

14

FINAL

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku



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14





"Does 'e even have a dick attached to 'im?!"

The Drunken Frenzy





Three Years Later

Boobs

Barren Loves

Northward Bound

A Vampire Is Born

Publishing Without Honor or Humility

Mom Friends, Dad Friends

The Days with Panties on Our Heads

Sirius

Redemption Rainbow

The Blue Songbirds



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NEW YORK

Copyright

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Vol. 14

Yomi Hirasaka

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II.Vol. 14

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

The protagonist.

CHIIHIRO HASHIMA

The protagonist.

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

The protagonist.

HARUTO FUWA

The protagonist.

NADESHIKO KISO

The protagonist.

MAKINA KAIZU

The protagonist.

ASHLEY YASAKA

The protagonist.

KAIKO MIKUNIYAMA

The protagonist.

SETSUNA ENA

The protagonist.

KENJIRO TOKI

The protagonist.

KAZUKO HASHIMA

Itsuki's wife.

Three Years Later

On a chilly night in mid-November, the award ceremony for the 20th GF Bunko New Writers Contest was being held within a large conference venue at a certain hotel in Tokyo.

“We’ll begin tonight by having our main judge Haruto Fuwa give us his overall review of this year’s contest. Mr. Fuwa made his debut at the 10th GF Bunko New Writers Contest, and his first work, *Holy Knight of the Absolute World*, was adapted into an anime series. His second story, *Leviathan Revive*, saw even greater success as an anime, and with a second season in the works, he has truly become one of the leading writers in the world of light novels!”

After the voice actress emceeing the event gave her spiel, Haruto went up onstage.

Haruto Fuwa was twenty-eight years old and a successful author with a tall frame, a well-balanced face, and a ten-year-long career as a professional writer. Ever since he joined the New Writers Contest judging table five years ago, he had been responsible for offering his general commentary at these award ceremonies. Being introduced as a “leading writer” in this business always felt weird to him, but after five years of it, he had grown accustomed. So, without any particular enthusiasm, he picked up the microphone and began speaking.

“Umm, hello. My name’s Haruto Fuwa, and on behalf of the other judges, I’d like to offer my general comments about this year’s submissions. But first...” He turned toward the voice-actress emcee. “My first work was actually titled *Chevalier of the Absolute World*. The Chinese characters do mean ‘holy knight,’ but it’s a special term.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” the young emcee said, hurriedly apologizing in the face of Haruto’s refreshing, sarcasm-free smile. The audience laughed at this little exchange.

“Ha-ha! Well, a few years back, it was kind of the in thing to mix English readings with Chinese characters, but it’s fallen by the wayside lately, which I think is too bad, ha-ha-ha. Man, it’s been ten years since I received this award, hasn’t it...? It’s kind of emotional, in a way. So! First, I’d like to extend my congratulations to all our winners tonight. They’ve produced a cornucopia of truly unique and outstanding work, very much befitting the twentieth anniversary of this contest. As a writing judge, I couldn’t be happier to see this. Lately, it’s become the norm for authors to make their publishing debut with their previously written web novels, but in the midst of that...”

Haruto’s speech, given with his trademark casual, lighthearted tone, was mixed with practical advice for newcomers and sharp analysis of recent industry trends. It captured the attention of not only the winners, but everyone else in the audience as well.



“Thanks very much, Mr. Fuwa!”

After he stepped down from the podium, Haruto was greeted by Tadashi Kamo, a fellow member of the jury. He was dressed in a high-end (if noticeably stained) suit, accessorized with the empty wineglass in his hand.

“Boy, am I glad to leave that speech in *your* hands, Mr. Fuwa. There’s no way I could ever give one as good as that, I don’t think.”

“Hey, it’s about getting used to it. I’ll have you give it a shot next year, Kamo.”

“*La la laaa*, can’t hear you...”

Haruto laughed as Kamo very deliberately turned his face aside. Kamo had become a judge two years ago, when Makina Kaizu resigned his position. The jury was traditionally filled with people who had entered the light-novel business after winning this New Writers Contest, but all the other potential candidates—meaning novelists at least as successful or long-lasting as Haruto—had either stopped writing or jumped ship to another imprint for their main projects, and that left Kamo as the one guy qualified for the post.

“I’m really not cut out to be a judge anyway, y’know. Like, a guy who used to

be chronically unemployed being responsible for something that can affect people's entire lives... It's heavy, man."

"I don't think you need to get so worked up about it," Haruto told the whining Kamo. "Like, you're pretty much guaranteed to make your publishing debut the moment you're picked as a finalist anyway. All *we're* really doing here is deciding who gets awarded however much prize money."

This was exactly what Makina Kaizu had told Haruto five years ago, when he joined the selection committee. But not even Haruto was used to the pressure behind these choices—and despite what he said, Kaizu always treated the process seriously. In a way, Haruto thought, if he felt the full weight of responsibility with this work, Kamo was actually a pretty good judge.

"Man... Can't someone else take over for me next year?"

"I doubt it."

"...Yeah. My fellow work pals are all gone, so... Like, they were all *good* guys, too. Goddamn." Kamo was doing his best war-movie impersonation.

"Who's all gone?"

Aoba Kasamatsu, who won a prize the same year as Kamo, approached him with a skeptical look on her face. With her was Ui Aioi, another winner that year.

After making her writing debut during her second year of high school, Aoba was now twenty-one and a junior in college. Her second series, *The Disappointing Siblings' Student Council War*, hit it big enough that the novels were still ongoing, but the publication pace had slowed down while she focused on her university studies. Ui, meanwhile, was now twenty-eight, writing full-time, and juggling three different light novel series at once. She was producing somewhere around ten books a year, in fact—a very quick pace even by the standards of this business.

"Ahhh, Aobaaaaa! You've become more and more beautiful over time, haven't you? And I think your boobs have gotten bigger, too!"

Kamo accompanied this appraisal with a leery smile.

Aoba turned her cold eyes toward her phone. “I just recorded that, you know. I wonder what would happen if I put it up on the net?”

His face immediately paled. “Gehhh!! No, don’t do that! I mean it! If I get canceled right now, they’ll call off the TV drama version!”

“That’s what you get for being such a casual sexual harasser in this day and age.”

“No, seriously, cut me a break! Besides, I’m into young girls with washboard tits anyway! You’re not even on my radar anymore, Aoba! Go back to high school for me, please! Also, I’m sorry!!”

“Why is this starting to sound like you’re dumping me or something?!” Aoba blushed as she delivered the jab. “Now I wish I really *did* record it,” she grumbled as she put away her phone.

Ui laughed a bit. “Hee-hee... Well, you really *are* getting prettier by the day, you know.”

Aoba had always had striking facial features, but when she entered college, she began to dress more fashionably. She had grown into a beautiful, attractive woman with a subtle hint of sex appeal.

“Well, look at *you*, Ui—actually, never mind.”

Aoba shyly stopped herself before she could begin. Unlike her, Ui was devoting almost all of her time to writing novels—so she was still a fan of hoodies and sweats, all but screaming to the world how little time she had to care about fashion.



“I know what you were about to say, Aoba,” Ui countered tersely.

“I’ll have you know, I had every intention of dressing up for this award ceremony...but...I couldn’t fit in the dress I bought for it a while back!”

“Ahh, yeah, I think Ui’s been puttin’ on the pounds since— *Urgh!*”

Before Kamo could even finish his thoughtless, ill-advised comment, he was met with Aoba’s body blow and Ui’s low kick.

“Ohh... Subjected this horribly unfair violence from two beautiful women... Since when was I the hero of my own harem comedy...?”

The two of them gave Kamo stares full of ice as he still managed to say something stupid through his pain and anguish.

Haruto snickered at them. “Ha-ha... Y’know, it’s funny how nearly everyone from the 15th contest succeeded in their own ways.”

Only three people from the 15th New Writers Contest were in attendance at this party, but the other prizewinners were still working as writers. Yoshihiro Kiso (age 72) managed to score an anime adaptation for his series *Conquest of the Silver Demon*, making him one of the central pillars of the GF Bunko library. He used his advanced age as an excuse to get out of judging obligations, but his writing career wasn’t ending anytime soon. Soma Misaka (age 21), after changing his pen name to “Steak Tsukemono” three years ago and making his second debut with Branch Hill Bunko, had continued to energetically release new titles. Makoto Yanagase (age 35) was still attracting a small but dedicated fanbase for his spanking-oriented stories, which had taken on a new dimension now that he had switched to an “adult” publishing label. Several of his works had even been adapted into 18+ anime OVAs.

There were many people by now who had debuted after this crop only to disappear from the scene after publishing a few novels (or even one), so having all six prizewinners from a single year continue to find success like this was a rarity to see across the industry, not just for GF Bunko.

“By the way, is the professor not here tonight? I haven’t seen him.”

Now that the subject had turned to their peers, Aoba brought up the question

with Haruto. By “professor,” she meant Itsuki Hashima; she used to call him her “big bro,” but was obliged to come up with something else after he got married.

“Itsuki? He said he’d show up, but I haven’t noticed him, either.”

Haruto looked around the meeting hall. There was no sign of him...but Kenjiro Toki, Itsuki’s editor at GF Bunko, was right nearby, so Haruto asked him what was up with Itsuki.

Toki replied with a slightly awkward grin. “Ah...unfortunately, Itsuki had some urgent business that kept him from coming tonight.”

“Urgent business?”

Haruto wondered what business would be urgent enough to make him miss this awards party. Just as he did, Toki’s phone vibrated.

“...It’s Itsuki,” Toki said. Then, for reasons known only to him, he handed his phone to Haruto.

“You want me to pick up?”

Toki nodded, so Haruto pressed the “Answer” button and brought the phone to his ear.

“...This is Snake... Colonel, can you hear me...?”

The low, restrained voice on the other end wasn’t Snake at all. It belonged to Itsuki Hashima, age twenty-six.

“Who’s the colonel?”

“Huh...?! Is that Haruto...? Why are you answering this...? Well, you’ll do. In fact, this works well for me...”

The anxiety clear in Itsuki’s voice made Haruto even more confused.

“What’s up, Itsuki?”

“I’m being confined against my will at a certain location...”

“Confined?! Seriously, what’s going on with you, Itsuki?!”

“Haruto,” Itsuki weakly continued instead of answering the question. *“I need you to provide a distraction for ten...no, even five minutes... I’ll figure out a way*

to escape by then... I know you can do it... In fact, you're the only one..."

"A distraction? Against what?!"

...Haruto had already surmised the situation to some extent, but he put up with the farce anyway, voice as serious as possible.

"Th-the name of this menace is—"

But before he could give the name...

"Ah! You! I told you, no phones allowed! How did you smuggle that in there anyway?! I checked, like, all your belongings!"

Another voice, not Itsuki's, rang across the phone. It belonged to Miyako Shirakawa, age twenty-six, the editor at Branch Hill Bunko that Itsuki was assigned to.

"Please... Just a glance... Give me just a single look at my familyyyy..."

"You can see them in person as soon as you finish this draft!"

"Don't you mean 'you can see them in hell'?"

"Quit making it sound so apocalyptic! I'll let you see them while you're still alive, all right?!"

Haruto let out a laugh at this ridiculous exchange he was overhearing. "Hey, can I hang up yet?"

"W-wait! Don't abandon me!"

"Who are you talking to? ...Oh, Mr. Toki? Hello there!"

Miyako had taken the phone from Itsuki and spoken right into it. Haruto took a deep breath.

"Hey, Miyako."

"Huh?! Haruto?!"

The surprise was clear in Miyako's voice.

"Sounds like you've got your hands full, like always. You're confining him in the usual torture chamber?"

"It's not a torture chamber. It's a special room we've provided so creators can

concentrate on their assignments.”

Miyako was all business as she corrected Haruto.

Just like in Gift Publishing HQ, Branch Hill had a “containment room” that confined slow writers against their will—um, that is, allowed them to fully concentrate on their assignments. It was accessible from the back of the café that took up the first floor of Branch Hill’s building via a secret entrance, a former basement wine cellar that the publisher had repurposed for authors who were naughty with their deadlines. And after three years of signing on with Branch Hill Bunko, Itsuki Hashima had become a regular client down there.

“Whoa, Itsuki! Wait up!”

“Damn it! Let me go! I gotta get back to my family!”

“If you care that much about your family, just do what I say!”

Apparently Itsuki had just attempted an escape. The sounds of a scuffle were audible through the phone.

“Stop it! ...Ugh. All right. I’ll do whatever you say... Just promise me you won’t lay a finger on my family...”

“Will you stop setting me up to be a movie villain already?!”

“Oh, like you have the moral high ground after literally kidnapping me! You demon! You monster! You editor!”

Haruto felt an aching in his chest.

Miyako had worked as Itsuki’s editor for three years now, and she spent much more time—and much more *intense* time—with him than Haruto did these days. Miyako and Haruto had gone out several times over the past three years, but they still weren’t in anything like a relationship. The only palpable advance was that Miyako was now comfortable referring to Haruto by his first name. With *I Want to Be the Protagonist* (edited by Miyako) becoming a major hit, she now had a lot more media-adaptation work to handle, along with a stable of other problem-child writers assigned to her. It kept her beaver away every day without rest.

Haruto, meanwhile, had seen the anime adaptation of *Leviathan Revive* turn

into a success after being involved with everything from screenwriting to backstory supervision. He was now busy with a whole litany of spinoff projects, and not just season two of the anime. There was the script for the smartphone game, the story for the manga adaptation, his seat at the judges' table... Add that to his main job of writing novels, and he was more insanely busy than ever before.

Put it all together, and it meant the pair had hardly even had a chance to see each other lately. Having steady work was a great thing, and it wasn't like Miyako was going to try anything romantic with the happily married Itsuki, but seeing her spend so much of her personal time with other men still gave Haruto a sense of ominous foreboding.

"Well, um, good luck over there."

He tried to sound as indifferent as possible as he ended the call.

"Phew..."

He sighed in relief, then lifted his face up to find Toki, Kamo, Aoba, and Ui giving him tepid looks. All four of them were well aware of how Haruto and Miyako's more-than-friends, less-than-lovers relationship had been dragging on for years.

"Sure is tough being a popular, handsome writer, isn't it?"

Kamo slapped him on the shoulder, his voice as grating as ever. Haruto seethed quietly.

"The type of pure love you two have just makes my heart soar," Aoba deadpanned.

"Haruto, if you can't bear the loneliness any longer, you can always come to my place, okay?"

Haruto could only reply to Ui's obvious teasing with a dry laugh.



While Haruto was being teased by Ui and the others, Itsuki Hashima was poutingly returning to his unfinished novel inside Branch Hill's confinement

chamber.

Ever since *I Want to Be the Protagonist* became a megahit after Miyako convinced him to publish it, Itsuki had published a total of seven one-shot novels in the past three years. He was also continuing the *L⇌R Days* series for GF Bunko, but given the agent contract he signed, most of his work was now being published by Branch Hill.

In an agent contract, a publisher does more than simply serve as an editor and producer for a work. They function as the author's agent, negotiating on their behalf with other companies (not just publishers, but game companies, anime producers, the media, and so on), fine-tuning their schedules, and managing them overall so they can work in the best environment possible. The author, in turn, pays a fee to the publisher for this service, but while the contract was signed with Branch Hill, it was really Miyako doing all the agent work, and nearly all the fees Itsuki paid Branch Hill went straight to her.

The seven novels Itsuki had teamed up with Miyako to get published by Branch Hill and other publishers were all decent sellers, but none of them received praise beyond *I Want to Be the Protagonist*, and the more combative online commentators were already calling him a “one-trick *Protagonist* pony.” Itsuki had anticipated this, and he too was aware that he hadn't been able to surpass *I Want to Be the Protagonist* yet, but it still royally pissed him off.

What's more, Kazuko Hashima (pen name Nayuta Kani), his wife of one year, was now a mother, and she'd announced that she was taking off from writing for maternity leave. This attracted the raging ire of some of Nayuta's more diehard fans. They were now involved in daily ugly skirmishes with Itsuki's own fanbase on social media, anonymous forums, and review sites—enough so that honest reviews and praise for Itsuki were getting buried in the muck.

All the mixed media projects were giving him more and more work distractions. The frustration at not being able to write novels up to his lofty standards was growing by the day. Becoming a husband and father had led to major changes in his life, and he now had a responsibility to keep his family solvent. He'd also started to sweat seeing Haruto become more and more popular, and seeing Miyako become a more and more capable editor by the day. All of it was now attacking him en masse—and so Itsuki had fallen into

something of a slump.

“Gaaaaaaaahhhh! I wish every hot author besides me, every shitty editor, every shitty hater of mine—I hope they all catch some weird disease and start spraying multicolored bile from all their goddamn pores!”

Shouting these curses in a dimly lit room where no one could hear him, Itsuki violently pecked away at his keyboard. The completed manuscript that resulted from pouring his rage into the computer was packed with typos and tended toward being a confusing mess most of the time, but:

“Hmm... Well, you’re gonna have to do a lot of fixing in your revision round, but you can go home for today.”

With that, Miyako—after reading through it all—released Itsuki from the underground dungeon.



“Welcome back, Itsuki.”

A little before midnight, Itsuki arrived home for the first time in around three days. His wife Kazuko greeted him with a smile. (It should be noted that she was wearing clothes.)

Itsuki was currently living in a three-bedroom apartment designed for families. He had moved out of his old place nearby Gift Publishing, a tinier joint he had dwelled in since his college days, back three years ago. This new apartment was a ten-minute walk to Itsuki’s family house, which not only allowed his father Keisuke and mother Natsume to come take care of their kid often—it also let Itsuki and Kazuko pick up his little sister Shiori at kindergarten.

“Are you hungry? I’ll warm up some dinner for you. Or did you want to take a bath first?”

Kazuko used to be wholly incapable of household chores or cooking, but ever since she married and moved in with Itsuki, she’d begged Chihiro for guidance and had grown to the point where she had a full set of homemaker skills. Chihiro had given some instruction to the similarly clueless Itsuki as well, but Kazuko’s dedication to the craft gave her a big lead over him.

“I’m gonna go take a shower. But before that...”

Itsuki gently opened the door to the Japanese-style chamber connected to the living room. This was being used as a bedroom, with a baby-sized futon placed in between Itsuki and Kazuko’s, and inside of it, a baby was sleeping peacefully. This was Sora Hashima, age eighteen months—Itsuki and Kazuko’s son. And one look at his face left Itsuki’s soul feeling clean and pure—the fatigue from three days in confinement, the depression at seeing his writing career fail to go the way he wanted, all of it.

If it means protecting my wife and son, I’ll hold out against anything. I gotta keep doing my best for my family.

The words that sprang to Itsuki’s mind were as correct as they were beautiful, something no one should ever be embarrassed to think. But for some reason, they didn’t feel quite right to him. Was this person—Itsuki Hashima the novelist—really ever such a good man?



Q&A Corner

QUESTION

I have a question for the writers.
What's it feel like when you wrap up a series
you've worked on for years?



Well, there's a feeling of achievement, but when you realize you won't be writing about this world and characters any longer, that can be sad. You recall all the joy and pain when looking at reader feedback and dealing with other media, and you get anxious about what you'll do next. It's a lot of emotion at once, so it's not easy to explain.

But one thing I can say is that any writer who fully completes a series is truly happy, and so is the completed series itself.



Yeah... There's no doubt about that.

Boobies

On a Saturday, not long after Itsuki's release from the confinement room, he joined Kazuko and Sora on a trip to the Hashima family home. After Sora was born, it had become a custom for the two families to have dinner together on Saturday nights.

"Oh, hello there."

Chihiro greeted the three of them at the door. At twenty-two years old, she was now a senior in college and slated to begin grad school next year. Her hair was long now, her facial features more mature, and there was no sign of the years she spent cross-dressing as a man...except for her breasts.

"Hee-hee! Good to see you, Sora."

She greeted Sora in Itsuki's arms. "Chi-sis! Chi-sis!" the boy replied, reaching out and smiling at her. They were technically aunt and nephew, but Chihiro insisted on being referred to as his big sister.

"Here."

Itsuki gave Sora to Chihiro and headed inside with Kazuko. Then: "Bro-bro!! Bro-bro's here!!"

With a shout, Shiori Hashima—Itsuki and Chihiro's little sister—ran down the hallway.

"Yep! Bro-bro's here!"

"Whoaaa! Bro-bro!!"

She leaped up from the hall, Itsuki grabbing her out of the air and lifting her up.

"Yahhh! Aieeee!"

Shiori let out guttural screams of joy. She was currently three years and nine months old, and she absolutely loved the big brother who came to visit every few days. Every time he showed up, she always let him spoil her like this. She had gotten pretty big in recent months, and Itsuki had grown too sedentary to put up with a lot of her demands for uppies and horsey rides, but one smile from her made it all seem worth it.

So Shiori took him to the living room, and once they had played enough for her satisfaction: “Bro-bro!” Her eyes gleaming, Shiori grabbed Itsuki’s sleeve.

“Hmm?”

“Boobies!”

“Boobies again? You sure like it, don’t you, Shi?”

Shiori nodded, seeming a little proud of it. “Yeah! I love boobies!”

“Well, all right...”

Itsuki rolled up the sweater he was wearing, revealing a nipple that he put in front of his little sister’s eyes.

“Nya-hah!” Overjoyed, Shiori latched on to it.

“Aphh...!”

Nursing his little sister gave Itsuki a weird sort of thrill that ran across his body, and he couldn’t help making a small noise.

“Slrrp...slrrp...♪”

“Ahhh! Fwoooo...!”

After a while of happily ministering to Itsuki’s teat, she removed her mouth, satisfied.

“Phewww!♪”

“Huff huff... You happy now...?”

Shiori smiled and nodded at the question, asked in a panting, trance-like voice.

“Yeah! Yours is the best, bro-bro! It has a rich and complex flavor, but the

lingering succulence gives it a delicate accent!”

“...Where did you learn all *those* words?” asked Itsuki, grinning.

Shiori Hashima loved boobs. She was weaned off breast milk long ago; apparently she just liked the feeling of her tongue and teeth against a good nipple and areola, and she wanted to nurse on anybody she ran into. Men, women, babies, adults, triple-Ds, single-As—all were fair game. When she was a baby crying her hardest, she’d stop whenever she had something to suckle on, but even after she moved on from breastfeeding, her love for the human bosom not only failed to dissipate; she was starting to develop weird preferences, defined by her own terminology.

“Are boobs really that different from each other, Shi?” Kazuko asked, laughing.

“Oh, totally,” Shiori avowed. “I’ll show you, Kazu-sis!”

“Okay, sure.”

“All right!”

Shiori sat between the seated Kazuko’s legs, crossing her arms as the back of her head went against her sister-in-law’s breasts.

“Boobies, you know... They have life in them,” Shiori declared.

“This is suddenly getting very high concept.” Kazuko smiled, while Itsuki gave it a slightly awkward laugh.

“So, um, bro-bro’s boobies have body, you know?”

“What kind of ‘body’ would a nipple have...?” Itsuki muttered.

Shiori pointed at Chihiro, who was currently entertaining Sora. “Sis-sis’s boobies taste more full and refreshing! It’s smooth, and it feels really good. Mom’s remind me of being a baby. They’re meant more for little kids, so they’re kind of lacking to me. Sora’s are, um...velvety! I can’t really say yet, but I think they have potential! And Dad’s... They’re so bitter!”

Her face scrunched up at this, making Kazuko burst out in laughter.

Keisuke, setting the living-room table, looked a little crestfallen. “Wow, Dad’s

are bitter, huh?”

“Yeah. I think I’m too little. I bet grownups would like them better.”

“I wonder what the appropriate age is for your father’s boobs,” Kazuko commented. “What about mine, then?”

“Kazu-sis, yours are really mellow, but so much depth to them, too!”

“Did you hear that, Itsuki?” Kazuko crowed. “My boobs are mellow, but with so much depth to them, apparently!”

“I can’t really comment on that.” Itsuki chuckled. He certainly knew how they felt against his fingers and tongue, but he had never taken note of their taste.

“Also, Nadeko’s are immature and lack depth. They’re average, the kind you see anywhere. And Athley’s are really tasty and ripe! They seem sour at first, but they would appeal to anyone, I think!”

“...Have you been watching cooking shows or something?” Itsuki began to sweat. “And don’t use words like *average* and *ripe* around those two, all right?”

“Nadeko” referred to Nadeshiko Kiso, who’d occasionally stop by the Hashima house (even though she didn’t live nearby) and play with Shiori. Athley, meanwhile, was Ashley Yasaka (née Ono), Itsuki’s tax accountant; she had a child at almost the same time Kazuko did, so she and the Hashima house shared in a lot of family stuff.

“Hee-hee! Well, great job, Shi. Are you gonna be a boobie critic when you grow up?” Kazuko asked.

“Don’t give her any weird ideas,” warned Itsuki—but this seemed to pique Shiori’s curiosity.

“Bro-bro, what’s a critic?”

“Well, a critic’s someone who knows more about something than other people, but mainly, they have knowledge and feelings for something that run really deep. They can discover new viewpoints and things to like that regular people and even the author themselves don’t pick up on, and they tell people about them and help expand the work’s potential. They’re really good at research and expression. The world’s crawling with idiots posing as critics,

constantly complaining and acting like they said something remotely interesting, but a real critic is rare, especially in the world of light novels!”

Shiori froze for a moment. Then she shouted, “Oh, okay!”

“What, you get it?!” asked a surprised Itsuki.

“Bro-bro, you’re tired!”

Kazuko and Chihiro both guffawed.

“...You’re right. Bro-bro *has* been kinda tired lately.” Itsuki grinned and patted Shiori’s head.

Shiori happily smiled back. “And also, I see why critics are so great! I’m gonna be a boobie critic!”

“Good luck with that,” Kazuko said, irresponsibly encouraging her.

“Oh? Weren’t you going to become a PreCure, Shi?” Chihiro interjected with a smile.

“Oh, right!” shouted Shiori, eyes wide open. After a few moments of internal debate: “I’m gonna be a boobie critic PreCure!”

“That’s an innovative new turn for the series!” Itsuki exclaimed at his little sister’s announcement. Then he smiled. “But you’re free to try for whatever you want, so...”

And so, through twists and turns, a young girl’s life was irrevocably changed... maybe.

Barren Loves

“Do you have a moment, Itsuki?”

Chihiro was speaking to Itsuki, fresh from the family dinner and watching Shiori and Sora play with each other. A can of *chuhai* malt liquor was in her hand. Her alcohol tolerance was pretty low, so even after reaching adulthood, she almost never drank.

“What’s up?”

“The GF Bunko awards were a bit ago, weren’t they?”

Itsuki scowled. “Yeah... I didn’t get to go.”

“Oh? Why not?” Chihiro looked surprised. There were a lot of industry friends he only got to meet once a year at that event. Even back four years ago, when he had the all-time mother of writer’s blocks, Itsuki didn’t dare miss it.

“My new volume was so behind, Branch Hill kidnapped me...” Itsuki seemed reluctant to even bring up the memory in his mind.

“Oh...”

“Yeah... But what about the awards?”

“Um...I was just wondering how things were.”

“How things were?”

Chihiro blushed a little. “With Haruhiko...”

“Oh, Haruto? You see him more often than I do, don’t you?”

Itsuki raised an eyebrow. After pretending to be her boyfriend in college that one time, Haruto had enjoyed assistance from a few engineering students at Chihiro’s college for *Leviathan Revive*’s story setting and scientific background. Even Chihiro, who was a freshman at the time and unable to help much, was

now a core member of the *Leviathan* support team, frequently meeting up with Haruto to discuss this or that story detail.

“I’ve been too busy with my own research to see him lately...”

“Oh...” Itsuki looked up, a tad exasperated. “Well, we talked on the phone a bit while I was kidnapped, but he sounded the same as usual. He and Miyako both seemed normal to me.”

“They really were, huh...?”

Chihiro sighed at Itsuki’s words—not out of relief, but out of concern. It made him feel anxious. For over four years now, Chihiro had fostered a one-sided crush for Haruto, so the continued lack of progress on his and Miyako’s relationship should have been good news for her. But after falling silent and looking all conflicted for a few moments, Chihiro downed her drink. Then she looked Itsuki straight in the eye, full of resolve.

“...Chihiro?”

“Listen, Itsuki, there’s something I’d like your help on.”

“My help? What’s that?”

“I want Haruhiko and Miyako to make some progress.”

“Huh?!” Itsuki exclaimed loudly, carefully studying Chihiro’s face. “Make some progress...? But don’t you love Haruto?”

“Yeah. I still do.” Her words were sharp, even as they seemed to sadden her.

“So why, then...?”

“I think...I want to give up.”

Ever since she’d gotten involved with Haruto’s work, Chihiro had used that as an excuse to play RPGs and board games with him. Sometimes it was just the two of them. She had even tried tempting him once in a locked college lab, wearing nothing but a white lab coat and a smile, but she had never been successful. She knew long before that the feeling wasn’t at all mutual, but she kept on attacking, never giving up—and that was because Haruto and Miyako still weren’t a couple.

“I really just want to strike the final blow already.”

“The final blow...?” Itsuki laughed at the rather ominous phrase. “You’re really okay with Haruto and Miyako pairing up?”

“Yeah... I mean, I think I’ll cry and be depressed and full of regret and stuff for a while...but if I don’t overcome this, I’m never going to move on, so...” Chihiro smiled, looking ready to cry right now.

“Ah. Boy, you sure gave yourself a lot of hardship, didn’t you?”

Itsuki looked at her with pity in his eyes. Meddling with someone else’s love just so you can work out your own feelings might not be the most virtuous thing to do, no. But as her big brother, it pained Itsuki to see Chihiro go on with this unrequited love for years on end, and the will-they, won’t-they aspect of Haruto and Miyako’s relationship was honestly starting to grate on his nerves.

“All right. I’ll try to figure out a way to couple them up.”

“Okay. Thanks a lot, Itsuki.”

“So what should I do, exactly?”

“Umm...maybe lock them in a room where they can’t leave until they have sex or something?”

The way she blushed a little as she said it only made Itsuki laugh harder.

“You’re actually capable of telling dirty jokes now, huh?”

“If you spend four years in otaku-oriented clubs, you can’t help but learn a thing or two... But I really think that’s the only direction that’s gonna work.”

Itsuki nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure a lot of the reason nothing’s happened with their relationship is because they don’t get to meet very often in the first place. But both of them really *are* crazy busy, so...”

“I think the main reason Miyako’s crazy busy is you, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely not,” claimed Itsuki as Chihiro gave him some serious side-eye. “Like...okay, maybe I’m responsible for a few percentage points of it, but saying it’s the *main* reason is going too far. She’s got a lot of other troublemaker writers, too, you know—Steak Tsukemono, Hikari Kairo, and them. She literally

told me that I'm easier to deal with because I'll always give up if she takes my family hostage, goddammit! Thanks to me signing that stupid agent contract, I'll lose all my work if Miyako forsakes me, so I can't ever fully escape from her, either."

"Miyako's really become a full-fledged editor, hasn't she?"

"You mean she's become a fully demonic editor," Itsuki replied, dull-eyed. "Any 'full-fledged' editor... They're all horrible monsters. But anyway, if we try to respect their schedules, they'll be stuck in 'going out to eat every now and then' mode the rest of their lives. We gotta get 'em on a date, or else."

"Yeah. So how will we make it so it's just the two of them?"

"They're both so serious-minded. We could call both of them over and pretend it's about work."

"I'm a little reluctant to just trick them like that...but all right. This is for my future, after all."

"You've gotten pretty devious, too, haven't you...? But we need someplace where they're obliged to be alone for a long time. We can't have them leaving the moment they realize they've been tricked."

"So it's back to the room where they have to have sex before they can leave..."

"And how are we gonna set that up? Also, I think we should try to avoid confining them in a locked room or whatever. I've been subjected to that often enough that I know you're never gonna feel like loving anyone in that situation. Your stress just goes off the charts. They'll start resenting each other."

"Ohh, you think? Well, that wouldn't be so bad, either..."

"Since when are you so twisted?"

"J-just kidding."

So as they chatted with each other, the Hashima siblings began to work out their plan...

Northward Bound

One night, as Miyako was working late (as usual), she received a phone call from Itsuki.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to visit Hakodate soon for research purposes. Can you come with me?”

“Huh? Hakodate? Why?”

“I’m having trouble picking a good location for my story, but as I researched Japan’s port towns, Hakodate seemed like the perfect spot. The skyline at night’s supposed to be great, there are all these historic Western-style buildings...”

In addition to the series that had just landed Itsuki in the wine cellar a few days back, Itsuki and Miyako were also working out an outline for his next novel. The proposal was still vague—a slightly bittersweet ensemble drama about young love, set in a port town—and apart from that, the setting, characters, and story were all still up in the air. Now he was bringing up Hakodate, a city on the southern tip of the large northern island of Hokkaido.

“Hakodate, huh...? It has a reputation as a bustling tourist destination, for sure, but do you really think it has the right vibe? Not some quieter, more desolate seaboard town?”

“I was thinking the same thing at first, but having it in a busier place creates more contrast with the bitterer aspects of the story.”

“Hmm... Well, if you think so, then let’s go check it out.”

It was common enough for an editor to join a writer on a research excursion. Miyako had gone to many with Itsuki and her other writers by now.

“Okay, what day works for you?”

“Umm...are we staying over, by the way?”

“Yeah. I wanna see the night skyline.”

“Right, right.”

Miyako opened up her schedule, searching for a two-day period free of meetings or other outside work. Then she offered a date to Itsuki.

“All right. I’ll get the tickets and stuff, okay? And a hotel.”

“Oh, you will? Great, then. Don’t forget to get a receipt written to Branch Hill for me.”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Thanks again.”

“You too.”

The phone call ended, and Miyako went back to work. It would be a trip alone with Itsuki. The Miyako of a few years ago would be too excited to sleep at this news, but now nothing about this set her heart aflutter—for the most part, she was dreading having this new responsibility placed in her lap when she was already busy. (That and glad for a chance to check out Hokkaido’s excellent seafood on the company’s dime, but that was immaterial.) The next day, Itsuki sent Miyako a message.

I got Shinkansen tickets. Let’s meet up on 12/X at 10am at the Ueno Station central entrance.

“We’re taking the train?!”

Miyako, assuming the distance from Tokyo to Hakodate meant this would be a plane trip, promptly called Itsuki on the phone.

“Why are we taking the Shinkansen over?”

“I want to see the views on the way to Hakodate, not just the city itself. Ideally, I’d love to take a car and stop here and there, but that’ll take too much time, so I’m going for this instead.”

“Even on the Shinkansen, we’re talking a four-hour trip or so...”

“Yeah, but even if it’s a bit over an hour by air, you still have airport security and all that stuff eating time, don’t you?”

“I suppose...”

“You have Internet access on the train, so you can just keep working while you’re on it. I got us Gran Class seats, so they’ll be really big.”

“You got Gran Class?! Accounting’s gonna hate you for that... I’m not sure they’re going to cover it.”

Gran Class was the Japan Shinkansen train system’s equivalent to premier class, even better than the first-class Green seats. Every seat was huge and high quality and came with a free meal—including unlimited drinks, alcoholic or non. It was still cheaper than a first-class plane ticket, but it wasn’t exactly a cheap date, either. Whenever Miyako took long-distance trains for work, it was always in standard class; accounting told her they’d never cover a Green-class seat unless all the regular cars were full.

“Well, I’ll cover the price difference, so don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, it’s fine; I’ll pay for it myself. Ughh...but anyway, I’ll meet you that morning at the station.”

“Great. Looking forward to it.”

“Me too.”

Miyako wrote the event into her schedule. And between the Shinkansen and the Gran Class tickets, it never occurred to her to wonder why they were leaving not from Tokyo Station—the origin point of the bullet trains to northern Japan—but Ueno instead, the next station after.



Meanwhile, Haruto had just received a message from Chihiro. In it, she explained that she’d be traveling to a university in Hokkaido soon to see a professor involved with robotic research for her senior thesis, so why didn’t Haruto join her? Apparently everything was already worked out with the professor in question—and when Haruto looked up the name, it turned out to be someone involved with agricultural robotics he’d been meaning to look

more into for his work. By all means! he wrote back. I'm packed with work, but I'll make it happen.

Then Chihiro gave him the date and time to meet up. December Xth...at Tokyo Station. Apparently, she'd arrange for the tickets.

We're not flying over? Haruto asked.

The professor's house is near the Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto station on the Shinkansen line, so it'd be a lot easier to just take the train there instead of working out transport from the airport.

Chihiro's reply seemed reasonable enough to Haruto.

Then the big day arrived. After he waited a bit at Tokyo Station, Chihiro came slightly later than scheduled.

"Sorry I'm late..."

"Oh, it's fine. Thanks for inviting me today."

"No, no, thank you!" Chihiro seemed unusually tense.

"...? Are you feeling okay, Chihiro?"

"Ah, um, no, it's just, the idea of staying with you at a hotel got me kind of nervous...so my stomach is bothering me a bit..."

"Well, I mean, it's not a vacation, is it? I'm here for my book work, and you're going for research! We have separate hotel rooms anyway!"

Haruto made sure a few points were emphasized in his reply. Four years since he first said no to her, Chihiro still hadn't given up at all; she kept finding little opportunities to make her approach, so he couldn't let his guard down.

"Oh, I know," replied Chihiro with a wry grin. "Here's your train ticket." She handed over a ticket with receipt.

"Thanks. Um, the cost..."

Haruto was about to pay Chihiro the cost of two tickets before she hurriedly stopped him. "Oh, the university's paying for my ticket, so that's okay."

So she only accepted the money for Haruto's ticket.

“Okay—we don’t have much time left, so let’s get going.”

“Right.”

Haruto ran the ticket through the turnstile to the Shinkansen platforms, Chihiro following behind him. Checking the ticket and the electronic board above them, they made it to the platform they were due to embark from. It was ten minutes before departure, but this was the first trip from Tokyo to Hokkaido for the day, so the train was already standing by on the tracks. They chatted for a bit, waiting until they could enter the car they’d be riding on, way up at the front. After a few minutes, the PA squawked to life and the entrance doors opened.

“Oh, sorry—I’m gonna go buy something to drink from the machine, so you go in first.”

Before Haruto could say anything else, Chihiro left the line and headed for the vending machines. *Doesn’t Gran Class give you free drinks?* Haruto thought as he boarded alone and sat down. He had a luxurious-looking leather seat with so much legroom that he didn’t even need to put his wheeled suitcase up on the luggage rack. The tray table was just as well-made and easy to place a laptop on for work purposes.

He was still sitting there, quietly impressed with his first Gran Class experience, when the announcement came that they’d be departing soon. Chihiro wasn’t back yet, which worried Haruto, so he took out his phone—only to find that she had just texted him I’m in the bathroom.

Yeah, she said her stomach was upset...

He sent her a “take your time” sticker, and in another little bit, the train glided away from the platform. In the meantime, he took out his tablet PC and began looking at the materials he was asked to approve for the anime series. Five minutes later, the Shinkansen train arrived at Ueno Station. Chihiro still wasn’t around.

The door opened, new passengers filing in.

“Ah... Haruto?”

Haruto looked up toward the confused-sounding voice. He saw Miyako there.

“Miyako?! Why are *you* here?!”

Miyako looked at her ticket, then the seat adjacent to Haruto. “This is my seat, but...”

“Huh? I think this is Chihiro’s...”

“Chi? Oh, you’re with Chi today?”

“Yeah... We’re going to Hokkaido. Chihiro was introducing me to this college professor who does work in agricultural robotics. I think I could use his stuff in my novels.” He hurriedly set out to explain, lest he be misunderstood.

“I was going to Hakodate with Itsuki so he could research *his* novel, too.”

“Where’s Itsuki?”

“He said he was going to buy a drink before we left.”

“Really? Chihiro said the same thing earlier—”

As they spoke, growing more and more confused, the train doors closed and they left Ueno Station.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” asked the attendant working the Gran Class car.

“N-no, we’re fine,” Miyako replied, sliding into her seat. Then Haruto received another sticker from Chihiro—this one featuring *Gundam*’s Char Aznable bowing with the word “Sorry...” above him. She could have chosen any of a million “apology” stickers, but she chose the one that suggested she was pretending to be a friend, only to secretly be plotting his murder. That couldn’t have been an accident.

At just about the same time, Miyako’s phone vibrated. She looked at the phone and yelped. “What?!”

“What’s wrong?” Haruto asked. Miyako responded by showing him the message from Itsuki on her phone.

Sorry, but something urgent came up so I have to bail. Go check out Hakodate for me with the guy seated next to you.

This was followed by the URL for a hotel website and the message Tonight’s hotel. I have a reservation for two under the name Miyako Shirakawa.

“What could he be thinking...?!”

Haruto smiled dryly at Miyako as her facial muscles tightened.

“It looks like the Hashima siblings pulled one over on us...”

“Huh? But why Chi as well...?”

Miyako knew well that Chihiro had a long-term crush on Haruto.

“I guess Chihiro’s finally given up on me...?”

Haruto still had a vague smile on his face. He had an idea of Chihiro’s intentions. She didn’t want to keep going with this unrequited love, so this was her way of saying “just strike the final blow already.” He had already flat out told her he wasn’t interested, so he didn’t feel like Chihiro held the moral high ground here, but he did feel guilty about the years of pain she’d had to go through. He wasn’t angry about being deceived like this—in fact, having Chihiro set all of this up for him made Haruto both thankful and more than a little ready to take the leap.

“Well, since I’m already here, I’ll keep going to Hakodate, but what about—”

He was about to ask “What about you?” Then he thought of a better turn of phrase.

“Would you like to join me, Miyako?”

It was about twenty minutes to Omiya Station, the next stop, and then the train wouldn’t stop again for several hours until it reached Sendai up north. If they wanted to change their plans, now was the time.

Miyako heaved a hefty sigh at Haruto’s invitation. But just then the Gran Class attendant began offering menus and drinks to them.

“Would you like something to drink?”

Miyako looked at the menu. “Cider, please.”



She was ordering an alcoholic beverage—meaning there was no getting out at Omiya. She was staying on this train for the duration.

“Oh, uh, I’ll have a cider, too.”

“Excellent.” The attendant let them be.

Haruto looked at Miyako’s face. She was turned toward the aisle, blushing a little.

“I mean, I already bought a ticket with the company’s money, and we don’t get anything back if we cancel our hotel reservation the day of. We pretty much have to go to Hakodate, don’t we?”

“Yeah. Let’s just consider it the equivalent of a snow day, huh?”

Relief and tension were intermixed in Haruto’s voice. This couple’s journey was underway.



Both of them had been up late last night at work, so a light meal and glass of cider were enough to trigger sudden exhaustion. Before long, one of the pair drifted off to sleep, then the other.

They both woke up just when the conductor announced they’d be passing through the Seikan Tunnel, the underground tube connecting Japan’s main island of Honshu with Hokkaido to the north.

“Oh... I fell asleep.”

“Me too...”

Miyako sounded embarrassed about it. Haruto laughed a little.

“You know,” she said as she stretched out a bit, “when I sleep on a plane or train, it always makes my neck hurt later, but I feel just fine now. These seats are so comfy.”

“Yeah. Feels like kind of a waste to sleep through the entire Gran Class journey, though. It was all you can drink, too.”

Miyako laughed. “Aren’t you a A-list author, Haruto? You can afford to buy it

by the glass.”

“Hey, I can’t change who I am inside. I don’t really think my financial sensibilities have changed at all since before I started as a pro. Not like any of my hobbies take up a lot of money anyway.”

“What about your bar tabs? You always drink fancy craft beer.”

“Yeahhh, imported beer can be on the expensive side...but it’s still just beer, you know? It’s not some kind of weird one-percenter investment the way wine and whiskey can be. If I had to pay tens of thousands of yen for a single bottle of something, I’d be too nervous to really savor it.”

“Me too.”

Haruto hid his anxiety, keeping his voice light and airy. “But if we’re thinking about, like, the future, I guess it’s important that we approach money in similar ways, isn’t it?”

“Maybe so. Personally, I think if you earned the money, you’re free to do whatever you want with it, but...”

It was the most casual way Haruto could think of to sell himself to her. But Miyako, too, was hiding her trepidation and keeping her own replies terse.

Haruto, a bit disappointed at this, pressed the attendant call button and ordered a bottle of apple juice made in the northern Japanese prefecture of Aomori. Miyako chimed in to ask for some herbal tea.

Once the train was out of the Seikan Tunnel, the temperature noticeably dropped inside. The car was heated, but there was a light yet palpable chill in the air.

“I didn’t check the weather or anything, but I didn’t think it’d be *this* different.”

“If it’s like this inside the train, how cold is it outside...?”

Haruto and Miyako shivered a bit as they examined the scene out the window.



About twenty minutes after exiting the tunnel, the Shinkansen train finally reached its terminus at Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto.

“Oh man, it’s freezing!” Miyako cried as the cold wind outside the train brushed against her face.

“Actually, I think I remember Itsuki and Setsuna talking about how they nearly died going to Hokkaido in the winter...”

Those two were at Sapporo, Hokkaido’s largest city, in February. This was Hakodate, a fair distance south of Sapporo, in early December...but it was still pretty darn chilly.

For now, the two of them went inside the station building from the arrival platform and headed for the Kodate Liner train to the city of Hakodate proper. Waiting inside the heated train car before departure, Haruto noticed a message from Chihiro on his phone.

I put together all the material on the agricultural robot you wanted to learn about in my Dropbox folder, so just enjoy yourself.

“...Chihiro strikes again.”

Even after tricking him, Chihiro’s follow-up was impeccable. All Haruto could do was sit there, astonished. Meanwhile, Itsuki was filling Miyako’s inbox up with recommendations for places and restaurants to visit in Hakodate. Okay, great, just get back to work!!! she replied as she looked at the list.

“I’m pretty hungry. Want something light before we check in?”

“Sounds good.”

The food on the Gran Class train car was quite good, using seasonal ingredients and all, but it wasn’t very big—a little lacking for a full lunch. So, after taking the fifteen-minute journey from Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto to Hakodate Station, the two of them headed for a Lucky Pierrot, a chain of unique fast-food restaurants spread out around the city that was supposed to be really popular.

Going inside, they both ordered the Chinese Chicken Burger, supposedly the most popular item on the menu, and they were both digging in after a few

minutes. They looked at each other, eyes wide open.

“This is good...”

“Yeah! It is!”

Between the two buns was a juicy, crispy chicken patty drizzled with a sweet-and-spicy dark sauce and topped with lettuce and mayonnaise. It wasn't teriyaki or American-style, but Chinese *youlinji* fried chicken, hence the name of the item on the menu. The sourness in the mayo worked incredibly well with the sauce, while the texture of the lettuce added a nice accent. The result: an overwhelming umami flavor across your mouth, instantly wiping away concerns about whether eating a chicken sandwich as your first meal in Hokkaido was really a good idea. It tasted great, it was just the right size, and it was cheap, too. The menu didn't end with the Chinese Chicken Burger, either; there were regular beef burgers too, as well as curry, rice omelets, and even pizza and pasta for some reason, turning fast-food common sense on its head.

“...I wonder if they could start a franchise near the editorial office,” Miyako seriously suggested when they were done. The one disadvantage of Branch Hill's location was that there weren't many good lunch places right nearby, which made the afternoon meal breaks a little samey.

“I want one near my place, too. I guess being in Hokkaido is what lets them offer this kind of quality for the price, but still. If they could provide this in Tokyo, they'd be huge.”

Haruto sounded pretty disappointed as he smiled.



After filling their stomachs, the couple walked toward their hotel. It was four in the afternoon, so there was a line of people waiting to check in at the lobby.

“Hello, we're checking in under Shirakawa?”

The guy at the front desk checked his computer. “Miyako Shirakawa?”

“Right.”

“Great. So I have you here one night, one twin room for two guests, breakfast

included?”

““Huh?!””

Miyako and Haruto both burst out at the same time. The front-desk clerk gave them a puzzled look.

“Does that sound right to you?”

“Umm... When you say one twin room, do you mean it’s two people...in one room?” Haruto asked with some trepidation.

“That’s correct,” the clerk nodded.

“What was Itsuki thinking...?!”

“No, I think this was more Chihiro’s doing,” Haruto said, voice straining. That insane boldness, that drive to take the shortest possible route to her needs, once she decided to take action—it could only be Chihiro. It hardly seemed like the kind of thing you’d expect from a girl who had made her latest romantic advances just a few days ago, but her propensity for changing gears like that was pure Chihiro as well.

“Um, sir...?”

“Um,” the hesitant Haruto said to the concerned clerk, “do you think we could get one more room?”

“I’m sorry, we’re fully booked for the evening.”

“Oh...”

“All right,” interjected Miyako. “That’s fine, then.”

“Huh? Are you sure?” he asked with some surprise.

She blushed a bit. “If there’s nothing open, what can we do about it? Let’s just brace ourselves and do the thing.”

“Oh, uh, okay.”

So the two of them, heartbeats accelerating as they finished checking in, headed for their room. It contained two semi-double beds.

“Wh-which one do you want, Miyako?”

“I’ll take...this one.”

Miyako answered the nervous question just as awkwardly, choosing one of the beds at random and placing her bag on it.

“Okay, uhh, when do you want to go to Mount Hakodate?”

“The sun’s about to set, so it ought to be just about perfect if we took off right now, don’t you think?”

“Great. Let’s get going, then.”

“Yeah, we’d better do that.”

Taking along nothing but the bare necessities like wallets and phones, Haruto and Miyako all but fled the room they had just walked into.



There was a line of people in front of the ropeway up Mount Hakodate, all hoping to take in the night view. The sun had fully set by the time they finally managed to reach the top of the mountain. The peak was, as expected, full of visitors. It was also pretty dark, to the point that they would’ve been separated quickly if they didn’t keep an eye out.

“This way, Miyako.”

Haruto casually took Miyako’s hand as he worked his way through the crowd and toward the far edge of the observation deck offering a view of the whole city.

“Wow, it’s pretty.”

Taking in the famed million-dollar view, Miyako let out a sigh of bliss. There was the city, sandwiched on both sides by the jet-black ocean, its sparkling lights offering sharp contrast like an overturned box of jewelry. You could only find it here in Hakodate, and to make the view even more attractive, the city had added little improvements like orange streetlights and prominent flood lighting for the town’s more historic buildings and churches.

Haruto marveled at how this beautiful sight must be the most romantic thing possible for a couple. Or he tried to. But it was proving difficult. There were just

so many people around them; a mixture of Japanese, Chinese, English, and more languages filled the air, and they had to raise their voices more than a little to maintain a conversation. Many of the visitors were taking pictures or selfies, and you were obliged to wait your turn for space by the railing, so it was difficult to settle down somewhere and fully take in the view.

He had thought about, you know, maybe stealing a kiss amid this romantic atmosphere...but the mood just wasn't right for it at all. There were couples here in their own little worlds, of course, oblivious to the clamor around them, but Haruto and Miyako weren't even an item yet. For them, that behavior was well-nigh impossible.

So, after taking the usual photos from the usual angles, the two of them quickly retreated from the observation deck.



After taking the ropeway back down Mount Hakodate, they picked a nice-looking spot out of the list Itsuki messaged Miyako and took a taxi there. Some of the places on the list were “date” restaurants, offering a litany of couples-oriented options, but instead they went for an *izakaya*-style bar where they'd be able to find good seafood.

Sitting at the bustling bar, they ordered some sake, a plate of assorted sashimi, some *ika-somen* (raw squid cut into noodle-like strips, a Hakodate specialty), and so forth. The sake arrived shortly after, accompanied by some complimentary salted squid, so they shared a quick toast.

“Well, here's to a good day.”

“Mm-hmm.”

The rest of the meal came soon after, both of them smacking their lips at the incredibly fresh seafood. Consuming the sake at a somewhat accelerated pace, they began talking about what they had been up to lately, the problems they'd been dealing with, and recent events in the industry. Their stomachs were full in short time, and between that and the light inebriation, the conversation grew livelier.

This was generally how Haruto and Miyako's dates always turned out. Three years ago, Miyako said that the day would come where she finally accepted herself, and if Haruto still liked her, they'd get together. Since then, absolutely nothing had changed.

...Chihiro set all this up for me, and just look. What am I even doing?

A new resolve began to color Haruto's eyes.

"You know... Isn't it weird, how we're all the way up in Hokkaido and it's just like any other drinking date for us?"

"...You're right." Miyako had noticed the hint of passion hidden in Haruto's voice.

"Miyako, um—"

"I still remember my promise, you know," she cut in.

"Huh?"

"Uh...like, that someday I'll fully recognize myself, and if you still love me by then, we can be a couple."

"Oh, yeah, I was just about to suggest we talk about that..." Haruto wasn't sure how to continue after she stole his thunder. "So...you still haven't accepted yourself? Because to me, I think you're definitely a full-fledged editor by now. You've launched all kinds of hit series; you have plenty to show for your career. You're keeping problem authors like Itsuki under control. Honestly, if someone that good at her job after just four years isn't a full-fledged editor, I'd have to wonder just how hazardous the light-novel business really is."

Miyako smiled a bit at Haruto's sincere praise.

"Yeah, to be honest, I think I'm working pretty darn hard by industry standards."

"All right, so—" Haruto was cut off once more.

"I'm sorry. Do you mind waiting just a little longer?"

"Just a little?"

"To be exact, allow me to challenge myself with just one more book."

“One more book?”

The sudden introduction of this concrete deadline made Haruto more concerned than overjoyed.

Miyako watched him, face sincere. “I want to make Itsuki’s next new work something that surpasses *I Want to Be the Protagonist*. And whether it does or not...once it’s published, let’s start dating then.”

Miyako seemed ready to throw everything she had toward this goal. It almost overwhelmed Haruto.

“Surpassing *I Want to Be the Protagonist*, huh...? Yeah, everything Itsuki’s released since then has been reliably high quality, but it doesn’t quite reach that point, I don’t think...and people still treat *Protagonist* like it’s his greatest masterpiece.”

Miyako nodded. “Exactly. And honestly, I don’t think his book coming out next month is his greatest masterpiece, either.”

“So how are you gonna try to surpass that? Because it’s Itsuki actually writing the thing, isn’t it? It seems like he’s in kind of a slump, too...”

“All I can do is trust in Itsuki and do the best work I can as an editor. Besides, I think I have an idea of what Itsuki’s lacking if he wants to surpass *Protagonist*.”

“You do?! Why don’t you just tell him?”

Miyako lightly shook her head. “I think it’s something Itsuki himself has to notice, or it won’t really work. If he can really look into his own heart, I think he’ll pick up on it really fast, but...”

Miyako flashed a sad smile. Haruto just looked at the side of her face, unsure what to say. She was a full-fledged editor, one who knew well how to carry herself. For a writer like Haruto, who emphasized writing skill and analysis, she unfortunately wasn’t the type who’d be likely to work well with him.



Returning to their hotel did nothing to add any romance to the evening. After they warmed up at the hotel’s large public bath, they went to their room,

answered e-mails and worked on media approvals, and went to bed at two in the morning or so.

The next morning, they stuffed themselves on a breakfast buffet featuring such outlandish items as all-you-can-eat salmon roe and sashimi, checked out of the hotel, did some touring around the Bay and Motomachi areas, had seafood bowls for a late lunch, then returned to Tokyo on the Shinkansen.

They split up at Tokyo Station, and on the train back home, Haruto messaged Chihiro and Itsuki that he was back from Hakodate. He sent some photos of his meals, the night views, the old buildings, the port, and more stuff in an attempt to brag as much as possible.

But did anything new happen between you and Miyako?

Chihiro, growing more and more impatient, just came out with the question. Yeah, Haruto texted back with a grin. Itsuki replied with a sticker of an anime character nodding and going “Ahh, I see”; Chihiro replied with silence. She might have been behind all of this, but seeing actual results from it must have given her mixed feelings—that much was clear to Haruto.

She said we can get together once she makes something with Itsuki that surpasses Protagonist.

She’d actually said that she would say yes whether she was successful or not, but he fibbed a bit, partly to motivate Itsuki and partly just to mess with them.

Huh? Why?!

Itsuki’s troubled comment was greeted with another text from Haruto: So hurry up and make your greatest masterpiece yet. This, in turn, resulted in an “I have no idea” sticker.

Hurry up and write that masterpiece, chimed in Chihiro, adding a sticker of Golgo 13 readying his sniper rifle for good measure. Itsuki sent a sticker of someone shouting, “Why me?”

Well...try your best for us, Itsuki. Because clearly the future of me, Miyako, and Chihiro is riding on your shoulders.

Haruto imagined how much Itsuki must be panicking by now, even as he

wished him the best of luck.



The night after Haruto and Miyako returned from Hakodate, a drunken Chihiro Hashima was at Itsuki's place, using her brother as a sounding board to vent her sorrows. Kazuko was in the bedroom, helping Sora fall asleep.

"I swear-a god! Whuh th' hell's he doin', goin' all th' way up to Hokkaido?! Just connect with 'er already! He's jus' leavin' me in limbo!"

"Yeah, yeah..."

Itsuki, growing exasperated at Chihiro's cycle of taking a swig of beer and repeating herself over and over again, was barely even part of the conversation anymore.

She was drinking Lindemans Pêcheresse, a fruit beer with peach juice added, and the ABV on it was a low 2.5 percent. Itsuki got it specifically for her since he knew how bad she was at holding her drink, but she wound up downing a few as though they were sparkling fruit drinks or something, and now this.

"Does he have any idea what it took, puttin' all 'is together?! Haruhiko's such a putz! A piece-a shit! Does 'e even have a dick attached to 'im?!"

"I know, I know, Haruto's an impotent putz, et cetera."

Chihiro's eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "Ey! Don' talk mean 'bout Haruhiko!"

"Which do you want?" Itsuki growled.

"I give 'em a hotel together," a spellbound Chihiro replied, "an' he still has restraint! Izz so *awesome*! Not everyone can do that, y'know. Ahhh, I love 'im..."

"Uh-huh."

Drinking with his little sister was a situation that would once make Itsuki foam at the mouth. Now that it was his reality, it was such a pain in the ass.

"B'sides! Myaa-ko's bein' a total ass about it! They both love each other, but they never get to-damn-gether! Wha's the *point*?! They're like one a' those romcoms that just won't *end*!"

She accentuated her point by banging on the table. Itsuki smiled a bit.

“Well, I do agree that Miyako is being way too much trouble about this.”

“Y’see?”

“But that’s also one of her good traits, so...”

That earnest drive to remain sincere to her own heart was absolutely one of Miyako’s best points. It was a nice contrast from Chihiro, who valued rationality, liked to make snap decisions, and acted on them quickly.

“Whuhh?! Izzuki, whose side’re y’on?”

“Y-your side, of course, Chi!”

“Good!!” After a satisfied nod, Chihiro suddenly stared at Itsuki with sullen eyes. “So write yer stupid masterpiece already. Hurry up. Do it now.”

“You can’t write a masterpiece just because you want to. Otherwise everyone would do it.”

Itsuki chuckled at the idea, while Chihiro puffed up her cheeks like a grade schooler throwing a tantrum.

“Well, do it anyway! ’Cuz if you don’t, Haruhiko’s gonna be a virgin the rest-a his life!”

“Oh, right, yeah. Well, I’ll give it my best shot.”

It really didn’t matter to Itsuki whether Haruto went his whole life without ever getting laid, but honestly speaking, he really *did* want to surpass *I Want to Be the Protagonist*. He just didn’t know what he needed to achieve that. After the assorted novels he’d written in the past three years, he was sure his writing skill had improved—or it should have, anyway.

“Well, *try*, okaaay? ’Cuz when y’put yer mind t’somethin’, Izzuki, ya do great...”

With that final muddled outburst, Chihiro finally placed her head on the table and passed out.

“Eesh... My little sister causes me so much trouble.”

With a sigh, Itsuki picked up his phone and messaged his father: Chihiro just

fell asleep, so she'll stay with me tonight.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Married characters: Where did you go on your honeymoon?



My first wife and I went to Italy.

My first husband and I didn't go on one. With Keisuke...the first trip we made as a married couple was to Atami, by the beach.



Kazuko and I went to Taiwan.

They held a joint autograph event while we were there, and all the locals celebrated our marriage. It was fun.



We went to Pennsylvania, in the U.S.

That doesn't sound like a honeymoon hotspot. Why there?



A lot of zombie films were shot there.

Oh...



A Vampire Is Born

Long ago, in the age when magic still existed in this world, the land was ruled not by humanity, but by vampires.....

The vampires lived really long lives, they could cast a lot of really awesome magic, and you could cut them with a sword or whatever and they wouldn't even die.

But one day, the king of the vampires fell in love with a human girl. A child was born between them, but he was bullied by both the vampires and the humans.....

But one day, while this child was cutting grass in the mountains, he fell off a cliff, only to be saved by a mysterious man. The two wound up living together.....

This man was actually the strongest vampire hunter, who came one step away from defeating the king of the vampires long ago, so the man taught the child all his skills.

The child grew over time, and he came to learn a whole bunch of magic.

Then one day, when he turned seventeen years old, the village the child was born in was attacked by a horde of monsters.....

The child's name was Ciel Godkaiser von Helsing.

He was a beautiful young man with silvery hair and crimson eyes, clad in a jet-black outfit, and he was the strongest vampire hunter, capable of using both holy and dark powers.

[...]

And so Ciel's first battle came to an end.

But this was nothing but the opening chapter to a great, new legend.....

“Hee-hee-hee... I think I’ll stop there for today...”

With that declaration, the girl placed the stack of papers that contained her first novel—*Evil Master of the Holy Fang, The First Episode: Beginnings*—on the table.

“Whoa! That was so good! You’re a genius!”

“Hee-hee-hee... More, praise me more...”

The audience response made the girl smile, satisfied.

It was a day in mid-December, and the girl reading her novel to Shiori was Nadeshiko Kiso, age 14. She was dressed in a gothic-Lolita outfit and wearing a red-tinted contact lens in her right eye.

Having grown up around publishing companies and Itsuki’s apartment, gotten spoiled by professional writers and editors, and granted access to all the anime and nerd stuff she wanted, Nadeshiko had taken a liking to somewhat darker material around when she reached middle school. By her second year, she had been afflicted with that disease that affects many teens her age—a mixture of overinflated ego and abject naïveté.

She began to call herself the “†descendant of vampires†,” granting herself the self-styled “true name” of †Diansath “Origin” von Draculia†. Her grandmother (Yoshihiro Kiso’s wife) was from Romania, home of Vlad the Impaler, the real-life inspiration for Dracula, and apparently she saw destiny at work there somehow.

“I really love talking to you, Nadeko!”

“My name is not Nadeko. It is †Diansath ‘Origin’ von Draculia†... What do you like more—*PreCure* or my story?”

“*PreCure!*” Shiori instantly replied.

“Mmm. Do you like *Aikatsu* or my story more?”

“*Aikatsu!*”

Another prompt reply. It irked Nadeshiko, but not gravely so.

“Hee-hee-hee... Well, perhaps my tales are a tad too mature for someone

your age...and being third behind *PreCure* and *Aikatsu* is hardly something to sniff at. I have all but conquered you, in fact...”

This forced logic was enough to convince Nadeshiko for now.



Nadeshiko had been coming to the Hashima residence regularly to read her novels to Shiori for the past half year or so. She had begun writing them at the age of ten, and whenever she read them to her grandfather Yoshihiro, not to mention GF Bunko members Satoshi Godo and Kenjiro Toki, they consistently showered her with praise. She’d let this go to her head a little bit, and now she was trying to become a professional novelist herself.

In her first year of middle school, she wrote her first full-length novel. Then, sensing the time was ripe, she submitted it to a new-authors contest—but, sadly, she was rejected in the first selection round. Fully convinced this was some kind of mistake, Nadeshiko marched right up to Toki and Godo at GF Bunko and had them read it again.

“Do you really want to be a professional writer, Nadeshiko?” Toki asked, trying to make sure as he skimmed her work.

“Hee-hee-hee... Yes, exactly...”

Toki and Godo exchanged looks, then turned back toward Nadeshiko.

“All right. In that case...I will provide you with a professional editor’s reply.”

“...!”

Nadeshiko fidgeted a little; the men were normally so jovial and loved praising everything she did.

Indeed, the feedback the two of them gave her was unforgiving. From the prose to the story and characters, nothing about this novel was near professional quality. It was perfectly valid to send this manuscript to the shredder in the first round.

And even worse:

“Since I know you personally, I gave you a special read this time around...but if

you're seriously aiming for a career in this business, you need to be submitting to new-writer contests, not going to us."

The verdict from Toki left Nadeshiko tremendously disheartened as she left the editorial department. But back home, she recovered quickly. "They may be professional editors," she told herself, "but they are barren, bereft of all emotion. There must be so many others who understand the value of this work!"

So she uploaded her story to a user-submitted web novel site. It received very few page views, and the few comments it received—"not interesting at all," "the characters aren't engaging," "the writing is self-important and hard to follow"—were universally negative. That, finally, broke Nadeshiko's heart.

The Internet is a scary place. They don't understand that the person on the other side of the screen is an actual human being.

After that, she had stopped writing, and her life had descended into depression. But one day, Itsuki Hashima invited her over to visit. Her grandfather had apparently tried getting her out of her doldrums by having her old friend play with her for a bit. There, at Itsuki's place, she ran into his real little sister Shiori, who happened to be visiting. Nadeshiko didn't have a high opinion of her at first—this was the girl, after all, who was responsible for taking Itsuki's attention away from her—but Shiori quickly took a liking to her, and they became friends.

When Shiori bugged Nadeshiko to read her a story, she decided to have some fun and read the work she published on that web novel site to her. But Shiori listened on and seemed to enjoy it. She had only just turned three years old at the time, and chances were she was enjoying Nadeshiko's exaggerated gestures and manner of speech instead of actually comprehending the story. But now it was a fact—someone liked her novel. And that truly saved Nadeshiko.

Ever since, whenever she had a new work finished, she would march right over to Shiori and have her praise it to high heaven.



"Nadeko, boobies!"

Once story time was done and they all enjoyed a snack from Chihiro, Shiori begged Nadeshiko for some post-meal nursing, stars in her eyes.

“I *told* you, my name is †Diansath ‘Origin’ von Draculia†...”

“You’re a great writer, Nadeko! A big genius! Better than bro-bro!”

“Hee-hee-hee... Well, so be it...”

She laughed, in a good mood, then suddenly disrobed and revealed her pert breasts. Unlike her mentality, her body was pretty well developed for a girl of fourteen; she was tall, had a big chest, and the increasing tightness of her dresses was starting to distress her.

“Yahoo! 🎵 Lick lick lick! 🎵”

“Hee-hee-hee... Ahh, you’re like a mangy mutt without any training... Nh... Ah... Hey, no, too intense...💩”

Being suckled like this, Nadeshiko resisted the urge to moan. What she didn’t realize was that Shiori had her pegged as someone who’d easily give boobie time in exchange for a little praise. At this rate, it might be some time yet before she made her professional writing debut.



Publishing Without Honor or Humility

On a day in late December, the Branch Hill editorial team was holding their end-of-year party at an *izakaya* in the Shinjuku neighborhood of Tokyo. Ayane Mitahora, the assistant editor-in-chief, lifted her glass for a toast.

“Here’s to a great year, everyone! We’ll still have to go to work tomorrow, but we’ve wrapped up the worst of it, so for today, let’s just party it up! This place is known for its Chinese cuisine, and they got shark fin soup and Peking duck and stuff! The president will pay for however much we overshoot our budget, so I don’t want *any* of you worrying about money, got it?!”

“I said nothing of the sort.” Nobunaga Shiogamine, president of Branch Hill, squinted at Ayane. She just laughed it off.

“Ah-ha-hah! Why do you think we called you in here, president?!”

“I’m also the editor-in-chief, remember... You’re the only person I know who’d invite the president of a company to make him buy shark fin soup and Peking duck for you...”

But Shiogamine shrugged and laughed to himself.

“Okay, that sounds like permission to me! Cheers!!”

““““Cheers!!””””

The editors all clinked glasses with whoever was nearby. Miyako shared the toast with several coworkers before downing her Asahi Extra Cold. The thicker, richer beer Haruto and Itsuki normally drank was good and all, but there was nothing like a lager designed to be thrown back with abandon. When it came to fried foods like yakitori and chicken, nothing paired better.

There were six people in Branch Hill Bunko’s editorial department, Ayane and Miyako included. Nobunaga Shiogamine was also serving as editor-in-chief,

mainly so *someone* would take responsibility if things broke bad, but otherwise he took a hands-off approach to the label. A lot of things were left to the discretion of the individual Branch Hill Bunko editors; they all stuck to their own style, which meant there wasn't that much cohesion between them, but working together for three years, a natural sort of team spirit and camaraderie was taking form. Today, especially, when they had just made it through the worst of the pre-holiday rush, the whole editorial team was partying it up.

"You kicked ass again this year, Shirakawa," said Shirogamine.

"Oh no, I still have a while to go," Miyako meekly replied.

"Uh-uh. You're already one of our ace editors. Other publishers fear you, you know. They call you 'the lady pirate of Branch Hill.'"

"Oh, stop that! It's really awkward for me!"

Miyako blushed as she protested Shirogamine's ribbing.

All of the writers she was supervising at the moment were veterans with experience contributing to other publishers. GF Bunko was a particularly popular starting point for many of them, and first among them was Sota Izumi, aka Steak Tsukemono, who became a web novelist after things fell apart between him and GF. The second was Itsuki Hashima. He was originally supposed to release just one novel through Branch Hill, but in the end, the publisher turned into his main outlet. The third was Sushita Nakashima, who won a prize at the 16th GF Bunko New Writers Contest with *My Sisters Come from Parallel Universes*; he looked up to his idol Itsuki Hashima so much that he broke the three-year exclusivity rule and followed him over to Branch Hill. Hikari Kairo, the young grand prize winner at the 16th GF Bunko contest with *Searching for the Heart*, didn't hit it off with her editor and also switched to Branch Hill after Nakashima introduced her to Miyako and they meshed well.

None of this was due to Miyako proactively headhunting authors from anywhere, and yet she had violated the unwritten three-year rule and taken four writers—including Hikari Kairo, hailed as the potential second coming of Nayuta Kani—who had won prizes from GF Bunko. This turned into a big controversy, enough so that GF editor-in-chief Godo personally went over to Branch Hill to file a protest.

What's more, Yohei Kitagata, a writer for GF, had also taken all his copyrights—including for *Sillies*, a hit that was a candidate for anime adaptation—and jumped ship to Branch Hill as well. He didn't work with Miyako and hadn't placed in any GF Bunko writer contests, but Kitagata knew Miyako from her days part-timing at GF. He'd asked her for a reference to some other editor, and she had simply obliged—but to the external observer, this was Miyako being ruthless as ever.

It should be noted that authors moving copyrights around is a huge deal for both a writer and the publisher, one that requires a lot of annoying paperwork. Kitagata went through with it because GF refused to issue reprints of his work—they were sold out, but the publisher didn't want to take on any more inventory of his series and figured the readers would make do with the e-book versions. In the modern era where anyone can easily sell e-books by themselves, the biggest reason why writers sign on with publishers at all is because they're willing to risk taking on unsold inventory in place of the writer—and that was hardly an exaggeration.

This wasn't the first case of a writer ditching a publisher for not holding up their end of the bargain, and it definitely wasn't going to be the last. Bad blood between sales teams that want to keep inventory to a minimum and editorial teams that want to keep expanding sales as much as possible was hardly rare in this business; it was seen in every publisher, Branch Hill included, and Miyako's own team would sometimes have to engage in strained talks with the sales team.

But enough about that. The point is that Miyako had gained a reputation among writers for never abandoning the ones relying on her, and so she was attracting novelists who (for whatever reason) couldn't quite work it out with other firms. This was why other editorial teams feared her as a female buccaneer, sailing the high seas on the HMS *Branch Hill* in search of new authors to ruthlessly plunder.

Meanwhile, Miyako's boss Ayane Mitahora, while not enjoying the same notoriety, had a knack for snapping up web novel authors coveted by other companies, talented artists who could handle anime adaptations, decent animation production companies, and so forth. People spoke of her in hushed

tones as Branch Hill's P. T. Barnum, always pulling a scam to draw new talent to her team's side. Some even referred to their boss Nobunaga Shirogamine, Branch Hill Bunko's editor-in-chief, as the publishing industry's Calico Jack—a real-life Caribbean pirate captain who became known for having two female crew members, Mary Read and Anne Bonny.

"Whenever I trade business cards with other editors," griped Miyako, "they all stare at me like 'Ah! The pirate captain herself!' I wish I could do something about that..."

"You should be proud of it. Other publishers *fear* us."

She scowled at Shirogamine's interpretation. "But I think it's a problem if my reputation runs too far ahead of me. Because, I mean, it hasn't gone well with *everyone* who's leaned on me..."

Miyako had gained quite a reputation in the business as someone who kept making hits with talent from GF Bunko, but not even she had a perfect record. Her tendency to focus on trusting relationships and work on writers and projects until she was satisfied with them led to complaints from some of her clients—"her instructions are so vague, I'm not sure what she wants from me"; "I wish she'd be clearer about what exactly she wants to see fixed," "editors shouldn't be too friendly with writers; I want a more businesslike relationship."

What's more, many of the writers who came to her had run into trouble with other publishers thanks to their own misconduct—but when she frankly pointed it out, almost none of them could accept facts. Ayane and other veteran editors could wriggle their way around these problems and keep a firm hold on the reins, but Miyako didn't have that kind of technical skill. She just somehow found a way to build a rapport with "unique" geniuses like Itsuki Hashima and Hikari Kairo; she wasn't the type of editor who could work well with everybody.

"When you're talking about a writer and editor, they're all people, you know. There's lots of examples of a writer being driven up the wall by one editor, but another writer loving the same editor like their own mother. You really can't tell unless you start working with each other."

"That's totally true."

“Right, so keep on picking up writers from other publishers, please. Why don’t you have Nayuta Kani write for us, even? You know her, don’t you?”

Shirogamine was making a pretty bold statement here, whether he was just joking or not. It made Miyako tense up. If she headhunted *her* on top of everyone else, she’d never be able to face up to GF Bunko editorial again.

But then:

“Sounds like you’re talking about something interesting over there.”

Turning toward the low, grating voice, they found a scary mobster looming over them...in the form of Satoshi Godo, head of GF Bunko. Behind him were Kenjiro Toki, Kirara Yamagata, and other faces from GF editorial that Miyako knew well.

“Ah... Mr. Godo! What’s up?”

“We’re having our end-of-year party,” Godo curtly replied to Miyako. Then he glared at Shirogamine.

“I didn’t expect to run into the Calico Jack of publishing in here, though.”

Godo’s glare would make most people pee their pants, but Shirogamine just smiled. “I’d prefer if people called me the Oda Nobunaga of publishing. I mean, I share a first name with the guy.”

“Hmph. Who’d ever call you the name of one of Japan’s greatest historical figures? The name of a dirty pirate who hid behind two women before he finally got dragged out and hanged suits you *much* more.”

Shirogamine frowned. “My, that’s a lot of trash talking for a supposed editor-in-chief. Don’t you think you’re more qualified for some other position? Maybe as a mobster or something?”

“Well, at least I’d be obliged to adhere to a code of honor, then. Not like you pirates.”

Godo looked like a yakuza enforcer; Shirogamine looked more like an intelligent territorial mob leader. Sparks flew as they stared each other down, the tension spreading across the GF and Branch Hill employees around them.

To Satoshi Godo, Nobunaga Shirogamine was an enemy whose existence he

simply couldn't abide. Miyako was someone he'd personally trained; seeing her perform in this industry was a delight for him. But it was also true that she had inflicted massive damage on GF, and all of that hate was directed straight at Shirogamine. Kenjiro Toki and the rest of the GF staff generally felt the same way, and the hostility was clear among them.

It was a tense moment, one where any false move could trigger a bloodbath. Then:

"Ugh, we're trying to have an end-of-year party! Let's have some fun here! We can't cause trouble for the waitstaff, all right? Oh, I'll have some mapo tofu and a highball, please!"

Ayane's cheerful voice calmed the mood, even as she ordered some more for herself.

"...True. That woman is right."

The malice melted from Godo's face as tensions eased. Miyako breathed an internal sigh of relief.

"Oh, right! Since the whole GF group is here, would you guys like to drink together with us?"

Ayane's suggestion—seemingly naive at first, but actually not at all—froze everyone in place all over again.



But when the offer was about to be turned down:

"I don't mind at all. Assuming you don't?" Shirogamine almost seemed to be challenging the other side.

"I have no reason to turn down the offer, no." Godo smiled as he replied, a vein almost popping in his forehead. And with that, the hellish Branch Hill/GF joint end-of-year party was underway.

Neither side really seemed to know what to do at first, but they started by exchanging business cards with whoever happened to be nearby. Miyako tried her best to flee to a faraway seat.

“I’d love a chance to go in-depth with Miyako again. It’s been forever.”

“Oh, I know. You’ll be sitting here, right, Shirakawa?”

Godo and Shirogamine all but forced her to share a table with them. Toki sat next to Godo, his sympathetic eyes turned toward Miyako. Ayane, the one who had engineered all this in the first place, was already chatting and laughing with Yamagata and other GF staffers at another table.

Toki and Godo’s beers arrived, so the four of them began with a toast.

“Well, umm... I’m sorry if I’ve been acting ungrateful to you...” Miyako began by apologizing to Godo.

“There’s no need for that,” Shirogamine replied. “You haven’t done anything wrong at all. Any GF writer who came to our stable did so of their own volition.”

“...But even so, isn’t there a certain civic duty one should be adhering to?” Godo retorted.

Shirogamine shrugged. “You mean the unwritten three-year rule? If you’re bringing up conventions that aren’t part of any written contract with me, well, I don’t know what to tell you. But what does it say about *you* if that rule’s driving writers away from your company, even with all the risk that entails?”

“Yes, if we’ve failed to establish trusting relationships with our authors, we don’t have anyone else to blame for that. But still, if new authors find it that easy to jump ship to another publisher, then there’s no point spending the money to hold a yearly new writer award.”

“Well, with the advent of web novels, haven’t the economics behind those prizes collapsed anyway? If you want to turn pro at this point, it’s much faster to publish online than compete for a prize.”

It was a cold-hearted response from Shirogamine.

Godo frowned even further. “What do you think would happen, though, if publishers simply abandoned their mission to cultivate new talent and just bought up untested prospects from the Internet instead? That’s what led to the current industry, where web novels are just eating us for lunch.”

“Whether they’re posted online first or not, if good novels are coming out and

selling well, that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"I'm not talking about whether web novels are inherently a bad thing or not. There's been lots of series that would never win a prize but still hit it big on the web. But we can't have nothing *but* web novels. Yes, there are works who fail in the contest circuit but still find an audience online—on the other hand, these contests help us discover works that can't find popularity online."

"But if a series is *truly* good, it'll find its audience, even in the vast sea of the Internet. Let's say that Nayuta Kani's *Silvery Landscape* was self-published online first. The title isn't all that eye-catching, and the writing doesn't really follow the current web novel fashion. But do you still think it'd remain buried?"

"I think that's a pretty extreme argument. It's a big leap to assume that'd ever happen."

"Huh?"

"Yes, you see a lot of inexperienced authors win prizes in contests with really unique ideas and unusual senses of style. But how often does it happen that a writer produces something like that, then grows and matures in the same direction as what they showed in their debut work? From the second book forward, that standout style gets dumbed down, and in the worst cases, they just start cranking out these cookie-cutter books to chase whatever the trend is. If that's how it goes, why try to discover new talent that way at all?"

"...I can't speak about how other firms see it, but at GF Bunko, at least, our editorial team doesn't demand that writers stick to what sells. If a writer transforms their writing style after their first book, it's entirely their own free will."

"That was the case at the company I used to work for, too. People on the net made fun of it like 'Oh, someone must have swapped the author,' but in most cases, if a writer drastically changed their style, it was something *they* wanted to do. And why are they willing to make that commitment—to kill the inherent uniqueness that earned them that new-writer prize in the first place? It's simple. If your stuff doesn't sell, that's hard for you. That's it."

"Exactly... It's tough on you, mentally and financially. And maybe having a small but fervent fanbase will provide some mental satisfaction, but it won't

help your bank account very much. Every writer needs to live, after all... We can't order them to stick with their original edge, even if it's not selling."

"Well, don't you think that's deceptive? If you've really committed to a writer's talent and seriously *want* that talent to bear fruit someday, you should at least tell them something like 'don't worry about sales numbers; we'll figure out a way to keep you fed until your books start selling.' Because what are we seeing in reality? Once a writer's branded as 'unprofitable,' the publisher gives them the cold shoulder and they're discarded like yesterday's news."

"It's not our policy to ever shut out writers like that. As long as they want to keep writing, we keep providing our support."

"Hah! That sounds very noble on the surface, but aren't you *really* just continually making them produce trendy work they're not suited for until they have to be taken out behind the shed? Because continually writing novels that don't find an audience and don't garner any praise is going to wear on any author's mind. Then they drop out of the industry themselves. I've seen it happen so many times. It'd almost be kinder if you said they can't cut it sooner and just dumped them from the payroll."

"It's arrogant to completely write off someone else's talent. Besides, if we do that, the only type of writers who'd be left are those lucky enough to be a match for the times, or talented enough to freely change their writing style."

"Well, that's great, isn't it? Survival of the fittest. Only those suited for the era can find a niche."

"That's ridiculous...! What's the point of a publisher that doesn't protect its assets? There *is* none."

"If all you can do is keep them on life support for a little while longer, isn't that the same as not protecting them at all?"

"If they can hold out long enough, sometimes the trends can turn their way."

"But if a writer, or a publisher, gets constantly tossed around by trends instead of trying to forge a path to a new era themselves, do they really deserve to keep going?"

"If we have an industry where only a small handful of the strongest get to

survive, that's hellish for all of us. Having a large playing field where even normal, everyday writers can find a living is exactly what we need. That way, we can create the geniuses who'll build those new eras."

Shirogamine and Godo glared at each other.

"...Well," Shirogamine said with a faint smile, "I think we both agree that the more writers we can bring happiness to, genius or not, the better."

Godo sighed a little. "I think you take too radical an approach in your thoughts, but there's no doubting the fact the publishing industry can't last in its current state. We need to make some major changes..."

After acknowledging each other's opinions, the two of them finished off their beers and went right back into heated argument. Miyako and Toki had no room to get a word in, instead pecking at their food as they quietly, intently listened to their bosses.



Shirogamine and Godo's debate wound up continuing all the way to closing time. Even after everyone was outside and the end-of-year party was over, the two of them disappeared into the night, eager to continue discussing the future direction of the industry at some other bar.

"Wow... That became quite a party," Miyako said to Toki, who was walking next to her as they headed for the station.

"Yeah." Toki chuckled. "I haven't seen the boss get that heated in a while. I heard the rumors about Nobunaga Shirogamine, but he really *is* something special."

"He's usually a lot more easygoing than that, but yeah. Usually, he's more like 'if it's a good story, keep it up.' I guess he has his own convictions after all. It's kind of surprising."

"I see. Maybe, as two EICs, there's a lot that resonates between them." A pause. "And by the way, how's Itsuki doing? I didn't see him at the award ceremony last month."

"I'm sorry... We had him confined at the office to finish a volume."

Toki laughed at the visibly blushing Miyako. “You’ve really become a full-on editor, haven’t you, Shirakawa?”

“I’ve gained a talent for catching reluctant writers, anyway...” She grinned. “But Itsuki’s the same as always, I guess. It looks like he’s in a bit of a slump... but I think it’s a necessary slump if he wants to reach the next level.”

“I see... You’ve really become a partner for him, haven’t you?”

There was something forlorn about Toki’s voice that drove Miyako to ask a question she had been wondering about for a while.

“Um... Mr. Toki, now that Itsuki’s got an agent contract with me and he’s mainly working for Branch Hill... What do you think about that?”

Toki stopped walking, eyes up in the air as he thought for a bit.

“It’s frustrating.”

It was his honest, unvarnished reply.

“Itsuki Hashima was the first writer I officially supervised when I joined Gift Publishing. I really thought we could work together to produce the kind of masterpiece that’d create a whole new era. We fought a lot, but we kept it going for six years, and seeing him develop so much as I worked with him was a lot of fun for me. He was probably the writer I cared about the most...and, you know, he got snatched away by this new editor from another company. Of course that’s frustrating.”

“Oh... Um, sorry, I guess...”

Toki smiled at Miyako’s apology. “But the most frustrating thing of all was *I Want to Be the Protagonist*...and the fact that I wasn’t the guy who drove him to write it.”

“It’s not like I was, either...”

That book was a love letter Itsuki wrote for an audience of one that Miyako, living in the same apartment, just happened to have a chance to read. She fell in love with it, then convinced him to publish it, and here they were.

“Maybe not, but if you weren’t there, Shirakawa, that never would’ve seen the light of day.”

“That... Well, yeah.”

It was the truth; she couldn't deny it. Besides, Miyako herself was the model for Kei Kuroyama, one of *I Want to Be the Protagonist's* main characters. In that way, certainly, she was quite involved with the content.

“I might have been Itsuki's editor, but I never really became his friend like that. I think that might be the difference between you and me, Shirakawa.” Toki sighed. “Shirakawa...keep taking care of Itsuki for me, all right?”

He nodded his head a bit and began walking ahead. Miyako stopped him.

“Wait a minute, Mr. Toki.”

“Hmm?”

“It's true that I'm both Itsuki's business partner and his friend. I know there are things that only he and I together could create. But...I'm sure there are things only you and him can create, too. He was your first writer; you were his first editor; you worked together for years; you're both men; you're older than him...and I'm sure all those differences from me could absolutely result in something else.”

This wasn't her trying to console or encourage him. Miyako really meant it.

Toki blinked, caught off guard. “...Do you really think so?”

“Yes!”

Miyako nodded. Toki smiled, almost letting emotion overtake him.

“Yeah... Well, I suppose I have to keep my hand on Itsuki after all, then.”

Miyako smiled at Toki's resolute statement. “Well,” she said, “I'm gonna keep trying my best, too.”

“...You know, when I invited you to work part-time with us five years ago, I never anticipated *this* would happen.”

“Neither did I. When I think about what if you didn't invite me, I think it's fair to say that you changed my life, Toki-san.”

The two of them chewed over the mysteries of life for a moment. Miyako Shirakawa, editor at Branch Hill Bunko; Kenjiro Toki, editor at GF Bunko. Both of

them worked with Itsuki Hashima, and both of them were ruthless competitors, working at the forefront of their respective departments...and this relationship would last for a long, long time to come.



Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Do the editors have any kind of credo, or something they try to watch for in their work?



The biggest thing is that me and the writers stay healthy. I make the writers I cover take regular physicals.

I suppose it's taking every measure to bring out every bit of the potential our authors have.



A fun work environment!



The editor needs to be his writer's biggest fan...but he can't become a fanboy, either.



Never give up on trying to build a full rapport with writers, I think.



I think it's about not trying to push your values. I try to give writers the kind of work they're best suited for. An editor's really nothing more than a slave to talent, after all...



Mom Friends, Dad Friends

On the evening of December 25, Itsuki held a Christmas party at his place. They had actually had another party at the Hashima family home the previous day, so this was now a two-day free-for-all.

The event was attended by Itsuki, his wife Kazuko, their son Sora, the sisters Chihiro and Shiori Hashima, and the Yasaka family—Makina Kaizu (real name: Akira Yasaka), Ashley Yasaka, and their daughter Yuu Yasaka. The Yasakas' apartment was about a ten-minute drive from Itsuki's place, and once they got married, Ashley moved her accounting office near their home. Sora's birthday, by the way, was May 17, while Yuu's was May 14—a three-day difference. Between that and being born in the same hospital (the place where Shiori was born as well), Sora and Yuu were quite literally lifelong friends so far.

The Hashimas and Yasakas had grown close as they discussed newlywed and newborn-raising life, and while one couple was a bit older than the other, they were now firm mommy/daddy friends. Kazuko and Ashley in particular had shared in the trials and tribulations of pregnancy and birth, something men didn't have to experience, so they had built a strong bond over time. It's now hard to believe the two girls would ever compete over Itsuki in the alternate story route from a past volume of *A Sister's All You Need*.

"Okay, all done! These are Gundam boobies!"

"Ha-ha!" "Gun-demm!"

Shiori was in the living room with Sora and Yuu, playing her big-sister role and using LEGO bricks to build something that was kind of hard for the grown-ups to recognize. Kazuko and Ashley were watching them, warm smiles on their faces, as they engaged in some friendly chitchat.

"Have you ever seen *My Neighbor Totoro*, Kazuko?"

“Umm, actually, no, I haven’t.”

“Because I saw it for the first time the other day, but I can definitely see how it’s become a classic loved by generations now.”

“Really? I’ll have to check it out. Oh, speaking of which, I finally got to see *Frozen* the other day. I didn’t realize the ‘let it go, let it go’ song was in a scene like that—it was kind of a surprise.”

“Right? It’s a good movie, but I’m not sure our kids are quite ready for it.”

Before they became mothers, they were both huge fans of B-movies involving a lot of zombies or sharks (or both). More recently, they had been swapping suggestions for movies they could show their children when they were a bit older. Nobody could have ever predicted a few years ago that they’d be chatting about Ghibli or Disney films someday.

Their husbands, Itsuki and Kaizu, were enjoying some wine with Chihiro’s snack plate in the dining room, looking on at this portrait of happiness before them.

“Boy... Sure is peaceful, huh?”

“Yeah...”

Kaizu seemed smitten by it, letting a faint smile appear on his face.

“...I tell you, until just a little bit ago, I really never imagined that I’d ever have a family. Even now, I sometimes feel like all of this is a dream.”

“Oh, it’s reality, all right. You got a lot of work waiting for you at home, you know.”

“Don’t remind me,” Kaizu said with a scowl.

At the moment, he was doing work for several publishers—not in light novels, but in regular fiction. *Mistress of the Sixth Sense*, a one-off novel he wrote not long after his wedding, caught the attention of a talented producer; they made a film out of it with a well-known actress in the leading role, and it became a big hit. Offers from multiple publishers had been rolling in ever since.

Kaizu’s writing style—stable and high in quality, but lacking much in the way of personal uniqueness—was an unexpected asset when it came to adapting his

work for movies or TV, where a project's cast often took precedence over the plot in the early stages. Whenever he put out a new book, it would get made into a movie or drama series. In terms of sheer popularity, Makina Kaizu was now well ahead of both Itsuki and Haruto.

"I meant to live out my whole life as an anonymous light novel writer, too. You never know what'll happen, huh? And I can't even imagine what Kasuka would say if she saw me fleeing from light novels and pursuing this other path in my life."

Kaizu sounded like he was beating himself up over it.

"The shame of running, as they say," Itsuki replied.

Running away from something can cause shame, but it can also help you. It was a Hungarian expression, supposedly. Basically it meant that one shouldn't cling to their current environment, but sometimes run away from it and choose their own place to fight it out.

"I think you making it big in regular fiction gives a lot of hope to light novel writers, you know. Like, knowing there are other options out there... That gives hope to anyone, doesn't it?"

Having a film producer notice your work and turn you into a household name in fiction sounds like a Cinderella story, but Kaizu's success wasn't sheer luck at all. In Itsuki's mind, it was absolutely the result of the humble talents he had spent years cultivating.

"I'm a hope, huh...?"

Kaizu sounded moved by it.

"It'd be nice if that were true."

"Besides, if Kasuka Sekigahara saw how happy you and Ashley are right now, I think she'd be really glad for you both."

"Yeah?" said Kaizu, thinking it over. Then he smiled. "...Yeah." Kasuka was a woman who valued hard work being rewarded with happiness over anything else; of course she'd be happy for a friend finding joy in life.

"But how have *you* been lately, Itsuki?"

“I...haven’t been a hundred percent, really.”

He’d never whine in front of his family, or Miyako or Haruto for that matter, but around Kaizu, Itsuki felt comfortable being totally honest.

“Like, I write stuff, but it just isn’t hitting right with me... I don’t feel like I’m making any forward progress.”

“Hmm...” Kaizu nodded sagely. “Well, it’s not like some average joe like me has any advice he can give in response to that.”

Itsuki laughed at Kaizu, self-deprecating as always. “You don’t think? Because I was hoping you could lend me some of your experience.”

“Well...I know it’s trite to say, but don’t you think you’re trying to carry too much?”

“Too much work?”

“That too, I guess.”

“But you’re working on several projects at once, too, aren’t you?”

“*I’m* only writing novels. *You’re* supervising pretty much everything related to your anime and manga adaptations, aren’t you? I don’t see why you have to go through all the trouble.”

“But it’s my work, you know? Of course it’s important to me. And Haruto takes the same approach.”

Kaizu gave a wry grin. “I guess the biggest difference between me and you two is whether we count things besides our novels—stuff we’re not directly involved with the creation of—as ‘our work.’”

Ever since that first movie project, Kaizu had never even once meddled with the content of his media adaptations. No matter what kind of project came along, he never said no to it—that was his credo. This occasionally resulted in situations like the plot getting reworked into a completely different story or a would-be rising star with no acting talent getting shoehorned into the project, but Kaizu never voiced any dissatisfaction with any of that. Some industry people accused him of not having any love for his own work, but maintaining that stance—and gaining a reputation as a writer who wasn’t difficult to work

with—undeniably did a lot to popularize his work, too.

“And, really, to put it an extreme way, I don’t really care about the novels, either. For me they’re a way to make a living. Just a way I can keep my family in good shape.”

It wasn’t a view shared by Itsuki, but if Kaizu was at a point where he could sincerely believe that, Itsuki had to take his hat off to him. Here was a guy who completely understood what he found to be truly important. He had a clear picture of what he needed in life, and he genuinely didn’t give much of a care about anything else. In Itsuki’s mind, it was almost staggering to see.

What’s truly important to me?

Number one, of course, was Kazuko and Sora. So what about his novels? To him right now, did they rank below his family—something he could write off as a way to keep himself and his kin fed and housed?

If that were true...then Itsuki Hashima likely wasn’t the protagonist of his life any longer.

BOOK PROPOSAL

MISTRESS OF THE SIXTH SENSE

BY: MAKINA KAIZU
THREE VOLUMES ON SALE NOW.

■SYNOPSIS

Akio Yagami, a fair-to-middling writer, visits a nearby accounting office for help with his taxes. There he encounters Asumi Ono, a beautiful accountant with looks like a bisque doll and an age he couldn't even guess at. In exchange for waiving her fees, Asumi ropes Akio into helping her with a family inheritance case she's taken on, ordering him to visit the mansion of a recently deceased billionaire. It's a new kind of armchair mystery, one where a sadistic tax accountant uncovers the darkness behind a family that ruled ruthlessly over the entire city!

■CHARACTERS

Akio Yagami

A 32-year-old mystery writer who's never made much of a name for himself. He had an unexpected bestseller last year, so he asks Asumi for tax advice. She instead convinces him to investigate the mansion of a local billionaire, but getting to play detective in someone else's house is actually pretty fun for him.

Asumi Ono

A tax accountant. Small, beautiful, and seemingly ageless, she's always dressed like nobility. Enlists Akio to help her solve an inheritance dispute while she gracefully relaxes in her office.

Taizo Kuhouin

A mega-rich man who built his fortune all within his own lifetime. He passed away at age 87, but after his family discovered multiple wills in his name, they've been at each other's throats.

Eiji Kuhouin

The 34-year-old grandson of Taizo. Hired Asumi to help him.

Maiko Saibara

The 26-year-old family maid at the Kuhouin residence. Actually Taizo's daughter, a fact kept under wraps.

The Days with Panties on Our Heads

On a Sunday in late December, Miyako—at home on one of her few legitimate days off—was engaged in a nude yoga session. Or, to be exact, she was being put in nude yoga poses. Kaiko Mikuniyama (age 25), the manga artist she lived with, had once again asked her for modeling help.

Miyako had been too busy to provide this kind of assistance lately, so Kaiko apparently wanted to sketch multiple yoga poses today while she had her handy. They ran down the list, from the dove position to the cow pose and seemingly everything in between—positions Miyako would never take up in real life, but Kaiko briskly sketched them all in short order.

Kaiko was still drawing the manga adaptation of Itsuki's *All About My Little Sister* for *Comic Gifted* magazine. The novel series had concluded two or so years ago, but the manga received so much praise for its high quality that it actually outsold the novels by this point; it was slated to keep running until it reached the end of the novel plotline. In addition to *All About*, Kaiko had also launched her own original series in another magazine three years ago, which was also doing well—and as if that weren't enough, she had begun to be active in the doujin scene, and her work instantly found an audience there as well.

"You really *do* have just the best body," Kaiko said, huffing through the pair of panties she had strapped to her head. "It's fun to draw."

"I'm starting to get a little self-conscious about my stomach," Miyako replied. She tried to exercise when she had the time, but given her lack of any healthy routine and her habit of eating meals late at night, she couldn't help but fall a little out of shape.

"Maybe, but having a bit of padding on you... There's a demand for that, too, you know."

“Don’t call it padding!” Miyako protested. “...Besides, if you need a model, why don’t you ask *her* instead of me?”

Kaiko’s eyes lit up. “Don’t be ridiculous. How could I ever make manga out of my precious girl’s nude body and expose it to the public?”

Miyako squinted at Kaiko. “And exposing *mine* to the public isn’t a problem...?”

This “precious girl” was Kaiko’s lover, a twenty-two-year-old woman who she hired as an assistant artist. As someone into the little-sister trope, Kaiko had this woman call her “big sis” and they had messed around as a fun lesbian experiment...and somewhere along the line, the play became real, with the assistant insisting on a full relationship.

“I mean, if you want to keep her all to yourself, that’s understandable...but at least stop doing not-safe-for-work stuff in your work room while I’m here, all right?”

“H-how did you...?!”

Kaiko blushed. Clearly, it was news to her.

“You think I can’t hear you girls through the door when I’m in the living room...?”

The mere recollection made Miyako blush as well. Few things in a shared apartment were more awkward than having to hear your roommate and friend moan rhythmically while you’re eating dinner.

“Yeah... I... We’ll be more careful...”

Kaiko hung her head.

“You know...if you feel like I’m getting in the way more, I could always move out.”

“No, no, I’m not asking for that at all!” Kaiko shot that idea down immediately. “I mean, I would like to live together with my girl someday, but that’s not for a while to come, I don’t think. I need to convince my parents first.”

“Oh, right.”

“Ah, but if you’re thinking about moving in with Fuwa, then don’t be afraid to say so, all right?”

Miyako had already told Kaiko that she intended to get together with Haruto when the time was right.

“Mmm... I *did* agree to make it formal with him soon, but I don’t think we’ll be immediately living together, no.”

“Okay. So it’ll be the two of us for the time being, then?”

“Yeah,” Miyako said, smiling at the visibly relieved Kaiko.

Between marrying, falling in love, finding a job, going to a new school, moving, aging, and everything else, one can never divorce themselves from change in life. That was something Miyako had been feeling all too vividly in recent years. Someday, she’d be moving away from Kaiko—and that was why she wanted to cherish the days she had left with this slightly weird friend of hers.

“By the way, Mya, are you free during the winter Comiket?”

“Comiket? I suppose I am, yeah.”

Branch Hill didn’t have an official presence at Comiket, so she wouldn’t have any work related to that, but she planned to attend so she could say hello to the creators and anime people she worked with.

“Well, if you’re interested, would you mind helping me sell my next doujin work? One of my workmates who was going to help me got the flu, so...”

“A sales assistant, huh? I don’t have to cosplay, do I?”

Back when she worked part-time for GF, she’d have to man their booth at every Comiket in full cosplay. It was actually kind of fun, once she got used to it, but now that she had a few more pounds on her, she felt self-conscious about it.

“No problem there,” Kaiko replied.

“Oh good. I’d be happy to, then.”

“Thank you very much!”



On the day of the winter Comiket, Miyako was now fully regretting her offer to help at the booth of Innocent Lovely, Kaiko Mikuniyama's personal doujin group. The booth was being run by Kaiko, her lover Manaka Kumano, and Miyako. That didn't make Miyako feel like a third wheel or anything, of course. The problem was how they were dressed.

"You said we weren't cosplaying," she groaned.

"That's right," Kaiko chirpily replied. "It's not cosplay. This is the official uniform of my group."

"I would have preferred cosplay to this...!"

All three of them were dressed in normal clothing, with one exception—the pairs of panties covering their faces. Miyako had actually seen this in action when she visited Kaiko's booth at some previous Comiket, but she had completely forgotten about it and the shock that it caused her.

"Ughh... I can't believe I'm seeing the day where *I'm* doing this, too..."

The panties all belonged to Kaiko's personal collection, which meant (according to Kaiko, anyway) exclusively as headgear rather than for their normal purpose. In order to tell Kaiko apart from her booth assistants, Miyako's and Manaka's panties had "#1" and "#2" embroidered on them, right down the middle.

Even in these hours before the opening, three young women wearing panties on their heads in the middle of Comiket had already attracted no small amount of attention from nearby booths, as well as the event staff. Lots of booths featured cosplayers as barkers and cashiers, but Miyako and the gang stood out far more than any of them.

"It's fine, Miyako," Kaiko energetically shouted, hoping to encourage her. "You'll get used to it right away!"



“I don’t want to, really...but are you okay with this, Manaka?”

“Uh-huh! It threw me at first, but now I wear these when I’m drawing manga as well. I want to become an artist like my big sister, so...!”

“Hee-hee! Aww, that’s so cute of you, Mana. Your panties look great, too.” Kaiko caressed Manaka’s cheek.

“Ah, big sis,” she replied, as if in a dream, while Miyako stared, glassy-eyed as a dead fish. That was when the PA announced that the convention was open to attendees, and seconds later, people began to swarm through the entrances.

A long line promptly formed at the Innocent Lovely booth, with Manaka keeping everyone in order and the other two handling purchases.

The comic Kaiko produced for this event was an original story, 18+ only, starring a guy who gets killed in an auto accident and reincarnated as a pair of panties that has tentacles growing out of it (and the power of flight) and then has sex with thirteen panty-loving little sisters dressed in lingerie—the kind of thing you’d only find in the doujin world, where comics are crafted for *extremely* niche audiences. The art was absolutely the smuttiest thing you’ve ever seen, but the plot and setup were so outlandish that actually getting off to the content as a reader might require concentration.

Selling pornographic fetish manga with panties covering her head made Miyako wonder to herself “What am I even doing...?” for the first time in quite a while, but as she shut off her emotions and focused entirely on pushing the product, she gradually stopped worrying so much about what was covering her face.



Innocent Lovely sold out its stock before noon rolled around, so Miyako held down the booth while Kaiko and Manaka went out to take pics of cosplayers. That was when Haruto Fuwa showed up, carrying a paper bag filled with lots of thin, probably pornographic doujin manga. He was likely purchasing anything *Leviathan Revive* themed for his collection.

“Haruto!” Miyako exclaimed.

“H-hey, hope it’s going well...Miyako...?” For some reason, Haruto was suddenly stumbling over his words. “Ummm... H-here, uh, I got this for you,” he managed to say, taking a box of cookies out from the bag.

“Thank you very much!” she replied, accepting it with a smile. Haruto’s face remained frozen in fear.

“...? What’s up?”

“That’s what I wanna ask!” he shouted, unable to stand the suspense. Miyako stared at him for a few moments, then finally remembered that she was wearing a pair of panties over her head.

“This, um, this is the official uniform of this doujin group!”

“Oh... Sure, okay.”

Even with that logical explanation, Haruto didn’t look too comfortable. He knew about Kaiko’s panty habits while she was drawing manga, but he hadn’t seen them in person before, so this would be the first time he ever personally interacted with someone wearing panties on their head. Perhaps his reaction was understandable after all.

So he tried his very best to smile, despite everything. “I,” he attempted to begin, before pausing. “...No matter how you look, I still love you, so...”

“Please don’t act like I’m all about weird panty fetishes now!”

Miyako hurriedly removed the panties from her head. But instead of relief, Haruto had a look of honest sadness on his face.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Haruto?”

“No, um... Like, the girl I love is taking off her panties in front of me for the first time, but I’m not at all happy about it... In fact, I think I’m gonna cry...”

“I don’t think this counts, all right?! Also, thanks for grossing me out!”

As she shouted at Haruto, pleading her case as her cheeks turned bright red, she swore to herself that she’d never help with Kaiko’s doujin group again—and yet she kept pantying up and going out there every year anyway.

GROUP INTRODUCTION

DOUJIN GROUP *INNOCENT LOVELY*

RELEASE LIST (ALL TITLES ARE 18+)

MY LITTLE SISTER EATS PANTIES

Kaiko Mikuniyama's first work in the doujin scene. A young girl, who loves panties so much that she eats them, falls in love with her older brother who's aiming to become a high-end lingerie designer.

Y-YOU CAN STRIP THE PANTIES OFF MY BODY, BUT YOU'LL NEVER STRIP MY SOUL!

A variant of the classic "female knight gets tortured and humiliated" trope. Features a unique method of expression where the heroine's panties are still drawn on her body even when ripped off in the story, which drew praise and wonder from the audience.

PANTY PRINCESS KNIGHT

Another damsel-in-distress tale. A strong-minded princess goes on an adventure wearing panties to disguise herself, only to experience forbidden love with the prince of an enemy kingdom.

YOUR PANTIES CAN DO WHATEVER THEY WANT TO ME, BIG BROTHER

A "panty master" (a vocation passed down from father to son across generations) is off on a training journey, and his little sister offers her body to help. Notable for its hardcore porn scenes that challenge the physical limits of the human body.

RISE OF THE THIRTEEN SHOCKING PANTY BABES

Innocent Lovely's latest work. The hero, killed in a car accident, is resurrected as a pair of panties sporting several sets of tentacles, allowing him to make love to thirteen panty-loving, panty-sporting women at once. The fact that all thirteen have their own unique background and characterization is nothing short of astounding.

Sirius

It was the afternoon of January 1, and Itsuki and Kazuko were at the local shrine to make their traditional New Year's Day visit. They didn't want to take Sora to crowded places yet, so they dropped him off at the Hashima family home for today; he'd get to visit his first shrine with the Yasaka family at a later date.

They were at a nearby shrine, the same one Chihiro and Itsuki visited for New Year's four years ago, and both of them were dressed in kimono. Kazuko's outfit was something she'd owned since before they married, a flashy pink kimono with a flower pattern. Itsuki was wearing his own as well, a refined, mostly black affair that belonged to his dad and was nearly identical to the one he wore four years ago. Back then, his parents had said he looked like a little kid in his pop's outfit (which he was), but after a few years and a child, he had reached a level of maturity that this kimono suited decently well.

"It's been a while since we've done this shrine trip by ourselves."

Itsuki nodded at Kazuko. "It sure has."

Ever since Sora was born, whenever a Hashima went out, it was either all three of them at once or one person at a time, the other watching Sora at home.

After about half an hour of waiting, it was their turn at the shrine itself. After a bow, Itsuki threw a five-yen coin into the donation box (a traditional way of wishing for continued good personal relationships), while Kazuko upped the ante with a 500-yen coin. Five hundred yen wasn't a traditional offering; as the most valuable coin in Japanese currency, it carried the nuance of "never getting better than this" when used as an offering, which was bad luck. But as Kazuko put it, "I couldn't be any happier right now, so I just want to thank the gods for this." Whether this personal logic of hers was valid or not, she always had a

shiny 500-yen coin for the box every year.

After ringing the bell, bowing twice, and clapping their hands twice, they closed their eyes and prayed.

I wish that my family...and also my parents, my two sisters, my mother-in-law over at Kazuko's place, and also the Yasakas, Miyako, Haruto, and Kaiko... I wish everybody around me has a healthy, happy new year.

That was Itsuki's prayer, and he debated a bit over whether to add his wish for a masterpiece that could surpass *I Want to Be the Protagonist*, but decided against it. When it came to his novels, he didn't want to rely on divine assistance—he wanted to figure this out by himself. He was still grasping at straws over it, however, so if he had the chance, a little help from above would've been more than appreciated.

With one final bow, they left the shrine and purchased charms promising good health and a safe family.

"Do you want to buy some souvenirs, Itsuki?" Kazuko asked, scanning the stalls by the shrine. Itsuki followed her eyes.

"Oh, yeah... How about some of this sponge cake for Sora? And is Shi old enough for takoyaki yet?"

"I think it'd be fine. She's almost four."

"She's kind of a gourmet, though... I don't know if some fried octopus from a street vendor would satisfy her..."

"She's only a gourmet when it comes to nipples, isn't she?"

"Good point," laughed Itsuki.

So they purchased some sponge cake, takoyaki, and *imagawa-yaki* (sweet red beans cooked in pancake batter). On the way back, Itsuki also bought a corn dog for himself, while Kazuko opted for a more traditional hot dog on a stick. They had sushi and soba noodles at New Year's Eve, traditional *osechi* cuisine and *ozouni* soup in the morning, and more of the same at Itsuki's parents' place, so after all that fancy Japanese food, they much appreciated this junkier street fare.

“I haven’t had a hot dog in a while, actually. It’s good.”

She ate it completely normally, making sure not to get any ketchup on herself, and definitely not pretending to fellate it like a penis the way she used to. Since marrying Itsuki, she had done away with pretty much all sexual humor, and she dropped the habit of going around the house naked as well. She used to go on about her dream of staying naked all day and having constant, nonstop sex with Itsuki at all times, but all that was now a thing of the past. She was cooking, doing household chores, and handling a lot of the child-raising as well.

Yes, Kazuko had grown to become the perfect wife and mother.

...But is that really growth?

“Hey, Kazuko?” Itsuki suddenly said.

“Yes?”

“...When’re you gonna go back to writing?”

The question, one he had wanted to ask but never could for some reason, finally made it out into the open. Ever since she’d announced that she was taking time off her career to raise her child, Kazuko had written nothing at all novel-related. This rest period had begun early on in her pregnancy, so the last book she’d published was now over two years old.

“Mmmm...” Kazuko took another bite of her hot dog. “Well, Sora’s still pretty little, so I need to focus on raising him for the time being.”

“Sure, yeah, but...”

In Japan, most offices allowed you a maximum of two years’ child-rearing leave. Sora was nineteen months old, so maybe it was a little early to talk about returning to work—and besides, there was no point applying government standards to freelance work like novel writing. But:

“If you say ‘for the time being,’ that means you *will* come back to it, right?”

“Hmm...” Kazuko raised an eyebrow at Itsuki’s request for confirmation. “To be honest with you, it’s like... I kinda think it’d be fine if I just retired right here.”

“...You think?”

Kazuko's voice was soft, gentle, as if what she was saying wasn't anything important. Itsuki had to keep his own voice from shaking. She was now putting his vague fear into clear words, and it stabbed at his heart.

"I mean, you're getting really popular, Itsuki. We have more than enough money saved up. Do I really need to earn us any more?"

"You never really wrote for the money in the first place, did you?"

"No, I didn't. So, like, that's one less reason for me to come back."

Kazuko had begun writing novels in order to meet Itsuki, and she'd kept writing novels in order to enter a relationship with him. Now that they were married with a child, she had fully lost her motive.

"A lot of readers are waiting for your novels."

"Mmmm...I *do* feel a little bad about that, yeah. But the most important thing to me right now is Sora. Living peacefully with you and Sora makes me too happy. I can't imagine myself thinking about writing again, you know?"

She gave him a smile, a completely satisfied, serene smile.

"Ah... Well, so be it."

Itsuki smiled back, trying his hardest to fight down the raging emotions bubbling inside of him and keep from shaking. No way could he possibly advise her to care more about random, anonymous readers than her own child. Asking her to return to a world akin to hell on earth—doing away with her current fulfilling happiness to face deadlines, whittle away her mental and physical stamina, and potentially never get rewarded for it—was impossible.

I can't just say "I want to read your novels, so be Nayuta Kani for me again." That's just me being selfish. Pure egotism. My one and only love, living in bliss... How could I ever say that?

Itsuki Hashima, in Kazuko's eyes, was both a very precious person and a very precious novelist. And to Itsuki, Nayuta Kani was a precious person and a precious novelist. Ever since he read *The Silvery Landscape*, her first work, Nayuta Kani was a rival he hoped to catch up with someday, a fearsome enemy whose overwhelming talent simply crushed him—the novelist he loved the

most in the world. Apart from her editor Kirara Yamagata and the people involved with the New Writers Contest, he was Nayuta Kani's number one fan.

A world without Nayuta Kani had no fun left in it. He wanted to read her novels. He wanted to be faced with that awe-inspiring force again. He had grown as a novelist since then, and now, he wanted to face her. In other words—what he wanted to say was:

Fight me!!

...But she wasn't a rival character from a shounen fighting manga, and a grown man could never say anything so nonsensical and self-serving in real life. He couldn't say it...but he kept writing. Why? Because Itsuki Hashima was a writer. Because no matter how stupid, nonsensical, and self-serving a desire it was, being able to freely tell stories in the novel format was the best job in the world.



That night, Miyako Shirakawa was working at home (despite it being New Year's Day) when an e-mail from Itsuki arrived in her inbox.

Hello, hope you're doing well. I'm sending you the proposal for a new novel.

"Itsuki...!"

Miyako promptly opened up the attachment.

The title of the project was *You Tomorrow Is All I Need*. Looking through the introduction, background setting, cast of characters, and story synopsis, she arrived at the "Target Audience" section at the very end. It made tears well in her eyes.

- Target Audience: Nayuta Kani

"I knew you'd finally notice, Itsuki."

That was the thing *I Want to Be the Protagonist* had but none of his subsequent releases had—strong emotions, pointed straight at somebody. *I Want To Be the Protagonist* had his love for Kazuko Honden at its core. Exactly

what Itsuki was putting into *You Tomorrow Is All I Need*. was still unclear in this proposal phase, but Miyako could believe in one thing: This book was going to become Itsuki Hashima's greatest masterpiece.

"Okay...!"

She nodded, picked up the phone by her side, and placed a call.

"Oh, hello. This is Shirakawa from Branch Hill... Right, yes. I'd like to make you an official offer on the thing we discussed."



"I'd like to make you an official offer on the thing we discussed."

A smile appeared on his lips as he heard Miyako's words.

“You made me wait
way too long, sir.”



Readily accepting Miyako's offer, the man—Setsuna Ena, age 22—ended the call. He was an illustrator working under the name Puriketsu, and his talents and popularity had only grown in the ensuing years.

His looks had changed quite a bit since back when he was chasing Chihiro's butt around. He was much more handsome, he was no longer dyeing his hair flashy colors, and he was in the habit of matching his outfits with chic blazers, in no small part because he had grown a good four inches in the meantime.

It had been over a year since Miyako had contacted him, saying, "I want you to handle the illustrations for Itsuki Hashima's greatest masterpiece, so can you keep some space open in your schedule?" Putting an illustrator as in demand as Puriketsu on reserve for a book that would be completed at some indeterminate time was virtually unthinkable in this industry, but Setsuna wasted no time replying, "All right. Until then, I'll go easier on my work"—and that was that.

Ever since then, Setsuna had been taking a bare minimum of work, using the resulting free time to constantly practice and improve his drawing. And not just illustrations, either—he did some more work in cubism, something he'd dabbled in a few years back; he traveled to various places to sketch what he saw; and he gained experience in computer graphics, oils, watercolors, ink, sculpture, ceramics, calligraphy, music, and a million other genres, polishing his techniques and perspectives.

...Why aren't I illustrating your new series?!

Back when Itsuki's *Genesis Sisters of the New World* (illustrated by Setsuna) ended, Setsuna had heard that someone else would be doing the art for his next series. When Setsuna demanded an explanation, Itsuki had replied:

My novels totally lose out to your art. So...for now...I can't team up with you again.

Seven years later, Itsuki was now undeniably a popular author, one high up enough that nobody would accuse him of coasting to the bestseller lists on the power of his illustrator. When Setsuna read *I Want to Be the Protagonist* three years ago, he'd been frustrated over why he wasn't picked to handle the art for it—but at the same time, he'd worried that if he *had* illustrated this book, his

artwork would lose out to the text. Ever since then, he'd passionately striven to improve his art. He'd abandoned his flip attitude and fashion sense, and he'd started keeping his phone with him, answering his clients' phone calls, and actually sticking to deadlines for a change.

Puriketsu was now reborn into the greatest of creators, gifted with mounds of talent and character, and people in the industry were calling him "God-ketsu" behind his back.

"I've waited seven years for this day to come."

He looked out the window of the hotel room he was staying at. The Winter Triangle, formed by three bright stars in the winter sky, was visible to him. One of them was Sirius, twinkling bright enough to be visible with the naked eye. Setsuna reached out to it. It was the brightest star in the sky, apart from the sun, and seafarers used to follow it to gain their bearings on the ocean. He always had a liking for it. The fact that it sounded a bit like "butt" in Japanese always charmed him.

So, with the foreshadowing from Volume 1 finally paying off, the biggest, most ass-lovingest star in the sky was once again teamed up with Itsuki Hashima.

BOOK PROPOSAL

YOU TOMORROW IS ALL I NEED.

STORY: ITSUKI HASHIMA ART: PURIKETSU
RELEASED IN A TWO-VOLUME SET.

■SYNOPSIS

Fenris, a young man created as part of a project to produce the ultimate in fighting warriors, grows up unaware of the true origin of his powers and embarks on a directionless journey around the world. He grows stronger as he's bathed in the blood of the monsters and other warriors he defeats along the way. He's considered too dangerous to keep alive, but no skilled assassin or clever trap can hold out against his overwhelming force. Eventually, once he's worshiped as a god by a certain contingent, he attracts the anger of the actual creator of the world...

■CHARACTERS

Fenris

A young man who travels wherever his whims take him. Handsome, with white hair and gray eyes. Created by the mage Worden, he was abandoned as a failed project, but survived and later gained incredible powers.

Teare Greipnir

A young girl whose life Fenris rescued on a whim. Granted Fenris's blood and semen in order to heal her wounds, she also inherited part of his powers. She loves the man who saved her life, but after a vision from the world's creator, Teare goes on the hunt for him.

Worden Hahlvels

King of the greatest kingdom in the Midlands. A mage with mounds of untold knowledge, he continues to seek awareness of the unknown even now. Fears Fenris, his own creation, enough to try taking his life.

Yumir the Creator

A quantum computer.

Redemption Rainbow

You Tomorrow Is All I Need., Itsuki Hashima's latest work, was released as a two-volume set in early April. It was a sort of "OP hero" tale, set in a fantasy swords-and-sorcery realm and featuring an incredibly powerful protagonist laying waste to everything around him.

Despite a title that suggested a romance novel, it was littered with blood-and-guts violence and explicit sex scenes, and the hero's characterization was a far cry from the realistic, relatable, generally *cool* protagonists of Itsuki's past work. This guy had overwhelming force, but he didn't use it for do-gooder justice—he just raged whenever his emotions drove him over the edge, not hesitating to kill even women and children in his way. This was no Han Solo-style roguish yet ultimately appealing hero, either. There was no rhyme or reason to his actions; sometimes he'd help people without any expectation of getting anything back, and sometimes he'd abandon those in similar situations without a second thought.

He'd save people, and kill people, because he was in a good mood. He'd save people, and kill people, because he was in a bad mood. He'd do it because the skies were gray. He'd do it because the sun was yellow. He'd do it because he was hungry. He behaved wildly, without any consistency, like a young child granted immense power, and the story ended with him being hunted down and killed by a woman he previously saved and granted part of his power to.

"Perhaps I was waiting all this time for someone to kill me..."

He had hissed the sentence as he faced off with the heroine. And when he was really was cornered, pathetically wailing and begging for his life, there was no courageous beauty to his final moments; all that remained was a bad aftertaste.

It was a completely different thing from any of Itsuki Hashima's previous

work, and a pretty unusual release by light novel standards overall. It was thus greeted with mixed reviews—if anything, the scales tipped toward the negative side at first.

“I can’t empathize with him.”

“I hate him.”

The book attracted a lot of ire from readers used to the realistic characters and tales of young discovery Itsuki had specialized in since *I Want to Be the Protagonist*. One of them even sent a handwritten letter to him reading, *I wish that you hadn’t written something like this*.

Despite that, though, sales continued to grow over time.

“I can’t empathize at all, but somehow, I feel like he’s part of me.”

“It’s a discomfoting, unpleasant novel, but I just can’t stop reading.”

“It’s absolutely a masterpiece, but at the same time, I hate it.”

“I hate this novel, but it’s absolutely a masterpiece.”

“It’s thrilling, but so sad.”

“It’s sad, but so thrilling.”

Social media and review sites teemed with feedback like this, as contradictory as the contradictory hero himself. The word-of-mouth consensus was “I can’t really explain it, but this is just really incredible.” It had fallen off the paperback sales rankings two weeks after launch, but it came back on the list after a month, then gradually rose through the ranks—a very unusual trend to see.

Running at the base of the entire novel was a sense of sorrow, an emotion carried by all those who couldn’t figure out a way to live right. When readers picked up on the acute feelings hidden behind all the violent belligerence, they were faced with the truth—“this protagonist isn’t me at all, but still, this feels a lot like *my* story.” If the real aim of a novel was to make readers experience a life unlike their own, then in a way, *You Tomorrow Is All I Need*. was actually a very orthodox novel.

This novel, filled with a universality that touched everyone who read it, was written by Itsuki Hashima exclusively for the audience of Kazuko Hashima—or,

really, “Nayuta Kani.” This wasn’t the comforting tale of a God-chosen genius being emotionally fulfilled and losing the impulse to create—it was an all-out attack, meant to make her genius heart boil and reignite the fire inside her mind. He put all the skills and emotions he had polished up to now into it, along with a certain something powerful, something too pure and disgusting to call love. It was a bullet propelled by words, designed to take her happy, contented mind and drag it back into the swamp of creation. A 100,000-word fan letter, honed to challenge the god of novels at her own game.

He didn’t let Kazuko read any of the early printouts or galleys; only when it was a complete book, Setsuna’s illustrations included, did he hand it over to her. And after she spent quite a long time reading *You Tomorrow Is All I Need.*, Kazuko didn’t immediately volunteer her feelings about it.

“Itsuki... Would you mind if I had you handle chores and Sora for a little while?”

...I want to write a novel.

Those were the softly spoken words of *Nayuta Kani* as she stood up.



Around a year after *You Tomorrow Is All I Need.*’s publication, Itsuki Hashima was at a first-class hotel downtown to attend a certain event—the first annual Reiwa Entertainment Awards. This was a new thing, devised by a consortium of TV networks and book publishers; it gave prizes in manga, anime, games, movies, light novels, and more, recognizing “products that deserve to be seen the most by people worldwide.” Itsuki’s *You Tomorrow Is All I Need.* had won the Grand Prix prize in the light novel category, and the award ceremony was today.

He’d get interviewed by assorted TV and newspaper outlets, and all the Grand Prix winners would have their speeches streamed online. He had already shown his face in magazine and online interviews by now, but he had never given a long speech to a large audience before, so he was extremely nervous.

“D-do you think you could give this speech for me, Miyako? I think a lot of winners have people speaking for them...”

He was talking to Miyako, who was with him as his editor.

“Why’re you freaking out now? You said you were gonna wow everybody earlier.”

“Right. You beat me for this prize, remember. Quit acting like a wimp about it.”

Haruto Fuwa was there, too, picking on him and acting like the stereotypical rival from a kids’ series. His *Leviathan Revive* missed out on a prize, but it had been nominated at least, so he was invited to the ceremony.

“I *really* don’t need you calling me a wimp, Haruto... Prince Sister Complex.”

“What does *that* have to do with it?!”

Haruto was clearly flustered by this jab. “Keep it up, Itsuki,” Miyako added, staring at Haruto. “That sister-obsessed fool!”

Not long after *You Tomorrow Is All I Need*. was released, Miyako kept her promise and agreed to make her relationship with Haruto official. They were pretty much already together anyway, so things went exceedingly well. If it kept going this smoothly, marriage seemed like all but a given—except half a year ago, when Haruto announced he was leaving his family house to live with Miyako as a test run for marriage, his sister launched an intense resistance to it. Only then did she finally reveal the love she had for her brother, going so far as to say, “I’ll die if you leave here, bro!” So the plan was hurriedly called off.

Haruto still hadn’t been able to convince his sister to let him go, so Miyako was still sharing an apartment with Kaiko. Once Miyako told her roommate that she was planning to live with Haruto, Kaiko and Manaka went through all the work convincing their parents to accept their own relationship...and right now, they were both giving Miyako serious “get out of here” vibes.

“Heh... Okay, from now on, I’m calling you the Little-Sister Novel Hero. Or maybe I could call you Kyosuke or Masamune instead?”

“Those are both characters from novels where the little sister’s the big star, man! Please, anything but that!”

Haruto looked genuinely concerned about his future. Miyako just sighed at

her boyfriend.

“Ui and Chi both took a step back from you, you know. I wasn’t expecting the ultimate hidden boss to step in now of all times... Why don’t you just marry your little sister, huh?”

“Wh-whoa, Miyako! I’ll work something out with her, all right?! *Please* don’t dump me over this!”

Miyako laughed at the earnest request. “Yeah, yeah, like I can do anything else... I mean, she’s had a crush on you for, what, nearly twenty years? I know you can’t work all of that out in one day.”

“Ha-ha!” Itsuki laughed. “You guys had a good unrequited-crush streak going, too.”

“Whose fault do you think *that* is?!” “And whose fault was *that*?!”

Itsuki’s attempt at a light joke was greeted with stereophonic spite from Haruto and Miyako. “S-sorry,” he added, although he internally wondered if that was really his fault.

“B-but hey, why don’t you maybe have Chihiro and Ui visit your sister and let them try to persuade her?”

“That’s a good idea!”

Miyako agreed with Itsuki’s offer, but Haruto visibly paled. “All I can picture is this hellish situation where all three of them are tearing into me at once...”

“What’s this about Chihiro?”

They were interrupted by Setsuna Ena, a handsome young man in a fetching blazer.

“Oh! Setsuna! You came!”

Setsuna calmly smiled. “It’s your big night, sir. Again, congratulations on winning the prize.”

“What’re you talking about? I only won it thanks to your artwork. You gotta keep helping me make excellent books!”

“Of course. I look forward to that, sir.”

Itsuki and Setsuna, now both fully grown men, shook hands to settle it.

“By the way, sir...”

“Hmm?”

“Is Chihiro seeing anyone right now?”

“I don’t think so. She said she’s had it with love for now.” Then Itsuki realized what he was saying. “Setsuna, you...!”

“Yeah.” Setsuna nodded back.

“You and Chihiro...?”

Here was a handsome illustrator, so vastly changed inside and out, all but assured a great career ahead. Maybe, Itsuki thought, Setsuna as he stood today would be suitable for Chihiro after all.

“Over the past several years,” Setsuna calmly stated, “I’ve been doing a lot for my art, and it made me realize something. I really *do* want to see Chihiro’s rear end in real life. If I can catch sight of her once-in-a-millennium ass, that’ll help me reach even greater heights.”

“...And you want to be her boyfriend for that?”

“Yes!” Setsuna nodded, eyes pure as a clear sky.

“Are you...interested in anything about her apart from her ass?”

“Huh? I like her face and her personality a lot, too, but...yeah, I guess the ass is the main thing.”

“Get the hell outta here! If you loved her from the heart, that’s one thing, but I’m not gonna give my precious little sister to someone who just wants a peek at her butt!”

Itsuki slapped away the hand he was shaking a moment ago as he shouted.

“Hey, it’s all right! I promise I’ll find a way to love the non-ass parts of her, too! Sooner or later!”

“Don’t bring this up with me again until you do!”

Perhaps Setsuna’s internal transformation was more wishful thinking on

Itsuki's part than anything. This guy was still just an idiotic, ass-obsessed illustrator. And for an idiotic novelist like Itsuki Hashima, there couldn't have been a better partner out there.



Once the start time for the ceremony drew near, Itsuki went away from his friends and toward the seating for the prize winners. Sitting among the other stars of the evening, he took a deep breath to calm himself. As he did, his phone vibrated to notify him of a message from his wife.

Almost time, isn't it? Sora and your whole family are waiting in front of the computer~

Chihiro and my parents are watching...?

The pressure only got worse. He wasn't even entirely sure whether his work was worthy of earning the top prize.

The nominees for the light novel award included *More Than Any Starry Sky*, *More Than Any Memory*, Nayuta Kani's latest novel. She wrote it up after reading Itsuki's *You Tomorrow Is All I Need.*, and remarkably, it was set fourteen years after *You Tomorrow*, with the hero's son embarking on an adventure. Itsuki had a feeling that whatever she wrote would function as a sort of reply to his work, but he never imagined that she'd produce an unauthorized sequel to his own novel. It took him a while to recover from the shock.

In a word, this novel could be described as a love story—not love between a man and woman, but family love, love for one's homeland, love for the world, love for all the unknown people out there, motherly love, fatherly love, love for children, love for oneself. The story of a lonely hero who encountered all this love, only to have it save him. The kindest, gentlest story Nayuta Kani had ever written. Brand-new territory for her, something she could only have written after sharing a relationship with Itsuki and becoming a mother. GF editorial asked Itsuki for permission to publish it, and he immediately gave it. There was no way he could keep this masterpiece from the general public.

Nayuta Kani's first new publication in two years taking the form of a sequel to someone else's novel certainly confused a lot of the audience, but the

overwhelming power of the tale created a massive amount of passionate fans, just like with all her previous work. It was locked in for a Reiwa Entertainment Award nomination, but it didn't get the prize—being a derivative work probably knocked it down a few points.

In terms of completeness, Itsuki believed Nayuta's novel was better than his. Really, *You Tomorrow Is All I Need*. got the nod in no small part because of the release of *More Than Any Starry Sky, More Than Any Memory* putting more attention on his work and giving it a huge sales boost. It was his first real competition against Nayuta Kani, something he had sought out for many years, but he couldn't be too happy with how it turned out—Nayuta herself helped him past the finish line, really.

I am such a pain, aren't I?

And, he thought, he was likely to be one for the rest of his life. In all the years to come, he'd see himself in fierce competition with Nayuta Kani and all the many other rivals in his mind; he'd win or lose in equal measures, and he'd burn up his soul fighting them all off. It was so fun, so engaging, so full of joy for him.

The ceremony began, and after a bit, it was Itsuki's turn. He came up onstage, receiving a plaque from the presenter.

"Congratulations!"

"...Thank you very much."

The emcee was Yuma Takashina, a famous actor who had appeared in many movie and TV adaptations of manga and light novels. This was the first time Itsuki had ever met him face-to-face.

So this is the bastard who tried staging an illicit affair with my girl...? God, he's beyond hot...

It wasn't just about being snappily dressed. His aura was all-encompassing. He was just standing there, but his presence was simply overwhelming. Itsuki was supposed to be the star tonight, but being next to him, he almost felt like he was fading out of sight.

This is how a real star shines...

Once again, Itsuki realized just how much of a miracle it was that he hadn't lost Kazuko to him. A drop of cold sweat ran down his cheek.

"Now, Itsuki Hashima, a few words, please."

When Yuma stepped away from the microphone, he gave Itsuki a smile packed with all sorts of intent.

Does this guy still have feelings for Kazuko?

Itsuki stared back at him, then came up to the podium, opening the envelope with his comments and leisurely reading them.

"Um, it's a great honor to receive the first Grand Prix prize in this category. I'd like to sincerely thank the readers that supported me, as well as everyone on the selection committee."

After that standard introduction:

"So I'm not used to this sort of thing, and I'm really nervous, but I don't think I'll have a chance to talk in front of this many people very often, so I'll try my best... I think a lot of people may not be aware by this point, but in the four or so years since I made my professional writing debut, I wrote over twenty straight novels that were all in the 'little sister' genre. In other words, they were books where the main heroine was the protagonist's little sister and they had a romantic relationship with each other."

Itsuki spoke slowly, savoring the nostalgia of the words.

"At the time, I fully, seriously intended to keep writing little-sister novels and eventually come up with the ultimate little sister, something no one had ever seen before. I thought I'd write the best little-sister story ever, and then I'd take over the entire light novel market—all of entertainment, really. There were a lot of readers who supported me during that time, and of those books, *All About My Little Sister* received an anime adaptation as well."

"...However, after a certain point, I completely stopped writing novels in this genre. Or, to be exact, circumstances in my life made it no longer possible to write them. It was all kind of a unique situation, and it's frankly a little too unbelievable to go into detail here. Regardless, I fell into a terrible slump in my career."

“Itsuki...”

At the Hashima residence, Chihiro Hashima, watching the stream with the rest of her family, couldn't help but say his name out loud. She recalled that completely outlandish, yet rather fun time of her life when she'd hidden her gender and lived as Itsuki's younger brother. Warm tears came to her eyes.

“I hate to even think about those dark days any longer, but after overcoming that period of my life, the first novel I wrote was *I Want to Be the Protagonist*, which came out four years ago. The title of that novel is really the starting point behind my whole life, and even now it's at the core of my psyche.”

Then Itsuki took the microphone off the stand and left his notes on the podium.

“Oh, great, what's he gonna do now...?”

“That's the guy I know, all right.”

Miyako, watching from the front row, began to sweat. Setsuna couldn't have enjoyed this more. Haruto was all smiles, too, but inside, he seethed over not being up there himself.

“The way I see it, a ‘protagonist’ isn't something you can try to become, but rather something you sort of happen to become when you're not paying attention, after a long process of being lost, troubled, asking the world to figure out a way to live for you.”

He looked over the audience, flashing a knowing smile to the camera.

“That's why I, at least, believe that I'm absolutely a protagonist.”

A shockwave erupted in the audience.

“...I'm sure some people listening to this, or seeing it later or reading about it in news coverage, must think I'm a twenty-seven-year-old man-child. A lot of them must be glaring at me right now, thinking I'm lecturing them, wondering why this random light novel writer is acting so full of himself. But to those people, I want to ask: If you read a novel that starred you as the protagonist, would you be able to enjoy the story? Because if you don't think

you could...then I think you need to change. Or, really, I think you're *wishing* you could change."

Itsuki was pleading his case before all the unknown people that could be out there listening—as if praying, or shouting. He truly believed his words would reach the ears of someone who sorely needed them right now.

"Hee-hee-hee... Big bro Itsuki is so cool... So, so cool..."

Nadeshiko Kiso, watching the stream on her phone, let her fingers curl into a fist of determination. As the person who was such an inspiration to her, he was reaching her, at least.

"All of us—not unusually powerful, or kind, just sorta halfway with everything—I don't think we could ever be superheroes in a story, or even supervillains. But at the very least, I want all of you to love the stories you create, where you're the protagonist. I don't want you to give up on being a protagonist people can love."

"Hoo boy... Itsuki sure likes living life on the edge..."

Makina Kaizu, watching the stream with his wife, sighed a bit. His eyes narrowed slightly, as if Itsuki himself were shining brightly. That's what writers did, he supposed—if they had something to say and a place to say it, they couldn't help but dive right in, even if they knew the consequences to come.

"He sure does. I've always thought this, but that style of his reminds me of Kasuka in some ways." Ashley sadly reflected on her husband's words.

"Yeah. He was kinda like her apprentice...and just like her, he loves his readers and his novels way too much."

"You're right. So you need to keep an eye on him, all right? As a friend and as a veteran."

She flashed an affectionate smile.

"Now, *You Tomorrow Is All I Need*. is neither a little-sister story nor something in the style of *I Want to Be the Protagonist*. It was new territory for me, a total change in style, and despite a title that foreshadows romance, it's a battle fantasy novel filled with sex and violence. When it first came out, of

course it got slammed in the reviews. Honestly, that was hard.”

“Itsuki...”

Kazuko Hashima smiled at Itsuki as he smiled at his own hardships on the screen. Sora, sitting on her lap, was reaching out to him, innocently shouting “Daddy! Daddy!”

“Yep. That’s Daddy there,” she said to her little boy as she watched Itsuki strike a bold figure. Itsuki Hashima—a novelist, and a person, she once idolized, now her loving husband and still her favorite writer. Nayuta Kani—the novelist’s destined partner, someone he was fated to love and compete with for all time.

“But in the end, a lot of people came to accept it, and now it’s received this prize, so I’m glad I wrote it now.”

Itsuki’s expression took on a defiant streak.

“Umm, so I need to apologize to my long-time fans, people who started reading with *I Want to Be the Protagonist*, people who discovered me with *You Tomorrow*, or anyone else who might discover and enjoy my work later on. I think I’m gonna continue to change, and I think that may result in disappointing some of you over time. Readers might call me a traitor, like they did when I stopped writing in the little-sister wheelhouse. People might say to me ‘This isn’t what I wanted to see from you,’ and I’m sure it’ll hurt my feelings. But I’m no longer afraid of change. I regret nothing about the path I’ve traveled... Well, honestly, I have a *lot* of regrets, but I still want to maintain a mindset that I don’t.

“Change, I believe, is progress. And continuing to change means continuing to move forward. But it also means showing the world what you *truly* are, paradoxically enough—something that will never change as long as you hold on to it.”

Even if a million people sneered at him, as long as something resonated with at least one person, that was good enough. As long as it reached that “you” he hadn’t seen yet. And with that resolve in mind, Itsuki staked his claim.

“So look out, world. I’m the protagonist.”

He was giving his passionate speech to all the protagonists of the world. To

Nayuta Kani. To Chihiro Hashima. To Miyako Shirakawa. To Haruto Fuwa. To Setsuna Ena. To Kaiko Mikuniyama. To Nadeshiko Kiso. To Makina Kaizu. To Ashley Yasaka. To Kenjiro Toki. To Satoshi Godo. To Kirara Yamagata. To Aoba Kasamatsu. To Ui Aioi. To Yoshihiro Kiso. To Tadashi Kamo. To Makoto Yanagase. To Sota Izumi. To Ayane Mitahora. To Nobunaga Shirogamine. To Keisuke Hashima. To Natsume Hashima. To Shiori Hashima. To Sora Hashima. To Yuu Yasaka. To Yuma Takashina. To Masahiko Hirugano. To Munenori Tarui. To Tsutomu Ohshima. To Takuro Norikura. To Masaki Asakura. To Kakeru Yamada. To Sushita Nakashima. To everyone involved with him before, and to all the potential protagonists of tomorrow whose names or faces he didn't even know yet.

He prayed his words would reach them. He held a fierce hope that his words would light a match in someone's heart and call forth the flames of a new tale.

“...I'm going on too long, so I'll wrap it up with this.”

He took a deep breath, gazing out into the faraway landscape before him. Then he shouted:

“I'm right here, everyone! Pros, amateurs, artists, craftspeople, geniuses, average people, fans, haters, critics, Internet rabble, heroes, heroines, sub-characters, NPCs... Everyone who likes me and everyone who hates me! And even you, watching this with that bored expression on your face! I got one thing to say to all of you...”



**“Bring
it
on!”**

The End

Afterword

Bring it on.

These final words were something I decided on from the moment I started writing *Sister*, not long after I gave my all on the final volume of my previous series. With them, *A Sister's All You Need.*, an encapsulation of my emotions in several hundreds of thousands of words, comes to an end. If something in it touched your heart, I couldn't be happier as a writer.

The series has run across five years and fourteen volumes, but I proceeded from start to finish on it without any major trouble to speak of. That being said, I naturally ran into a lot of unexpected issues; in particular, I never expected that Ashley would become such an important character. When she mentioned she was acquainted with Kaizu and Kasuka at that one get-together, I was like "Are you kidding me?!" but I'm glad that she found happiness in the end. I was feeling bad about using her inability to get married as a throwaway joke anyway.

I did make one clear mistake, however. When I depicted Itsuki writing *Sisterly Combat* and *All About My Little Sister* at the same time, that was so I could show his editor griping at him to stop working on Series A and write more for Series B instead—something that I find so incredibly annoying about my career. But in Itsuki's case, he ran into a lot of other constant trouble in his life, and between this and that, I completely missed my window for covering that subplot. It feels a little pathetic now, and it's one thing I really wanted to get across, so I'll write it here instead. To a writer, all the series they create are equally precious to them, and when an editor says something like that, it does nothing but torpedo my motivation. It's a major blow not only to me, but also to fans of Series A *and* Series B, so please refrain from saying that to me (and, if possible, other authors).

So this series went along exceedingly well, far better than anything I was involved with before, but that's thanks in no small part to my artist Kantoku producing astonishing work, both in quality and in faithfulness to the schedule. I really don't want him to abandon me, and my next work for Gagaga Bunko is still up in the air, but I'd love a chance to work with him again.

I also need to thank Iwaasa, my editor who's been by my side the past five years. Life seems perfect for him, both at work and in his private time, and it sounds like his second child will be born shortly. Meanwhile, I still can't get married. It's time to do away with kind little pleasantries like "I hope your dick falls off" with him. I'm gonna rip Iwaasa's dick off myself!

Yomi Hirasaka,

Silver-Haired Nude Lolita Writer

January 2020

Notes

- When I said last volume that the latest drama CD would be the last piece of *Sister* spinoff media ever released, I was lying. Sorry. The Japanese audiobooks of the *Sister* series are now on sale at Amazon, Apple Books, and so forth. Unlike the drama CDs, these audiobooks include all the non-dialogue narration and even the afterwords, which is pretty embarrassing for me, but it's fun in its own way apart from the books, so give it a listen. Kaizu's monologue from Volume 7 in particular made me cry. We're planning to release the entire series in audio form and most of it is out already, so I think Volume 14 will be released before long, too.
- Kantoku is releasing an artbook that includes illustrations from the *Sister* series. It'll come out the same time as this book in Japan, and I hope you'll buy it and take a look back at the series through its artwork. It also includes a talk between me and Kantoku where we discuss *Sister* and reveal some secrets behind its production.
- We're planning to release a series of stamps for the LINE social media service featuring the chibi characters that show up in the table-of-

contents pages throughout the series. I have every intention of actually using these in conversations, so they're meant for practical use, I promise. Check them out and start spamming away.

- I contributed a short story to the *Sorcerous Stabber Orphen Anthology*, on sale now from TO Books (which, by the way, was one of the models for Branch Hill). I'm sure a lot of *Sister* readers are *Orphen* fans as well, so if you enjoy it, that'd be great.

- *Yuri Before the Deadline* is due for release from some publisher that's not Gagaga Bunko, but a preview has been posted on the Japanese web novel site Kakuyomu (as of January 2020). It's set between Volumes 13 and 14 of *Sister*, and you can find it by searching for my name and Kakuyomu online. I might post other stuff as well if the fancy strikes me.

- Few of the things I wrote about above have solid release dates in place yet, so check out Gagaga Bunko's Twitter account, web page, or my own Twitter (@hirasakayomi) for the latest information.

This book will now be rounded out with a side story set ten years after the events of Volume 14, starring Sora Hashima, Yuu Yasaka, Shiori Hashima, and so forth. Please enjoy.

The Blue Songbirds

One morning, Sora Hashima woke up to find his aunt sleeping naked next to him. This might sound like the start to a horror story, but Sora was fourteen years old and his aunt sleeping naked next to him was sixteen—only two years' difference.

Shiori Hashima, his aunt by two years (although they were three school years apart due to their birthdays), was renowned for her beauty at the high school she attended. She was a dead ringer for her sister Chihiro back when she was in high school, but unlike Chihiro's, her breasts were average. Much like her sister, however, Shiori was intelligent, athletic, and perfect with household chores and cooking. She was gentle and mild-mannered, but strong at the core and dependable, and as a second-year in high school, she was head of the student council.

She was, of course, extremely popular, subject to confessions of love from countless boys and girls over the years, but she turned them all down—always telling them “I'm in love with my younger brother,” apparently. It was a real pain in the ass, Sora thought. He wasn't even her brother anyway.

He had seen her naked a million times; it elicited no emotion from him at all, so he laid his hands on her soft chest and stomach and pushed hard. Shiori promptly rolled off the bed, taking the comforter with her.

“Gehh...” She groaned like a toad as she woke up. “You're so mean, Sora...”

She frowned at him, eyes welling up, but Sora just stared coldly back.

“No I'm not. Why are you sleeping in other people's beds?”

“Umm, I was licking your boobs while you were sleeping, and I guess I fell asleep myself.”

“You maniac!”

Sora threw a pillow with all his might. Shiori nimbly caught it with one hand. It wasn't that Sora was some kind of weakling—Shiori just had incredible physical skills.

“Ugh...”

With a frustrated groan, Sora put a hand up to check his nipples. They were slightly damp, and the buttons on his pajama top were undone. He had been sleeping too soundly to notice, and that was his downfall.

This aunt of his had the weirdest fetish for licking his nipples. According to her parents, she used to go after the breasts of pretty much everyone in her life, but by the time Sora reached elementary school, she became exclusively a nephew-nipple hunter, longing for his exclusively.

“This pillow smells like you, Sora...” Shiori hugged the pillow thrown at her, lovingly sniffing at it.

“S-stop that! That's gross!”

He took it back in a panic, driving Shiori to stand up.

“Anyway, I'm gonna go make breakfast. I'll whip up your favorite ground beef steak with love and devotion, all right?”

“You can just make it regular, actually.”

Sora's parents were both successful writers, and they'd often leave him alone while they were out doing research for novels or attending book signing events. Right now, they were on a trip around the world. Whenever they were gone, Shiori—who lived at her parents' place nearby—would come over to cook and clean for him.

Just as she was about to hop into the kitchen, her beautiful butt cheeks jiggling the whole way:

“Sora! I've come to take care of your morning wood!”

Suddenly the door flew open, revealing a petite young girl with long, dark, and impressively shiny hair. This was Yuu Yasaka, age 14, wearing a gothic-Lolita-style dress; she had known Sora since they were both born, and they attended the same middle school.

Barging in with a smile, Yuu immediately noticed the naked body before her. Her face tightened up. “Oh... You’re here, too, Auntie?”

“Good morning, Yuu!” Shiori smiled at her.

Yuu sneered back. “Good morning, *Auntie*.”

“...No, not auntie. Big sis, all right?” Shiori attempted a diplomatic correction.

“What are you talking about? You’re Sora’s aunt, aren’t you?” Yuu scoffed. “Hee-hee-hee... Sora already has me. That’s all the big sister she needs.”

Sora was born May 17, Yuu May 14, which made her just three days older than him, but Yuu always acted like a bossy big sister around him nonetheless.

“But you aren’t even related to him, Yuu! You’re a total stranger!”

“Hee-hee-hee... That’s right! I’m not related, which means I can legally marry him! And *you’re* in an illegal childhood-friend-style relationship, so I think you should just clear the way for me already. I’m about to have sex with Sora, after all!”

“No, you’re not,” a tired-looking Sora said.

“You used to be so cute, Yuu,” wailed Shiori. “All ‘I wanna be like you, Shi!’ and stuff. Anywhere I’d go, you were always tagging along behind me.”

Yuu’s become like Shi, all right, Sora thought to himself. *As far as being a deranged pervert, anyway.*

The Hashimas and Yasakas had always done things as families, thanks to the relationship they kindled early on, so Shiori and Yuu had known each other virtually their entire lives. The self-styled big sister (actually his aunt) who kept going after his nipples, and the self-styled big sister (wholly unrelated to him) who kept going after his virginity—both were integral parts of Sora’s life, and both were nothing but sexual deviants in his eyes.

“Oh, I’ve long since forgotten about the past! All I am *now* is an outlet for Sora’s sexual urges! Come on, Sora, whip out your penis!”

“I’m not giving Sora over to some crazed dog in heat like you! *I’ll* keep his dick protected!”

“Why is a nude old auntie calling me a dog in heat?!”

“Well, *we’re* related, so it’s okay if we see each other naked. Why? Because we’ve got real love! If you’re just craving his dick without showing off your own body, that just proves you only see Sora as a sex partner, Yuu!”

“I... I can be nude around Sora, too!”

“Stop it,” Sora said, throwing a pillow at Yuu before she finished disrobing on the spot.

“Mmph! Ugh... That’s so mean, Sora...”

The pillow hit Yuu in the face, bringing tears to her eyes. Unlike Shiori, Yuu wasn’t all that physically gifted.

“But this pillow smells like Sora, though...*huff huff huff...*”

“Just stop! That’s gross!”

But just as Sora approached Yuu to confiscate the pillow she was so lovingly sniffing:

“Will you shut up?! It’s still morning!!”

Another woman stormed into Sora’s room like a marauding monster. There were dark rings underneath her blue eyes, her long blond hair frizzy and oily from lack of washing, although her face itself was still very attractive. She was dressed in hot pants and a tube top, and between that and her slender, big-breasted figure, she was the epitome of casual stylishness.

This was Nadeshiko Kiso, age 26. She had trained under Sora’s parents—Itsuki Hashima and Nayuta Kani—and now she was a full-time light novel writer with nearly ten years of professional publication under her belt. She had wound up here five years ago, leaving the family home after her parents and grandfather both urged her to stop writing for a career, and now she was both writing her own books and serving as Itsuki and Nayuta’s administrative assistant. Cooking and cleaning, however, were well beyond her abilities.

“Oh, you were up, Nadeko?” Shiori asked, surprised.

Nadeshiko stared back at her, eyes dead to the world. “I pulled three all-

nighters in a row to finish up this draft and I'm *finally* about to get some sleep, dumbass. But then you idiot kids start carrying on like maniacs next door to me..."

Nadeshiko had taken up (free) boarding in the room next to Sora's. It occupied one wing of the very large mansion the Hashima family had purchased seven years ago, and even though there were rooms for each family member, a vast guest room, a room just for manga, a room just for novels, a room just for figures, a storage room for Dad's work, a storage room for Mom's work, and a museum room displaying things like the crayon portrait of Sora's parents he drew as a toddler and the "1 free shoulder massage" ticket he gave Dad for his birthday once, the house still had more rooms they weren't using. (Sora really wanted to do something about that last room, but that was his problem.)

"Sorry, Nadeshiko," Sora said.

"You don't need to apologize, Sora! It's all my fault! I'm supposed to set an example as your big sister, but look at me carrying on..."

"No, no, this is on me! I'm getting all angry at this nude, disgusting auntie... It was terribly immature of me."

Shiori and Yuu both tried to score points by covering for Sora. It didn't make Nadeshiko any less cranky.

"I really don't care, all right? Just keep it the hell quiet this early. Good night!"

"Sleep well. Oh, did you want something for lunch later?"

"Um, sure, yeah."

With that reply to Shiori, Nadeshiko returned to her room.

"Right. I need to cook breakfast with love for Sora now. Come on, Sora, get changed and come on down."

"*You* put on some clothes first," Sora replied to the smiling nudist before him.

"I-I'll help you out!"

Shiori and Yuu left the room. Sora sighed as he got out of bed. Mornings at the Hashima manor when Mom and Dad weren't around always tended to unfold like this.



After changing, washing his face, and going down to the dining room, Sora found Shiori (now a bit more clothed) and Yuu finished with the cooking and ready to eat. They all sat down and enjoyed the meal.

On the menu this morning was a rather large ground-beef steak with an equally large amount of rice, a sunny-side-up egg, some salad, and a cup of corn soup. It was a lot for the first meal of the day, but Sora and Shiori were both undergoing a growth spurt, so they both had no problem tucking away this much each morning. Yuu, meanwhile, must have already eaten at her place, because she was just nibbling on a leaf of lettuce from the large salad bowl.

Family breakfasts these days often tend to be focused on nutrition, filling stomachs without costing a lot or taking a while to make, but in the Hashima residence, someone made a home-cooked meal almost every day. Sora could cook as well, although not quite as well as Shiori, and their parents both enjoyed experimenting in the kitchen when they had the free time. Unlike writing novels, cooking was a vocation that let you enjoy (i.e. eat) the results pretty quickly after you started working on it, so as they put it, it was the best hobby a writer could have. Their kitchen was large, featuring an island in the middle with ample cooking space on it, so several people could prepare their food at once.

“Oh, hey, it’s my sister.”

Shiori stopped eating for a moment. Sora followed her eyes toward the news program on the living-room screen. It showed Chihiro Hashima, Shiori’s sister and Sora’s other aunt.

“You’re right,” he said. “When was Aunt Chi coming back again?”

“I don’t know,” Shiori replied.

Through his family, Sora was acquainted with quite a number of distinguished people—his parents, Nadeshiko, Makina Kaizu (Yuu’s father and a very popular writer), Kaiko Mikuniyama (aka the “Mother of Panties Manga”), Miyako Shirakawa (the go-getter president of a publishing agency), the actor Yuma Takashina, and so on. But Chihiro was by far the most household name among them.

Chihiro Hashima—thirty-four years old—was an astronaut. After carrying out many missions and setting assorted records as the youngest astronaut to perform this or that procedure in space, her achievements (and her beauty) had made her an international celebrity. Her autobiography, released last year, easily outsold anything Itsuki Hashima or Nayuta Kani had published up to now, and in it, she revealed for the first time to the public that she pretended to be a boy around her brother and his friends for several years. The response was predictably massive, to the point that journalists and photographers staked out her family home for a while.

She had been living on the International Space Station for the past two-ish months. When Sora asked when she was “coming back” just now, he meant back to Earth.

“She sure is something, isn’t she?” Shiori said, looking a little disinterested as the screen showed her sister smiling and waving as she spun around in zero gravity.



After the three of them finished breakfast, Shiori took her high-tech bicycle—a trendy model, packed with safety features and eco-friendly nods—to high school, Sora and Yuu going by foot to their middle school. A few minutes on the road, and they started seeing more boys and girls from the same schools.

Well before it became a national trend in Japan to do away with school dress codes—in fact, back when Sora’s aunt Chihiro was still a student here—this middle school allowed students to wear whatever they wanted. But while a lot of their fellow students were dressed for comfort in rough, casual gear, Yuu’s dress stood out as fancy and perfectly designed as a cosplay outfit. With her small size and well-defined facial features, she looked like a cute doll in her dress. Whenever she and Sora were walking together, they could hear jealous strangers whispering things like “Why *her*?” and “They don’t go together at all.”

This negative feedback, of course, was mostly thrown at Yuu, and there was a good reason why people said things like “why Sora Hashima” and “she doesn’t go together with Sora Hashima at all.” That’s because Sora Hashima was an incredibly handsome young man, one who would humble most any beautiful

young girl he was with. His eyes were a pure blue, his hair silver like his mother's, and his face both gentle and noble. His voice was on the cutesy side as a kid, much like voice actor Hisako Kanamoto, but it had broken recently and now he had a more mature, attractive one, like voice actor Yusuke Kobayashi.

He had been approached on the street by modeling or talent agencies more than once, and when his aunt Shiori told people "I'm in love with my brother," people weren't repulsed—they accepted it. If it's *him*, who can blame her? He looked like a prince from a shojo manga who had burst out of the pages and into real life; plus, he was the son of two famous, charismatic writers, lived in a huge mansion, had more money than he knew what to do with, and was the nephew of astronaut Chihiro Hashima. It's fair to say that Sora Hashima was a pretty special child from the moment he was born.

"Why *her*?" "They don't go together at all." "Who's that stunted little girl with him?" "He's happy with *that*?" "What a weird outfit."

...The assorted negative feedback that landed in Sora's ears was naturally overheard by Yuu next to him as well, but she didn't twitch an eyebrow. In fact, she relished it, holding Sora's arm and keeping her body close to his.

Being so close to Sora like this had made Yuu the target of slander and harassment at school. Some of it was pretty cruel, in fact, but Yuu fought back against all of it, not hesitating to use high-tech gadgets and even the services of lawyers and detectives she knew via her parents' work contacts. The ringleader of the bullies who had troubled her was driven out of her school entirely, and she had gotten a rep as someone not to mess with. Nobody dared try to directly pick on her, instead being content with calling her names from afar.

But with Sora being positioned this "bad girl's" boyfriend, she was serving as a kind of seawall keeping others away from him. Having known her since they were infants, he didn't dislike her at all, but there were no feelings of romance on his part at all. He *did* want to have a girlfriend, but if any girl stepped up to date him, she'd doubtlessly receive the sort of abuse Yuu took in the past. So these two strong-willed childhood friends pretended to be a couple in public. Yuu knew full well that Sora had no romantic feelings for her, but she also knew he didn't want anyone to be hurt because of him, and she took advantage of that to stay close to his side.

It was, to be frank, a pretty twisted relationship, and Sora constantly dreamed about having a normal teenage social life instead of what he had at the moment. He didn't *want* to be born as this special presence. He wouldn't have minded being born with normal looks, not having all these outstanding achievements, not becoming the target of bullying, playing with friends like normal, and maybe dating the fifth-cutest girl in his homeroom—that kind of extremely non-dramatic life. He had no intention of being the protagonist of the sorts of high school romcoms and teenage dramas his parents wrote.



After school, Sora usually spent afternoons at his club's meeting room.

He was in the literature club, getting invited after people found out his parents were Itsuki Hashima and Nayuta Kani, and he agreed to be part of their roster as long as he didn't actually have to do anything. The club had six members, and for the most part it was a pretty chill scene, with people mostly just reading whatever books and magazines they wanted (or playing games). This laid-back atmosphere attracted Sora, and while he fully intended to ghost the club meetings at first, he now showed up at the clubroom almost every day. With Sora in the club, Yuu naturally followed soon after, but all the other members were mature, casual young men, so she often joined them reading in the clubroom as well, not feeling obliged to put up a tough front.

Today, as usual, they were both playing a board game that used a lot of fancy high-tech stuff with one of the other club members.

"Excuse me..."

A small, timid voice was heard from the door as a female student came in. She had long bangs that fully hid her eyes. From the color of her school-issued indoor sandals, one could tell she was in her third and final year of middle school. There was no dress code, but you had to wear sandals that were color coded by your school year, and that was why a lot of students wore baggy jeans and such. These were monochrome rubber sandals, not much different from Crocs, and you could only match them in so many ways with your outfits. Yuu was wearing a pair as well, although she constantly complained about it.

Regardless, Yuu and the rest of the club gave this girl puzzled looks.

“Um... Is Sora Hashima in here?”

Yuu immediately went into full alert. “Did you need his help for something?” she asked, eyeing her upperclassman sharply.

“A-are you Sora Hashima?”

“Huh? N-no!”

The unexpected reaction threw Yuu. She didn’t think there was anyone at this school who didn’t know Sora Hashima’s face, much less his gender.

“That’s me,” Sora said, standing up. The student jogged over to him.

“I, um, my name’s Kaede Mitahora from the drama club, and I came here because I had a favor to ask.”

“The drama club...”

Sora frowned a bit. The drama club had invited him to join once in the past, but he turned them down. He wanted a teenage school life where he stood out as little as possible, so acting in school plays was a nonstarter for him.

“What did you need...?” Sora asked, half-anticipating what it was.

“Would you mind writing the script for our next play?!”

“I’m sorry, but I—huh?”

He was expecting her to ask him to join the cast for something or other. But Kaede’s request threw him entirely.

“The script?”

“Y-yes! We’d like you to write the script for the play we’ll perform at the next competition.”

“B-but why me?”

“I read the playbook you wrote that won a prize.”

“Oh...”

Right, right, he thought, there was that. Right at the start of his second year in middle school, he had contributed a play to the local town’s middle school literary competition, mainly so his literature club could prove to the school that

they were doing, you know, literature. The event had categories for novels, poems, essays, book reviews, and so forth, and Sora won the grand prize in the playbook category.

Student: Teacher, what's a playbook?

Teacher: A playbook is the script written for a play, or a literary work written with the intention of being performed on a stage—there's no strict definition, but that's pretty much it. People listening to the audiobook version of this will probably have no idea what's going on right now, but sorry about that.

Student: Oh, right, most stuff by Shakespeare is in that format.

Teacher: Exactly. He was a playwright, after all. RPG replays are generally written in this style as well, a tradition adopted by *Chronica Chronicle* in this very series.

Student: Oh, but didn't a lot of people who aren't used to it write in to complain that it was annoying to follow and you should stop using it?

Teacher: They can shut the hell up if they know what's good for them.

This competition wasn't held by a publisher or anything, so there were very few entries. The playbook category didn't even have twenty, in fact. The grand prize, by the way, was a 3,000-yen gift card redeemable at any bookstore. The winning pieces were only published in a hard-to-find corner of the local town's government website, too, which made Sora wonder why they even held the thing in the first place.

"Wow, someone actually read it...?" Sora asked, half surprised and half exasperated.

"It was such a wonderful play. The characters felt so alive, and the way the foreshadowing paid off at the end all at once was incredibly moving."

"Y-you think so?" Sora said, flustered at how serious Kaede seemed about it. People had complimented his good looks many times, but nobody had ever personally praised his work before—and he had forgotten all about this one.

"So I'd love for you to write a script for us!"

"Wait a minute! Can you not proceed with this while ignoring his manager,

please?!”

“Since when were you my manager?” Sora said, glaring at Yuu. “...By the way, do you know Itsuki Hashima or Nayuta Kani? The novelists?”

Kaede tilted her head slightly. “I’m sorry, I don’t really read novels much...”

“Ah.” Sora smiled a bit. “Well, I can write you something, sure. I’ve got the time for it.”

If he was the writer, not an actor, that wouldn’t attract too much unwanted attention.

“You can? Oh, thank you!” Kaede’s voice rose in volume, and she thrust her upper body down in a deep bow, her long bangs sweeping away to reveal the top half of her face. The usual trope would normally call for her to be an incredibly beautiful woman underneath that hair, but while Kaede was pretty run-of-the-mill, the tiny fire burning in her eyes left an impression on Sora.



Once he accepted the job, Sora decided to watch the play they performed at last year’s school festival for reference. It was a science-fiction take on Osamu Dazai’s classic short story *Run, Melos!*, and the whole cast wore cosplay from *Star Wars* and *Dragon Ball*. The props and backdrops were handmade, not off-the-shelf, and, to put it kindly, they were built on a budget. The play itself pretty much followed the original short story as well, which made it unclear why they bothered changing the setting.

The acting ability of the cast was pretty average all around...but the kid who played Melos was clearly the best of the group; even an amateur like Sora could tell. The tone of voice, the emotions, the movement—everything was done at a high level, and the swordfighting scenes (performed with toy lightsabers) looked a lot more natural than anticipated.

“...It’s a pretty normal middle school play,” Yuu said as she watched. “Neither good nor bad, really. But I supposed the kid playing Melos deserves some praise.”

“Why are you acting like you’re so above them?” countered Sora. “But, yeah, I agree. I think the main actor is really great.”

Kaede blushed a bit. “Th-thank you...”

“...? Why are you blushing?”

Kaede averted her eyes. “Oh...you didn’t notice? I’m playing Melos...”

“Huh?”

Sora and Yuu were shocked. Their eyes swiveled between Kaede and the actor on the screen. Sora had been completely sure that Melos was played by a boy—one whose voice was pretty high, sure, but not unbelievably so if you assumed his voice hadn’t changed yet. The voice had real booming timbre, not at all like Kaede’s nervous warble, and even Melos’s body frame seemed different. The guy on the screen truly seemed a measure larger than the girl before them.

“Excuse me,” Yuu said. Then she moved Kaede’s bangs away from her face. Sora compared that face with the person in the video—Kaede, looking down in embarrassment, versus the bold Melos looking straight at the camera. The impression was completely different, but it was definitely the same face.

“Y-you’re really Melos here?” Sora asked, still not fully convinced.

“Y-yes.” Kaede nodded, voice barely a whisper.

“...Wow, you can change yourself that much? That’s great.”

The compliment came out of Sora’s mouth without a second thought. Maybe this girl was actually a natural genius at this. He had only just met her, but already Sora was very interested.



After Kaede left the clubroom, Sora promptly launched the free memo app on his tablet (provided by the school, about identical to the third-generation iPad Pro in-feature set) and began working out the structure of his script. Using the solo brainstorming approach his father occasionally tried, he wrote down the keywords, ideas, and whatever else came to mind, occasionally circling words that looked like usable material and drawing lines between terms that seemed like fun to put together.

The cast he had to work with (including Kaede) included four boys and five

girls. Nobody in the club last year was a third-year, so everyone in the *Run, Melos!* video was available for this play. He had been asked for a fantasy-themed setting and wholly original story, not something adapted from elsewhere. Sora was free to theme it any way he liked, but a happy ending was a must. They had a backdrop on the stage that they could project photos and CGI graphics on, so the sky was the limit. There was a fog machine they could use for stage effects, but things like fire, bubbles, and confetti were all prohibited. The school's fashion club would help with costuming, as long as they weren't asked for a vast amount of work; the costumes for the sci-fi *Melos* came from a friend who gave them the inventory from a shuttered cosplay store, so they couldn't rely on that place any longer. They also couldn't get very fancy with the props, but as Kaede put it, they'd try their best.

"...I think I want to bring Kaede's acting skills to the forefront. Maybe some kind of fantasy story where she's kicking lots of ass? But we only have a cast of nine people and not much leeway with visual effects, so..." Sora mumbled to himself as he gathered his thoughts.

"You're pretty into this, huh?" Yuu said.

"...Not really," he replied, trying to sound casual about it.

"You always wanted to craft a story like this, didn't you, Sora?"

"No. I just said yes because I was free."

Yuu smiled a bit at Sora. "Well, I'll leave it at that, then."

"Again, why are you acting like you're so above me...? You didn't even place in that town competition."

Now Yuu was scowling. "What do you want? Unlike plays, they had lots of entries in the haiku category."

She had a point. Haiku was the most popular part of the entire event. But:

"...I don't think you would've won even if that was the only entry they got."

"Why not? 'When you fall in love *the best banana of all* is your sweetheart's dick'—if it's your lover's penis, you want to instinctively put it in your mouth, like a sweet banana. I think it perfectly evokes a woman's loving emotions. It's

perfect.”

“Hearing it again just now, it’s even worse than I remembered...”

“The word ‘banana’ is seasonal, too. You know how important seasonal words are in haiku. I really think there must’ve been some mistake at the judges’ table. Or maybe I should have gone with my second choice instead? ‘Sora’s dick makes me *want to slurp and suck on it* like a yummy treat’? This is a student competition, so I thought the judges would like it better if I stuck to tradition and brought up seasonal themes, but...”

“‘Seasonal themes’ isn’t the problem.”

Sora sighed at the confused Yuu. For him, at least, he’d never consider expressing his own romantic heart as-is in his work. Being creative like that is such a losing bet. Baring your entire heart in front of a crowd of people... All the creators who did that, his parents included, must be insane.



One evening, two weeks later:

“What. The. *Hell* is wrong with her...?!”

Upon receiving Kaede’s request, Sora spent three days working late into the night on his script. When he gave it to her, she turned it down, saying, “I thought it was just kind of lacking.” Of course, this was the first time Sora had ever tried writing for the stage, so he assumed some trial and error would be necessary. So, convinced it was all part of the process, he spent three more days writing another draft...but the feedback from Kaede wasn’t much better.

Reasoning that the third time was the charm, Sora referred to a couple books and websites about scriptwriting—and today, after school, he proudly showed off his third draft to Kaede. Her merciless response: “I think that’s the most boring one so far.”

Sora wanted to just give up and say, “I can’t do this anymore!” but Kaede looked sad about that possibility, so he resolved to try it one more time. But going back home to write just reminded him of how unfairly his work was being treated all over again. So now he was in the bath and shouting at no one in particular.

“What are you yelling about?” Nadeshiko said, strolling into the bathroom naked. She was still looking pretty haggard, the rings back around her eyes. The bathroom here at the Hashima manor was very large, so Sora’s parents, Nadeshiko, and Shiori all barged in without caring very much. Shiori was one thing, but Nadeshiko was well-developed enough that seeing *her* nude did make Sora just a bit excited.

“Nothing.”

He looked away from Nadeshiko, grouching to himself as she took a shower, then eased into the large bathtub on the opposite side from Sora.

“Ahh, what a relief... So you’ve been writing something lately, Sora?”

“Kind of.”

Sora tried to remain terse as he felt his eyes being magnetically attracted to Nadeshiko’s breasts.

“Is it a novel?”

“No. It’s the script for a play. The head of the drama club asked me for one.”

“Why were you asked for *that*?”

“Because the playbook I submitted to the town’s competition won a prize, and she said it really affected her.”

“Oh, that play? Yeah, that was a really neat piece of work.”

Getting praise from a professional writer made Sora blush a little.

“R-really? You thought so, too?”

“Yeah. It made me realize just how great all those other writers are.” Sora tensed up.

The play he wrote for that competition was based on an RPG session he was part of back in his first year of middle school. The game was Grancrest; Sora was the game master, and the players were Itsuki Hashima, Kazuko Hashima, Haruto Fuwa, and Makina Kaizu.



“...I wrote the story for it,” Sora pouted.

“Yeah, the outline.” Nadeshiko gave him an ironic smile. “With RPGs, the story generally goes how the game master works it, but the players are free to take things in all sorts of crazy directions. It’s kind of like the GM and the players teaming up to tell a story.”

“...But that story went pretty much the way I devised it.”

“Right, because all the players saw where it was going. They kept it pointed that direction because they didn’t want to change things too much. They even added foreshadowing in their dialogue for you, to make things more exciting for the next session. Basically, you had four first-class writers bending over backward to make things as fun for the game master as possible. It would’ve turned out great no matter who was GM’ing.”

Sora stared blankly at Nadeshiko. The lively characters Kaede heaped praise upon, the carefully placed foreshadowing... It was all thanks to his parents and their friends, nothing he did himself.

“...!”

His face turned red with shame, his eyes burning hot. Nadeshiko, noticing this, hurriedly walked back her comments.

“W-well, the story itself was pretty well done for a middle schooler, though, I think.”

“You don’t have to console me, thanks.”

“Oh.” Nadeshiko grinned. “So what are you gonna do about this one?”

“What am I gonna do?”

“About your script. Are you gonna keep writing it?”

“I think I’m gonna have to quit. I know there’s no way I can write anything up to her standards.” Sora had to force out the answer.

“Oh?” Nadeshiko sounded wholly indifferent. “Well, if you *want* to write, you ought to keep going.”

“It’s not that easy...”

“Hey, there’s no such thing as impossible in this world. If you keep persevering and don’t give up, maybe you’ll figure out a way someday. Not that it sounds convincing coming from me, I’m sure.”

She chuckled a little at herself. Nadeshiko Kiso had been active in the professional writing scene for almost ten years, but her reputation as an author was average to below average...or maybe only better than bad. She managed to make her debut after winning a prize in the lowest level of new-writer awards back in high school, but she frankly lacked the kind of actual ability one would expect from a ten-year veteran.

So she used assets besides her work to stay in the industry, uploading selfies and cosplay photos to social media, streaming regularly, and cosplaying at doujin events and such. In time, she even got profiled on TV as the “light novel writer who’s just too cute.” With every new book release, she held autograph and photo sessions, and most of her books sold well, but the reviews were almost universally bad. Nadeshiko’s novels were more throwaway merchandise for Nadeshiko the influencer brand than anything else. Enjoying this popularity beyond her talent naturally attracted a lot of haters that review-bombed her Amazon listings and turned the comment sections of whatever new photos and video she posted into yet another flame war.

This state of affairs was the main reason why her grandfather, the well-known and talented writer Yoshihiro Kiso, and her parents were against her staying in this business. The resulting tension led to her finally leaving home and “apprenticing” with the Hashimas.

Itsuki and Nayuta’s take on Nadeshiko was “she’s got a lot of natural intelligence, so she’s really good at research, and she writes fast enough that she’s fine at novelizations and game or anime scripts where the content’s already set in stone. In terms of original ideas, though, she’s got nothing.” Despite that, however, Nadeshiko kept her nose to the grindstone, still writing her original novels while carrying out her daily work and cosplay photo quota.

“...How can you keep trying so hard like that, Nadeshiko?”

Despite having no talent.

Sora found a way to keep that follow-up sentence far away from his mouth.

Nadeshiko let out a deep sigh, then turned away, eyes staring off into the distance.

“Well... I guess because I wanted to be the protagonist, too.”

“...”

The grown-ups around Sora occasionally had *those* eyes. The brutish eyes of someone who didn’t care how much they bothered people around them—sometimes even neglecting their own family to keep doggedly pursuing whatever it was they were after.

I want to be the protagonist. Those words—the title of the novel that first set his father’s career in motion—Sora hated them so much.



Once he was out of the bath, Sora began rewriting the script from scratch, swearing to himself that this was the last time.

Before, he had been writing on the assumption that Kaede would take the main role, the rest of the cast propping her up, and that he needed to keep the sets as simple and bare as possible. But now he abandoned all of that, defiantly writing whatever came to his mind.

It’s not like I have the ability to craft a good story like my parents. Let’s just forget about writing well at all, create the biggest piece of crap I can, and make Kaede conclude that she was barking up the wrong tree.

The script was an ensemble piece starring the students of a fantasy-realm magic school. It mainly focused on five wizards of varying ages and genders, along with a few other important characters. Being set in a magic school, it called for the creation of a wide set of props, small and large. He was sure Kaede would say, “there’s no way we can produce this,” turn it down, and then he’d be free of this work.

But:

“Yeah, this is good! I like it.”

When he had Kaede read the finished script three days later, she gave him a broad smile back.

“I’m gonna show this to the other club members right now.”

“Huh? You mean you’ll accept it?”

“Yeah.” Kaede nodded at the flummoxed Sora like nothing was amiss.

“No, um, but are you sure this is okay? Because I think it’ll be pretty tough to pull off.”

“I’ll have to discuss it with everyone first. If something’s just impossible to pull off, we might have to ask you for some adjustments, but I’d like to get this on the stage as-is as much as possible.”

“But it’s not even *worth* going through all that trouble for—”

“Sure it is,” Kaede said, interrupting him. “With the scripts you wrote before, you always seemed to be forcing yourself, kind of, or maybe trying to consider us in the drama club too much. But the characters here all feel really alive, the story makes some bold moves, and I’d like to get this produced with the rest of the drama club.”

“...!”

Sora had to fight off the rush of emotion inside of him. “Umm,” he said, trying to stay cool about it, “not to sound mean, but based on your play last year, I’m not sure the drama club’s up to the challenge.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so, either,” Kaede freely admitted with a nod. “But that’s why I think this is worth stretching out and striving for.”

“But why are you so insistent about having an original script for your play?” Sora asked. “I’m sure if you went online, you could find lots of plays better than mine, in terms of...like, being better written, or having characters that match the cast better, or being easier to produce in terms of sets and stuff.”

“Because I want to work with our drama club to try plays that nobody’s ever seen before. And this’ll be our last chance, too.”

“Huh? Last chance how...?”

“Anyway,” Kaede quickly responded, “we’ll go with this script. Thank you very much for writing such a wonderful story for us. I’ll have the rest of the club read it right away, so can you come to our clubroom with me, Sora?”

She pulled him away, accepting no further objections. The feeling of her hand made his mind soar, and his face reddened as he meekly followed her to the drama club. It would be a little while longer before he found what she meant by “our last chance.”



Cast rehearsals were generally held on the stage in one side of the school’s gymnasium. Sets and costumes were stored in a multipurpose space close to the clubroom, and the clubroom itself was mostly a storage shed.

In the past few days since the script was completed, Sora had been working with the cast to revise the flows of certain scenes, along with bits of dialogue that were easy to stumble over. Between that and helping out with set creation, he had been busily running between the gym and the club space quite a bit lately.

“We’ve both become part of the drama club, huh?” griped Yuu, busy helping Sora stitch some costumes together. He hadn’t asked her for help, but considering Yuu’s sewing skills, her assistance was appreciated.

“A lot of the production staff have a lot of work to do thanks to my script,” Sora flatly stated. “It wouldn’t be right if I didn’t help at all.”

Yuu frowned. “You act like you’re doing it just because you’re obliged to, but you look like you’re having a lot of fun.”

“Not really. This was just how it turned out, is all.”

Then the smartwatch on Sora’s wrist vibrated. Checking it, he saw a message from Kaede asking him to come to the gym for a full run-through of the script.

“They’re asking for me over at the gym right now, so can I let you handle this outfit?”

“...Sure.”

“Thanks.”

Ignoring the dissatisfied look on Yuu’s face, Sora stood up and jogged off to the gym. “...He’s just like a puppy,” Yuu bitterly said, feeling a bit lonely as she watched him run off.



...Kaede Mitahora really is a talented actor.

Ten minutes into the full rehearsal, Sora was thinking to himself as he watched the proceedings from a chair in front of the stage.

Kaede was playing one of the main characters, a young magic school student with androgynous looks. She was wearing sweats instead of an actual costume, but her long bangs were tied back as she put in a bold, delicate performance with her emotion-laden voice. She shone like she was someone completely different now.

That being said, having a standout star in the cast wasn't necessarily a plus. The rest of the actors had improved since last year's *Run, Melos! (SF Edition)*, but they were still inferior to Kaede. This was an ensemble cast, so most of the characters appeared an equal amount of the time. This created noticeable gaps between scenes with and without Kaede, which made the play seem lower quality as a whole than it actually was.

Watching the run-through to the end, Sora gave his honest feelings to the cast. They accepted it, but they didn't look too happy about it.

"Well, we're trying our best. If you're comparing us to Kaede, there's not much we can do about that."

"Besides, she was always our leading cast member, but now we're doing this ensemble piece out of nowhere... We have first-year students here, too."

"Don't you think we'd be better off switching to something with a single protagonist?"

Kaede flatly denied that request.

"Then maybe Kaede can turn it down a little bit...? Then it wouldn't be so jarring."

"Yeah..." "Maybe we'll have to." "That'd be for the better."

"No, wait, wait!" Sora scrambled to butt in. "If the higher-level people have to cut it down for the lower-level ones, that's just weird, you know? Haven't you ever thought about trying to catch up to Kaede's level?"

Sora's world was filled with people far more amazing than him, such as his father Itsuki and Yoshihiro Kiso—but even with all that talent, they never gave up struggling to achieve more. To him, the cast's response to this problem was unthinkable. He hated the idea of the “protagonist” being something to look up to, but that “protagonist” character had already become an integral part of his core.

“If we could do that, we would have a long time ago.”

“*You* don't act, Hashima, so you don't get it.”

And Sora had no response to that. He wasn't part of the drama club.

He turned toward Kaede. Her bangs were back down over her eyes again as she watched Sora and her fellow club members, looking a bit distressed. She was clearly a superior actor, but she didn't seem quite so good at being a leader and uniting a team.

“...By the way, do you guys have a teacher advisor or anything?”

“We do,” someone replied, “but he's not worth much to us.”

As he put it, the current advisor took over after the previous one left. He was assigned the role solely because he wasn't advising any other clubs at the time; he knew nothing about drama or staging plays, he wasn't particularly interested in learning about them, and overall he just let the club do their own thing.

“Oh...”

So there was no leader. That, it seemed to Sora, was the most fatal flaw to this club. There wasn't that much time before the competition—certainly not enough for that advisor or Sora to learn all about stage production.

It'd be nice if we had some kind of super assistant who could improve everyone in a short time, but no way there's anyone that handy around...

“...Oh? Maybe there is, actually...”

“Sora?”

Kaede peered into his eyes as he fell silent, face thoughtful.

“Whoa!” He took a step back, blushing. “...Do you mind if I try talking to

someone I know to see if he'd be interested in coaching us?"

The drama club gave each other curious looks.



Three days later:

"Hello. My name is Yuma Takashina, and I've agreed to be your temporary acting coach for the next month. Great to meet all of you!"

When the man Sora brought along introduced himself, everyone in the drama club, Kaede included, froze in place. "Whaaaaaaaaa?!" they cried in unison.

Yuma Takashina, age 37, needed no introduction. He was a first-class actor, the star of many TV shows and movies, and in recent years, he'd started up his own theater troupe and switched his focus primarily to stage acting. Nobody was going to complain about this coach's qualifications. In fact, he was clearly beyond overqualified to be guiding a middle school drama club.

Being friends with both of his parents, Yuma had stopped by the Hashima residence now and then ever since Sora was young. He never hesitated to join Sora at play, using his well-honed physique to perfectly perform all the signature moves of *sentai* heroes and Kamen Rider for him. Sora loved him as a little kid, to the point that he had once said, "I wish you were my dad, Yuma," and made his father wince.

Nowadays, Sora fully understood just how special it was for Yuma Takashina to just drop in from time to time. For this coaching request, he assumed Yuma could help him find some other actor who had the free time to take this job on. But Yuma immediately agreed to take it on himself: "If it's you asking," he said, "I'll see what I can do."

This cheat-code solution to the problem turned out beautifully. With Yuma Takashina providing tough but fair individual guidance to each member of the cast, everyone in the club improved noticeably in very short order. And not just the cast, either—Yuma also had an eye out for the stage crew, and everyone instantly fell in love with him. Kaede's respect for him in particular was beyond description; she'd occasionally spy on him from far away, awed at his majestic presence—something Sora didn't appreciate too much.

Either way, two weeks after Yuma came on as an acting coach, the reborn drama club began their first full dress rehearsal in the gymnasium. Sora was in a chair front and center as before, Yuma next to him with a script in his hand. Yuu, as well, was positioned right nearby as usual. This time, though, the handsome silver-haired lad and famed actor were joined by members of the basketball team, table tennis team, and other groups that used the gym. They were all ditching practice for the moment to see what was going on, and there were also students crowding the doorways and second-floor balcony.

Amid all this unexpected attention, the cast dutifully carried out their performance. Even with the improvements everyone had made, Kaede was still head and shoulders above the rest; the audience, focused only on Yuma and Sora to begin with, gradually turned their gazes toward the stage.

Then the story reached its climactic scene, when the main characters all relied on their internal faith and clashed against one another for what they felt was right. This scene was rehearsed without the fog machine they'd use in the actual show, and the lights were kept fully on out of respect for the sports teams using the gym. That made the action a little hard to follow, but even so, the cast's acting skills brought serious impact to the scene. The sight of Kaede stalking the stage, carrying a lightsaber (i.e. her magic sword) in both hands, stole the show for both Sora and the audience.

But:

"Hmm...?"

Yuma next to him squinted, sounding a little unsure of himself. He was always gentle with these kids, even when scolding them over something. Now, however, he was looking very concerned about Kaede.

The reason why became clear ten or so seconds later. After crossing lightsabers with a rival character, Kaede suddenly collapsed on the stage with a loud thud. At first, Sora casually thought *That's Kaede for you; even when she falls, it's so natural that it doesn't seem like acting. But I don't think that was in the script...*

"Kaede!" "Mitahora!"

The actors immediately stopped their performance, scrambling to reach

Kaede. Sora and Yuma joined them, calling her name—but no matter how many times they did, she didn't regain consciousness.



The school nurse promptly called an ambulance that took Kaede off to the hospital.

"You okay, Sora?" Yuma asked, concerned over the sight of Sora spacing out in front of the stage.

"Y-yeah..." Sora regained his composure, turning toward a drama club member. "Um, was something wrong with Kaede?"

The club was still agitated, but from the moment she collapsed, they all acted like this was something they anticipated in advance. The sorrowful cast looked at each other, and finally, the third-year boy who was the club vice president started to speak.

"To tell the truth..."

The name of the disease eating its way through Kaede Mitahora's body shocked Sora. He was aware of it; it had showed up in one of his mother's novels that he had read. It was something that modern medicine had few options against, one that was almost always fatal within a few years. The vice president said that Kaede visited her doctor twice a week for checkups, and she'd begged him to let her keep attending school until the competition was over. Beyond that, it'd depend on how she was doing, but she'd likely have to be admitted to the hospital at that point, and graduating normally would be impossible for her.

And this'll be our last chance, too...

Now he understood what she meant by that.

So...she's going to die? Just like the heroine from that novel...?

"Ngh...!"

Sora ran off, passing through the school gate. Calling a self-driving taxi, he headed for the hospital Kaede was taken to.



He was unfortunately caught in afternoon rush hour, and it looked like it'd take a decent while before he could reach the hospital. Trains and cars had evolved a lot in the past ten years, but there was still no freedom from rush hours for the citizens of Japan.

Tapping his finger and groaning as he looked out the window, Sora suddenly received a message from Kaede.

I heard you're coming to the hospital.

I'm all right, so you don't need to worry that much

I think the exam will be over in an hour or so. If you do come, wait in the lobby for me

She was conscious and well enough to type out a message. Sora felt a wave of relief. I'll wait there, he texted back as he sighed to himself.

Once he finally made it, he did what he was told, waiting in the lobby for just under an hour. Then Kaede appeared, seated in a high-tech wheelchair and accompanied by a nurse. The wheelchair had an IV on it, a tube snaking its way into her wrist.

"Thanks for coming all the way here, Hashima."

"N-no, um..." Sora couldn't find the words. It made Kaede laugh a little.

"Sorry I didn't tell you about my illness."

"Th-that's okay..."

"But... Ahh, I thought I could hold out until the next competition... I guess I kind of pushed it too much." Kaede let out a saddened sigh. "I'll be in the hospital for a few days," she said in a scratchy voice, "and the doctor insisted I rest in bed after that. Stage acting is definitely off the table."

Kaede looked at the floor, choking back a sob. And as she cried, all Sora could do was stand there silently. After half a minute of this, Kaede looked up, wiped the tears away with the arm the IV wasn't connected to, and lifted up her bangs. Her powerful eyes were locked on Sora.

"Hashima, I need a favor from you."

“All right,” Sora immediately replied.

Kaede chuckled. “I didn’t say what it was yet.”

“I’ll do anything for you.”

“Hee-hee! Thank you.”

She smiled at him once more before her face grew serious again.

“I want you to take my place in the show.”

“All right.”

Once again, there was no hesitation.



Back at home, Sora found Yuu waiting for him at the front door.

“I—I wasn’t waiting because I was worried about you or anything. I just wanted to go out moonbathing for a little bit.”

“And you chose the front door of someone else’s house to do it at?”

Sora didn’t remember asking Yuu for an explanation. But then he gave an answer to a question Yuu didn’t ask, either.

“I’m going to be taking Kaede’s place in the play.”

Yuu’s eyes shot open. “You? Onstage?”

“Yeah.”

“Even after you said you never wanted to do something so conspicuous?”

“I’ve already been conspicuous lately. This won’t make much more of a difference.”

“Sure, it will.” Yuu greeted Sora’s casual smile with serious concern. “Is this you getting dragged into something that wound up making you stand out, or is this you volunteering to go into the spotlight? Because there’s a huge difference between the two.”

“...”

“Do you want to be the protagonist?”

“No,” Sora replied, lightly shaking his head and smiling. The emotions seemed ready to take him once more. “But if it’s for Kaede’s sake, I’ll be one anyway.”



The next day, Sora officially joined the drama club.

“Um, once again, I’m Sora Hashima, year two. I’m still a beginner at acting, but I’ll do my best.”

Kaede had already informed everyone at the club that she couldn’t make the competition and asked Sora Hashima to take her place. They all welcomed him as an official member. Yuu, who constantly stuck with him as a rule, didn’t join him in the club—“I don’t have any duty to go *that* far,” as she put it.

“Yuma...we don’t have much time, so be as tough with me as you need to.” Sora bowed deeply to Yuma, who seemed emotionally overwhelmed himself.

“I never thought I’d become your acting coach, Sora. But all right. I’m not going to go easy on you, so I hope you’re ready.”

...He wasn’t kidding, as it turned out. The way he taught Sora was incomparably harsher than how he treated the rest of the drama club. And not just in the after-school sessions, either—they recorded their morning rehearsals and lunch-break practice runs as well, so Yuma could watch them and list up everything Sora did wrong. There was no rest after school as well, with Sora working out for stamina, training his voice, and doing everything else he could manage alone.

At this rate, he wasn’t going to be able to hold out until the competition, so he slept through class to build up his strength. He didn’t know it, but whenever a teacher tried to wake him up, the students would all shout, “Don’t destroy this beautiful, angelic sleeping face!” so he actually got a lot of quality sleep in.

Sora felt every bit like the protagonist of some guts-and-glory sports manga. The days were tougher than anything he had experienced before, but he never thought once about throwing in the towel.

After two weeks of this, Sora the amateur had somehow grown to the point that he wasn’t inferior to the rest of the cast.

“You did a really good job, Sora. At this rate, you’ll be just fine tomorrow.”

Yuma smiled at Sora during the final dress rehearsal, the day before the big show at the competition.

“Thank you very much, sir. I’m still nowhere near the standard of Kaede, but I’ll do my best not to disappoint her.”

In the two weeks since Kaede was hospitalized, she hadn’t been back to school once. The drama club was sending her rehearsal videos on the group chat, keeping each other updated on the latest, but she never got to see Sora onstage in person. It would apparently be a while before she was discharged, so they didn’t even know if she could attend the show tomorrow.

...If she can’t even see it, what did I go through all this effort for...?

Just when Sora felt a dark wave of foreboding in his mind, he received a message—just for him, not via the drama-club group chat.

I got permission to be outside for two hours tomorrow! I’m totally gonna be there, so keep up the good work!

The moment he saw those words, the dark fog seemed to lift from his heart, the life springing back to his body after the exhausting rehearsal. Then Sora finally understood how strong his feelings were. He’d be willing to do anything for this girl. This was exactly what he had seen depicted so many times before in so many stories—something he read, watched, and listened to over and over.

...So this is love?

If it was, the world was just mercilessly cruel. His first love—the first story that he was the protagonist of—was irrevocably fated to end in tragedy.



The next day, at a community hall in town, the middle-school drama competition began.

As Sora’s school’s turn came closer and closer, just when the staff told everyone in the green room to get ready, Kaede sent a message to the whole drama club.

I’m finally here! I’m so glad I made it on time!

I'll be watching you in the wheelchair way in the back! Good luck!

Everyone cheered.

"Okay," the vice president said, "let's give the president the best show we've got." He, along with the rest of the cast and crew, formed a circle.

"Well, Hashima, give the order."

Sora panicked. "What? Me?! The newest guy here?"

"You wrote it, you contributed to direction and sets, you brought a coach in, and now you're the lead actor. You're clearly the boss of this project."

The rest of the club nodded their agreement.

"It's not like I'm the *only* lead actor," Sora pointed out, still looking ill at ease. "But, okay... 'Look out, world! We're the protagonists now!'"

He said the first thing that came to mind, and the rest of the gang shouted, "Yeah!!" in response.



Here was *The Boundless Challengers*, written by Sora Hashima.

One day, five apprentice wizards attending class at a magic academy inadvertently awaken a demon sealed in the school basement. In exchange for releasing him, the demon promises to grant any wish. The group's opinions are split—one student wants power, another knowledge, another fortune; the fourth wishes to serve the demon, while the fifth wishes for nothing and looks for a way to banish the demon once more.

If this were a standard morality play, the fifth student would doubtlessly be the main protagonist. But all five students have solid reasons in their backstory for the wishes they make, and the one seeking to banish the demon doesn't necessarily have just motives, either. They occasionally squabble over issues caused by the demon, and they occasionally work together to solve them—but in time, all five have values they refuse to give up on, leading to an intense battle to the death. For a middle school play, it was a complex, mature story, and honestly, the structure and themes could've used some polishing. An impartial observer would get the impression that the ideas behind the tale were

too big for the author's talents to handle.

Regardless, Sora was taking Kaede Mitahora's role. His name was Sieg, the student who volunteers to serve the demon in order to exact revenge for his murdered lover. He faces off against the other students, and by the end, he falls completely in love with the demon, who takes on the form of a beautiful woman. His acting skill was maybe a little off compared to the rest of the cast, but he had the looks of a fantasy hero already, and Sieg's backstory matched remarkably well with the troubles Sora had in his own heart. Every move he made seemed to have the touch of a seasoned actor.

From the seats, Yuu Yasaka (seated next to Shiori Hashima) watched on, a look of pained sadness on her face.

Sora really *was* a born protagonist. He was destined to become one from the moment he started breathing. Not like herself. She hated her hair color; she hated her eye color. Why couldn't she be a blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty like her mother? If she was, it'd be such a perfect picture when she joined the silver-haired, blue-eyed Sora.

Genetically speaking, black hair dominated over blond and black eyes dominated over blue, so it was perfectly natural for Yuu to have both. But in Sora's case, his father had black hair and eyes, while her mother had that silver-blue combo. It was one of those generation-skipping things, apparently, but in his case, the recessive genes won out in his generation—a rare thing to see. Sora really *was* special, and Yuu was just normal.

For that matter, she hated that name. Yuu. She'd liked how cute it sounded as a kid, but when she asked her parents where it came from, apparently it had the same Chinese character as the name of a friend who they both cared a lot about. This person had passed away a long time before Yuu was born, and in Yuu's eyes, her parents saw her as nothing but a replacement for that dead friend.

But despite being a normal girl burdened with the name of some stranger, she still tried her hardest to be a heroine for Sora Hashima, the protagonist. She heard that her mother caught her father's heart with a lot of dirty jokes and sexual appeal, so she copied that and became a "dirty girl" herself. The fact was

that words like “penis” and “sex” embarrassed her to say, and she’d prefer to have her first sexual experience on Christmas during the third year of a relationship. She *was* a fan of goth-Loli fashion, but putting it on, taking it off, and keeping it intact were all a major effort—if she had her way, she didn’t want to sport it every day at school. But that was the only fashion that’d really make a normal, black-haired, short-statured girl like herself stand out, so she lived with it.

And, really, it was tough being constantly berated as not being worthy enough for Sora. She knew most of all how unworthy she was. But she still wanted to be with him...and someday, she wanted to be his main heroine. And yet...

The story was now over, the curtain having fallen, and the entire cast came out and bowed deeply. When Sora in the middle raised his head back up, Yuu felt like their eyes met for a moment. Then he flashed the greatest smile ever, something that instantly charmed everyone who saw him. She thought for a second that he was smiling at her, but soon realized she was mistaken. His eyes were turned toward a seat behind and across from her own—and Kaede Mitahora was right there. A tragic young girl, gifted with genius-level talent but struck by an incurable illness. Way up there on the “main heroine” chart compared to her.

Why did someone like her have to pop up so suddenly? There was no way Yuu could beat her. If anything, Yuu wished she could take that disease in her place. Then Sora would look her way instead...

These thoughts and more crossed Yuu’s mind. She loathed herself for how shallow she was acting, and then she couldn’t stop the tears.



Aw, Yuu’s crying...

Shiori looked to her side at the bawling Yuu. A warm smile came to her face. She really *was* at her cutest when she was crying. It excited her.

Shiori Hashima was in love with Yuu Yasaka, in a romantic way.

The way she gallantly acted all brave in order to stay close to this golden child was so cute. The way she made an effort to spout out all these dirty words,

bottling up her shame, was simply adorable. The way she struggled to become a heroine despite being a normal girl laden with hang-ups—the pitiful way she had already thrown away all vestiges of herself—was so terrifyingly loveable that it made Shiori’s heart palpitate.

...But she also knew that as long as Yuu wasn’t like her, these feelings had no hope of ever being rewarded. Yuu had always been all about Sora for ages, and those feelings were never going to be pointed her way.

If not, then, Shiori at least wanted to exist inside Yuu’s heart as a potential love rival to hate. She kept making passes at Sora so she could stay close not to him, but to Yuu. She wanted Yuu to compare her small body to Shiori’s own naked one and get all depressed about it. She wasn’t about to waste time and effort trying to make Yuu turn her way. She didn’t need happiness. She wouldn’t come for Yuu’s heart or body. She just wanted to keep her close-up view of Yuu absorbed in her unrewarded love, crying over it in secret. That was all.

...Even she thought this was a little twisted. Not even she was sure how things wound up like this. Maybe it was the rebound from growing up surrounded by straightforward people like Itsuki and Chihiro. The light they shone in was so strong, nobody noticed the little bit of darkness growing inside of her.



As the stage crew carried away the props, Kaede sent the drama club a message.

That was really great! Well done, everyone!

I have a curfew so I have to go back now, but let’s talk more in-depth later!

“Kaede...”

It was a simple message, one that didn’t hint at just how much she really wanted to be up there herself, but it still made Sora’s heart burn.

Then:

“We’re all good here, Hashima. You should go visit the president.”

The vice president patted Sora on the shoulder.

“Huh? But...”

Sora looked around. The rest of the crew were all nodding and motioning at him to get going.

“...Thanks very much. I'll see you later!”

Sora promptly ran off, hurrying for the hall entrance. There weren't that many attendees in the first place, so he quickly found Kaede. She was in a wheelchair, pushed by a woman in her forties who was presumably her mother.

“Kaede!”

“Sora?”

She turned around. “Oh, are you...?” the woman with her said, seemingly aware of who he was. Leaving her mother behind, Kaede operated the wheelchair herself, zooming over to him.

“Are you done cleaning up?”

“Everyone else is still working on it. They wanted me to see you.”

“Oh.” Kaede smiled. “Your performance was really good. I didn't think you'd do that well at it. Are you sure you've never acted before?”

“No, but Yuma worked me really hard, so at least I can pretend to know what I'm doing. I couldn't hold a candle to you, though.”

Sora wasn't just being modest. He really meant it.

“But you officially joined the drama club for me, didn't you? So if you keep practicing, play a lot of roles, that sort of thing...I'm sure you'll become even better than you are now.”

Kaede's eyes seemed to be pointed far in the distance.

“Sure wish I could perform with you on the same stage when it happens...”

Sora's eyes watered.

“You will... I'm sure you will...!”

His voice was shaky as he forced the words out.

“I *am* gonna practice. I *am* gonna play a lot of roles, and I’m gonna be an actor just as good as you. And I’ll get better at writing, too, and I’ll write the greatest story in the world someday. So please perform alongside me. I can do anything for you, Kaede. I can even become the kind of protagonist who’ll overcome anything that gets in my way...!”

That opened the floodgates. Sora’s refined face was now awash in tears.

“So... Please, Kaede, don’t die...”

The tears became a constant stream as he half prayed, half screamed. And for some reason, Kaede looked completely taken aback by Sora.

“...Huh? Don’t *die*?! Am I gonna die?!”

“Uhh...?”

Sora wiped the tears away, realizing Kaede was staring wide-eyed at him. Something wasn’t right with this.

“No, I mean, your illness...”

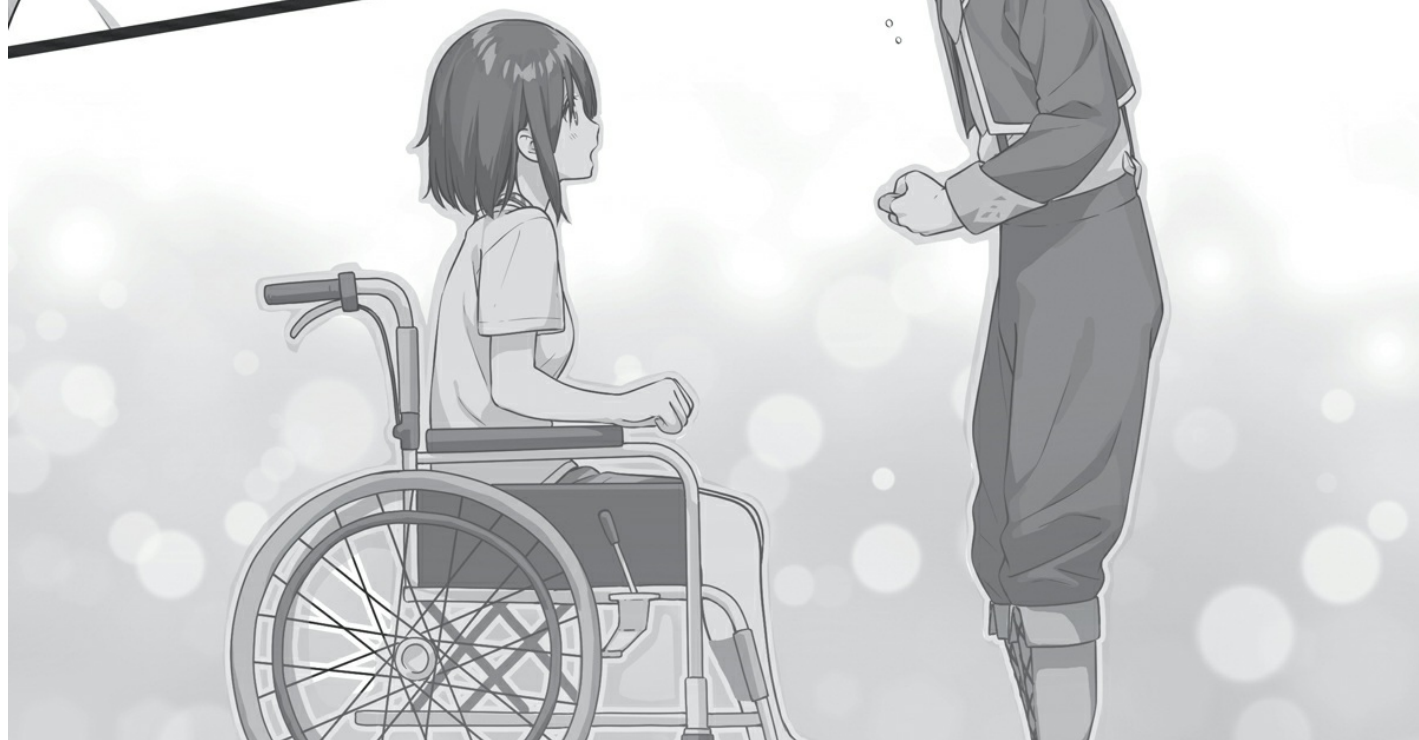
He lowered his voice, naming the disease in question. “Oh, yeah, that’s right.” Kaede nodded. She suffered from a lethal disease, but she seemed pretty calm about it.

“But... But that’s an incurable disease, right? And terminal?”

“Uh, no? Like, I’m being treated?”

“Whaaaa?!”

As Kaede explained, yes, back when his mother Nayuta Kani published that novel over ten years ago, that disease was incurable and deadly. But an effective medication developed several years back meant that now it could be fully cured, without any dangerous surgery or painful side effects. Advances in medicine never cease to amaze.



“Umm...so when you said this could be your ‘last chance’ back then...?”

“Oh, you heard that...? I meant it was the last chance I’d get to put on a play with these club members, of course. This is curable, but I’m still gonna need to be hospitalized for at least half a year, so all the current third-years are gonna graduate on me...”

“Oh... Ohhh. I see. That...ha-ha...”

Sora attempted a dry laugh. Back when the vice president gave him the name of Kaede’s disease, if he had asked for more details instead of saying, “Oh, I know it,” none of this would have happened. But didn’t he say that she had no chance of graduating? He must have meant that she wouldn’t be graduating with the rest of the current class. What kind of bastard leaves out important details like that?

“But I’m glad, though.”

“Huh?”

“The plan is for me to repeat a grade and still be in my third year of middle school next year, but I wasn’t too sure whether I wanted to stay in the drama club or not. But you’re gonna keep working on acting, write the greatest story ever, and perform alongside me, right? If that’s what you’re saying to me, no way I can stop now. I have some long rehab ahead of me, but I’ll try my best to get on the mend as soon as possible!”

“Oh... Yeah. Good luck. I’ll be waiting, I guess?”

Kaede’s melodious voice made Sora’s heart skip a beat. He basked in the joy of learning she wasn’t going to die, even as the embarrassment almost made him spontaneously combust out of shame. Why did he let that happen? He just wanted to crawl into a hole.

But just then:

“Hee-hee-hee... I heard the whole story.”

Yuu, who had slinked on up while he wasn’t paying attention, smiled a very meaningful smile. Shiori was next to her.

“I’m glad your disease isn’t so incurable after all,” she said as she tromped up

to Kaede. “Here’s hoping that you’ll make it back to school sooner than later.”

Kaede raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Ah... Thank you?”

“Wait... But wouldn’t it be better for you if she died, Yuu?” Shiori said.

Sora gasped at the sudden morbid turn in this conversation. “Whoa, Shi! What are you talking about?!”

Yuu looked back at Shiori. “Hee-hee-hee... Indeed, Auntie, what *are* you talking about? If she dies, she’ll become someone completely unforgettable to him.”

Someone unforgettable—just as Kasuka, whose name could also be read as “Yuu,” was to Yuu’s own parents.

“But if she’s still alive, I can still defeat her—whether she’s the main heroine of this story or not.”

The ferocity behind Yuu’s resolute smile was greeted with a lonesome grin and an “Oh...” from Shiori.

“Um, Yasaka?” Kaede said, looking up at Yuu.

“Yes?”

Kaede slowly got up from her wheelchair, looking straight into Yuu’s face.

“Wh-what?” Yuu said, falling back a bit.

“I’m not going to lose, either.”

“...?!”

Sora and Yuu’s eyes opened wide.

“Kaede, do you mean...”

Do you mean you have a thing for me? The thought made Sora’s cheeks flush as Kaede continued.

“Because *I’m* going to be the star performing alongside Sora...and he’ll write the greatest story ever told for me!”

““Huh?””

Sora and Yuu just stared at Kaede. She stared back.

“Huh? You’re talking about joining the drama club and trying to take my heroine roles from me, aren’t you, Yasaka?”

Yuu deeply sighed. “.....Uh.....well, let’s go with that.”

“Hee-hee! You always *were* a good actor, Yuu.”

Shiori couldn’t help but get a word in.

“Shi?!” Yuu yelled back. “...Hmph! Ugh. What are you, one of those oblivious protagonists that were popular in early 2010s’ romcoms? Because that’s fine by me, but I dunno how Sora feels about it...”

“What was that? Something about peelings?”

“You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?!”

“Of course I am.” Kaede smiled at Yuu’s ranting. Then she turned toward Sora. “Sora, I’m going to focus on getting better for now. Can you wait around half a year for me?”

He stared at her for a few moments. Then:

“Y-yes! I’ll wait for however long you need until you’re back in school!”

His breathing grew ragged. Yuu’s lips flapped helplessly as she failed to find any words; Shiori’s entire body shook as she contained her laughter; and behind Kaede, her mother muttered. “Ahh, she likes them younger than her, huh? Just like me...”

“Anyway, Sora, see you later.”

Kaede sat back down in the wheelchair, her mother gripping the handles.

“Yeah. See you.”

Sora smiled, Kaede waved back, and her mother slowly wheeled her away. Yuu watched Sora see her off, a visible sadness in her eyes. Shiori, in turn, watched Yuu watch Sora see her off, eyes full of emotions too wicked to really be called love.

Nobody knew how this quartet’s story would unfold from here on. The romantic comedy had only just begun—and so the protagonists marched on to their futures, no matter whether it proved to be a comedy or tragedy to them

all...

(Not to be continued)



“...Okay, I’m done reading it, Itsuki.”

It was a few months after the first annual Reiwa Entertainment Awards ceremony, and Chihiro was in the Hashima family living room with her brother, putting down the printout of a short novel. Called *The Blue Songbirds*, it was apparently inspired by a dream Itsuki’d had the other day that was set ten or so years into the future, starring Chihiro’s nephew Sora (age 2) and depicting a teenage romance centered around a drama club.

“Oh, yeah? What did you think?”

“Haaaaahhhhhh...” Chihiro began with a long, deep, exaggerated sigh. “Mm, well, there’s a lot of things I’d like to say, but...”

“Yeah.”

“First, is it such a good idea to put real-life people in your novels without permission? I know you’ve never done doujin work before, but you live off the entertainment industry, so you know that you need to be careful dealing with actual people, right?”

“It’s not without permission. Shi, Sora, and Yuu all gave their okay.”

“Oh, they did?”

“Here.”

Itsuki showed Chihiro a video on his phone. It showed the three children playing with trains while Itsuki sat nearby.

“Hey, guys, can I write about you in a novel?”

“Your novel, bro-bro?! I’ll be in your book?!”

“That’s right, Shi. I dunno if it’ll be a book yet, but...”

“Wow! Cool! It’s a, um, uh, a great honor! Wowww!”

Shiori was dancing around with excitement. Sora and Yuu copied her: “Eeee!

Yaaaay!” and “Wheeee!”

“You see?”

“Uhh...does that really count as giving permission?” Chihiro scratched her head. “Also, I don’t remember giving you permission to use me.”

“Well, you’re... You got more of a cameo, so I figured it was fine.”

“Uh, it’s not? I know I only show up on TV once, but I really don’t like the setting you gave me! Like, if I’m thirty-four years old and my last name’s still Hashima, that means I’m not married yet, doesn’t it?!”

“Not necessarily,” Itsuki calmly replied. “At age twenty-eight, you married an American astronaut named George (age thirty), but it fell apart quickly because George got hung up over how you kept on surpassing him, so you filed for divorce two years later and went back to your maiden name.”

“That’s even worse! Stop giving me these sordid backstories!” Chihiro took a deep breath, realizing that she was getting too loud about this. “But did Nadeshiko give *her* permission?”

“No. I read it to her yesterday because I figured she’d give the okay then.”

“And her response?”

“She was pretty pissed off.”

“There, you see?! How many times do you have to break her heart before you’re satisfied, huh?!”

Itsuki looked apologetic, at least for now. “I dunno, it’s just been fun to wheedle her lately... Don’t you think she’s at her cutest when her face is all clouded?”

“You’re starting to sound like the sixteen-year-old Shi in your own story... Also, *all* girls look best when they’re smiling. Like, what’s with the choices for future Shi’s characterization?”

“Don’t ask me. I just wrote down what I saw in the dream.” Itsuki looked serious enough about it.

Chihiro still seemed doubtful. “I dunno... Aren’t dreams usually a lot more

subjective and incoherent than that? I don't think most dreams have a clear plotline and an omnipotent narrator telling us about multiple characters' emotions and stuff."

Chihiro's logic was greeted with a look of surprise.

"Huh? Don't *you* ever have any dreams with a movie-like three-act structure, well-defined characters, and a complete story?"

"Huh? I don't think I ever have, no..."

"No...? Well, Kazuko and Haruto do sometimes, apparently. You know, movie-like dreams."

"Really?"

"Yeah. But I guess dreams are your brain's way of organizing memories, so unless you become a first-class writer like us, constantly creating stories with our brains all day, you may never have dreams at this level..."

Itsuki accentuated this with a smug grin. It sorely irritated Chihiro.

"...Well, if that was your dream, then fine...but this novel glosses over its descriptions of futuristic gadgets way too much."

"Ah...?!" Itsuki groaned at this criticism.

"Like, you drag out that term 'high-tech' over and over again. I know it's hard to accurately predict what life will be like in ten years, but if you actually do your research, you can imagine the trends to some extent, can't you?"

"W-well, I mean...it was a dream, so..."

"Even if it was, if you're making it into a novel you want people to read, you have to brush it up at least a little bit."

"Oof..."

Itsuki fell silent, finding himself without any valid defense. Chihiro kept going.

"And I feel like you're over-reliant on the fact this is ten years in the future. Kaede's illness, for example. If there's a disease that's completely incurable and lethal with current medicine, but they invent some wonder drug ten years from now that makes it totally curable—like, what kind of disease are you

picturing, exactly? You didn't really think about that, did you?"

"W-well, I kept that vague because if I use an actual disease name, the publisher's compliance department starts getting on my case..."

"Even so, you can't just skip the details and make up some convenient fake disease for your needs, can you? That's a little too convenient."

"Ugh..."

"Also, the education system depicted here's a little different from real life, but did you do any actual research about that, or were you just making that up for your convenience as well?"

"You...got me there."

"And one more thing..."

.....

.....

...Chihiro's laundry list of concerns, just as merciless as Miyako and Toki's, lasted for almost another hour.

"G-give me a break already..."

Chihiro sighed at the dazed, staggered Itsuki.

"I know I went over a lot...but this just doesn't *feel* nice, you know? The way you make a dream into this concrete novel, the way you insert real people and act all smug around them about it, the way you present yourself as this incredible writer throughout... It's just gross. Indefensibly so."

"Arrrrghh!!"

The lethal blow fully broke Itsuki's heart. Chihiro always had something of a wicked streak, but after she became better acquainted with Haruto's sister recently, her poison tongue was growing more venomous than ever.

Itsuki stood up, eyes watery, and stared at Chihiro, struggling to remain balanced.

"What, Itsuki?"

“.....If...”

“If?”

“If it *wasn’t* gross, it wouldn’t be a novel!! You’re so stupid, Chihiro!! You’re a crappy little sister! Why don’t you go be a go-getter editor somewhere?!”

Screaming like a stupid little kid, Itsuki dashed out of the house, not even bothering to take his stuff along with him. It was a disgraceful act from someone who had been crowned the best light novel author in Japan just a little while ago.

Chihiro sat there for a bit, staring at the doorway her brother tore out from.

“I *am* interested in editorial work...but no thanks.” She picked up the printout on the table. “I’m going to be an astronaut after all.”

She had gone to grad school so she could obtain the PhD she’d need in order to become one. But Chihiro had never discussed this dream for the future with anyone—not Itsuki, not her parents or friends, not even Haruto. And yet it had been fulfilled in the novel. It was really startling.

Maybe Itsuki had one of those premonition-type dreams...?

“Heh. Yeah, right.”

She laughed off the unscientific idea. She *was* going to be an astronaut, but she was also going to find someone to marry by age thirty-four. There wouldn’t be any George from NASA. Shiori wasn’t going to succumb to the darkness, and after ten years, Nadeshiko was certainly going to be... Well, if not a writer, then at least she wouldn’t be so apathetic.

But most of all, this novel made an incredibly glaring omission. It didn’t make a single mention of Sora’s little sister—the one in Kazuko Hashima’s womb right now.

“...Nobody really knows what’ll happen in the future, besides.”

Still, Chihiro was sure about one thing. Whether it was ten years from now, or a hundred, or even a thousand, she was sure people would still keep on asking

for way too much out of life. Talent, money, status, reputation, family, looks, personality, dreams, hope, resignation, peace, friends, lovers, little sisters. Whatever someone wants the most, someone else already has, and that someone never values it enough. Whenever two people want the same thing the most, it's almost a miracle—and comedies and tragedies both happen because, well, miracles don't.

The only option for us was to continue struggling in this sad, ridiculous world.

Only those who never gave up and kept on advancing would be able to obtain their own story for themselves—a story where they can say, “This, yes *this*, is all you need.”

(The End)

Afterword Part 2

Ha-ha-ha! So you fools thought this was a side story? Well, it was actually part of the main story! ...I mean, I started it with every intention of producing a side story, but *Sister* has always been at least somewhat grounded in reality, and even in a side story, I didn't want a major plot point to be too far unhinged from it. Still, though, a humanities grad like me can't really predict what the world will be like in ten years, and I don't even know if the light novel industry will still exist then, so this is how I ended it. Just like Chihiro said, I don't think anyone knows what the future will bring, but maybe this really is the kind of tale awaiting Sora and Yuu in the future.

And so *A Sister's All You Need* comes to its real, true, honest end. I pray that the futures of everyone who read this to the end is as happy as possible, but even more than that, *I* want to be happy. I wanna get married, dammit!!!

As for my next series, following the survey we held in Volume 13, *Yuri Before the Deadline* was the most popular pick. That was the only proposal that shared a setting with *Sister* and featured Miyako as a character, so I should've seen it coming, but like I mentioned in Afterword Part 1, I've posted a bit of a preview on Kakuyomu and it should go on sale within 2020.

The second most popular proposal was *We All Failed*. I'm far removed from my own college exam-taking period by now and I know the system keeps making tiny changes from year to year. Just the other day, the government announced they'd introduce essay questions to the common entrance exam, only to basically say "never mind" just a bit later; it's ridiculous. The more I look into this premise, the less suitable it seems for a long light novel series, but I'm still considering how I can make it happen.

The other three proposals (except for *Gourmand Princess*) were all about equally as popular, and all are still under consideration. I guess nobody wants to

see me tackle the fantasy genre, huh? That's all the more reason why I could try it anyway. It's wholly possible.

So I still have no idea what the future will bring, but I sincerely hope that your future and mine intertwine once more in the form of my newest work. I'm sure we'll see each other soon enough.

Yomi Hirasaka

January 2020

Afterword

This is Kantoku, the series illustrator.

For this volume, my afterword depicts Chihiro in the future. Her charms are definitely galaxy-size, no doubt about that.

The story has finally come to a close, and I'm glad to see it reach its natural conclusion. It's always a little sad when something ends like this, but my first takeaway from it all is "man, that was great!" And the side story that was all about the kids—wasn't it a blast? I feel like we could make this series a multi-generational thing, easy.

Also, a *Sister* artbook is going on sale in Japan the same time as this volume via direct marketing! It includes all the illustrations from Volume 1 forward, so I hope you'll buy it as a way to reflect back on the series.



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KANTOKU

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