

“Well, Mya, just plain big sharks aren’t anything unusual. What you *could* see are flying sharks, sharks on the ground or on mountains, shark ghosts, sharks with lots of heads, sharks fused with octopuses or demons, sharks bigger than

airplanes... Anything you want. I think there was a zombie shark once.”

“Um, is it really a shark, then?” came the understandable question from Miyako.

“Oh, don’t be that way, Mya. No normal shark appears in a shark film.”

“Hee-hee-hee... Exactly!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about...”

The nonsense of these two bad-movie aficionados made Miyako break out in a cold sweat.

“In the world of shark movies, if the filmmaker calls it one, then it is!”

“Okay...? Well, I’d like to make something more decent. Emotional.”

“Emotional how?”

Miyako thought a bit. “Oh, like... For example, a man and a woman fall in love and one of them dies... Or maybe a dog or a cat shows up, and they die in the end...”

“So you’re saying you’d prefer a story full of people and animals dying? Then you’re good with a shark movie!”

“No I’m not! They’d die of illness or something!”

“Well, if zombies catch a virus, that counts as a disease, right?” Ashley said.

“Ahhh, so you’re more of a zombie lover, Mya?”

“I *said* that I’m not!” Miyako shouted.

“Me,” Itsuki said, “I’m more into fast action than grim horror stories. You know, people using special skills to fight these huge battles!”

“I’m more into fantasy,” replied Haruto, “like *Lord of the Rings* or *Game of Thrones*. We can’t do that as an indie film, but...”

“Oh, in that case, can we do a story with Gundams in it?”

“You wanna make a Gundam movie?!” Haruto stared at Chihiro.

“Funny to think Chihiro’s coming up with the most dangerous idea of all,” Itsuki said, shuddering.

Nayuta frowned. “Hmm... Sounds like we all have different opinions.”

“Indeed,” Ashley said. “In that case...”

“In that case?” Chihiro echoed, curious.

“Let’s make a film that incorporates a little bit from all our wishes.”

“Ooh! I can see that approach, too!” Nayuta was all for Ashley’s idea.

“That’s crazy,” Miyako retorted—but Ashley just smiled and looked around the room.

“And you can do that, yes? You’re professional writers, after all.”

Itsuki gave her a bold smile. “Heh... You’ve got us wrong, Ashley.”

“Huh?”

“The three of us aren’t *just* professional writers. We’re *first-rate* professional writers! Zombies, sharks, emotional scenes, supernatural action, fantasy, Gundams—I promise you we can bring it all together to produce the greatest piece of entertainment ever made!”

“Hee-hee-hee... I’ll look forward to that.” Ashley smiled, satisfied.

“Ahhh, I can guess how this is gonna go.” Haruto sighed—but Itsuki and Ashley were both too worked up to hear him.



A week later, back at Itsuki’s apartment:

“So here’s the script me, Kanikou, and Haruto worked together to produce. It’ll be the greatest film ever, and it’s called *Lord of the Shark Zombies: I Was Reincarnated in Another World, So I Boarded a Gundam and Destroyed Armies of Psychic Monsters!*”

Itsuki looked incredibly smug as he handed copies of the printed script to everyone.

“Hee-hee-hee... I think I’ve really outdone myself this time.”

Nayuta was all smiles and confidence. Miyako, meanwhile, was all tension and nerves.

“The title’s already giving me a bad feeling... But what do you think of it, Fuwa?”

“...At first,” a haggard-looking Haruto replied, “I was just trying to keep this reined in. But I couldn’t stop Itsuki and Nayu’s stampede—and in the end, not even I’m too sure what I was writing exactly... But maybe it really *is* a masterpiece, so just go ahead and read it...”

“All right...”

For now, the group decided to read through the script.

“Oh...wow...”

“Whoa...”

Miyako and Chihiro visibly winced as they pressed on. From zombies and sharks to tear-jerking scenes, psychic powers, fantasy, and (yes) a Gundam, it was a chaotic mix of everything that people had requested. Just reading it made their heads hurt.

As for the reaction of Ashley, the director:

“Hee... Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee...”

A thin smile appeared on her face as she read. She was no longer willing to hold back her emotions.

“Um...Ashley?”

Just as Chihiro looked at Ashley’s face:

“It’s wonderful! So wonderful! This is exactly the script I was looking for!”

“Are you crazy?!” Chihiro couldn’t believe her ears.

“Ha-ha-ha! Isn’t it? Isn’t it?!” Itsuki couldn’t be prouder of himself.

“Well, if we have the okay for the script, it’s time to get down to the nitty-gritty!”

And Nayuta was just as excited as those two.



Three days later, the gang arrived at an uninhabited Okinawan island for

shooting. Itsuki, Nayuta, and Miyako had visited this deserted place a long time ago; it was the perfect backdrop for the first scenes.

“Look at that ocean!” Nayuta stretched out her arms, shouting at the sea.

“This project sure is unfolding fast...”

“I feel like we’re just going on sheer momentum right now...”

Haruto and Chihiro already looked a tad exhausted.

Ashley hurriedly gave out instructions. “Okay, all of you, get ready to start shooting. Itsuki and everyone else are gonna serve as our cast, too.”

They’d started with six members, but Makina Kaizu and Ui Aioi had also joined the staff for today. Kaizu was actually pretty good with electronic equipment, so he was the cameraman, while Ui knew a lot about makeup, so that was her job...not that she knew anything about *horror* makeup, but still.

“Sorry, you two,” Haruto said. “I didn’t mean to get you involved in something weird like this...”

“No, no, it’s an honor to be involved. I look forward to seeing which actress is going to provide my voice for this.”

Ui smiled after giving that rather enigmatic statement.

“I’m used to Ashley going off the rails,” Kaizu said as he took the camera out of its bag, resigned to his fate.

“Okay, let’s start with the opening scene!”

Itsuki, Haruto, Nayuta, Miyako, and Chihiro, fresh from changing into their swimsuits, headed off to the beach at Ashley’s command.

“I changed into this...but isn’t it a little too flashy? It’s kind of embarrassing...”

“Ngh... I’ve never worn anything so racy before...”

Neither Miyako nor Chihiro was too excited about this. Their wardrobes were provided by Ashley and Nayuta; Miyako was in a Brazilian bikini that was more string than fabric, and Chihiro was in an extremely low-rise two-piece. The suits in the main story this volume were bold enough, but they were nothing compared to these. No way you’d wear them in a pool at Nagashima Spa Land.

There are *children* there.

“Kick off with a bunch of bikini babes for no reason! The classic shark film trope!”

Nayuta, meanwhile, was wearing a micro-bikini, one that looked like it could be ripped off at any moment—a far cry from the cuter swimsuits on the film cast.

“Well, I think the ladies look great,” an embarrassed Haruto said, “...but who’s ever going to enjoy watching me and Itsuki in these bikini briefs...?”

“These are riding up on me so bad... It’s gonna pop out...”

“What’s wrong with flashing a little dick?” Nayuta said to her fidgeting boyfriend.

“A lot!” he shouted back.

Ashley, meanwhile, surveyed the performers from her director’s chair. “All right, let’s start rolling. I want you guys to be a bunch of idiot normies on vacation in a south-seas island. Ready...and action!”

Kaizu began rolling, Ui sounding the clapboard as Ashley gave orders through a megaphone.

“Huh?! What, right now?” said Miyako, panicking.

Chihiro, a little reluctant, walked into the water. “Um, ummm... Woooo!” She gave a shy little yelp as she kicked at the water.

Haruto joined her in the water. “Woooo! Wooooo!”

“Wooo!” added Miyako, running around and adding to the chaos.

“Woooo! Woooo!”

Itsuki and Nayuta, posing as a couple, happily splashed water on each other.

“Woo! Woo-woo!” Chihiro said, trying to communicate solely through a single syllable.

“Woo?” Haruto replied. “Woo, woo woo, woo?”

“Woo woo woo,” added Miyako, “woo woo, woo?”

“Woo woo-woo, woo-woo! Wooo!”

“Woo woo, woo-woo woo, woo-wooooo!”

“Woooo woooo! Woo woooo!”

After getting a bunch of shots of the gang messing around and going “woo woo” a lot: “Okay, cut! You guys were great. A lot of woo-nderful excitement.” Ashley gave them a satisfied nod.

“All we said was woo,” a bewildered Chihiro said.

“Party people can talk to each other with nothing but woos, you know. That’s how it works.”

“Really? Wow, that’s impressive...”

“And now for the debut of the shark zombies!”

“Um,” Miyako warily said, “what exactly are shark zombies?”

“Whoa,” interjected Haruto, “didn’t you read any of the worldbuilding? Shark zombies are terrifying mythical monsters who live on this island, zombies with a shark’s head. Anyone who gets bitten by one is said to become a shark zombie themselves...”

“Do we really need the shark element here? Aren’t regular zombies good enough?”

Miyako had a point, but Nayuta sneered at her. “What are you talking about? Shark zombies are good swimmers, so they can attack ships approaching the island!”

“Oh, they’re amphibious? Wow, like Z’gok robots!”

Chihiro, who had browsed through the supporting material, was glad to see that detail in action.

“Okay, guys, get ready. Itsuki and Nayuta, you’re making out behind a rock when the shark zombie attacks! Haruto, you’ll be playing the monster. Here you are.”

Ashley gave Haruto the tools he needed to become a shark zombie.

“A shark mask and... Ewww, what’s this?!” Haruto stared at the unrolled set of

tights.

“It’s a form-fitting Lycra zombie cosplay suit.”



Miyako winced. “That’s pretty realistic... Where do they sell those?”

“You can get them via mail order easy. It’s Halloween stuff, basically.”

“First these bikini briefs and now this body stocking... Ugh...”

With a sigh, Haruto darted behind a handy tree.



A couple, played by Itsuki and Nayuta, were making out in the shade of a rocky beach, the waves lapping nearby.

“Oh... No, my darling, not here... ♥”

“Haah, haah... I—I can’t hold out no longer... Look, I’m swellin’ like a Twinkie down thar...”

“Ooooh, you’re such a freak, aren’t you? Hee-hee! ♥”

“Yeah, ain’t that nice? C’mon, let’s bump some uglies...”

“Ahhh! You’re so naughty, you big Twinkie man! ♥”

“Mmnnmph...”

“Hngnggmh...”

Just as their lips were about to meet:

“Hisssssssssssssssssss!”

With a healthy shout, a shark zombie (Haruto) with a shark head and zombie body flew in front of them.

“Ah, ahhh!”

“Oh no! What’n tarnation is this monster?!”

Nayuta and Itsuki shouted, their voices a little wooden.

“Hissssss!” The shark zombie sank its teeth into Itsuki’s arm.

“Aaaaaaaaah! My arm, my arm!”

“Hisssssssss!”

Now the shark zombie was plunging its head into Nayuta’s chest.

“Oh nooooo! It’s eating my titties!”

“Graaaaaaah!”

“Aaaaaaaah!”

“Eeeeeeeeeek!”

“Cut!” Ashley shouted as Kaizu stopped filming. “Good performances, all of you. Next up, we’re filming the scene where you two are shark zombies and you start attacking other people!”

Kaizu gave Ashley a warm “oh, brother” look as she carried on.



Three young friends (Chihiro, Miyako, and Haruto) were seated on a plastic sheet laid out on the beach.

“Uh, boy, those two sure are late,” Chihiro intoned. “What are they doing.”

Haruto sneered as hard as he could. “Heh-heh! Ahhh, they’re prob’ly out neckin’ somewhere.”

“Heyyyy,” Miyako said, sounding both embarrassed and wooden, “how about we go woo-woo over there?”

“I like it. Woo!”

But just as Haruto was jumping for joy over this, the zombified Itsuki and Nayuta were slowly lumbering toward them, groaning.

“Ohhhhhhhh...”

“Aaaaaaaaah...”

Chihiro spotted them. “Oh, they’re back. Woo!”

Miyako stood up and started running for them, but then...

“Hisssssssss!”

Then Itsuki bit her arm.

“Eek! My woooooo!”

“What did you do to her,” Chihiro called awkwardly.

“Something’s wrong!” Haruto said. “Let’s get out of here!”

“B-but Wooie is still there!”

“Hrrrrrrrrrrrg!” Nayuta bit into Miyako’s breasts.

“Wooooooooo!”

With that final shriek, Miyako was overpowered and eaten alive by the two zombies.

“There’s no saving her! We gotta get out fast!”

“Right!”

So Haruto and Chihiro abandoned Miyako and ran away, the two zombies running after them full tilt.

“Haah...haah...haah...”

Once they shook them off, Haruto stopped, his breathing ragged.

“Phew... We ought to be safe here...”

“Yeah... Ah... Hnggg...”

Suddenly, Haruto fell to the ground, holding his side painfully.

“Wh-what’s wrong?! Oh no, you’re bleeding bad... Did, did it get you while you were defending me earlier?”

“Heh-heh...” Haruto looked up weakly at Chihiro. “Guess I let one of those bastards bite me... I wonder if I’ll turn into one of them now...?”

“Oh no...”

“But...before I turn into a monster...I want you to kill me with this gun...that we found on the ground a couple minutes ago...” Haruto pulled a handgun out of his pocket, attempting to give it to Chihiro.

“I can’t do that! I’ve loved you for so long!”

“Me too, woooo... That’s why I want you to do it...with your own hands... Please...I... *Ugh*... While...I’m still human... Please...”

“O-okay... Woo!”

Once she had his gun, Chihiro needed only a second or two to fire a bullet into Haruto's head.

"Cut!" shouted Ashley.

Chihiro turned around, confused. She still had a few lines left in this scene.

"...Chihiro, you worked out your emotions and blew him away too fast. This is a really moving scene, right? You're fulfilling the final wish of your one and only beloved, so try to act more conflicted about it, okay?"

"Oh, really? Because I figured I'd want to put him out of his misery as soon as possible..."

"Boy, if there really *was* a zombie apocalypse, I'm pretty sure Chi would have no trouble surviving to the end."

Nayuta, watching from just out of frame, smiled.



A little while longer, and they wrapped up all their scenes on the island.

Back on the main island of Okinawa, the gang all toasted one another at an *izakaya*. Kaizu was shooting all of this; they figured the footage could be used in a making-of featurette.

"Phewww! Nothing like a good beer after a hard day's work!"

Itsuki was having a blast with his beer cocktail—an Orion with hibiscus extract.

"It wasn't really work." Haruto chuckled. "It's just a film we're making for fun."

"Hee-hee-hee! Good job, everyone." Ashley gave them all a satisfied smile as she sipped her *awamori* and soda. "Thanks to all your work, we completed shooting on schedule today. We'll film the fantasy portion tomorrow."

"The fantasy part... So Partier A, who was killed by Partier D—or me, that is—wakes up reincarnated in another world, right?"

Miyako smiled at Chihiro. "I know this story is insane, but just making a movie with all of you is kind of fun, isn't it? Like we're working on our high school's

yearly festival.”

“Oh, I know what you mean! My class held a play and ran a haunted house.”

Nayuta bit her lip as Miyako and Chihiro reminisced about high school.

“Gee, too bad I was too much of a shut-in to experience all that.”

“Me either. Kind of a dark time for me.”

“Yeah! And I was too nerdy to participate in anything!”

Itsuki and Haruto, already a little drunk, echoed Nayuta’s opinion.

“Hee-hee-hee... Well, no matter which school clique you were a member of, I want everybody to enjoy tonight!”

“What was school like for you, Ashley?” Chihiro asked.

“Well...there was a lot of student activism back in those days. I’d get involved with demonstrations, throw Molotov cocktails at riot police, that kinda thing.”

“Wow, really? Sounds like a rough time.”

“I’m kidding. You don’t have to believe *everything* I say.” Ashley glared at Chihiro. Then her voice turned a bit sweeter. “But...you know, my experience was pretty normal. I studied, got involved with clubs...”

“Oh, I see. Everyone has their own history, huh?” Chihiro sagely nodded, despite Ashley’s disapproving glance.

“...You know, Chihiro, I really wish you’d stop treating people like they’re ancient fossils. It really hurts.”

Then Itsuki got up.

“Ah, sorry, bathroom break.”



“Ugggggggggh...”

Itsuki was using the *izakaya* bathroom urinal when he heard something like a moan from one of the stalls.

“Waaaaaaaaaah...”

“Huh...?”

He turned around, suspicious.

“Aaaaaaah...!”

The stall door sprang open, revealing a zombie inside.

“Ah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!”



“Huh? Hey, did that sound like a scream just now?” Miyako asked.

Nayuta laughed. “Oh, look at you! I know we’re shooting a zombie film, but that’s such a trite joke!”

“Hmm, maybe I imagined it...”

Miyako looked puzzled for a moment but went back to tackling the food on the table.

Then Itsuki returned, staggering a bit.

“Oh, you’re back? I’ll go use the bathroom, then—” Just as Haruto got up and headed out: **“Ooooooh...”** Suddenly, Itsuki let out a guttural groan and grabbed Haruto’s body.

“I-Itsuki?!” As Haruto shouted at him, Itsuki let out an oddly cute voice.

“Big Broooooooooo...”

“Huh? Big Bro?!”

“I loooooooooove youuuuuuuu...!”

Then he gave him a fat, wet, sloppy kiss.

“I-Itsuki?! What are you doing?!” Nayuta was honestly panicked.

“Whoa, Itsuki! Are you drunk?!”

Miyako and the others were similarly disturbed, but Itsuki kept going with his deep kiss as Haruto struggled to breathe.

“Are you all right, Fuwa?!” shouted Chihiro.

After about a minute, Itsuki finally let go.

“Ooooh...! Haaah...!” Haruto coughed, sounding like he was in agony as he crumpled to the ground.

“Itsuki! No matter how drunk you are, you know I’m right here—”

“Big Brooooooooo...”

Now it was Haruto moaning all cutely.

Slowly staggering to his feet, Haruto gave Miyako and the others a horrifying, toothy smile, his pupils blown out and his irises bloodred and shaped like heart marks.

“Huh? Whoa! Fuwa?!”

“Big Brooooooooo... I loooooooooove youuuuuuuuu...”

“Big Brooooooooooooooooo...”

“Something’s wrong! Keep away from them!” Ashley’s voice tensed up as Haruto and Itsuki slowly approached them.

“Big Brooooooooo...”

“Big Brooooooooo...”

“Let’s get outta here for now! Then we gotta call the police and an ambulance!”

“R-right...!”

Miyako nodded at Chihiro, and they all fled the *izakaya* to get away from the infected pair. Itsuki and Haruto dashed after them—this time moving pretty briskly like normal people, not the shambling gait from before.

The group ran away from them, frantic. But:

“Ah!” Nayuta tripped over her own feet.

“Nayu!” shouted Miyako.

“Big Brooooooooo...” Itsuki caught up to Nayuta, holding her down as his lips approached hers.

“Please snap out of it! I’m not your big brother, Itsuki; I’m your lover—
Mmph!”

Itsuki didn't wait for her to finish before mercilessly taking her lips.

“Hommmmph...”

“Ngh...ah...hff...”

Their lips parted, a sticky thread of saliva running between them.

“N-Nayu...?”

Nayuta slowly turned around at Miyako's fearful call. **“...Big Brooooooooo. I love youuuu...”**

She was moaning in that sickly sweet voice, looking as horrifying as the other two.

“Now Nayu's gone crazy, too!”

“L-let's get out of here!” Chihiro said, grabbing Miyako's arm.

“Makina, keep the camera rolling just in case!”

“I know,” Kaizu replied, pointing the camera behind him as he ran.



Somehow managing to shake off Itsuki, Haruto, and Nayuta, the group took a moment to catch their breath.

“Haah, haah, haah... We got away from them...but what's going on here...?!” Miyako was already teary-eyed.

“It's little-sister zombieeeeeees!”

“Agggh!”

Miyako screamed as an old man appeared out of the shadows. “Little-sister zombieeeeees,” he continued in his raspy voice. “The sister zombies have come back to lllllllife...!”

“Wh-who's *this* guy?”

“Um, what do you mean by *little-sister zombies*?”

“Little-sister zombies... Little-sister zombieeeeeeeeees...”

The old man ignored Chihiro's question, disappearing into the darkness as he

repeated the phrase *little-sister zombieeeeees*.

“Whoa...?!”

“He’s gone...”

“So he shows up, says weird stuff, and leaves? What’s *with* that old man?” Miyako was even more bewildered now.

“I’ve heard of this,” Ashley said, face deadly serious.

“Huh?”

“It’s a local legend passed down over generations... Once, there was a girl who fell in love with her own big brother, but he was forced into marrying another woman. Out of despair, the girl took her own life, but instead of going to heaven, she became a living zombie—and now, when everyone with the big-brother attribute comes near, she appears and starts attacking people. It’s said that anyone who gets a deep enough kiss from her will become a little sister as well...”

Miyako, being an editor, was about to reject this as too far-fetched, but Chihiro spoke up before she could.

“The big-brother attribute... So when Itsuki and Fuwa came here, they inadvertently resurrected the little-sister zombie?”

“It sounds so unrealistic, but you saw how zombielike they were...”

Miyako sighed. But just then:

“Big Brooooooooooooo...”

“Big Brooooooooooooo...”

With heavy groaning, Itsuki, Haruto, and Nayuta emerged from the darkness. And not just them. They were joined by a crowd of more than twenty little-sister zombies.

“Big Brooooooooooooo... I loooooooooove youuuuu... Big Brooooooooooooo...”

“L-look at them all!” Miyako screamed.

“Oh dear, looks like everyone at the *izakaya* has been turned into little-sister zombies...!”

“Why do you sound like you’re enjoying this?!” Chihiro asked Ashley.

“Well, now we can shoot a realistic zombie-horde scene without having to hire extras! Isn’t that wonderful? Makina, don’t you dare stop the camera!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kaizu nodded, sounding indifferent, although he was sweating profusely.

In the midst of all this, Nayuta caught up with Ui and gave her a deep kiss.

“...! Why am I treated so roughly in this story?! ...**Big Broooooooooo... I loooooove you...**”

“Not Ui, too...!”

Miyako ran off again, a pained expression on her face.



“Big Broooooooooooooo... I looooooooooove youuuuuuuu...”

Miyako, Chihiro, Ashley, and Kaizu ran as fast as they could, relentlessly pursued by the horde of zombies. But after all that exertion, their stamina was running out.

“Haah, haah, haah... Th-they’re still after us... At this rate, we’re gonna be joining them soon...!”

“Ashley, is there any way to turn the little-sister zombies back into people?!”

“According to the legend,” Ashley told Chihiro, “the zombies will be purified if you show them true love between brother and sister.”

“True love...?”

“Yes. The little sister needs to kiss her big brother.”

“What?!”

“And the only little sister here...”

Miyako, Ashley, and Kaizu all looked at Chihiro.

“M-me?!”

“You need to kiss Itsuki, Chihiro. If you can prove to the little-sister zombies that love triumphs over all, even if you’re brother and sister, they’ll all be

purified.”

“I—I can’t! I could never kiss my brother! He’s already taken, besides...”

Chihiro tried to fight it...but just then, the zombie Itsuki caught up with her.

“Big Brooooooooooo...”

“Please, Chihiro! You’re the only one who can save them all!”

“Come on, Chi. I’m sure Nayu would understand.”

Ashley and Miyako pleaded with Chihiro.

“Big Brooooooooooo... Big Brooooooooooooooooooo...”

Zombie Itsuki was soon joined by zombie Haruto, zombie Nayuta, and a bunch of others.

“Itsuki... Kani... Fuwa...”

Chihiro somberly looked at the transformation that had befallen her close friends. Then a determined look came to her face.

“All... All right. I’ll kiss my brother!”

“Chi... I’m sorry.”

Chihiro just smiled at Miyako’s apology. “It’s for all of them and all of you. Here I go...!”

The next moment, she ran for the approaching zombies. Zombie Itsuki and zombie Haruto came up to her.

“Big Brooooooooooo...”

“Big Brooooooooooo...”

“...! *Ha!*”

Chihiro made a flying leap, arms outstretched, and made the kiss.

“Mmgh...!”

But it wasn’t zombie Itsuki’s lips she touched. It was zombie Haruto’s next to him.

“Huhhh?!”

Ashley's eyes shot out.

"Wh-whoa, Chi! Why're you kissing Fuwa?!"

Miyako's shouting fell on deaf ears as Chihiro continued to passionately kiss him. Struggling for breath, she pulled away, only to be horrified when she recognized the face of her partner.

"Huh?! Oh, whoa! I-I'm sorry! I kinda gave in to temptation!"

"Chi..."

Miyako gave her a chiding "get your act together" kind of look.

Just then:

"Ohhhhhhhh...!"

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Woooooooooooo...!"

"Ooooooooooooooooooh!"

All at once, the zombies let out bloodcurdling cries that seemed to echo from the deepest underground abyss.

"Huh? Wha—?!"

Miyako panicked as Ashley broke out in a cold sweat.

"The little sister kissed a man besides her big brother, and that made the little-sister zombies angry! Now they won't stop until they make everybody in the world their little sister..."

"No... The human race is doomed because of me...?"

"Not to kick you when you're down," Miyako shouted back, "but yes, it's one hundred percent *your* fault!"

"I suppose love would drive any girl crazy... Tee-hee! ♥" Chihiro grinned and stuck out her tongue.

"You don't regret it one bit, do you?! Look, Chi, as a professional editor, if you're a little sister starring in a novel with a title that makes it sound like a little-sister thing, and you fall in love with the hero's best friend, that's gonna

cause some seriously negative feedback!”

“Get ahold of yourself, Miyako. This is reality. It’s not a light novel.”

Chihiro pouted at them. “...Well, if you debut in the cast like you’re part of the hero’s harem, only to run to another man after the hero dumps you, wouldn’t that lead to even harsher feedback?”

“I—I don’t know who you’re talking about...”

“Never mind. Just muttering to myself.”

Miyako’s face tightened at Chihiro’s taunts.

“Hee-hee! I think I need to sit down and have a nice, long talk with you someday, Chi—”

“Right, right,” interrupted Ashley, “you girls go through that torture session over in the main story!”

Just then:

“Big Brooooooooooooo! Smoooooooooch!”

Zombie Nayuta, who had crept up on them unawares, gave Miyako a deep kiss.

“Mmmmp...!”

“Miyako!” shouted Chihiro as zombie Nayuta removed her lips...

“...Big Broooo... I loooove youuu...”

The zombified Miyako sounded all cutesy.

Chihiro was shocked. “Not Miyako, too...! W-wait, my body feels all weird... itchy...tasty...”

“Even if you started it,” Ashley nonchalantly stated as Chihiro went all zombie before her eyes, “you know kissing Haruto earlier infected you, right?”

“...Big Broooooo... ♥”

But Ashley’s words no longer reached Chihiro’s ears.

Ashley, resigned to her fate, stepped back as she turned to face the advancing zombie Chihiro.

“Well...looks like we’re done for, Makina. Don’t stop the camera. Whether it means anything or not, we’re recording the beginning of the end of the world here.”

“Right... Getting to spend such a momentous occasion together with you doesn’t feel too bad, actually.” Kaizu forced a smile.

Ashley joined him. “Hee-hee! You’re right.”

“Big Broooooooo... I looooooove youuuu, *smooch!*”

And with that, the zombie Chihiro took Ashley’s lips.

“Mmph... Chi... Chihiro...!”

Their lips parted...and Ashley slowly turned toward Kaizu, who was still filming.

“...Big Bro, I love ya! ♥”

With that final cutesy love call, Ashley lunged at Kaizu—and with a crash, the camera fell to the ground.



“What’re you up to, Big Bro?”

Major Itskinsey Hashmakov, killing time at the cockpit of his beloved craft because he was having trouble sleeping, was being visited by his sister, Chikhrona Hashmakova.

“Oh, just watching a video.”

“A video?”

“Yeah, some old archival footage...from the day the end of the world began, you know. I was hoping it’d put me to sleep, but I guess not.”

Itskinsey grinned a bit, opened the hatch of his Gundoom LS humanoid mobile weapon, and invited his sister inside.

Long ago, an unprecedented biohazard event known as the Sispocalypse broke out without warning on the island of Okinawa, Japan. Caused by a virus that turned infected people into little-sister zombies, it spread alarmingly fast across the world, turning more than half of the human race into little-sister

zombies within ten years. It triggered the collapse of civilization, making Earth no longer habitable.

Thirty years after the Sispocalypse, the few humans who had managed to survive in underground shelters gathered their remaining technological expertise to construct the *Sistia*, an immigrant spacefaring craft, and blasted off into the great unknown. For almost a century since then, they had wandered the twinkling sea of stars in search of a habitable planet on which to settle down, all while using their “mobile weapon” craft to fight off hostile extraterrestrial life. Itskinsey and Chikhrona were the so-called “third generation” of humans born in outer space.

“Earth, huh...? I’d love to visit sometime.”

Itskinsey shrugged at his sister’s words. “Ahhh, don’t be silly. It’s a dead planet crawling with little-sister zombies. What would you even do there?”

“Well, yeah, I’m scared of the zombies...but don’t you want to see it for yourself? See what real oceans look like, and pretty beaches?”

“Yeah, I suppose so...”

Itskinsey recalled the old footage of seas and sandy beaches he had watched before. How wonderful would it be to play with Chikhrona and go “woo woo” with her in a place like that?

“I’m sure we’ll get there someday—if not on Earth, then somewhere else with just as beautiful an ocean.”

“Yeah...”

Chikhrona nodded at her brother’s words. “But until then, Big Bro, let’s both do our best to stay alive.”

“You bet.” Itskinsey nodded. “As long as you’re around, I can deal with whatever hardships we face on our journey.”

He stood up to kiss Chikhrona on the lips. This graduated to a sloppy French kiss, and whether one side started it or the other, they were soon totally naked. They were siblings but also lovers.

“Ahhh, Big Bro, over there, your dick! Oooh, good, ahhh... ♥ Dick! ♥”

“Chikhrona! I love you, Chikhrona!”

Itskinsey (age 65) and Chikhrona (age 62) madly groped each other inside the cramped cockpit. Here on this immigrant spaceship, procreating and making more children was the prime directive for all aboard—the taboo of incest did not exist. Now, at long last, there was no one in the vast universe who could stand in the way of this brother-sister tryst...

Afterword

Now the hero was walking toward the heroine...

Honestly, we could've called it a day with this series right there, couldn't we? That scene was so beautiful, even I thought that, but no, we're stretching this out just a bit more. So consider this the first half of the two-part *A Sister's All You Need*. finale. I hope some of you guys enjoyed the special-edition drama CD as well.

Regarding that CD, the original plan was to wrap up the story a little neater than we did, having the foreshadowing pay off and so forth, but I decided it'd be a lot more fun to just mix up everything together like the bad movie they were trying to make, so here's how it turned out. (By the way, the drama CD version actually has a different ending from the novel one.) Speaking of movies, I had a previous series of mine made into a live-action film once, but I was totally uninvolved with the production and promotion of it because (as I told myself) I didn't know anything about Japanese movies or actors. Now I regret that. Separating myself so cleanly from the film, dismissing it as something irrelevant to me, might have shielded me from any emotional damage if people trashed or slammed the film or it was a box-office bomb—but on the other hand, I gained nothing from it, either. I'm sure I could've experienced a lot that would have been possible only through that film, and passing all that up really feels like a wasted opportunity now. With those regrets in mind, I put everything I had into the *Sister* anime, from the screenplays on down, and it really gave me a lot back, both tangible and intangible. This drama CD will probably be the last non-book piece of *Sister* media released, but if we see similar developments with another series (or *Sister*, even) in the future, I definitely want to stay involved. Sometimes, there's stuff you'll get to see for yourself only if you dive in headfirst. Anime, games, movies, TV dramas, stage plays, you name it—I'll accept offers for anything!

So there's just one book left in this series. I'm gonna keep this sprint going until the very end, but be that as it may, as a professional writer and all, I really need to start thinking about a new series soon. Thus, starting on the next page, I'll release a few series concepts I have brewing, and I'll ask the Japanese audience in a questionnaire which ones you'd like to read the most. I can't guarantee that any of them will definitely become my next series, but these are all serious, non-ironic ideas on my part, so your cooperation is appreciated.

Anyway, see all of you in the afterword of the final volume.

Yomi Hirasaka

Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist Late July 2019

BOOK PROPOSAL

YURI BEFORE THE DEADLINE (tent.)

○CONCEPT

A yuri comedy building on the atmosphere of the daily life scenes in *Sister*. The setting is the same as *Sister*, but there won't be any shared characters apart from Miyako occasionally showing up. Not an ensemble piece, it'd instead depict the flirty (?) love between two heroines.

○SYNOPSIS

Yukari Ebiwara, popular novelist, has a highschool girl named Ayu Shirakawa couch-surfing in her apartment. Yukari's habit of deep-cleaning her place, taking trips, going fishing, and lots of other stuff in order to procrastinate on deadlines fazes Ayu, but still, life seems pretty happy here...

○CHARACTERS

Yukari Ebiwara

A twenty-three-year-old popular novelist. Pen name: Hikari Kairo. She'd be a stylish beauty if she tried at it, but generally, she doesn't care how she looks. Her favorite brand is Workman. Has a bad habit of distracting herself with cleaning and vacations before a deadline—a habit she doesn't intend to fix, because “guilt only adds to the thrill.” She's a bit of a prodigy, better than average at art, cooking, sports, and everything else, but this has made her vaguely bored of life for a while, and she's not particularly dedicated to the writing craft, either. A bit confused at the unfamiliar feelings she has for Ayu, she still remains aloof, not letting any of it reach the surface. How noble of her.

Ayu Shirakawa

A sixteen-year-old in her second year of high school. After running into trouble at her school, she left her parents and transferred to a new one in Tokyo, but since she can't use their dorm, her cousin refers her to Yukari's apartment near school grounds. Acts all cool, since she's bad at expressing her emotions. On the short side but big-breasted. Likes wearing punk T-shirts around the home. Fosters secret feelings of love for the slovenly Yukari but acts all cold and blunt around her. Pretty good at chores and cooking, but she knows that Yukari can outclass her when she tries, so she's anxious that she's not needed at all. Wants to grow up fast. So noble.

Miyako Shirakawa

Yukari's editor and Ayu's cousin. Her caring personality makes both of them adore her.

BOOK PROPOSAL

I HAVE THE MONEY, YOU KNOW! (tent.)

○CONCEPT

A crazy romcom starring a boy looking for something money can't buy and a demented rich girl with nothing but money.

○SYNOPSIS

"I will deign to make you my lover!" Kureha Mido attends an elite high school, but one day Spica Rokubungi, the prissiest girl in the whole school, orders him to be her boyfriend. She offers to provide anything he wants as long as he does her bidding, but he flatly refuses. Seeing her fume at this, Kureha realizes "it's like looking at me from long ago." In fact, Kureha is a musician with a string of number one hits that's made him incredibly rich. What he truly seeks is love—something money can't buy. Meanwhile, Spica keeps getting more desperate to win over Kureha with her wild spending...

○CHARACTERS

Kureha Mido

A seventeen-year-old second-year. Intelligent and attractive, he's written and composed a string of number one hits since middle school, making him rich off the royalties. He's also a pro-level guitar and piano player. Back in year one, he got carried away and asked his crush Ohka Tatenashi to be his girl, only to get shot down. The experience taught him modesty, making him into a perfect young man. Now he lives dual lives as a student and musician, looking for a chance to try his luck again with Ohka.

Spica Rokubungi

A fifteen-year-old first-year. The bossy, blond-haired heiress of the Rokubungi family, as small in size as she is in empathy. She joined this school via connections rather than academic talent, so she has the brilliant Ohka tutor her, becoming her friend without Kureha even knowing.

Ohka Tatenashi

A seventeen-year-old second-year. The top academic performer ever since she got in. Lives in poverty as she takes care of her brother and sister; she has a scholarship covering her tuition.

Beta Rokubungi

A fifteen-year-old first-year with silver hair. Spica's half sister and servant. Prefers to keep Spica stupid and oblivious so she can seize power in the family later.

Muneshige Otowa

A cool-looking twenty-year-old who serves as Kureha's secretary. Helps him out with love advice.

BOOK PROPOSAL

THE ABYSS LOOKS BACK AT ME (tent.)

○CONCEPT

A dramatic romcom ensemble tale featuring a set of oblivious teens who care for each other but can't quite close the distance.

○SYNOPSIS

Mibuchi, this pretty girl in class, keeps stealing glances at me. I know—she loves me, doesn't she? It's not like I absolutely need a girlfriend, but if she approaches me, I don't mind taking her.
...Meanwhile, Mibuchi is curious about this guy who keeps staring at her. He must love me, doesn't he? I don't care much about love stuff, but if he approaches me, I could think about it, sure...

○CHARACTERS

Koichi Sarashina

Second-year in high school, an attractive boy who looks intelligent until he opens his mouth. Likes to argue pointless details but just an average student.

Mari Mibuchi

Second-year. A mysterious girl who always sits in the corner of class, acting all languid. A little scary if she stares you down. Has the nickname "Abyss" thanks to her last name. An avid reader and literature club member. Her aura gives people the wrong idea, but she's actually ditzy and prone to wild flights of fancy.

Tatsunari Matsuda

Second-year. Koichi's friend, the academic head of the class. He craves a girlfriend, to the point where he's bought and read lots of books offering love guidance.

Akira Akatsuki

Third-year. Chair of the literature club, a fashion-oriented girl who looks out for Mari.

BOOK PROPOSAL

THE GOURMAND PRINCESS SAVORS ANOTHER WORLD. (tent.)

○CONCEPT

A gourmet- and battle-oriented light fantasy.

○SYNOPSIS

Koichiro Ajiki is a food YouTuber who travels the world trying out rare and gross cuisine. After losing his life at the hands of a robber, he wakes up as Rosaria, the (infant) daughter of nobility in another world. She's given a privileged upbringing, thanks to her intelligence and rare amount of mana, but at age fourteen, the trove of insects and lizards she's been keeping to eat is discovered, and she's banished from town as a heretic. Together with Frieda, her knight bodyguard, Rosaria embarks on an international adventure to find rare things to eat. There's just one catch—the world's engulfed in a massive war, and precious animals, plants, and food cultures are being lost to it every day. After obtaining a small territory of her own, Rosaria decides to bring peace back to the world—and collect rare foods from other nations in the process.

○CHARACTERS

Rosaria Klugel / Koichiro Ajiki

Age twenty-seven in his previous life, fourteen when Rosaria's story begins. He's been posting videos of himself eating insects, reptiles, and so on since college, earning him a cult following and enough money to go globe-trotting for other rare foods. He's not deliberately seeking out gross foods—in fact, Rosaria cooks up insects and such because the “real” food in this world is far too bland for her. Although Koichiro learned self-defense, he's easily killed by his assailant, so Rosaria made a point of mastering spirit-based magic at an early age. A merely average cook.

Frieda Klugel

Seventeen when her story begins. Born from a family of knights serving the Klugels, she trained to serve as Rosaria's guard and wields the deadliest sword in their domain. Deeply faithful and loving of Rosaria, she joined her master when she got kicked out of town. Serious-minded and stodgy, but when Rosaria asks her to, she doesn't mind putting her body on the line.

Charlotte

A mysterious, oddly eloquent little girl. Joins Rosaria after being amazed by her cooking philosophy. Actually a reincarnation of Talerrent, a powerful French politician and gourmet.

BOOK PROPOSAL *LIVING ALONE (tent.)*

○CONCEPT

A slice-of-life comedy depicting the not-all-that-typical travails of a college student living by himself for the first time, pressing on as he deals with all his usual issues and the weird people around him.

○SYNOPSIS

After getting into college, Kazuhito Kurashiki finally gets to leave home and live by himself at Corpo Mediterranean, a forty-year-old apartment building. He's excited for the experience at first, but between eating, cleaning, money, the NHK man knocking on his door, people trying to sell him newspapers, religious door knockers, and more, he's getting in lots of trouble. He also comes to know a number of cute girls, but all of them have rather odd traits that make them less than desirable parts of his life. Will Kazuhito be able to keep up his swinging single-bedroom life?

○CHARACTERS

Kazuhito Kurashiki

Age eighteen, a man living alone for the first time after getting accepted into college. A harmless-looking young man who, for better or worse, is a calming presence to everyone he meets. His parents' house is only an hour away by train, so they still harangue him about living with them instead.

Natsumi Higurashi

Age seventeen, a part-time worker whose jobs include knocking on doors selling newspaper subscriptions. This brought her to Kazuhito's door a few times, and before long, they were friendly enough to start complaining about their lives to each other. Her work has given her a good knowledge of people around the neighborhood.

Noa Minakami

Age twenty, a beautiful woman who lives alone next door. Treats Kazuhito very kindly, occasionally feeding him home-cooked meals. Also a member of a religious cult.

Kazari Saotome

Age nineteen, a coworker of Kazuhito's at the diner where he works. Joined about the same time as he did. Has rather androgynous good looks...or so it seems at first.

Norma Cassani

Age fifteen, the daughter of the Corpo Mediterranean landlord. Loves hitting up the residents for their rent. Talks like a gangster.

BOOK PROPOSAL

WE ALL FAILED (tent.)

○CONCEPT

A romcom set in a test-prep school, featuring the sad but oddly fun lives of people trying and failing to get into college.

○SYNOPSIS

Ryutaro Inami failed to pass a university entrance exam in his first attempt. Overcoming his glumness, he's signed on for a test-prep school—only to find it an oddly warm, fun place, filled with cute girls and old friends. “Just because you failed once, that isn’t the end of the world. Why can’t you just enjoy your youth anyway?” Yes, he never would have met these people with diverse academic skills and family environments otherwise—but the clock is ticking for the next exam season...

○CHARACTERS

Ryutaro Inami

Age eighteen. Spent his teenage years at one of the prefecture’s most prestigious high schools, studying away his golden years. Raised by a strict family, he hoped to get into college so he could break free and enjoy campus life, but he failed. Things with his parents are awkward, to say the least.

Kafuka Akizuki

A girl from Ryutaro’s high school. She was the famed teacher’s pet at school, prim in her horn-rimmed glasses and always scoring straight A’s, but she transformed her entire look for college—even before she took the entrance exams. After failing out, she really doesn’t want to run into any ex-classmates but winds up seated next to Ryutaro.

Shinya Hamura

Ryutaro’s middle-school classmate, a flirty guy who dyed his hair blond and got treated like a bad boy. He befriended Ryutaro after he started tutoring him. They went to separate high schools but reunite at this test-prep center.

Koyomi Nanasaka

A girl aiming to become a writer. In her last year of high school, she started writing a novel to escape reality, but it got rejected—and so did she by every college she applied to. Even now, she’s more focused on her novel than studying.

Airi Kujoin

A beautiful girl with long black hair who went to an upper-crust, girls-only high school. Her rich parents feel a woman’s place is at the altar by her groom, not higher education. They’ve given her one more year to attempt college, although she’s terrible at studying.

Afterword

This is Kantoku, the series illustrator. Did you know that if you hold your cat up to your body like you're breastfeeding a baby and feed it a treat, it's called "breast-mewing"? Is that too much of a stretch? It's still cute! ♡

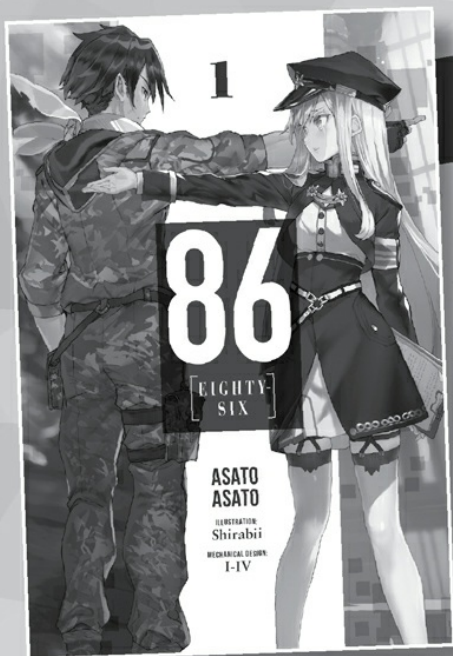
For this bonus illustration, I wavered between drawing Nadeshiko in cosplay or Godo, her biggest fan...but if Hirasaka got to play around so much with this chapter, then they oughtta let me do it, too! Wooooooooo!

The illustration I drew for the special edition is also nice and B movie-like, too. Lots of fun to draw. I'd love to try drawing something with an explosion in the background.

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HAVE YOU BEEN TURNED ON TO LIGHT NOVELS YET?



86—EIGHTY-SIX, VOL. 1-10

In truth, there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Beyond the fortified walls protecting the eighty-five Republic Sectors lies the “nonexistent” Eighty-Sixth Sector. The young men and women of this forsaken land are branded the Eighty-Six and, stripped of their humanity, pilot “unmanned” weapons into battle...

Manga adaptation available now!

WOLF & PARCHMENT, VOL. 1-6

The young man Col dreams of one day joining the holy clergy and departs on a journey from the bathhouse, Spice and Wolf. Winfiel Kingdom's prince has invited him to help correct the sins of the Church. But as his travels begin, Col discovers in his luggage a young girl with a wolf's ears and tail named Myuri who stowed away for the ride!

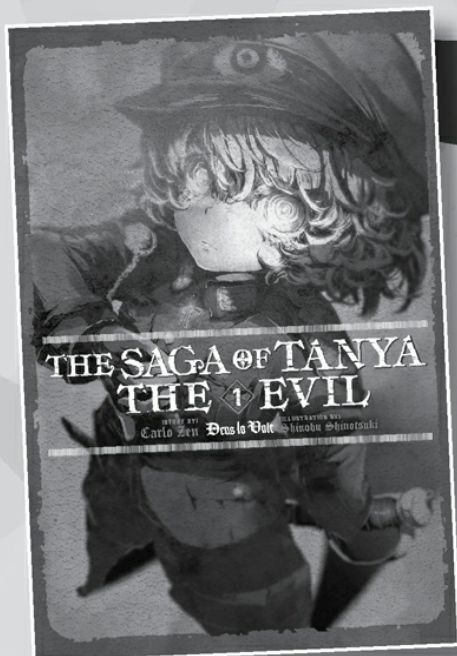
Manga adaptation available now!



SOLO LEVELING, VOL. 1-5

E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he's abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he's ever encountered.

Comic adaptation available now!



THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL, VOL. 1-10

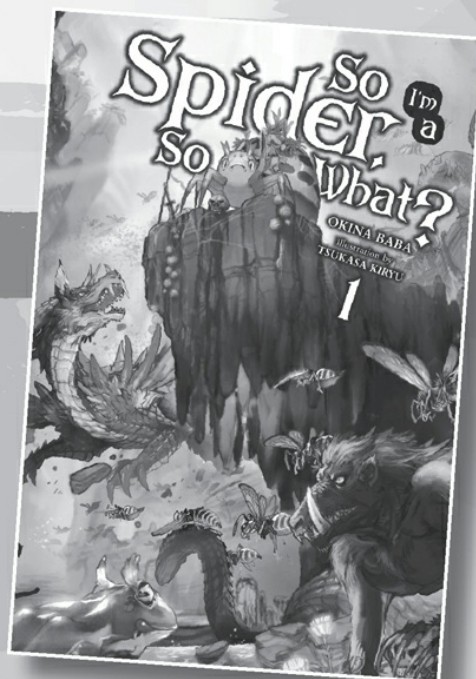
Reborn as a destitute orphaned girl with nothing to her name but memories of a previous life, Tanya will do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means living life behind the barrel of a gun!

Manga adaptation available now!

SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?, VOL. 1-14

I used to be a normal high school girl, but in the blink of an eye, I woke up in a place I've never seen before and—and I was reborn as a spider?!

Manga adaptation available now!



OVERLORD, VOL. 1-14

When Momonga logs in one last time just to be there when the servers go dark, something happens—and suddenly, fantasy is reality. A rogues' gallery of fanatically devoted NPCs is ready to obey his every order, but the world Momonga now inhabits is not the one he remembers.

Manga adaptation available now!

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