

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

3

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku



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Ingredients for Dinner



🌟 Rom-Com (Title TBD)

🌟 Let's Think Up a Present!

🌟 Let's Think Up a Story Line!

🌟 The Pursuer

🌟 Age Twenty-One

🌟 The Amusement Park

🌟 The Zoo

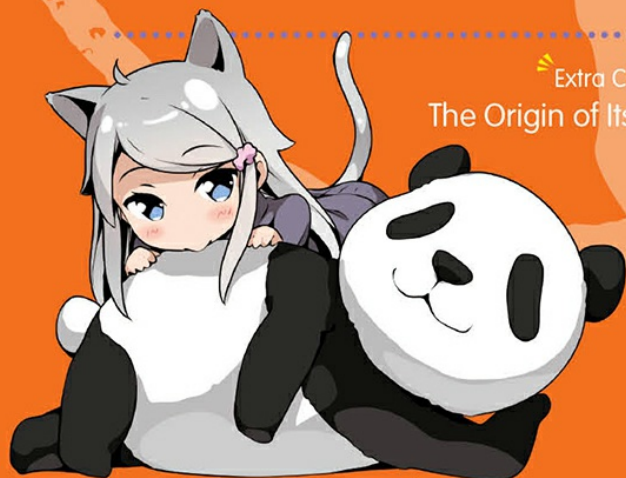
🌟 Part-Time

🌟 The Setting of Chronica Chronicle

🌟 The Aquarium

🌟 I Wanna Be the Protagonist

🌟 Extra Chapter
The Origin of Itsuki Hashima



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Yomi Hirasaka

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3


NEW YORK



Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 3

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 3

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

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

CHIIRO HASHIMA

Itsuki's younger brother. The perfect human being.

NAYUTA KANI

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

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant.

Rom-Com (Title TBD)

It was the middle of April, and in a certain diner in the middle of Akihabara, Itsuki Hashima and Haruto Fuwa were talking.

They were both novelists, and they both had new books out on that day, so they had gone to this neighborhood and visited a few of its bookstores to see how things were going. The results were fairly obvious. Thanks to the debut of its anime version on TV a few days earlier, Haruto's *Chevalier of the Absolute World* was selling like hotcakes—both the new volume and the previous ones in the series. Itsuki's *Sisterly Combat*, on the other hand, was doing as well as it always did—decently enough, but the difference in popularity from Haruto's series was painfully obvious.

It threw Itsuki off a bit, of course. He had invited Haruto over to Akihabara in part to help him get out of his funk, but now it was Haruto trying to smooth things over for Itsuki. It took the promise of a free lunch to cheer Itsuki up somewhat, and in the course of their idle chatter, Haruto slipped in a question, making it seem as chill and banal a query as possible.

“Is Miyako, like, seeing anyone right now?”

Itsuki blinked several times in response. He wasn't expecting this.

“Um...? Well, who knows?” he replied with a quizzical look.

Miyako Shirakawa was their common friend, a girl currently attending college. She had once been Itsuki's classmate at the place, and even after Itsuki dropped out, she still routinely invited herself over to his apartment, using it to write reports, study for exams, play games, and read books to kill time. She also occasionally gave women's fashion and trend advice to Itsuki, along with feedback about his current works in progress. Haruto had come to know her after an RPG session a couple of months ago.

“You got a thing for her or something?”

Haruto tried to act as calm and unaffected as possible by this direct strike. He still couldn't keep himself from blushing.

“Ahh... Um, you know, I was just kinda wondering.”

Ten days ago, the two of them, along with Miyako and their novelist friend Nayuta Kani, had watched the premiere of the anime adaptation of Haruto's *Chevalier of the Absolute World*. The production of it was so god-awful, it literally reduced Haruto to tears as Itsuki and Nayuta watched, wishing they were anywhere else. As novelists themselves, they had learned about the potential tragedy waiting for any work that gets the anime treatment, and that such tragedy had broken the heart of more than one author in the past.

It was impossible to explain without personal experience, even though they could imagine it well enough. That was why they refrained from offering him canned sympathy—they couldn't, if they didn't know what happened behind the scenes.

But Miyako did. She looked at the blubbering Haruto and didn't hesitate to offer her condolences, sobbing right alongside him as if *she* were the victim. When a friend was feeling sad, she was sad with them.

It sounds easy, but it's not a feat that just anyone can pull off. In her words:

I know it's sad when...when you try really hard at something, and it blows up on you!

Haruto had spent the past ten days depressed in his bedroom, but every time he felt like his heart was about to be swallowed up by the darkness, the memory of Miyako's tearstained face flashed in his mind. By now, when he was finally able to regain a little optimism for the future, he thought those tears were really what had kept him that one step away from the edge of utter despair. There was someone willing to cry with him, and that just barely kept the wound from being fatal.

“Like, she's really great, y'know?” Haruto blurted out, still red.

“Yeah,” Itsuki nodded. He had no objection to this. “But a boyfriend, huh? I haven't heard of any...”

He and Miyako were casual friends. They had never really discussed anything in the realm of their private lives. But:

“...But Kanikou did say something to me once, like ‘Myaa’s such a grown-up woman! And so incredibly *experienced*, too!’ She had, like, stars in her eyes when she said it, too...” (“I want to be like her,” she had continued to Itsuki, “so let’s start screwing right now!”)

“...An ‘incredibly experienced,’ ‘grown-up’ woman, huh...?”

Haruto imagined it. It made him swallow.

“Apparently?” Itsuki bluntly stated. To be honest, he didn’t really want to think about his friends that way.

“How incredibly experienced do you think...?”

“How should I know?! ...Like, I don’t know if there’s a guy in her life right now, but I’d certainly believe it if there was.”

Itsuki didn’t know much about Miyako’s current social life in college, but she was always hanging out with smiling, cheerful, socially well-adjusted women (the sort that Itsuki tended to have trouble dealing with), so it seemed a given that she had some male friends as well.

“Yeah... Yeah, I’d assume so. She’s so cute and kind to people. No way other guys would leave her alone...”

Haruto exhaled a soft sigh, as Itsuki took out his phone and began tapping at it.

“Whatcha doin’?”

“...Oh, I figured I could just ask her, so...”

He showed the screen to Haruto. It was open to the LINE social-network app, with the first message in the on-screen history reading:

Hey, do you have a boyfriend right now?

“Whoa, um, hey, don’t you think that’s a little *too* direct?!”

Itsuki’s eyebrow quirked upward as Haruto panicked. “How? Isn’t this the fastest way to find out?”

“Well, yeah, but...! C’mon, you have to work *up* to that first! I need to mentally prepare myself some more!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Itsuki grumbled as he pressed the “Send” button.

“Ahhhh...?!”

Haruto was in shock. He gaped at the screen, as “Read” popped up next to the message almost immediately.

“Ooh, she’s got it.”

“...Itsuki... You’ve got guts, you know that?”

Itsuki sighed at the peeved Haruto. “Well, *you’re* acting like a huge chicken over this. What happened to Prince Manwhore?”

“I’m not that kind of guy in real life!”

With a weird sort of whooshing sound, Miyako’s reply popped on-screen. The two of them read it.

No, why?

“Whoa... She doesn’t...”

Haruto breathed a visible sigh of relief, much to Itsuki’s semicontrived concern.

“‘Why?’ ...What should I tell her? I’m getting tired of tiptoeing around with you on this, so how ’bout I just type in ‘Haruto said he likes you’ and get it over with?”

“How ’bout let’s not, okay? I mean, anyone would wonder why you’re asking them if they have a boyfriend out of nowhere, you dumbass!”

“...I’m not a dumbass,” Itsuki grouched as he typed in Oh, just wondering. Don’t worry about it and sent it off.

“...Do you really think telling her ‘don’t worry about it’ is gonna make her do anything *besides* worry about it?” a still-dissatisfied Haruto observed. “Besides, like... Just from these messages alone, it’s gonna look a lot like *you* have a thing for her, won’t it?”

“What...?!”

Itsuki's eyes were wide open. He pondered the thought for several seconds.

"Well shit, you might be on to something."

"You really *are* a dumbass..."

Haruto stared straight at Itsuki's face. Itsuki responded by averting his eyes.

"...Hmm... If that's the impression she got, maybe I oughtta just be honest and say you were asking about her—"

"Don't! Seriously!"

"Hmmm..."

After a few more seconds' worth of agonizing, Itsuki finally sent Miyako an additional message.

Don't get the wrong idea! It's not like I have feelings for you or anything!

"Perfect! This oughtta take care of it."

"Um, you think?" Haruto asked doubtfully as Itsuki gave him a triumphant smile.

"Oh, totally. I used the emoji exclamation points and everything. It's perfect."

"Yeah? With that hot-and-cold act, isn't it starting to look like you're going all *tsundere* on her for no reason?"

"*Tsun...dere...?*" Itsuki gave the screen another glance as he considered this accusation. "Whoa, you're right!"

"Geez, man..."

"Hrrmmm... How am I supposed to set the record straight now...? If I keep texting her, it's just gonna look like I'm needling her even more, I think..."

Haruto sighed at the wavering Itsuki. "Ugh... Just act the way you always do around Miyako, all right? Message her the same dumb way you normally do."

"Hmm..."

"Yeah. And...I'll just bring it up to her sometime soon."

"Whoa."

Despite his crimson cheeks, Haruto clearly meant that as a bold declaration. It astonished his friend.

“I’m gonna do it,” he continued, voice growing more passionate. “I’m gonna confess my love for Miyako...and I swear I’ll make her a happy woman!”

“Um, yeah...” Itsuki gave him a funny look. “Man, you’re really wearing your emotions on your sleeve these days, huh, Haruto?”

“Well, my anime turned out like shit, so...”

Haruto’s countenance suddenly darkened.

“...This is probably one of the lowest points of my life. I gotta believe that, or I don’t know how I’m gonna go on. And if this is rock bottom, then there’s nowhere to go from here but up, right?”

“Yeah,” Itsuki said, nodding and halfheartedly laughing as Haruto forced a smile onto his face. Inside, though, he was recalling the words of a veteran novelist he knew in the business:

If your stuff starts to sell, you gotta do whatever it takes to be happy.

You know what happens when you think you’ve succeeded? You get treated like a human punching bag by people who haven’t even read your book. You get treated to a public stoning, and you’re not allowed to fire back at them one single bit. If you let that get to you, it’s gonna break your heart, and you’ll fall out of the scene. You can’t let that happen.

Who would ever want to get involved in a business where, the moment you claw your way to the top, you lose every right you ever had to happiness? Who’s gonna bother even trying to give it a shot?

So that’s your duty, all right? To be happy. You can buy a house, a fancy car, and designer clothing. You can blow a ton of money on food or cocktails or whatever. You can get married to a pop singer. You can go to signings or events and have your fans fawn all over you. You can pretend to be some kinda literary giant in interviews and lectures. That last one’s pretty risky, so I wouldn’t recommend it, but you could even try to mouth back at your editor a little bit. Hell, give up writing and just goof off all day. Anything.

As long as it makes you happy, feel free to satisfy any kind of deviant desire you can think of. Doesn't matter if you're a writer, a manga artist, a singer, an actor, a pro athlete—if you've made it all the way to the top of your scene, then you've got an obligation to show everybody who comes after you that you're happy.

...Not that *that* particular writer ever found happiness, of course.

Itsuki knew exactly how much effort Haruto had expended on this. He had never missed a deadline; he had offered full supervision and advice to the manga adaptation; he went to every brainstorming session for the anime; he expended untold amounts of time holding interviews and doing PR for it; he even wrote a special-edition novel to give away as a freebie with the Blu-ray version. All without a single complaint (in front of Itsuki, at least).

And Itsuki knew this was an ideal. Setting aside concerns about the future of the scene or whatnot, he truly believed that people who worked hard deserved to be rewarded. Besides, he knew that his own series was an **obvious** choice for an impending anime treatment, so he was planning to be at the top himself soon enough. He wanted Haruto to remain both his friend and close rival, and for that to happen, Haruto needed to keep his spirits up.

So he opened his mouth and said:

“Well, hang in there. I’m rootin’ for you, too.”

It was about 90 percent kindness and 10 percent an attempt to hide his embarrassment—and in some ways, nothing crueler could have been said.



Meanwhile:

Hey, do you have a boyfriend right now?

“Huhhh?!”

Miyako, reading Itsuki’s message on the train back home from college, audibly squawked in response.

Do I have a boyfriend? What could have possibly driven Itsuki to ask *that*, out of the blue? It threw her for a terrible loop, but she still tapped out a hurried

reply.

No, why?

Her heart accelerated as she awaited the reply. After a bit of a delay, it arrived.

Oh, just wondering. Don't worry about it



*

What do you mean, don't worry about it?!

Miyako tried her hardest not to shout it out loud as she chided him. Of course she was going to worry about it. What would make Itsuki wonder all of a sudden if she had a boyfriend? Was he really “just wondering”?

She and Itsuki had never discussed matters of the heart very much. He never had a taste for tales of the kind of raw, unbridled romance her college friends had experienced, and neither did Miyako, really. Whenever such topics came up, she'd usually just smile, nod, and wait for it to pass.

The idea of Itsuki asking about her relationship status out of nowhere was bizarre, no matter how you thought about it.

Is there a reason for this...? Does Itsuki, maybe, have a thing for...? She tried to stave off the *No way, girl* that crossed her mind.

I don't think nothing about her, no. And that's what makes this so shitty.

A while back, one night while the three of them stayed in Okinawa, Itsuki went red in the face and offered her an explanation of his relationship with Nayuta. Miyako's chest twinged with loneliness as she recalled his expression then.

She really thought that Itsuki liked Nayuta. He liked her, but it was much more complicated than that, so he was unable to reciprocate the feelings Nayuta broadcast to the world every day. For someone like Miyako, still finding her place in the world, it was hard to figure out whether her own take was accurate or not, but she was pretty sure Itsuki had something much more important than merely love in his heart.

So maybe... Maybe he can't be a couple with Nayu, so he wants me as a girlfriend instead...?!

Given Itsuki's personality, it hardly made sense, but you saw couples like that all the time. Not really loving each other but hanging out with a handy member of the opposite sex because they liked the idea of having a lover.

Itsuki was a little-sister-obsessed f██k, but he was also a grown man. He had

a not-so-small collection of 18+ books and video games, and he had the same kind of thoughts any man his age did. Being propositioned on a daily basis by someone as obstinate (and buxom) as Nayuta would fill anyone with anguish.

S-so... So he wants me as an outlet for all those anguished emotions he's feeling...?!

Just as Miyako went red in the face at the mental image, another message came in.

Don't get the wrong idea! It's not like I have feelings for you or anything!

Uh...uhhhhh...?

Now Miyako was even more confused.

If she was supposed to take that at face value, Itsuki said "don't get the wrong idea" because he realized his previous message meant something he didn't intend it to. But Miyako had seen lines like these in countless manga and light novels by now. The old *tsundere*—playing her hot and cold. Pretty-girl characters (and some guys, too), unable to accept their feelings, would blush and blurt out a sentence just like this for the readers to smirk at.

Itsuki Hashima was a professional novelist. There was no way he *wouldn't* realize he was typing out this well-trodden character trope. This had to be deliberate. Which meant he was *tsundering* on purpose.

Okay, so...does that mean Itsuki really does want to go out with me...?!

Miyako's face grew even redder. Going out with him? That'd be so mean to Nayu, and besides, if you don't *really* have a thing for someone, then it's not nice to string them along for no reason... *I—I definitely don't wanna become an outlet for Itsuki's raging hormones... I don't... I kind of don't, maybe... B-but, maybe not as much as Nayu, but maybe I kinda have a little thing for him, too...?*

A few of the nearby passengers gave Miyako funny looks as a cavalcade of emotions swept across her face. She didn't notice them.

So how should I respond to this?

"Let me think about it"? "OK"? "I'm sorry"? ...No. That would all be weird. He didn't ask her point-blank to be his girl.

Maybe I should get angrier, like “Why’d you think I’d think that, you dummy?” or “You don’t think anything about me?!” or something? Or how about I take the high road and type “Lollll tsundere much?” instead?

She began to get the feeling that no response would be correct. Human language felt like such a clumsy, unwieldy tool to her now. And as she pondered over it, the train reached her stop, so she had to be satisfied with sending him a sticker of a cartoon character smiling but also looking vaguely concerned.

Q&A Corner



In this section, we'll answer some of the questions we got from the Volume 2 reader-feedback form.

Thanks for all the questions!



This should fill up a *ton* of pages!

No! That's not the point! This is pure, selfless fan service and definitely *not* a way to fill pages!



Fine, fine, let's go with that. I'm just saying what everyone's thinking.

Yeah, so in this corner, we'll be answering some of the more detail-oriented questions about things that couldn't get addressed in the main story.



Important topics like "How is Chihiro managing to pretend to be a guy?" will be tackled in the main plotline, so you'll have to wait for that payoff. We're looking for much more trivial concerns, like dick size for the boys. So keep on sending those questions!

Let's Think Up a Present!

“So I’m thinking about throwing a surprise party.”

Three days after Itsuki and Haruto met in Akihabara, Nayuta blurted the statement out of nowhere as she sat by the low *kotatsu* table of Itsuki’s apartment, messing around with her tablet.

Nayuta Kani, the silver-haired and blue-eyed beauty, was a genius writer, the number-one novelist working for the publisher Itsuki and the others contributed to. In recent days, she had requested a “lockdown” (a hotel spot or office inside the publisher where writers or artists could fully concentrate on their work) and was rewarded with a long-term stay at a hotel ten or so minutes’ walk away from here. This made her physically closer to Itsuki now, which meant she was hanging out in his apartment more often than ever.

“Huh? A surprise...?”

Itsuki, lazing at his computer and “ego-searching” (i.e., checking the Internet for people talking about you or your work), gave her a quizzical look. There wasn’t much energy in his face; his eyelids were half-closed out of fatigue.

After their newest book comes out, most authors are too busy fretting over sales and reviews to worry much about writing. They stake out the new-release sections of bookstores for days in a row to see if customers are actually buying the thing, engage in ego-searching day and night, or just waste the day holding drinking parties, playing games, watching TV, sleeping, waking up just in time to score the login bonus on whatever mobile game has their attention, falling asleep again, and so forth.

It’s a phase, and one that lasts unpredictable amounts of time before the novelist feels ready to work again. Even with the same author, it can be long or short at any time. It depends on things like the amount of work spent on the

book, the author's dedication or confidence, the initial reaction, whether it's the first or last book of a series, whether the franchise is in danger of being cut unless it starts selling, and how close other deadlines are. There are some superhumans who can get back to work right on launch day, while other authors shamble around like zombies for several months or more.

The only thing for sure is that there's (probably) no such thing as a novelist who doesn't care about the response to their work. Even Nayuta Kani, driven by nothing except true love for Itsuki, once grew so overexcited after one of her books went on sale that her self-pleasure sessions became notably longer and more frequent.

As has frequently been said, a novel is like the child of its author. And no would-be parent simply abandons their child.

Given the fairly fast pace of his releases, Itsuki Hashima was the sort to return to work relatively quickly. The newly launched Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat*, however, was his most strenuous project yet—one that, thanks to all the pain and torment he dealt with during its production, he was sure was his greatest work. He had more love for it than any of his previous novels, and it filled him with a great sense of relief to have finally gotten it out. That and total exhaustion. And a level of sensitivity to sales figures and reviews that he had never before experienced.

"A surprise party."

"It's kind of surprising to hear you use such a normal-sounding word," Itsuki dully replied. "A surprise for what?"

"For Myaa's birthday, of course."

"Miyako's birthday... When was it?"

"April twenty-ninth."

"...Oh."

Itsuki had known Miyako for about two years and was completely clueless about her birthday. April 29 was about a week away.

"...Well, let's do it. A surprise party, or whatever. We'll just plan a party and

keep it a secret from her, right?”

After several days of lazing around his apartment, Itsuki had begun to have the sneaking suspicion that he'd better get his ass in gear, or else he'd be in trouble. This seemed like the perfect kick start for him.

Nayuta, for her part, gave him a cheerful nod. “Is it all right if we hold it in this apartment?”

“Sure. You, me, Haruto, and Chihiro?”

“Hmm... Do me and Myaa have any other friends in common?”

“Well, kind of a stretch to call 'em 'friends,' but there's my editor and my tax accountant.”

“Okay, Prince Manwhore and Chihiro, then.”

“Sure. I'll let 'em know.”

“That...and presents.”

“We can all bring our own, can't we?”

“Yeah... In that case, can you give me some present-shopping advice, Itsuki?”

Nayuta looked deadly serious about this. Itsuki flashed her a dubious look.

“Why are you asking me? You're a girl. You'd probably know more about what she'd like than I ever would.”

Nayuta lowered her voice. “I... I've never had the kind of friend I'd give a present to, so...”

“Oh. Yeah?” Itsuki awkwardly averted his eyes. “...Well, I've never given someone a birthday present, either. I always thought my friends' birthday parties were kind of like urban legends or something.”

“But you write all these hilarious romantic comedies, too, right, Itsuki? Don't you know a lot about what girls like as presents?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Don't be stupid! The heroines of *my* rom-coms are handy plot devices that'll be happy with whatever the main character gives them. It could be a box of dog shit, as long as he makes a real serious effort at picking it! I don't have the slightest idea what actual women like!”

Itsuki took clear pride in this for some reason.

“Oh! I, um, I’d be happy if *you* gave me dog shit, too, Itsuki, as long as you thought really hard about what I wanted!”

Itsuki gave the blushing Nayuta a withering look. “...Hey, if I thought long and hard about it and decided to give you a box of dog shit, it’d be about time for you to realize that I pretty much hated your guts, okay?”

“Wouldn’t you think more like ‘Ohh, this wonderful girl, so giddy over receiving a box of dog shit as long as it’s from me... Eeeeeeee! ♥’ or something?”

“No. I’d think you’re a total f██k.”

“Even if I was your little sister?”

“How *dare* you even *insinuate* I’d give dog shit as a present to my sister! I’d rather *she* give *me* dog shit for my birthday!”

“That makes you sound like a total f██k, too, Itsuki...”

“N-now look—”

Itsuki was about to fire back but instead took a moment to calm himself.

“...Why are we talking about dog shit again?”

“You started it.”

“And *you’re* the one who ran with it. It’s your fault.” Itsuki sighed. “...Well, do *you* have any idea what Miyako might like?”

Nayuta thought for a moment. A figurative lightbulb turned on over her head.

“Ooh! I do!”

“What?”

“She told me a bit ago she wanted a driver’s license!”

“So what? ...Think of something that someone else can actually give her.”

“...Sadly, I can’t.”

“...It’d probably be quickest to ask her, then.”

“No!” Nayuta thundered as Itsuki reached for his phone.

“Why not?”

“If you ask her what she wants, she’ll totally realize you’re talking about a birthday present!”

“Oh. Yeah... It’s a surprise party, too...”

“Exactly! So we need to think up the perfect present all by ourselves...!”

Itsuki grinned a little at Nayuta’s earnestness about this.

“...You must really love Miyako, don’cha?”

“Huh?” Nayuta froze for a moment. “Um, yeah, I do love Myaa. Hee-hee-hee!” She bashfully looked down to the floor, cheeks red. It was such a cute-looking act, it made Itsuki tense up despite himself.

“...You know, I’ve been wondering for a while, but why are you so friendly with Miyako anyway?”

“Well, I mean... She’s kind, she indulges me, she teaches me about all kinds of things, she gets mad for me and cries for me... I dunno... She’s like a big sister to me. I really look up to her... Nyaaah.”

She showed only the slightest hint of embarrassment as she made the last cutesy noise and smiled broadly. It was enough to strike an arrow straight through Itsuki’s heart.

—*She... She’s got the little-sister act down cold...!*

There is a novel series in Japan known as *Maria-sama ga Miteru*, or *Maria Watches Over Us*. It tells the tale of students attending the Catholic Lillian Girls’ Academy, where there exists a so-called *sœur* system. In this system, devised to promote clean, honest living among future generations of students, a first-year is paired with a girl from one of the later years, forming a special one-on-one relationship. These *sœurs* affect each other in assorted ways, guiding and influencing each other as they live out their glorious youthful years, the bonds often stronger than those forged by actual sisters.

Many readers found themselves deeply enthralled by this *sœur* concept, and Itsuki was one of them. Among other things, it presented the opportunity for anyone, regardless of how their family was configured, to become a little sister

—this was what Itsuki, at least, took home from the series. If you could find someone that you could truly adore, honor, nestle up to, and chase after, then you could adopt the role of their little sister, regardless of blood relation.

The way Nayuta acted toward Miyako, her idol, felt a bit to him like the pure, beautiful *sœurs* of the *Marimite* world. He already knew she was cute, but now that he associated her with the little-sister attribute, she was invincible. It astonished Itsuki.

“Um... Yeah. Yeah...”

He gave this a bit of serious thought, making sure she wouldn’t notice his surging heartbeat. If a little sister had a problem, he needed to do whatever he could to solve it. This was the duty and obligation of the entire human race.

“...Well, what would *you* like to get?”

“! I’ve got it!” Nayuta’s eyes burst open. “I want your dick, Itsuki!”

“Shut up.”

This was exactly the reply he expected, so he didn’t even bother raising an eyebrow. It didn’t dissuade Nayuta at all.

“Also, I’d like to have your underpants, or your socks, or your sweaty T-shirt, or your used tissues, or your fingernails, or your body hair, or lots of other things, actually, but what I’d like to have most of all is your love, Itsuki!”

“...And what is Miyako supposed to do with any of that? You trying to play a prank on her?”

“Mmmhh... I suppose out of all the things I could give Myaa, the one thing I could never part with is you, Itsuki...”

Nayuta frowned at the thought as she gazed up at Itsuki.

“...Really, all I want is you, so...”

“Oof...”

Her words were so pure and cute that they finally moved Itsuki, and in an attempt to cover it up, he started speaking very quickly. “Okay! Let’s lower the stakes a bit!”

“Lower the stakes?”

“I mean, if you think about it, if she *really* wanted something deep down, she’d buy it or get it herself. We should look for something that’s not quite so high on her want list... Like, if it came down to ‘have’ or ‘not have,’ she’d like to have it, but not enough to buy it herself.”

“Ooh, I see! Yeah, definitely. If I got something I wouldn’t bother buying myself but still thought was kinda neat, I’d like that!”

“Yeah, exactly. So let’s think up something like that, Kanikou. You got any ideas? Something kind of, like, on the fence like that?”

“Hmmm... I think...”

Nayuta thought for a few moments.

“...A **Virtual Boy**, maybe?”

“...Yeah, you *did* like retro games, didn’t you?”

The Virtual Boy was a 3-D game system released by Nintendo in 1995. It used a special display shaped like a pair of goggles that showed different screen images to the player’s left and right eyes to give the impression of 3-D graphics.

“It was a masterpiece before its time! The futuristic red-and-black hardware design is so sleek, too. You can play classic NES games on the Virtual Console or elsewhere these days, but thanks to the 3-D display, you can only play Virtual Boy games on the real thing. I heard a lot of the lineup is really top-notch, so I’ve always wanted a chance to try it out for myself!” Nayuta stood up, eyes sparkling.

Suddenly, she grew more serious.

“...But if you asked me whether I wanted to buy one, I dunno. There’s only twenty games or so in the entire library, and there are lots of 3-D games out these days, and head-mounted units are cheap enough for home use now, too...”

Nayuta’s love for classic games began with *Spelunker* and just ballooned from there. But she was a gamer, not a collector.

“...Well,” Itsuki concluded, “either way, that wouldn’t work for Miyako. I don’t

think she's even aware it exists."

"Yeah," Nayuta said with a nod. "But what about you? What's something that you'd be happy to get but don't wanna bother getting yourself?"

"Me...?" Itsuki thought over this. "...A S—dertone," he blurted out.

"A Slender—e? What's that?"

"Um, it's this thing you wrap around your stomach. It gives mild electric shocks to your abs. It's supposed to give you a six-pack and stuff."

"Ohhh, yeah, I think I saw that on the home-shopping network before. You want a six-pack, Itsuki?"

Itsuki gave a reluctant nod.

"Why is that?"

"...I went to this hot spring together with Setsuna a little while ago and...you know."

"?!"

Nayuta's response to the words "went to this hot spring together with" was instantaneous.

"Setsuna? You mean Puriketsu, the artist for *Genesis Sisters of the New World*?"

"Yeah."

"...He *is* a guy, right?"

"Nope! Setsuna's a thirteen-year-old, silver-haired, blue-eyed, hyper-beautiful illustrator, like Sagiri from *Eromanga Sensei* thrown straight into the 3-D world, and she calls me 'big bro' and spoils me by walking around in the nude.....in some of my daydreams, but really Setsuna's just your average chatty, easily-distracted guy. Yep, definitely a guy."

He had meant it as kind of a teasing joke, but Nayuta's wide eyes and dilated pupils were starting to scare him, so he reverted back to the truth midway.

"Ah, good. That's a relief."

“Y-yeah... Same here. So, like, if you look at Setsuna, he has kind of the same frame I do, but when he took off his clothes at the hot spring, you could actually see his individual abs. It was amazing.”

“Ahh. So that’s why you want to get abs, too?”

“Right. I’d like to work out, but I don’t feel like exercising or going to the gym all the time, so I’d rather get my physique the easy way. It’s just... You know, buying something like the Slen—tone from one of those TV advertisements is kind of embarrassing. If I got it as a present, though, I’d get to shock my abs into shape without feeling any shame at all.”

“...I’m kind of hoping you don’t turn into a bodybuilder or anything, Itsuki. But you *would* need some muscle for the kind of sex I’m into...”

“...? What did you say?”

“Nothing. I’ll get you a S—tone for your birthday. Have fun getting buff.”

“Sure,” Itsuki distractedly replied to Nayuta’s deadly serious offer. “And I’ll give you a Virtual Boy for *your* birthday, too.”

“Oh goody,” Nayuta droned.

“But even if it’s not a Slen—e, do you think a girl would like something for her health, or for weight training or something?”

“Hmm...” A doubtful look crept on to her face. “Myaa’s already got a great figure, so I don’t think she would need it. She’s really beautiful when she’s naked, you know. Her skin’s all smooth, and it feels great against your body.”

“...And what are you accomplishing by telling me that?” Itsuki shook off the image that rapidly formed itself in his mind. “Right. Something else, then...?”

“Why don’t we take a second and step away from the realm of things you want but don’t care enough to buy?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s a good idea, I think, but...like, I think it needs to feel more special than that. Something that fits *her*, not just something you could buy for anyone.”

“That’s asking a lot. I get what you mean, though.”

“Hee-hee-hee.” Nayuta gave a bashful laugh.

“How about an autograph book? With signatures from authors Miyako likes?”

“Oooh! That might be good.”

The light novel scene is a small world. Most authors are no more than two degrees of separation away from each other, so even if you don’t know someone, it’s generally easy enough to get their autograph, whether they work for your publisher or not. That doesn’t mean the average person can easily collect them, though, making it a great present for someone like Miyako who has a few writer friends.

“Do you know which authors she likes, Itsuki?”

“She mentioned she liked *Index* when we were playing that RPG. That and *The Irregular at Magic High School*. And *Oreimo* and *Marimite* and *No Game No Life* and *Chivalry of a Failed Knight* and *Date A Live* and *My Youth Romantic Comedy* and *SAO* and *Haganai* and *Eromanga* and *Seishun Buta Yarou* and *Strike the Blood* and *Dog & Scissors* and *Magika* and *Sakurasou* and *World Break* and *Kurorekishi* and *Chaika* and *Bahamut*—most of the ones I recommended to her, she likes...but when it comes to favorite *authors*, I’m not sure.”

One’s favorite books and one’s favorite authors aren’t necessarily one and the same thing. For light novels in particular, fans can often recall the names of titles and characters while totally forgetting the author’s name. It isn’t uncommon at all for an author with one hit series to completely fail with their next one, or another to work in the trenches for years before scoring a major success out of nowhere. A fan who follows an author across whatever they publish is a valuable asset indeed, the kind of person authors practically consider a saint.

Itsuki Hashima, who had a sizable enough dedicated fan base (despite the lack of any anime adaptation so far) and books that sold steadily upon every release, was a rare case, although people like him weren’t unheard of.

“...I suppose there’s no reason for me to point out that every series you recommended to her has cute little-sister characters in it, huh?”

Nayuta took out her phone and launched the LINE app. Figuring a question

like this wasn't likely to spoil the surprise, she decided to contact Miyako.

"I think we're really gonna have to ask Myaa after all."

Myaa, who's your favorite author?



"Huh?!"

The message from Nayuta, received in the middle of a university lecture, made Miyako shiver.

My favorite author?

The first name that reflexively came to mind was Itsuki Hashima. She hurriedly shook the idea off... *Calm down, girl. She's not asking who you like personally. She wants your favorite author. This is just idle chitchat, probably.*

My favorite author... Who would it be, actually? Miyako thought deeply about the question. She could think of several books she enjoyed, but "favorite author" didn't produce any very strong candidates. Even if she liked a series, it wasn't like she would seek out other titles from the same guy. The only author she had read the complete works of, debut to latest release, was Itsuki Hashima. This would seem to imply that Itsuki was her favorite. But...

—It's not like she's asking who I like or anything. It shouldn't be a problem. I'm not a fan of everything Itsuki writes about, but I do think he's engaging, so...

Her mind made up, Miyako took pains to ensure the professor didn't notice her using the phone as she wrote a reply.

If I had to pick one, I guess it'd be Itsuki. I've read all his stuff, so. That's just if I had to pick one, though!





“Sounds like her favorite author is you, Itsuki.”

“What?!”

Nayuta showed him her phone, a slightly pained look on her face. Reading it, his face relaxed into an unattractive, slack-jawed smile.

“Heh-heh-heh... Well, look at that. Really? I mean, really? Heh-heh-heh...hee-hee-hee-hee... She’s been a huge fan of me this whole time, heh-heh-heh... She coulda *told* me, heh-heh-heh... That sure is mean of her, ee-hee-hee... Deh-heh-heh...”

This blissful epiphany did not impress Nayuta. She seethed at him.

“...That’s *just* if she had to pick one. I think she meant more ‘I don’t have a favorite author, but I’ve read all Itsuki’s stuff, so by process of elimination’ kind of thing.”

“Heh-heh-heh... Oh, you getting jealous, Kanikou?”

“...Course not.” She pouted. It made Itsuki laugh even harder.

“Dah-ha-ha... Hey, it happens, right? Don’t let it get you down, Kanikou... Pfft! Heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha! Right! I think it’s time for me, the *faaaaavorite* author in Miyako’s life, to write a special autograph you can give her for her birthday present!” he crowed joyfully.

“...Nah.”

“Huh?”

“It’s okay. I’ll think up something else for her. You should give her that special autograph yourself, shouldn’t you? Hmph!”

With that, Nayuta turned her back to him.

For Nayuta Kani, it was the first time she had felt anything but blind love for Itsuki. She realized, at that moment, that he was a rival in the same field as her—although she wouldn’t fully realize it until much later.

Q&A Corner



QUESTION

What are all your birthdays?



Here is our very first question—one of the least impactful and controversial ones you could ask, but it does link up with the story line this time, so let's run with it.

How about a *little* respect for the readers...?



Like we just learned, my birthday is April 29. That's a holiday in the Japanese calendar, so my parents took me out to eat on that day a lot.

I'm June 6.



I'm on September 6.

July the tenth.



I'm September 16.

November 3, dude!



October 15.

...And that takes care of that. Just as riveting as I expected.



Hey, that's what Q&A columns are like. We'll probably be just as terse with the rest of the answers, so don't expect too much out of this.



Let's Think Up a Story Line!

"I gave you until today for the *All About* Volume 4 story line blurb, but do you have it?"

".....The story line.....?"

It was the day after Nayuta's surprise-party suggestion, later on in the evening, and the sudden phone call from editor Kenjiro Toki was making Itsuki's temples ache.

In addition to *Sisterly Combat*, which had its newest volume come out the other day, Itsuki was also writing a series called *All About My Little Sister*. *Sisterly Combat* was an earnest, serious battle-fantasy series, but *All About My Little Sister* was the opposite—a modern-day, wacky love comedy, although the hero's passion to overcome all the odds for the heroine (his little sister, of course) was pretty similar. Three volumes of the series were now on sale, with Volume 4 due to launch in two months...allegedly.

"...You forgot to come up with one, didn't you?"

"Wh-what? Of course not! I was just wrapping up the final revisions!"

"Really...?"

It was a lie, triggered by the coldness—and accuracy—of his editor's accusation.

"R-really! I'll absolutely send it to you before the day is through, so just relax and sit tight! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"...All right. I'll be here."

"S-sure thing... Whew..."

With the call ended, Itsuki breathed a well-deserved sigh of relief.

“Did something happen?” asked the dashing young man (actually a girl, but Itsuki didn’t know that) cleaning up the apartment, trying to look as neutral as possible. This was Itsuki’s younger stepbrother, Chihiro.

“...I need to think up a story line for *All About* Volume 4 right now.”

“Think up...a story line?” Chihiro asked, curious.

“When I say ‘story line,’ I mean just a few sentences. It’s that little blurb you see on the back cover of the book, or on publisher websites and pages on online bookstores.”

“Oh, that...” Chihiro nodded at himself, realizing what Itsuki meant. “The author writes those themselves?”

“No, the editor writes them a lot of the time, but I do my own.”

Toki wrote the summary for Itsuki’s very first novel, but Itsuki didn’t like it very much, so he requested the right to contribute his own from then on.

Some publishers are adamant that this is editing work and refuse to budge on it, but as Toki put it, “Whoever can write a better blurb will help the book out more,” so he let Itsuki handle it without too much pushback.

“Your next book’s coming out in June, right, Itsuki? That’s two months from now. They need it already?”

“Yeah, they need it for PR and advertising and stuff. We need to have a blurb written two or three months before launch. Whether the novel is finished or not, you’ve got to at least provide that in advance.”

“And...is the novel finished?”

“...About two-fifths of it,” Itsuki awkwardly replied. “I was planning to have the whole thing done by now, but I had a ton of trouble with the new *Sisterly Combat* volume... So now *All About*’s running late.”

“Is—is that gonna be okay?”

“The deadline’s still a ways off,” Itsuki told his concerned brother. “I’m fine. Based on my calculations, I should have *juuuust* enough time.”

“Enough time, or *juuuust* enough time?”

“...Enough time. It won’t wind up a disaster like *Sisterly* turned out to be. At least, not for the main text.”

“That’s great...but not for the main text? What about that story line blurb?”

A bead of cold sweat ran down Itsuki’s cheek. “I have to write that today...but those are kind of tricky.”

“Why is that? Whether you have the full text or not, you already thought about what’s gonna happen in this volume, right?”

“Heh... Well, about that...”

“Huh?!”

Chihiro was shocked, but Itsuki almost seemed proud.

“With *Sisterly Combat*, I only start writing once I’ve got the full plot worked out, but with *All About*, I like it to be kind of like a jam session, where I don’t know what’ll happen in advance. I go right into writing it without any previous prep. So I may be the author, but I don’t know what’s happening in Volume 4 yet!”

“Wow. I had no idea it was so unplanned like that...”

“It—it’s not unplanned! Like I said, it’s a jam session! A show where the characters move as they like and weave a story for me!”

It seemed like too much of an easy excuse for the exasperated Chihiro. But *All About My Little Sister* was a high-tempo story, packed with twist after unexpected twist, and while some reviewers called it “jarring” or “too random,” it was generally well received—and with those proven results, Chihiro couldn’t say this was the wrong writing style to use.

“A jam session’s great and all...but what’re you gonna do about that blurb?”

“I dunno. I guess I’ll just have to make something up,” Itsuki glumly reported.

To be honest, whether the manuscript was done or not, Itsuki didn’t really like writing story line blurbs. At the same time, if he handed the job over to Toki and didn’t touch it again, he also knew it’d affect the passion he had for completing a book. Writing it himself was the only option.

“That blurb’s only, like, not even a page of text, isn’t it? Is it that hard?” Chihiro seemed genuinely curious.

“...With my label, I’m asked to come up with maybe a hundred, no more than a hundred twenty-five words. Which isn’t a lot, but I wind up agonizing over that size limit a lot more than with regular writing.”

“Agonizing? Like how?”

“First off, I can’t have any major story spoilers. If it’s a detective story, you can’t talk about the criminal or the trick behind the murder, and if it’s a fighting series, you gotta be careful not to talk about who wins, or what kind of abilities the enemies have, or which abilities the heroes are gonna learn. With romance, it’s more like who’s confessing to whom and who starts dating whoever. You can’t write anything that’d affect the reader’s enjoyment of the novel...but at the same time, you have to fan their expectations, too.”

“Fan their expectations?”

“It’s part of the book’s packaging. With Volume 1 of a series, it’s the second-most important advertising tool after the front-cover illustration, but even with subsequent volumes, if you read the blurb and it doesn’t get you excited, some readers will stop buying at that point.”

“Oh... So not only are you talking about what’s inside; you’re trying to make it sound as interesting as possible.”

“Yeah. It’s really hard, figuring out how much detail you should go into. But, for example, sometimes you *do* need to talk about what kind of surprising things will happen, or what kind of crazy-strong enemy we’re facing off against, or who the hero’s going on a date with. Stuff the reader will want to read about.”

“...It’s kind of a fine line between what readers will want to know *before* they read it, and what they’ll want to know *after* they read it.”

“Right.” Itsuki nodded. “That sort of thing. And you have to be careful about some other stuff, too. If it’s not a Volume 1, you have to remember that the person reading the blurb may not have necessarily read all the past volumes.”

“How so?”

“The story line blurbs get posted on places like publisher websites and ads in brick-and-mortar bookstores. There’s a chance someone who doesn’t know the series at all might read that blurb. You have to avoid spoiling past volumes as much as possible.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Well, for example... Let’s say you have a character named A who first appears as an enemy. What if, in Volume 3 or whatever, the blurb reads, ‘The hero, working together with A,’ or something? Readers will wind up knowing that A does a face turn somewhere along the line.”

“Oh, that makes sense. If I read that first, then the first time A appeared in the story, it’d be like, ‘Oh, he’ll become a good guy later.’”

“Yeah. If you write ‘Overcoming the death of X,’ then everyone knows that X dies. If you write ‘Going on her first date with Y,’ everybody knows the heroine’s getting intimate with Y... There’s this famous real-life example, actually. It was this fantasy novel that relied on a lot of mystery elements, and they find the culprit at the end of the first volume. He gets away from the heroes, but then in the blurb for Volume 2, the culprit’s name is written right there. I really want to punch the guy who wrote that!”

“You were a victim, huh?”

“...The guy who wrote that, the guy who wrote the obi back text on Volume 8 of *V—land Saga*, and the guy who spoiled the main bad guy in *Persona 4* are gonna pay for their crimes. All of ‘em.”

Itsuki’s voice grew lower and lower.

“I mean, a lot of readers pick up a book only after they get interested in the anime or manga version, or they hear some good buzz about it. Some people don’t pick up a series until years after it was released. Spoiling a plotline is one of the most nefarious things you can do! It robs the reader of their fun and stomps all over the story and its author. People who get off on spreading spoilers around are barbarians, unworthy of being called civilized human beings! And doing something like that while in an *official* capacity? Idiots! A disgrace to the entire industry! They should be forced to live in an open sewer to atone for their evil deeds! You’re telling me, ‘Ooooooh, I don’t care about

spoilers, it's fine'? Don't give me that shit! Just because *you* don't mind having shit in your pants, does that mean you can smear it on other people, too? And some people are like, 'Well, if it's *really* a good story, it'll be fun to read even if you know what happens.' Come on! That just means it'd be a lot *more* fun if you *didn't* know! If you're stupid enough not to realize that, you don't have the right to get a single ounce of enjoyment out of something 'really good'! Eat shit, assholes!"

Looking rather distressed, Chihiro watched Itsuki as he angrily recalled his history of coming across lethal spoilers when he least expected it.

When he spotted his brother looking at him, Itsuki calmed himself down.

"...So, uh, yeah, in a story line blurb, you have to avoid serious spoilers while giving readers a taste of what's to come to get them excited. *And* you have strict space limits. Too short is a bad idea, too. You have to freestyle to get the atmosphere across—adding dialogue, or making it all informal-sounding, or even making it into a poem or going for a more literary style. It's a different skill set from novel writing—I know Kanikou lets her editor handle them 'cause she sucks at it, but Haruto self-produces everything and has a real talent for it."

"What about you?"

"Ehh, not bad, not exceptional. But I just hate it because it's a pain in the ass."

As he spoke, Itsuki turned toward his computer and began writing. His conversation with Chihiro had done a lot to organize his thoughts, letting him mentally shift gears from manuscript mode to blurb mode.

Of course, his brother was both intelligent and a good listener, so he suspected he may've just gotten carried away and talked his ear off for no good reason—but regardless: success! It was done before Chihiro finished making dinner.

After a week of agony following a shocking confession, Kazuma finally discovers the answer within himself. Meanwhile Ichika, becoming aware of her own feelings, decides to give Kazuma the whole truth—but those who wish ill for the couple are about to make their move!

"Ichika, I think I—"

“For you, my brother, I would—”

Where will the relationship between these two siblings and their passing memories go next? And what about Shingo and Yukiko, that other brother-and-sister pair? Will the secret of the Akatsuki clan finally be revealed?! Itsuki Hashima’s megahit sibling rom-com reaches its shocking, long-awaited Volume 4—showing off a kind of love that nobody’s seen before!!

“Oooh...”

Reading the completed blurb, Chihiro gave a soft sound of approval. He had read up to Volume 3 of *All About My Little Sister*, and from that experience, the blurb honestly made him want to read on. He knew what that “shocking confession” was, and both he and any other reader could surmise who the people “who wish ill for the couple” were.

As the author tucked into the tasty-looking curry in front of him, Chihiro asked, “...Are Kazuma and Ichika a ‘passing memory,’ or...?”

“Huh?” Itsuki lifted his head up enough to give Chihiro a questioning look. “I dunno.”

“You...don’t?”

“...I haven’t written it yet, but I’m sure they will be. Whether their *relationship* is, or it’s just referring to something else, I dunno.”

“Something else...? Well, it could be anything, then! I mean, they live together!”

“...Hey, I didn’t lie in there.”

“Mmh... Does something new happen between Yukiko and Shingo?”

“I don’t know. Assuming it does. It might not.”

“Aw, come on! You’re insinuating so much in this blurb!”

“It’s mostly just a bunch of hype I’m writing. There’s every chance their relationship won’t change at all.”

“Awwwww...” groaned Chihiro, thoroughly unconvinced by this. “At least we’ll dive into the Akatsuki family secret. I’m looking forward to that. You’ve been

dropping hints about that since Volume 1.”

“...Read closer. I said, ‘*Will* it be revealed?!’ Maybe it will, and maybe it won’t.”

“C’mon...”

Chihiro seemed seriously disappointed about this. Itsuki felt a tad guilty. “Look,” he offered, “I’ll make an effort to reveal that secret, and I’ll do my best to make sure Kazuma and Ichika get some quality time together, and I’ve got some active ideas about what might happen between Yukiko and Shingo, too.”

“Well, I’ll be looking forward to all that, so...”

“...Yeah,” Itsuki said, withering under the eyes of Chihiro as he leaned forward.


“...By the way, did you make up the ‘megahit’ and ‘long-awaited’ parts?”

“...Kind of.”

“I think you described yourself as ‘master talent Itsuki Hashima’ and, like, ‘the supreme leader of little-sister darlingness’ in previous ones.”

“.....Is there a problem with that?” Itsuki bluntly asked, even as his face turned a little red.

“Noooo,” Chihiro teased back.



SERIES INTRO

ALL ABOUT MY LITTLE SISTER

BY ITSUKI HASHIMA ART BY HOSHIIMO

THREE VOLUMES ON SALE NOW.

■STORY

Kazuma Akatsuki's sister Ichika, younger than him by one year, has a secret she can't tell anyone—she's a "super-slut" who has to drink her brother's blood regularly, or else she'll lose control and go after people at random! Despite how cruel she can be to Kazuma, Ichika continually tries to curry his favor to avoid entering super-slut mode. For the sake of his cute younger sister, Kazuma runs himself ragged to deliver the needed blood—even if she's in the bathroom or a ladies-only hot spring on a school trip! Meanwhile, the Onizaki siblings, friends to the Akatsukis, are known in some circles as crack demon hunters... Itsuki Hashima, master talent of the little-sister genre, brings you one crazy, immoral, and downright erotic love comedy!

■CHARACTERS

Kazuma Akatsuki

Second-year student in high school. A handsome, blond, red-eyed kid, often shunned by his classmates due to his bizarre behavior. He doesn't possess any special abilities, but he's willing to overcome any obstacle to help out his sister.

Ichika Akatsuki

Kazuma's sister, a first-year student in high school. Smart, but almost sadistic in the way she treats Kazuma. Unless she sucks her brother's blood, she'll go into super-slut mode and try to do it with anyone she sees, male or female. Her hormones also go into overdrive right after sampling his blood. Her cruelty toward Kazuma is how she lets off steam after he sees her in all kinds of compromising situations.

Shingo Onizaki

Kazuma's classmate, a tall, dark-haired, well-built man who resembles the samurai of old. Hopelessly in love with his sister Yukiko, a trait he shares in common with sister-obsessed Kazuma—often leading to arguments over which sister is better. In truth, however, he is the descendant of a clan of demon hunters.

Yukiko Onizaki

Ichika's classmate and Shingo's little sister. A long-haired old-style Japanese beauty and Ichika's best friend, she has learned assorted special skills to aid in her brother's demon-hunting work.

The Pursuer

One day after he sent Toki the totally made-up story line blurb, Itsuki decided to take a breather and run off to a nearby bookstore. He wound up purchasing ten or so things in hopes that they'd provide story inspiration—fashion and music magazines, game magazines, anime magazines, travel guidebooks, and so on. Itsuki tended to buy e-books a lot, since he had long been out of physical shelf space at home, but magazines and guides like these were easier to handle in paper form, since he could just flip through them in search of ideas instead of having to read from page one.

“Hmm...?”

On the way back, taking the long way around to enjoy the weather a bit, Itsuki ran into someone he knew. It was Setsuna Ena—a short kid with dyed hair and a, shall we say, unique sense of fashion. Setsuna worked as an illustrator under the pen name Puriketsu, and he was responsible for the art inside *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, which had led to them hanging out and traveling together as of late.

Itsuki assumed Setsuna was going somewhere. But he was just standing at a street intersection, looking around and pacing. *Must be waiting for someone*, he thought as he approached.

“Hey, Setsuna.”

“Oh! Hey there, sir! How's it going?”

“Um, good! What're you doing here, though?”

Setsuna's face became bizarrely stern.

“I'm looking for an ass.”

“...An ass?” asked Itsuki dubiously, struggling to understand the sentence.

Setsuna explained as his head swiveled around to survey the area. “About a month ago, I saw, like, the most amazing ass in the universe! I’m just checking to see if she’s around here.”

“The most amazing in the universe?”

“Yeah, like, the ass of the century... Maybe the ass of the millennium, even!”

“.....”

The explanation was not nearly enough.

“Do you have any idea who I’m talking about, sir?”

“Umm... I don’t know what the difference is between asses, really.”

“Ooh, I think you’d be able to tell this one right off. It’s, like, radiant!”

“...Her ass is?”

“It is!”

“She’s not a firefly, is she?”

“Oh, it’s just a metaphor, sir! There’s just, like, this aura that spills out right over her pants! I call that her ‘ass power level’!”

“Her...?”

Setsuna probably meant it to sound like *Dragon Ball Z*’s “power levels”—some kind of latent magic or occult ability invisible to the human eye. It sounded ridiculous...but if the one saying it was Puriketsu, ass-master for all time, it was instantly plausible.

“If I can get a look at that ass, I feel like I can really level up, myself,” he continued, assuming the serious countenance of a seasoned creative type.

Itsuki hoped he could work with him on something else in the future. If he could help level this illustrator up, it was bound to influence himself in some way.

“Ooh, man, I hope I didn’t scare her off...” Setsuna sighed.

“What?”

“Like, when I saw her the first time, I got so excited, I kinda wound up pulling

down her pants. Not her panties, but still.”

“Uh, whether you got her panties down or not, that’s still a crime, you dumbass. I mean, if that happened to me, I’d kinda avoid this neighborhood for a while, too. I’d be amazed if she didn’t call the cops.”

“...Look, I’m sorry,” pleaded Setsuna, casting his eyes downward as Itsuki eyed him coldly. It seemed like honest regret. “If I can see that girl again, though, I definitely want to apologize to her for that. Next time, I’ll ask as nicely as I can and make sure she says yes first.”

Itsuki wondered exactly how realistic this plan was, to have a girl he knew nothing about show him her ass on the sidewalk. But if anyone could actually pull that off, it had to be Puriketsu.

“Hmm... Well, if it’ll help you ‘level up’ or whatever, I’d like to maybe help you search a little, Setsuna. I have no idea what ‘ass power level’ is supposed to mean, though... Can you tell me anything about her besides her ass? Her face or clothes or whatever?”

Setsuna took a moment to think. “Yeahhh... She had a pretty cute face, I think! My mind was so full of her ass that I don’t remember much else, but...”

“Yeah, thanks for the help.”

“She’s probably about my age, I think... Oh, right! She had a tracksuit on!”

“Hmm... So a cute girl in a tracksuit, about sixteen years old...”

That didn’t really narrow things down, but a girl in a tracksuit might be a little less common.

“Wouldn’t that suggest she was coming home from the gym, or from practice for whatever sports team she’s on?”

Setsuna’s eyes opened wide at this. “Oh! Yeah! You’re right!”

“That’s still a pretty wide net...but it beats wandering around the street at random. Why don’t you try the local high schools and gyms and stuff?”

“That’s a good idea! Thanks, sir! I’ll go look right now!”

“S-sure... Nothing illegal this time, okay?”

“Sure thing! See you later, sir!”

Itsuki watched Setsuna dash off, a somewhat tormented look on his face, then walked back toward his apartment.

...Hey, doesn't Chihiro wear a tracksuit pretty often? his mind reminded him out of the blue. But the thought quickly disappeared. His little brother couldn't have anything to do with the girl sporting the Ass of the Millennium.

Q&A Corner



QUESTION

Please share the body measurements of the ladies!



This question was by far the most common.
Oh, you guys.

I can't believe how many terrible people
there are out there!



This is so embarrassing...



By the way, mine are 35-24-33.



...33-23-32.



From the top, twe— Um, never mind! I'm bowing
out from this one, guys!



Age Twenty-One

The evening of April 29, Miyako was on her way to Itsuki's apartment, having been invited there five-ish days ago for a gaming session with Haruto and crew.

Today was her twenty-first birthday. The fact that Itsuki had specified a day for this meetup suggested they might be celebrating her birthday...or so she hoped, a little bit. But would Itsuki really do something that thoughtful? She hadn't even told him her birthday. She banished the thought.

Her college buddies had held a little thing for her yesterday, however. Today was the start of Golden Week, the series of national holidays that kick off the first week of May in Japan, so they were too busy with work, dates, or visiting their families back home to meet up on the actual day.

Reaching Itsuki's apartment, Miyako rang the doorbell. The door opened, and Itsuki stuck his head out.

"Oh, you're here? Come on in."

"Um, sure," she said, noticing a sweet-smelling scent as she stepped inside. The moment she passed by the kitchen and walked into the living room, there was the *pow-pow-pow* of tiny crackers going off.

""""Surprise!!""""

Itsuki and the trio in the room—Nayuta Kani, Haruto Fuwa, and Chihiro Hashima—all shouted together.

"Huh...?!"

She had hoped for this, a little, but it happened so suddenly that it still made Miyako's eyes open wide.

"Happy birthday, Myaa... Did we surprise you?" Nayuta ventured, looking up

shyly.

“Um, y-yeah... You sure did...”

The girl beamed at Miyako. “Hee-hee-hee... We did it, guys!”

“It was Kanikou who suggested this,” Itsuki said, smiling a bit.

“Ohh... Well, thanks, Nayu.”

She gave Nayuta an appreciative pat on the head. “Hee-hee-hee,” came the pleased-sounding response. It made Miyako smile broadly. *This girl is sooo cute!*

The two men in the room, watching this exhibition of incredibly sisterly tropes, both blushed—Itsuki’s eyes on Nayuta, Haruto’s on Miyako.

“Hmm? What?” Miyako asked, noticing Haruto’s gaze.

“Oh, no, nothing! Happy birthday, Miyako. Let’s just sit you down at the seat of honor, okay?”

“Um, okay!”

Guided in, Miyako sat down on the side of the six-person *kotatsu* table by the window, where Haruto usually was as gamemaster for their RPG nights. Itsuki took the spot next to Nayuta, and Chihiro sat across from Miyako.

Laid out on the table was a massive dinner spread that made the diner Miyako’s friends had taken her to yesterday look like crumbs on the street. It even made her a little emotional. There were scalloped potatoes, spinach quiche, meat pies, seafood pasta, cream stew, and a big bowl of Caesar salad...

“Um, did you make all this, Chihiro?”

“Most of it... I might’ve made a bit too much,” Chihiro said with a nod, a bit bashful.



“This is just amazing... Y-you’re so much better at this girl stuff than me...”

“N-no, I’m terrible at girl stuff!!”

“Oh, um... Sorry?” said Miyako, confused at this odd overreaction.

“Here you go,” Haruto interjected, taking Miyako’s glass and pouring from a bottle with a cherry drawn on it. The liquid was deep red, imbued with tiny pink bubbles. This was Lindemans Kriek, a beer made with wild yeast found only in a certain part of Belgium, aged for one or two years, then infused with cherry juice and left to ferment for even longer. It had taken a lot of time and hard work to make this beer, and although it wasn’t intensely alcoholic, it had an amazingly full body to it.

Once all the glasses were filled:

“All right, Myaa... Happy birthday to you!”

Itsuki and Haruto joined Nayuta in the toast. “Thanks,” Miyako bashfully replied as she took a sip. The sweetness of the cherries spread across her mouth, alongside the slight acidity of the core beer. It was so easy to drink that she wound up downing half the glass in one go.

“Ooh, this is good!”

“I’m glad you like it,” a clearly relieved Haruto said.

In the midst of drinking the beer and enjoying everything Chihiro made for them, Haruto brought out a second bottle for Miyako’s glass. Like the Lindemans from before, this also had a cherry on the label.

“Another cherry beer?”

“This one’s called Boon Kriek. Give it a shot,” Haruto replied with a bit of a teasing smirk.

Miyako obliged, gulping it down. It was also a pretty shade of red, and the bottle’s design was even the same, so she figured it’d be another sweet candy of a beer. She was wrong.

“Nnh! It’s sour?! ...Oh, but I like this, too.”

Lindemans was all about the fruity sweetness, but with Boon Kriek, the

sourness was what came first, *then* just the right amount of fruit. It threw Miyako for a loop at first but still left her breathing a contented sigh.

“Well, great. I brought along a few different cherry beers for tonight, so give ‘em all a shot,” a semiconcerned Haruto said.

Meanwhile, Itsuki gently whispered to him. “Cherry beer? ...So you’re giving her your cherry, huh?”

“.....”

Whatever deep meaning Itsuki was implying, Haruto just averted his eyes and pretended not to hear it.



After taking a while to enjoy the sumptuous spread, it was time for presents. Each guest had brought their own along, and Itsuki had no idea what anyone else had gotten for Miyako.

“Okay, feel free to accept *my* present first!” he began, looking incredibly self-confident.

“Ooh! What did you get me?” Miyako tried to act calm, despite the beating of her heart.

“My present is...*this!*”

He whisked something out from the paper bag in his hand. It was a large white square of paper, apparently his autograph, and it had today’s date and “To Miyako Shirakawa” written small in one corner.

“Heh...”

“An autograph...? Whose autograph is it?” Miyako accepted the sheet, a bit flummoxed.

“Mine, of course!”

“Yours...?”

Even after he said it, the marker lines were so cursive and inscrutable that it was hard to make out “Itsuki Hashima” at all.

“...Did you come up with this yourself?”

“Ha! Of course I did. This is an autograph with real history behind it! I perfected it even before I began writing my first contest entry,” Itsuki announced.

“That’s kind of early on.” Haruto laughed with chagrin.

“Hmm...” Miyako looked less than convinced. “...So what *is* this?”

“It’s my birthday present, of course,” Itsuki replied, chest puffed out. “A handmade autograph from Itsuki Hashima, your one and only favorite author! There’s no better present than this!”

“.....”

“...What? So moved that you can’t bring yourself to speak?”

“No, I was just, like, huh...”

“Hmm?”

“Like, what kind of person gives their own autograph to someone for their birthday...?”

Miyako looked like she had well and truly had enough this time. This was definitely not bashfulness or an overwhelmed emotional response. She was 100-percent done, and that came across loud and clear to Itsuki as well.

“Um...huh...?”

“...Ugh...”

“...Am I, um, being a little *too* brash...?” the suddenly sweating Itsuki dared to whisper.

“Yeah,” Haruto said.

“Quite a lot, actually,” Nayuta added.

Chihiro simply pointed his eyes toward the ceiling.

“Aw, man... No way...”

“Geez... Well, I’ll take it, don’t get me wrong...but what should I do with it?”

With a sigh, Miyako placed the board in her bag.

“Hmph.” Itsuki pouted. “If you *really* don’t need it, you can auction it off on the Internet.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t do *that*. I mean, you did choose this present for me and all, so...”

She gave him a little smile.

“Um, here’s mine. Sorry it’s nothing too special.” Gingerly, Chihiro handed Miyako a small package wrapped in a cute little bow.

“Thanks, Chihiro. Can I open it?”

“Sure.” He nodded, and Miyako carefully unwrapped it.

Inside was a handkerchief. It was colorful, but not too flashy—a very delicate design in that way—perfect for Miyako’s tastes.

“Uh, I figured everyone could always use another handkerchief, and it wouldn’t matter much if someone else gave you the same thing, so...”

“Thanks so much! I really like this! I’ll take good care of it,” Miyako gushed honestly. “You sure know a woman’s heart, don’t you, Chihiro? You could teach your brother a thing or two, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, not at all! I don’t get what a woman thinks at all!”

Chihiro went red again as he protested, while Itsuki visibly soured.

“So, um... I got this for you...”

Haruto’s nervously offered present was a small bottle with a cork in it. There was a liquid inside, making Miyako wonder if it was perfume or some aromatherapy thing at first. But it also contained something long and thin, like a tree root, and there was sediment on the bottom.

It looked like a tiny aquarium, and inside, Miyako spotted three tiny creatures energetically swimming around.

“Wow, what’re these? Plankton?”

Giving a closer look, they actually looked more like impossibly tiny shrimp, each one no more than a centimeter long.

“Or...shrimp?”

“Yep. That they are.”

“Ooh! They’re so tiny and cute!” Miyako smiled. The sight of the shrimp darting to and fro was oddly soothing to her. The other three in the room leaned in to get a closer look.

“Whoa!”

“Hey, you’re right, they are cute!”

“Hohh... Shrimp, huh? Nice.”

“These are called pixie shrimp,” Haruto explained. “They’re part of the shrimp family. They eat algae that’s latched on to seaweed, along with their own skin that they shed, so there’s no real need to feed them. This writer named Yuu Shimizu gave some of these to a writer friend of his that was in the hospital, and it was such a hit with the doctors and nurses that they’d stop by the room just to see them swim around for a bit.”

Miyako was too busy beaming and exclaiming how cute the tiny creatures were to listen.

Well, this is fine, Haruto thought, starting to smile himself. He was a little concerned about giving a living thing as a present, despite the author friend he knew, but it was clearly a hit. The sight seriously relieved him.

...But it wasn’t even Miyako who was the most excited about it.

“Ooh, look at them! Those shrimp are so nice... Not only do they taste good, they’re really cute as pets, too! It’s hard to beat that...”

It was Itsuki, leaning way across the table to look into the bottle, eyes shining like stars.

“So cute... I should buy one for myself...”

“...Why are *you* freaking out the most?”

As Haruto grinned, Nayuta suddenly turned serious.

“Prince Manwhore! Is there a crab version of this? A really tiny crab that you don’t have to take care of and that lives a really long time?”

“Yeah, they had one that was about an inch or so long, but I don’t know any

that easy to keep...”

“Aww... I wanted Itsuki to gush about *my* crab, too...”

“...If that’s what you want, why don’t you just change your pen name to Shrimp Girl or something?”

Once the commotion died down, it was time for Nayuta’s present.

“This is from me,” she said as she presented a cutesy-looking envelope. Inside was an SD card.

“What’s in this?”

Nayuta blushed and smiled a bit.

“...A novel.”

“A novel?”

“Yes. I wrote a novel with you as the protagonist, Myaa. I really wanted to print it out for you, but it wound up being the size of a regular light novel volume, so I’m just giving you the data.”

“Me as the protagonist...?”

Miyako was one-fifth happy, four-fifths shocked and confused. If anything, it was Itsuki and Haruto who had the more animated responses.

“A Kanikou novel?!”

“A new novel from Nayu... You publish that, it’d easily sell a few hundred thousand...”

“Dude, let me read it, too!” Itsuki badgered her, deadly serious.

Nayuta just laughed it off, looking a bit embarrassed.

“No, don’t. I wrote this novel just for Myaa. It’s also the first fantasy genre novel I wrote, so I’m a little scared to show it.”

“Th-the first Nayuta Kani fantasy novel?! Daaaamn! Now I wanna know about it even more!”

“Ch-chill out, Itsuki.”

Chihiro thought it would be wise to speak up. His brother was gritting his

teeth, almost bursting with anger.

“.....pffuuu.....”

Itsuki took a deep breath. The sight of his anger scared Miyako even more, but now she smiled and turned to Nayuta.

“Well, thanks, Nayu. I look forward to reading it.”

“You bet!” came the reply, complete with an utterly carefree smile.



With the presents over, the five of them spent a little while drinking beer (or juice) and playing quick and easy games like Pickomino and Skull & Roses. After that, there was one more ritual left: the birthday cake. This wasn't from Chihiro's kitchen, for a change—they bought it from a store, and it had a little chocolate plate in the middle reading “HAPPY BIRTHDAY MIYAKO.” Twenty-one candles ringed the edge, all quickly lit once the lights were turned out. Itsuki, Haruto, Nayuta, and Chihiro all sang “Happy Birthday” for Miyako, who then blew the whole thing out in one breath. Soon, Chihiro had it cut into fifths.

“By the way,” Nayuta asked as they ate, “what do you think, Myaa? How's it feel being the big two-one?”

“How's it feel...?”

Miyako's cheeks were a bit red from all the cherry beer, but her fork still stopped in midair at the question.

“Hmm... Let me think...” Her expression slipped into a naturally wry grin. “You know, I thought being in my twenties would feel a lot more...adult.”

“Ahhh,” Itsuki and Haruto both replied, eagerly nodding. Itsuki, clearly drunk, picked up the topic.

“Yeah, I thought the exact same thing when I turned twenty! That and, like, when I graduated from high school, too!”

“Yeah, me too,” interjected Haruto. “Like, it makes you think—I graduated from high school, then graduated from college; I'm totally a grown-up by anybody's standard, but it doesn't feel like it at all.”

“...You think so, too, Fuwa?” Miyako asked, eyes lazily turning toward Haruto.

“Pretty much. Maybe it’s because I don’t have an office job. I spend all day writing novels, watching anime, playing games, reading manga and light novels... On the weekdays, I go drinking and play board games with my friends... It doesn’t really *feel* like I’m putting anything together at all. I’m paying my taxes and stuff, but...”

“Yeah, totally,” laughed Itsuki. “I mean, twenty-one... That’s supposed to be older than Azusa Miura from *The Idolmaster* or Nanoha from the third season of *Lyrical Nanoha*, you know? In novels and anime, you’d have the chattier young characters calling them old grannies and writing them off entirely... Not that I’m saying *you’re* an old granny, Miyako.”

“Yeah. I think Char was supposed to be twenty during the One Year War. Him and Haman during the Gryps War...”

“Pretty funny to think voice actors like Shuichi Ikeda and Ryouko Sakakibara were both playing twenty-year-olds, huh? Like, maybe some people get real low, gravelly voices when they’re young, too, but...”

“...We’re older than most of the characters we have saving the world or the universe in manga and novels or having whirlwind romances and stuff. I hate to admit it, but from an impartial perspective, we don’t have it together at all, do we?”

“No... But hang on,” Haruto said. “I still think we’re among the lucky ones, actually. I know an older writer who built this entire RC-car racetrack in his apartment, and he’d go race on it whenever he had writer’s block. Like, in his mid-thirties!”

“A full racetrack?! I’m kind of jealous!”

“Yeah, you see? I was totally jealous, too! Once I live by myself, I am so building one.”

“Okay, Haruto! You get a place and build that track, and I’ll come over to race you every afternoon!”

As the two carried on with each other, Miyako softly whispered to herself:

“...Writers have it so good. That kind of...I don’t know, childishness is something they can actually make money off of. You say you don’t have it together...but if you ask me, you’ve got it better put together than most. So don’t be too hard on yourselves...or else, I don’t know what I’d ever do with myself.”

“.....”

Sensing some real emotion from Miyako’s slurred speech, Itsuki and Haruto stopped. Miyako sighed.

“Ugh... Twenty seemed so grown-up back when I was in grade school... I had a real goal for the future, I was working hard for it...and I even had a romantic career, too...”

“You’re totally grown-up. All that sexy experience, too!” Nayuta said as Miyako’s smile turned into a smirk at her own expense.

“...I’m sorry. That was a lie.”

The revelation came all too casually.

“Huh?” Nayuta said, frozen upright.

“That whole thing about having a lot of love experience? That was a lie. I’ve never dated a guy in my life, and, of course, I’ve never...uh, done it with anyone...”

Nayuta’s reaction to this confession was pure confusion.

“Whew,” Miyako said, noting this even as she breathed a sigh of relief. “I finally came out with it.”

When talking with this girl before her—someone who adored her as an elder sister, who had hundreds of thousands of readers awaiting her latest work but wrote a novel just for her instead—this incredibly cute little-sister of a girl, Miyako just couldn’t find it in herself to lie any longer.

“Wow, Myaa, so you aren’t a slut after all?” Nayuta asked.

“...Um, I think I made that clear already...” Tears began to form in Miyako’s eyes. “...I’m sorry, Nayu. I’m sorry I lied up to now. I’m not the type of woman you should be aspiring to become.”

“Myaa...”

The sad eyes Nayuta had fixed upon her overwhelmed Miyako with crushing guilt.

“I’m sorry... I hope you don’t hate me for it. This present you gave me is totally amazing, but...I don’t know if I even deserve it—”

“How could I ever hate you for it?!” Nayuta said, voice ragged.

“Huh...?”

More like a parent scolding a child than out of pure anger, Nayuta shouted, “The reason I like you isn’t because you’re a grown-up with experience in bed. It’s because you’re a good person, Myaa!”

“Nayu...”

“Whether you’re a slut or a virgin, you’re my beloved big sister, Myaa!”

“Nayu...! Nayuuuu...”

This brought Miyako over the brink. She began crying uncontrollably and, latching on to Nayuta as her “younger sister,” buried her face in her chest.

“Ugh! You are *such* a nice kid! I love you! I almost want to kiss you!”

“...You can, if you want.”

“Huh?” Miyako lifted her head, surprised.

“...If it’s you, Myaa, I’ll let you kiss me anytime,” the blushing, teary-eyed Nayuta said.

The cutesy act made Miyako laugh a bit. “I can’t. Your lips belong to Itsuki, don’t they?”

“Ee-hee-hee! They sure do.”

Miyako smiled, her eyes looking a bit lonesome, as Nayuta fidgeted before her. The sight was enough to make Itsuki’s heart race as he looked on, although he couldn’t help but comment:

“...Uh, could you not decide what is and isn’t mine, please?”



After the party, Miyako was back in her room and already sticking the SD card with Nayuta's present into her computer. It contained a series of text files, starting at "1" and going on in sequential order. It was the first Nayuta Kani novel she had ever read—and it was just for her, never before seen by anyone else.

She could feel her hand shake a little bit as she used her mouse to double-click the "1" file.

...The story was about Miyako, born the princess of a kingdom, falling in love and having remarkably gratuitous amounts of sex with a young knight.

"This isn't really fantasy...it's just porn!"

They had secret sex, while the royal guard, the king, and his royal ministers were in the same room. They had prison sex—when the knight got found out and thrown in the dungeon, the princess came down to save him, and they screwed before making good their escape. Acrobatic sex on horseback while they fled their pursuers. At the inn, in the stables, in the forest, in a cave, at the lip of an active volcano, submerged in a lake, caught in a surging torrent, atop a flying broom, atop an iceberg (using a polar bear as a bed), in front of a sleeping dragon, inside the dragon's stomach, inside the monster king's castle, in the spirit world—it was *bang, bang, bang* everywhere! Every possible situation, every possible position, sex, sex, and more sex!

At the very end, the two of them—now mere concepts, floating in a faraway dimension—engaged in weird philosophical sex that was honestly hard to figure out, and wound up creating a new world as a result.

...Miyako had thought it was porn, but it was actually an entire **mythology**.

The core story line was simple enough, but between the cavalcade of shocking revelations and the sheer imaginativeness of the constant sex, this was smut, pure and simple. Still, Nayuta Kani's heavily lauded, "magical" storytelling skills made it all overwhelmingly convincing, dragging Miyako into its world before she even realized it. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" she occasionally shouted, blushing deeply and squirming in her chair. "What the hell am I *doing* here?" But she never stopped.

To make matters worse, the knight who served as the male lead was clearly

modeled after Nayuta's own interests—in other words, Itsuki. She even named him “Ikki” in the novel. It was someone deeply resembling Itsuki, having near-constant sex with Miyako, in a world-creation myth penned by Nayuta Kani, literary genius of our time.

N-now I feel weird...after reading that...

It enthralled her so much with its attractions that she read through the whole thing in one sitting. Even when she was done, she wound up squirming in bed for a while afterward, unable to free herself from the deep, immersive world she had just experienced.

Q&A Corner



QUESTION
How old is Ashley Ono?



We got this question a lot, too.



Yeah. I have no idea... Plus, when a character's age is unclear like that, it's pretty much a given that it'll never be revealed at—



I'm thirty-two.



Huh?



You asked how old I am, right?
I'm thirty-two.



Um... Oh. You really *are* a sadist, aren't you? Just doing away with all anticipation, all romance...



Hee-hee! With your reader base, they treat twenty-year-olds as hyper-mature, don't they? How's it feel to have a thirty-two-year-old call you "big brother"? Really turns you on, doesn't it? *Big brother?*



Uh? I don't see what age has to do with being a little sister.



Um... Oh. Wow. Impressive...

The Amusement Park

“Hey...”

It was several days after Miyako’s birthday party. Itsuki was working at his computer; Haruto was goofing around by his *kotatsu*.

“Yeah?” Itsuki asked, eyes still fixed on his notebook.

“Do you remember what I said at that diner in Akihabara?”

Itsuki thought for a moment. “...Like, about how my novels are so much better than yours?”

“No, nothing serious like that. Something sillier, more spur-of-the-moment...”

“...Oh, about how you have a thing for Miyako?”

“Yeah, that.” Haruto nodded, face reddening a bit. “Didn’t you say that you’d...help out a bit?”

“...Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t...”

“Well, you did... And I’m kind of counting on that a little, okay?”

“Counting on me?”

“Remember that birthday party? I was hoping you might’ve assisted me a little more back there...”

“...Were you?”

“Yeah.”

“.....Well, to be honest, I forgot,” Itsuki admitted.

“I *knew* it!” Haruto shouted.

“Well, I mean, Miyako and Nayu kinda started lezzing out for a bit...which

was, like, really exciting for me, but...”

“...Me too.”

Simply recalling Miyako and Nayuta embracing each other made Itsuki’s cheeks burn red. “...But it was Kanikou who organized that party. What kind of support was I supposed to give you?”

“...Fair enough. Well, when we get another opportunity, give me some support then, all right?”

“Heh. Sure,” said Itsuki, nodding gregariously. “...So exactly *how* am I supposed to support you guys getting together?”

“Uh...”

Haruto was at a loss for how to answer. He may have looked like a handsome, dashing young man, but he had only begun taking care of his looks in college. Before then, he was just another light novel, video game, and anime addict of an otaku. Plus, despite his attempts at reinventing himself for his university life, the RPG group he joined was such a disaster thanks to all the love drama that he didn’t have a single good memory from it. Ever since he won the new-writers competition and began making regular income as a professional, he had started being free to buy all the porn games and *doujinshi* he wanted—as “research material” for his job, of course—which made him even less of a prime catch to the average girl.

He did have a little sister, as well as conversational skills honed by his experience gamemastering for tabletop RPGs. He wouldn’t completely lose his composure in front of a woman. But when it came to romance, he was a total amateur.

“Well...for example...maybe create a situation where it’s just the two of us together, when we’re out drinking or something...?”

The idea came straight from all the fiction he had read and watched. He didn’t sound too confident about it.

“Hmm...”

Itsuki thought in silence for a while before reaching a new idea. “I got it!” He

shot up, shouting. “In that case, let’s go to the amusement park!”

“Th-the amusement park...?!”

“It’ll be you, me, and Miyako...and maybe I’ll invite Kanikou, too, *just to tag along*. I have my hero and heroine going on a date in my WIP right now, so I was thinking about visiting one for inspiration.”

“Oh... A double date at the amusement park, huh?”

“It’s not a date! I’m just there for inspiration!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Haruto said, smiling weakly at the wholly abashed Itsuki. “But you’re right. It’d be easy for us to get separated. I like it. There was a scene like that in *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong*, too.”

“Ooh, there was, wasn’t there? Well, that proves it works, then. That series is true to life, after all.”

“Great! Let’s do it!”

Itsuki wasted no time texting an invite to Miyako.



“Hyahh?!”

Miyako audibly yelped at her phone’s sudden vibration while she was rereading a printout of Nayuta’s present to her.

Wanna go to the amusement park tomorrow?

The amusement park? Together...?

She had read Nayuta’s novel several times over the past few days, and she was right in the midst of one of *those* scenes right now. It filled her mind with all sorts of pink-tinged delusional fantasies. *He... He doesn’t want to do something sexy with me, does he? Like in the novel?!*

Like Miyako and Ikki in the novel...on the Ferris wheel, in the haunted house, riding the merry-go-round, on the teacups, on the roller coaster, on the free-fall, on every possible attraction, engaging in every type of play possible...?

...Probably not, huh...?

Brushing off the crazed flights of fancy, Miyako sent a confirmation to Itsuki. As she expected, it wasn't a date, but a trip out for some novel research—and Haruto and Nayuta were joining them, even.

“...Haah...should've known.”

She sighed a sigh mixed with relief and disappointment as she sent her OK.



The next day, all four of them arrived at an amusement park within the city.

“Sure is crowded...,” Itsuki groaned as he saw the line in front of the ticket counter.

“Well, it's Golden Week,” Miyako observed. “That's how it always is.”

“Is it?” a surprised-looking Itsuki asked.

“What do you mean, ‘is it?’ Didn't you know?”

“I totally forgot.”

“...So did I,” Nayuta chimed in.

Haruto laughed. “Geez, guys, at least remember when Golden Week is... I tend to forget most of the three-day weekends, but still...”

Full-time writers are free to use their time pretty much any way they want, as long as they stick to their deadlines. They can work twelve hours a day, through weekends and holidays, or they can just take off all week and sleep in bed. This makes it easy to lose track of what day it is.

Haruto could recall the day of the week well enough—thanks to memorizing anime broadcast schedules and what day *Shonen Jump* came out—but even he was losing track of government holidays. Itsuki and Nayuta, on the other hand, were vague about everything.

“Talk about easygoing...,” Miyako groaned. The three writers with her had no defense.

Soon enough, they were inside the park, entry tickets and passes for certain attractions in hand. Nayuta immediately began gasping at all the sights around her.

“Wow. This is an amusement park? Wow...”

“Is this your first time visiting one, Nayu?”

“I went to one with my family as a kid, but I don’t remember too much. I’m really looking forward to this.”

“Neat... How about you pick what we ride first, Nayu?”

Itsuki and Haruto had no objection to this.

“Thank you, Myaa. In that case...”

Nayuta’s first choice was a giant roller coaster, the main attraction in this park.

“...Umm, could you maybe think this over, Kanikou?”

At the entrance to the coaster, Itsuki’s expression was extremely tense. As the long, high rails (easily visible from outside the park) loomed closer and closer, the sight became enough to overwhelm him. The idea of falling from a height like that struck him as insane. He heard continual bouts of powerful, forceful metallic clangs, followed by scores of screaming passengers. It only added to his intense fear.

“What is with this roller coaster...? Why’s it clanging so much...?”

“Hmm? Not a fan of roller coasters, Itsukiii?”

The intent behind Nayuta’s question was clearly sinister.

“I dunno about ‘not a fan...’ I’ve never been on one before. I was too short to ride them when I came here as a kid, and when we went to another amusement park for a class field trip, I just stuck to the video arcade...,” he protested moodily.

Nayuta seemed positively gleeful. “Wow, really?! Then how about we both experience our first time together?!”

“I—I-I’m fine with trying this out, but why do we have to go on the one going *clang-clang-clang* first?!”

“I’m the type of person who starts playing a game at the hardest difficulty then bumps it down if it’s just too impossible for me. I beat *Super Mario Bros.:*

The Lost Levels before I even tried the first one, too.”

“That’s a game! This is reality!”

“I know the difference, Itsuki. But at least you’re guaranteed to make it to the end with this. It’s *way* easier than a video game.”

“Ngh...”

Itsuki turned to Haruto and Miyako for help.

“...Well,” Miyako said, “I’m not a big fan of these thrill rides, either, but Naya’s heart is set on it.”

“Give it up, Itsuki.”

“Geh... Whatever!”

So he got in line, throwing everything he cared about by the wayside.



After half an hour, their turn came up. The light had already left Itsuki’s eyes as he boarded the car, Naya eagerly hopping on next to him.

“Hee-hee-hee! Pretty exciting, huh?”

“...I’m ready to die. Just kill me.”

Haruto and Miyako, meanwhile, were right behind them.

“...I’m starting to get a little nervous, too.”

“...Ha-ha! So am I...in more ways than one.”

The safety bar dropped down, and the cars began to roll.

“Ngh...!”

Hanging on to the bar with all his might, Itsuki slammed his eyelids shut. With a series of ominous clatters, the car began to slowly rise up...then suddenly, he was attacked by a feeling of weightlessness.

“Ee...!!”

Just as he was about to scream—

“Nh...?!”

He opened his eyes.

If anything, his first overwhelming sense of zero gravity was kind of comfy. The air whipping at his face, the view changing at incredible, dizzying speed, the jostling every which way, the centrifugal force ready to send him flying—it was exhilarating.

“Nnh?! Oh?! Oh?! Ohhhhhhhhh?!”

A smile naturally spread across his face as he let out yelps of delight.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hyaaaaah! Nyaaaaahh!”

Hearing someone laugh next to him, he turned to find Nayuta grinning ear to ear, hair flapping around in the air.

—*Whoa. This is really fun.*

He smiled at Nayuta, admitting defeat.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

“Nya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaaa!”

They surrendered themselves to the speed and sheer euphoria for a while longer, before the car decelerated and made its way back to the loading platform. They exited the ride, still in a state of reverie. Haruto was right behind them.

“...It’s—it’s finally over... What *was* that...? I can’t even...,” he whispered, dejected.

The fear was still scrawled over his face, his gait uneven and staggering. And what was worse, Miyako was in tears next to him.

“Ooh... That was so scary... No way, no more, I thought I was gonna dieeee...”

Nayuta and Itsuki, meanwhile, were the exact opposite, practically dancing around as they walked.

“Haaaa! That was so much fun, Itsuki! It was like *clang* and then *whoooooosh*, and it was amazing! I thought it was great!”

“Hell yeah...! I had no idea roller coasters were so much fun!”

“Which scream machine should we ride next?”

“Any one is fine by me. Might as well do ‘em all!”

“Yaaaaay! *Now* you’re speaking my language, Itsuki!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“...How can you guys be so *happy* right now...?”

Haruto couldn’t believe what he was watching. Itsuki and Nayuta gave him bemused stares.

“What’s wrong, Haruto? Let’s go on the next one.”

“H-hang on. Let’s take a break...”

“My head is killing me... I don’t want any more of those thrill rides...”

“Awww,” the other two intoned in unison.

“Sorry, Nayu,” Miyako said with a weak smile.

Then a thought struck Haruto. *This is it, isn’t it?* His chance to be all alone with Miyako for a while. He motioned with his eyes toward Itsuki.

“...? What’s up?”

Dammit. He’s not getting the message. He calls this support? Ah, well. Let’s spell it out for him.

“...Hey, so I think me and Miyako are gonna sit down for a second, so why don’t you go tour around the roller coasters for a little while?”

He worked hard to make it sound as casual as possible, gauging Miyako’s reaction the whole way. Miyako didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah... Why don’t you go hang out with Itsuki for a while, Nayu?”

Nayuta looked at Miyako, then Itsuki. “Alone with Itsuki...?! I’m not gonna say no to *that* chance!” Her face flushed red as she turned toward him.

Itsuki went a little red himself. “...All right... Man, you guys are wusses for giving up on the first ride...,” he grumbled.

“Yaaaay!” Nayuta cheered as she grabbed him by the hand. “See you later, Myaa!”

“Yep. See ya.”

Miyako smiled and waved as Nayuta forcibly dragged Itsuki forward. Itsuki pretended to resist but didn’t make much of an effort as he walked.

Once they were far off enough, Miyako stopped waving.

And then she remarked:

“Boy... They’re a perfect match for each other, Itsuki and Nayu. They should *really* just make it official already.”

“Y—”

Yeah, Haruto tried to say. Then he walked it back.

As Miyako watched them in the distance, her eyes looked far too lonely to agree with her.

Oh, Haruto finally realized. *So that’s what’s going on...*



Itsuki and Nayuta were lucky enough to hit all the park’s major coasters before time ran out, having another run on that first big one as the grand finale. Haruto and Miyako, for their part, went to the arcade, the haunted house, and a couple of other light “scare” attractions—but there was always something a little vacant behind their smiles.

It was sunset by the time they headed back. Itsuki, savoring the end of a glorious day, decided to whisper the question to Haruto.

“...So, any progress?”

“...!”

It made Haruto unconsciously clench his fists then slowly unclench them.

“Ha-ha... Nothing.”

“C’mon, ya wimp.”

“Ha-ha...,” Haruto replied, attempting to laugh it off. “...Well, I’ll just try to

keep things going at my own pace... Don't worry about trying to support me anymore."



The idea of Itsuki helping him score brownie points with Miyako turned out to be one of the cruelest things they could've ever done to her.

“...No? You sure?”

Itsuki looked puzzled, but he didn't pursue the question any further.

“...Anyway, Itsuki, weren't you doing research today, too? You sure riding nothing but roller coasters all day got you what you needed?”

“...Ah! Ahhhhhhhh!!!”

Haruto's observation made Itsuki scream.



Q&A Corner



QUESTION

What is your favorite part of the body?



I love everything about a little sister, but if I had to pick a part, probably the butt. Guess I have Setsuna's art from *Genesis Sisters of the New World* to thank for that.



The ass!



Itsuki's penis.



I'm glad we agree on that. I love having someone looking at me with clingy, desperate eyes.



What part...? Um, shoulder for beef and pork sirloin, and I guess for chicken, breast meat is my fave.



...Call me basic, but I'll go for the tits.



It's not the part of the body, it's the technique you use on it... Wait! No! Never mind!



The...eyes, maybe?



The Zoo

Itsuki wrote the entire amusement-park arc of *All About My Little Sister* Volume 4 the very next day. He had originally planned for his characters to go on a wider selection of rides, hugging each other for dear life in the haunted house and getting a good atmosphere going on the Ferris wheel. Your typical kind of happy, heart-racing date stereotype. Instead, they wound up riding roller coasters until they were ready to pass out.

Well, it's better than beating that old trope into the ground yet again, at least...

It was certainly a more memorable passage than the alternative. But: “Hmm... I dunno about this...”

He had wanted to deepen the relationship between his hero and heroine at the amusement park, but they had spent so much time screaming in coaster cars that they were still at best casual acquaintances. He had to make up for lost ground somewhere—but where?

“Mmmmm...”

Itsuki thought it over for a few seconds. Then he chose the easiest, tritest solution possible.

“Right! I’ll put ’em on another date!”

When it came to stereotypical date spots, next up was either the zoo or the aquarium, he figured. Maybe a trip to the zoo tomorrow would help with that.

“...Hey. Kanikou. Get up.”

Nayuta was sprawled out by the *kotatsu* table.

“Mnngh?”

“We’re going to the zoo tomorrow.”

“...! Okay!”

She was instantly wide-awake and accepted the offer immediately.



The next day, the two of them were at the zoo. The Golden Week holidays were over, and they were there on a weekday, so not too many patrons were around.

“Yep! Definitely better to go out on a weekday.”

“Mm-hmm!”

The two of them smiled at each other, in high spirits.

“I don’t think I’ve gone to the zoo in a while, either,” noted Nayuta.

“Yeah, I just went once as a kid...”

As a kid—before Chihiro became his stepbrother. Back when Itsuki’s mother was still alive.

“Well, great! Ready to look at these naked beasts, laid bare to the world, cooped up in cages and treated like the animals they are?”

“Don’t put it like *that*!”

The first thing they saw was the zoo’s most popular attraction—the panda enclosure. The whole area would be packed with onlookers on weekends, making it too hectic to really take your time watching them—but apart from Itsuki and Nayuta, there were only a couple of kids with their parents.

Right in the middle of the natural-looking habitat, there was a large pile of bamboo with a single panda sitting its ample butt on the ground next to it and chomping away. Its legs were spread and facing the railing, right where Itsuki was standing, so he and Nayuta had a box-seat view of what dangled between them.

“.....Wow. It’s huge, isn’t it?” marveled Nayuta as she gazed at it.

“...Yep. It sure is...”

It was incomparable to anything human. The scrotum alone might have been large enough to cover a grown man's face. You couldn't help but stare at it.

"Mommy! Cute panda!"

"Yes, it *is* cute, isn't it?"

A toddler and her mother were squealing in delight at the sight.

"...Spreading its legs in front of a preschooler like that," Nayuta commented. "That'd totally be indecent exposure if he was human."

"Yeah. This panda's crazy..."

The panda kept chewing on its bamboo, oblivious to the child's appraisal.

"You know, Itsuki, pandas kind of remind me of old men."

"...I was thinking that, too."

The sight of the panda expertly using its hands to munch down every bit of bamboo looked almost *too* much like some overweight old fogey at the bar, watching the baseball game with a beer in one hand and a yakitori skewer in the other.

"Look, Itsuki. This panda's about thirty in people years." Nayuta read the sign on the railing.

"The prime of its life, huh...? And how are *you* spending that precious time?" He looked at the animal with exasperation.

"Hey, he's got a job. This old guy's exposing his dick to the world all day and eating all the food he can. That's his job. I guess he's got a room to sleep in when it's after hours, but it says here it's got a pool and a heated floor and everything."

"Talk about living the high life."

"Plus, this is the most popular animal in the zoo."

"Man. If *I* could attract people just by sitting around naked eating food, I bet the zoo would pay a fortune for me, too."

"*I'd* watch you if you were naked all day."

The toddler nearby kept squealing and going “aww” as she waved at the middle-aged man...sorry, the panda in front of her.

The pair even found it a little touching as they left the habitat.



“Zoos are a lot more fun than you’d think, huh...?”

After doing a circuit around the park and taking in all the naked beasts on display, they were each drinking a cola float in the cafeteria. Lions, giraffes, elephants, hippopotamuses, zebras—all the typical zoo animals were there, but seeing them in person still had huge impact. No wonder they were popular.

Itsuki was glad he got to see a bunch of rare birds as well. He was a fan of owls, watching them all with enough passion to make Nayuta envious. The bats were also a surprising amount of fun—it was impossible to get bored of watching them flying around, eating, fighting with one another. He appreciated how hard they worked for their meal ticket, as opposed to that pervy panda dude gnawing on his bamboo.

“...I’ve been kind of curious about kangaroos,” Nayuta said seriously as she poked at the ice cream in her float.

“Kangaroos?”

“Yeah. You know, about their balls? They kind of hang between their legs like a pendulum?”

“...Yeah?”

“I was wondering, like, wouldn’t they just rip right off whenever the kangaroo starts hopping?”

“Quit scaring me...”

“Plus, male kangaroos fight each other for the female and stuff, right? I mean, imagine someone kickboxing with you when your crotch is just open to the world like that. It makes me worry for them.”

“.....You’re right. It’s like they’re exposing their weakest points to each other the whole time. It makes MMA look like a kid’s game.”

Itsuki tried to imagine what life would be like if his scrotum hung straight down, dangling like a kangaroo's. It made him shiver.

"And the lions and the elephants and everybody else all had their junk just hanging out, too, you know? I took a lot of photos. You wanna see?"

Nayuta showed Itsuki her photo folder. It kicked off with a sampling of kangaroo testicles, followed by the privates of lions, elephants, pandas, hippos, and far too many other creatures—all in extreme close-up.

"...What are you *doing*?" an exasperated Itsuki finally asked.

Nayuta turned her head to the side a little. "...Hee-hee, if only I could add some *human* genitals to this photo collection...peek, peek..."

"Stop stealing glances at me like that."

"Peek!"

"Stop looking at my crotch!"

"Mmmngh... Humans sure keep a tight guard on their cocks, don't they? They could learn a thing or two from the animal kingdom."

"Shut up." Itsuki sighed. "...Though how can they live like that? All defenseless?"

"And all naked, too."

"It kind of freaks me out... I mean, I guess they're safe in a zoo, but I'm amazed any of 'em can survive in the wild...all naked."

"Yeah, if you think about it that way, zoo animals really have it made, huh? They don't have to worry about being attacked, they can eat all the food they want for free, they got a vet if they're sick or injured, and sometimes the zookeepers even track down a mate for them."

"The royal treatment," Itsuki said with a nod. "...But I dunno if I'd be willing to live caged up, doing other people's bidding like that. No matter how hard I have it, I wanna live on my own two feet, kind of."

"Naked?"

"...Clothed."

Nayuta snickered. “Then I’d love to be a piglet for a wild man like you to eat up, Itsuki. Naked.”

“Wild men like me still get to choose what they eat,” Itsuki fired back.

“Aww, that’s mean.” Nayuta pouted as she blew bubbles into her soda.

Q&A Corner



QUESTION

What's your favorite animal?



Dragons.

Cat videos help me chill out, so a cat, I guess.



I like cats, too.

Cats are fine, but I'm more of a dog person.



I like cows.

I like the asses on Japanese monkeys!



Horses.

People.



Part-Time

Late in the afternoon one Saturday in early May, Chihiro Hashima paid a visit to a certain mixed-use building. It was six floors tall, built ten years ago, and looked very tidy, inside and out. Getting off at the fifth floor, he headed for the black door in front of him, one that featured a sign in red lettering: ONO TAX ACCOUNTING. This was the office of Ashley Ono, the accountant who had helped Itsuki Hashima and a number of other novelists with filing their tax returns.

“H-hello...,” he said as he nervously entered the office.

The office was a symphony of red and black. The carpet featured embroidered black roses on a red background. Black shades covered the windows, despite it being the middle of the day. There was a black table, a red sofa, and a bookshelf painted entirely black. Deeper in, a black desk and an ornate chair with flashy red decorations on it—and the blond-haired Ashley Ono was seated on that noble throne, wearing a dress.

...This is an accounting office, right...?

Chihiro had never been in any other accounting office, but nothing about this decor suggested an “office” at all. It thoroughly confused Chihiro, even as the woman with the young-looking face and the bewitching eyes opened her mouth.

“Hee-hee-hee... Glad to see you here, Chihiro.”

“Um, hello...Ashley. I’m, uh, I’m glad to be here.”

“Ho-ho... As am I.”

Chihiro was paying a visit to Ashley for one purpose only—to take on a part-time job. At the cherry blossom-viewing picnic the gang had a few days back, Ashley had enjoyed Chihiro’s homemade food and snacks so much that she

suggested Chihiro could help out at her office. She'd teach him the basics of bookkeeping when they weren't busy, and after some hemming and hawing, Chihiro decided to take up her offer on Saturdays only. Both his parents had qualms at first, but they relented—the term “tax accountant office” had a certain weight to it that helped out.

His responsibilities were mainly tidying up, making food, organizing documents, and other miscellaneous tasks, nothing too different from what he usually did at Itsuki's place. He'd get to study accounting a little, and the pay was pretty good, too.

“Right. How about I set you to work?”

“S-sure... Is there anybody else, by the way?”

Ashley was the only one in the office. It made Chihiro worry.

“I hire on some extra help during the busy period between December and March, but mostly it's just me.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Hee-hee-hee! Does being alone with me unnerve you? Well, don't worry... I won't eat you up,” she said with a devilish smile.

“Ha-ha... Um, so what would you like me to do first?”

“I'd like you to do some cleaning in the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?”

Looking where Ashley pointed, he spotted an inconspicuous door there, the same color as the rest of the wall.

“This is my office, but it's also my residence. My kitchen and bedroom are in there.”

“Oh, really?”

He opened the door—

“Eep...?!”

—and promptly let out an unconscious shriek.

The first thing he saw was a combination dining room—kitchen, a hundred or so square feet in size. The low table in the middle held a few empty instant-ramen containers and half-drunk sake bottles and cups, and the floor had ten or so empties rolling around, along with empty packets of string cheese, dried-squid snacks, convenience-store packaging, panties that had been tossed aside with abandon, and so forth.

Fearing the worst, he turned toward the sink. It was littered with unwashed dishes and utensils stewing in a dark, slimy swamp. Looking closer, he could see stains on the floor—maybe soy sauce, maybe sake; he didn't know—that hadn't been wiped off and were now making the whole place sticky.

"I manage to keep my office room clean for the sake of my customers," Ashley explained, a tad embarrassed, "but I just can't seem to find the time for the rest of this place."

To Chihiro, this went beyond a mere lack of time. *Does this girl know how to take care of herself at all...?*

"Ha-ha..." He recalled Itsuki's place when he first started living alone. It had been fairly similar. He couldn't help but laugh awkwardly.

"... Ashley?"

"What is it?"

"...Is it all right if I go all out on this?"

"Um, sure... Knock yourself out."

The sheer ghastliness of Chihiro's expression made even Ashley lean back a bit before nodding her approval.



About five hours later.

"...I barely even recognize it."

Scoping out her sparkling new apartment, Ashley couldn't help but gush a bit. The littered garbage was all tossed out, the floor and washbasin polished to a shine, the nasty sludge scrubbed from the sink. Even the dirt and dust had been

wiped away from the window glass and frames. And Chihiro didn't stop at the kitchen. He had the bedroom, hallway, bathroom, and toilet thoroughly clean as well.

The floors were waxed, using a few items Chihiro got permission from Ashley to purchase at the home-improvement store. He spotted three or so cockroaches as he did his work, but he quickly took care of them with a rolled-up newspaper, showing no hesitation whatsoever. Ono Tax Accounting's live-in quarters—a place that the term “squalor” could have easily been applied to just yesterday—now boasted the sheen it had back when Ashley first started living here.

“...I didn't think you'd go *this* far.”

Chihiro flashed a brisk smile as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “Oh, no. It was fun, getting to really go for it on a cleaning job for a change.”

“You're all sweaty. You can use my bath if you like.”

“The bath...”

After five hours of full-on cleaning, Chihiro was fairly covered in sweat. The office had a pretty large bathroom. He envied it a little.

“Thank you very much! I'd love to.”

So he headed for the bathroom and quickly disrobed—just as the door opened again.

“Oh, Chihiro, you can find the towels in the—”

“...?!”

“...Oh...?”

Ashley gave an odd look to Chihiro, standing there naked and unable to speak. Her eyes turned from his chest to what lay below that.

“...Hmm. So you were a girl, huh?”



Five minutes later, Ashley and Chihiro were lounging in the bath together.

“You know, I run into a lot of strange people in my line of work, but I think *you* rank pretty high up there. Tee-hee-hee...”

Despite her lack of tact, Ashley didn’t seem uncomfortable with this revelation, smiling warmly at her companion. Chihiro had told her the truth about hiding her gender from Itsuki—not that she had much choice.

“...My brother’s the only person in my family who thinks I’m a boy. I go to school and stuff as a girl—everything else, too, I mean. Except for his editor, Toki, and his other friends. I’m still passing as a guy with them.”

“And I guess the cat’s out of the bag with me, hmm? Hee-hee...”

“Um, I’m hoping you can keep this a secret from him...?”

“Ooh, well, who can say?”

“Please, Ms. Ono!”

Chihiro looked about to cry as Ashley gave her a sadistic grin.

“Tee-hee... It’s all right. I’m not in the habit of picking on girls just because their breasts aren’t too developed.”

The sadistic grin turned into a somewhat sincerer smile.

“Th-thank you very much,” Chihiro replied, not entirely satisfied but relieved enough for now.

“...But you know this isn’t the kind of secret you can hide from him forever?”

“...I know. I want to explain everything to him, sometime.”

“...And how do you think Itsuki will respond, hmm? He *looooves* his little sisters. Just *imagine* if he knew he had one cleaning his apartment all along...”

Chihiro bit her lip in silence.

“After all,” Ashley continued, “Itsuki’s one of my favorite toy—er, most valued clients...hee-hee... Oh, how I *do* wonder... Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee...”



Q&A Corner



QUESTION

Ashley, what are your favorite brands of sake?



Hmm... Well, I can't say I'm too loyal to any one brand, but I suppose I generally like my sake dense, rich, bursting with flavor. I like having the cloudy, unfiltered doburoku sake sometimes, too. Even some of the more delicate brands work for me, though, as long as you've got some spicy snacks to go with them.

QUESTION

If Itsuki or Haruto honestly asked Ashley to provide some bedroom services to them, would she say yes?



Would I...? It'd depend on how I felt at the time.

QUESTION

What is Ashley's weak point?



Weak point...? If you're asking what I don't like, I'll tell you one thing: I despise inheritance cases where the family members hate each other.

The Setting of Chronica Chronicle

■ World Overview

- An orthodox swords-and-sorcery setting based on medieval Europe.
- The details change as needed depending on the gamemaster's whim.

The Land of Chronica

The continent the story takes place in. Home to several nations, it has been free of war between its superpowers for the past twenty years...or so I put it at first, but let's just pretend I didn't say that, okay? Actually, the Empire of Horn River is attempting to conquer all the land, and things are pretty unstable everywhere.

Kingdom of Gagagia

A small nation on the eastern edge of Chronica. While it occupies a decent amount of territory, much of it is mountainous or forested, leaving few areas habitable for humanity. The soil is mostly dry, infertile, and unsuited for agriculture. It is home to many caves and ancient ruins, and merchants providing for the adventurers who come to slay monsters and search for treasure form a large chunk of the local economy. Given the need to handle all these monsters and strapping adventure types, their military is quite powerful and their generals quite adept, although they have their odd quirks. The capital and seat of royal power is Leoilga.

Aegis

A frontier town located about three days' walking from Leoilga. Ruled over by Count Bogen, a relative of the royal family, but due to Bogen's old age and illness, his son Lloyd and daughter Sylvia are fighting behind the scenes to inherit the title of town lord. Following the player party's actions, Lloyd was

placed in custody and Sylvia was named the official successor.

Principality of Midfield

Once, this nation was served by a wealth of talent, making up for its small size with its elite-level tactical diplomacy and advanced military skills to compete and even outclass its neighbors. Thanks to the covert activities of Horn River, however, it was annexed by the kingdom without a fight. Randolph Midfield, its sovereign, continues to nominally lead the territory, but many ministers and citizens resent him for selling out the principality under their noses. A long string of retirements and caravans fleeing in the night followed. More controversy was raised two years ago when, during a knighting ceremony, Prince Norwe (prime minister of Horn River) said, “The people of Midfield (MF) are dedicating everything they have for the defense of Horn River,” leading to the defection of veteran general Hagwanui to the kingdom of Gagagia. Behind the scenes, four young princesses (the player’s party) have grown tired of this ugly infighting and fled the country, an incident that has not escaped the notice of certain key people. Midfield’s capital is Rozecca.

Empire of Horn River

The largest military power on the continent. Home to many powerful forces, including the Horn-Sneaker Army, the Charger-Brain Army, and the Fantasia Army, allowing it to swarm over other nations with overwhelming strength. However, its internal organization has not kept up with its rapid expansion, leading to internal strife in many places. Its capital is Suzuyami.

Principality of Lightning

A vassal state of Horn River...although its Lightning Army, the most powerful in all the empire, allows it full autonomy from the empire. Not even the emperor himself holds sway over this land. Fiercely uncooperative with the empire’s attempts at unifying its borders, it often refuses to participate in cross-military maneuvers with other armies. It boasts a number of hero-class generals who are household names across the land; they work in close confidence with one another, to the point where some people refer to them as the “Lightning Sect.” Its capital is Reki.

Kingdom of Godwan

A small nation that boasts a mastery of powerful sorcery. Following a political marriage engineered with Horn River, the two nations have formed an alliance. Its explosive power when it joins the fray is truly a sight to behold, but its people can often be riled into foolish maneuvers. Although the nation thought the alliance would bring it nothing but good things, somewhere along the line, the empire has come to pull all the strings. Its capital is Cagero.

Republic of Obara

A new nation formed by ministers formerly from Midfield. Its forces are small, but it uses a variety of tactics to hold its own against Horn River and its neighbors. Its capital is the city of Gargrim.

Emirate of Spada

An economic giant on the south end of the island. Its nation houses a gigantic gold mine, giving it such an overwhelmingly huge budget that it can force through even the most reckless of strategies. Its capital is the free-trade city of Jumpur.

Kingdom of Gran Abyss

A kingdom that uses its unique information network to flexibly deal with new situations as they arise. Boasting a uniformly excellent army, the kingdom has gained praise for its rise in recent years. Its capital is Phonipolyca.

Elcadia Mountains

A forbidding mountain range spread across the northern region of Chronica. In recent years, the so-called Narows, a group of people from another world, have settled there. The Narows are a motley crew, composed of many types and ethnicities, but a majority of them boast superhuman strength, massive magical force, and extremely powerful skills. Some of the Narows are adventurers; others serve as bureaucrats for foreign governments; but all of them have produced quite notable results. It is not a nation and thus has no capital, but there is a Narow village in the mountains known as Betapolis.



“...Mmmmmmmmm...”

Haruto Fuwa, working out the details behind the RPG world he was gamemastering for, stretched out to relieve his aching shoulders. He was working this out for his party of four heroes—Itsuki, Nayuta, Miyako, and Chihiro—and since it looked like they’d be playing for a while to come, he needed to figure out and correct a few things while he still could. Once the game world and characters were set in stone, he intended to reorganize the gameplay system, as well as rethink the balance now that he had two play sessions under his belt.

To be honest, in the last session, he took advantage of his gamemaster’s screen to fudge his dice rolls every now and then. As a rule, of course, he stuck to what the dice told him—he just faked it a bit when it’d screw the whole game up if he didn’t. Really, if Haruto hadn’t doctored the numbers at least a little, the party would’ve been wiped out four times by now.

All four players were beginners, after all, so he didn’t want them to face too much of a challenge. He wanted to keep the action *just* intense enough so everyone could have fun. The idea was to balance it so that naturally happened without the gamemaster faking dice rolls, but that was harder than it sounded.

“...Well, I’ll give it a shot.”

—It’s fun when people are enjoying themselves because of me.

There was no doubting Haruto’s personal motivations—he wanted a hit, he wanted to be praised, he didn’t want to lose out to his rival authors. But that “entertaining people” thing—that was the heart of everything with him. Prepping this RPG reminded him of that.

To help out with his rebalancing, Haruto read through the character sheets he had picked up from everyone after the last session.

There was Itsuki’s sheet, with the “dislikes” section crammed so full that he had to continue writing outside the box. In the “likes” section, he had written, “little sisters, my fans, Belgian beer, shrimp, whale sharks, owls, deep-sea fish, grilled salmon, spring rolls, and crab.” He hadn’t mentioned the “crab” part when he read it out to the group, though. It made Haruto smile. Every now and then—just a bit—you saw this kinder side of him.

Then he looked at Miyako’s character sheet.

Likes

People who try really hard

Dislikes

People who make fun of them for it

That brought a natural smile to his face. *Miyako Shirakawa... What a great woman.*

At that moment, episode six of the *Chevalier of the Absolute World* anime was playing. It was just as god-awful as always, with each new episode being followed by a whirlpool of online ridicule directed not only at the show, but the original novels that Haruto had poured his soul into. Reading it was so hard, it made him want to die.

This world is a piece of shit; I wish it would just disappear; I hope you all die— such were the cruel thoughts ready to possess him at any moment.

But still, there were people like Miyako in this world. People who supported others when they tried really hard at something. That's what kept Haruto on his feet and giving his all.

He sighed as he stared at her character sheet.

"Man... I really *do* like her..."

Q&A Corner



QUESTION

Nayuta tends to get physically intimate with Miyako a lot. Is she into girls, too?



Mmm... I like getting naked and flirting with Myaa, sure, but that's just my way of getting more comfortable with her. But...yeah, I suppose there's a little part of me that would like to feel *really good* with her, too.

QUESTION

Itsuki acted like he didn't like Haruto pretending to be gay on social media—but what's he really think?



I promise you, I'm as straight as they get. I don't care if Haruto's fans keep that stuff going as a running joke, but if they actually start believing it, I'm gonna have some problems.

QUESTION

Please tell me the length and girth of Haruto's penis!



I was surprised that we actually seriously got this question... I mean...normal, I guess...?

The Aquarium

It was just another mid-May evening, with Chihiro stopping by Itsuki's place to drop off some food from the supermarket and finding him preparing to leave.

"Oh, are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah. To the aquarium."

"Oh? Now?" a surprised Chihiro replied.

"Yeah. I'm writing a scene set in an aquarium, but I wanted to see the real thing first."

"Didn't you go to one in Okinawa?"

Chihiro still had the whale-shark charm Itsuki bought for him at the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium dangling from his smartphone.

"Churaumi was a little *too* fancy for the aquarium I'm trying to depict here. I wanna see something more, you know, pedestrian."

"Pedestrian...? That's kinda rude." Chihiro laughed. "An aquarium, though, huh? That's neat..."

Itsuki hesitated a bit at the sight of Chihiro's apparent envy.

"...Well, wanna come with me?"

"Can I?"

"Sure."

"Let's!"

His broad smile made Itsuki's own face flush for some reason.



Once Chihiro had loaded up the cooler with ingredients, the pair headed for the train station.

“...You know, Bro, I don’t think we’ve gone out together like this before.”

“...You’re right. I guess not.” Itsuki awkwardly nodded as Chihiro’s cheeks grew warm.

The two of them had been stepbrothers for three years now. For a while just after his father remarried, Itsuki was spending most of his time holed up in his room, not wanting to look at his new mother, his new younger brother, and (least of all) his father. He’d just spend his days in the high-school library, studying or writing novels, or hanging out reading stuff in the bookstore until late. He never even ate with his family, and he kept conversations with them to the bare minimum necessary.

Chihiro, for his part, was making a bit of an effort to keep his distance from Itsuki, perhaps out of respect for his new brother. When Itsuki began living alone, however, Chihiro began coming over—and that improved things a lot between them. Itsuki never had anything against him, really—in terms of being forced to have a new family out of nowhere, they were both in the same boat—so while it was a bit awkward at first, it wasn’t uninvited. And as they played games together and Chihiro read his books, the two of them broke the ice.

Now they had built the relationship to the point where they were pretty much just like brothers...they thought. To Itsuki, at least, Chihiro and *only* Chihiro was a valued member of the Hashima family.

They got onto a train, heavily crowded with evening commuters. They were crammed against each other on their feet. Itsuki couldn’t help but notice that Chihiro was blushing all the way to his ears.

“...You all right? Your face is pretty red.”

“I—I’m fine,” he replied, face turned down. “Just a little cramped...”





The sun was already down by the time they reached the aquarium, but they still made it during opening hours.

The place didn't have any unique crowd-pleasers like the whale shark at Churaumi Aquarium, but there were lots of fish on exhibit in assorted amusing habitats, along with a walk-in glass tunnel through the water, a tank with jellyfish glowing in beautiful colors, and a lot of other impressive attractions. All the events—the feedings, the dolphin shows—were done for the day, but that thinned out the crowds enough that they could take their time with the exhibits.

“Wow... Pretty amazing...”

Chihiro's eyes shone as he peered into a large tank filled with all kinds of fish big and small.

“Ooh, look, Bro! That's an *iwashi*, a Japanese pilchard! I cooked a couple of those the other day! With the hamburger steak, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. That was good.”

“That giant bluefin tuna's pretty amazing, too... I couldn't guess how many servings you could make from that. And look how big that sea bream is, too! Wowww... Ahh, and a flounder! And a shark, too! I'd love to cook up a shark someday. There sure are a lot of fish I don't know, too... Wonder how you could eat them...”

Itsuki grinned as he warmly watched Chihiro.

“You just treat them all like recipe ingredients, don't you?”



It was just past closing time by the time they stepped out—Chihiro all smiles, and Itsuki feeling a little satisfied himself.

“Boy, that was fun!”

“Sure was.”

Chihiro gave his brother a concerned look. “But that was for your novel, right? I hope I wasn’t in the way of that.”

“No, you’re fine. In fact, I think I got some nice material thanks to you.”

This made Chihiro give him a funny look. “Material?”

“Yeah.”

It was funny to Itsuki, the idea of someone going to the aquarium and seeing every exhibit as tomorrow’s dinner. He could have the novel’s heroine carry on like Chihiro just did, or maybe use the joke to establish a brand-new character.

“...That, and I’m glad to see you get really passionate about something.”

Chihiro’s cheeks turned red all over again. “Oh...I mean, you haven’t really taken me anywhere much before, so...”

“...Yeah.” Itsuki fell silent for a few seconds. “...Well, why don’t we do it again soon? Forget all about novel research for a bit.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Wow. Thanks! I’ll hold you to that.”

“Sure,” Itsuki replied, eyes averted out of embarrassment as a smile blossomed on Chihiro’s face.

Before long, they were back at the aquarium’s nearby rail station.

“It’s pretty late, Bro, so I’m gonna go home. I’ll be over tomorrow to make dinner, okay?”

“Yep.”

But when they reached the turnstile, they found it packed to the gills with people.

“...Is something up?”

“Hmm...”

They listened to the station’s PA system. Apparently, the trains on the line the station served were stopped due to someone on the tracks, and it’d be a “little

while” until they were up and running again.

“How long is a ‘little while,’ do you think?”

“Who knows...? Probably not five or ten minutes, at least.”

Itsuki thought for a bit.

“All right, let’s take a taxi.”

He immediately turned on his heels, but Chihiro was still focused on the information board. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“Huh? Me too?”

“This ought to be enough to cover you, right?”

Itsuki took a 10,000-yen bill out of his pocket, offering it to him.

“Oh, n-no, I... I can wait for the train to start again, so...”

“...But then you’re gonna be home late. And it’ll be super-crowded.”

“It’s fine!”

“Mmh...”

It would’ve felt super-awkward to leave Chihiro alone and take a taxi home by himself. But he didn’t want to wait for a train when they had no idea when it would be arriving. So Itsuki brought up a map on his phone, checking their current location relative to his place and his family’s house. It was about twenty minutes’ driving back to where Chihiro lived, and while it wouldn’t exactly be the quickest way, both residences were in more or less the same direction.

He sighed.

“...All right. It’s on the way. You should ride along with me.”

“...!”

Chihiro looked surprised for a moment. Then he nodded his “yes” with unbridled enthusiasm.



Inside the taxi, the two of them bonded by talking about stuff from the

aquarium.

“What did you like apart from the edible fish?”

“Hmm... Maybe the jellyfish. They were beautiful. Really cute, too.”

“Yeah, the jelly exhibit was pretty neat.”

“The spotted garden eels were cute, too!”

“Those eels...? Yeah, given the visuals, I bet Kanikou would love them.”

Itsuki grinned a bit at his memory of the eels, poking their heads out from the sand.

“Maybe...”

Chihiro’s expression hardened a bit. Itsuki didn’t notice.

“You know, when I went with her to the zoo, all she focused on were the genitals of the pandas and kangaroos and stuff. She’s a total embarrassment.”

“R-really...? Wow...” Chihiro blushed. “It’s weird to think of a girl saying all that...vulgar kind of stuff.”

“Yeah.” Itsuki nodded. “You aren’t wrong there. But I kind of like it, you know? A girl who can get as low-down and vulgar as I can.”

“Hmm...” Chihiro frowned a bit at this. “So do you like people like Kani, Itsuki?”

“N-not like *that*, no...”

Itsuki turned his reddened face toward the window. The view outside was starting to become familiar. Before long, the taxi made its stop at a three-story residence in a quiet neighborhood—not a massive lot, but still boasting a little garden and garage. “HASHIMA” was carved into a stainless-steel plate on the wall.

This was the house Itsuki was raised in, currently occupied by his father, stepmother, and stepbrother. He gave it a resentful glare. It was the first time he had ever been back since he started living alone.

“...You wanna stay over tonight, maybe? They kept your room exactly how you left it...”

“Nah, I’m heading back.”

Chihiro’s gingerly posed question was met with an instant reply.

“Oh...” It saddened him, but the smile quickly came back. “Well, thanks for taking me over here!”

And just as Chihiro was about to get out of the taxi, the front door to the Hashima residence opened up, revealing a man inside.

“...!”

Itsuki’s face tightened. The man, recognizing Itsuki inside the car, looked similarly grim. He was in his mid-forties, dressed in a business shirt and slacks; every part of him was thin, and his eyes were sharp and stern. It was Keisuke Hashima, Itsuki’s father, Chihiro’s stepfather.

“Oh, Dad,” Chihiro whispered to himself.

“Tch...”

Itsuki lowered his voice.

“Get out of the car, Chihiro. Hurry up, now.”

“B-but—”

As Chihiro hesitated, Keisuke began briskly marching toward the taxi. “Itsuki,” he called, in a voice that left a harsh impression.

“.....”

Itsuki looked silently at his father, a peeved expression on his face.

Then, out of nowhere, Keisuke said:

“Thanks for the souvenirs.”

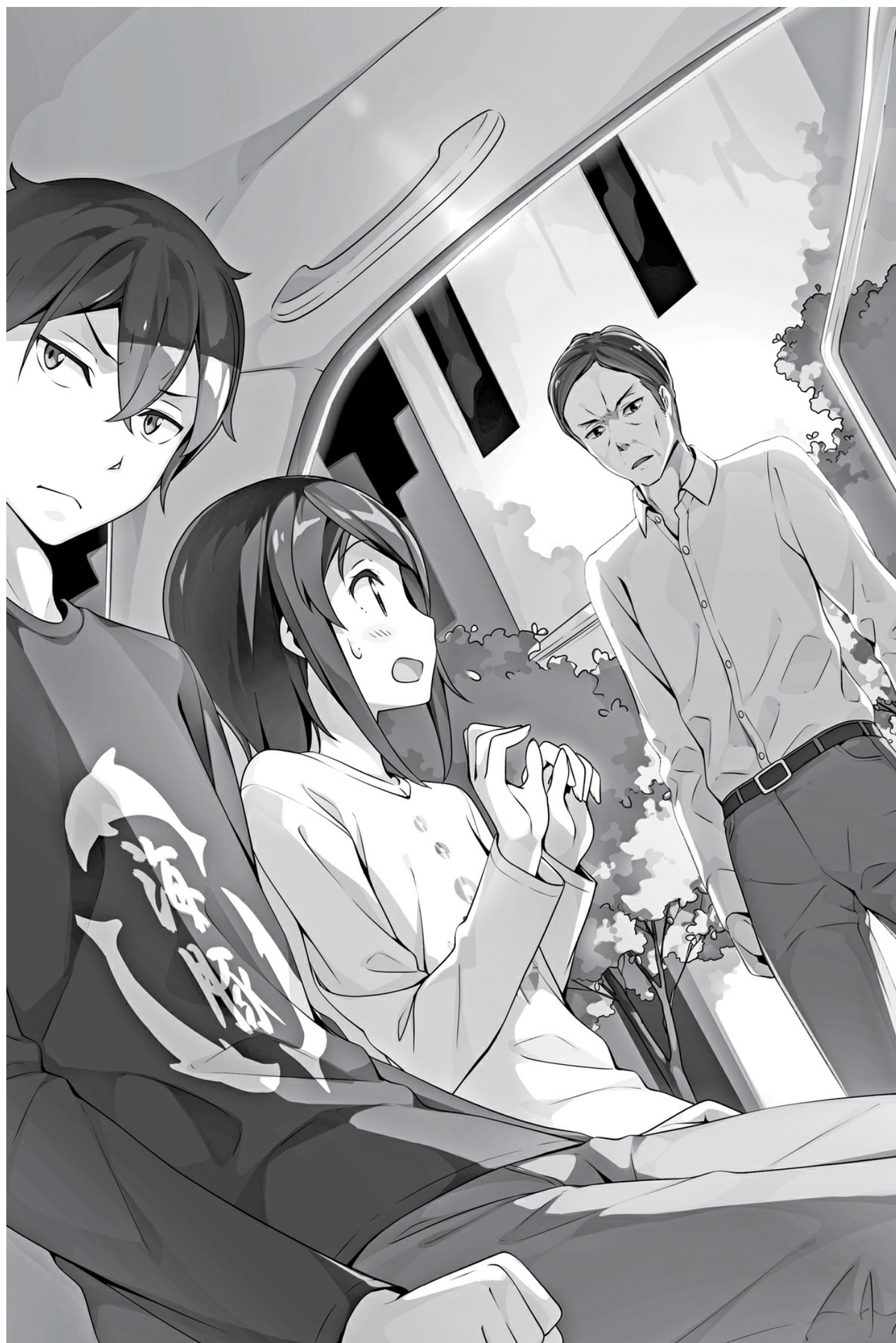
It was in a flat, businesslike tone, and it confused Itsuki for a moment.

Come to think of it, when he went to Okinawa and Hokkaido, he *did* give Chihiro some *awamori* liquor and some Shiroi Koibito chocolate as a souvenir for the family. That had been over three months ago, so it took a moment to remember.

“...Don’t mention it,” he bluntly replied.

Keisuke didn't raise an eyebrow in response. He turned around. That was all the business he had. Nothing about whether he enjoyed eating or drinking it. Just a quick word of thanks, out of pure duty—that was how it came across.

“H-hey, Dad! You haven't seen him in a while; why don't you talk with him a bit—?”



Keisuke ignored Chihiro as he walked back to his house.

“Ugh...”

With a saddened sigh, Chihiro turned back toward his brother.

“...Well, see you tomorrow, Bro.”

“...Yeah.”

He got out of the taxi, the door closing behind him. Itsuki gave the driver the address to his apartment, and the car sped off. Looking behind him, he could see Chihiro watching him go, a look of anguish on his face.

Q&A Corner



QUESTION

What is your favorite fish?



Whale sharks. I like a lot of other deep-sea fish, too. They look so cool.



I'd love to go diving and check out a manta ray.

I don't know much about fish asses.



Tentacles. Oh, wait, never mind.
Eels. I meant eels.

Oh, goldfish, guppies...
I like the cute ones.



I like any fish that you can eat...
That and whale sharks.

I just loooove sea-bream sashimi.



I went to this club called "Ryugu Castle," and the lady who came out looked like she came from the ocean depths... But never mind.



I Wanna Be the Protagonist

“Yeaaahhhhh! I’m *dooonnnnnnnneeeee!*!”

Several days after the aquarium trip, on a dark evening, Itsuki wrapped up the manuscript for Volume 4 of *All About My Little Sister*. He leaned back in his chair and spread his arms out wide.

This time, unlike with Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat*, he didn’t go through the hell of flirting with the Real Deadline. He had *only* broken three pseudo-deadlines here, and the tension from completing this work made it hard for him to think straight about what he had just written, but overall, he was satisfied with it... Yes, having characters visit an amusement park, a zoo, *and* an aquarium in the same volume wasn’t demonstrating particularly good balance, but with all these tasty events to read through, he was offering a hell of a lot for readers to digest.

“Oooh, nice one.”

“Congratulations!”

Haruto and Nayuta, lounging by the *kotatsu* table, gave him a round of applause as Itsuki promptly sent the document over to Toki for editing.

“Heh-heh-heh... I got this thing done a whole month before release! Talk about incredible progress! I’m the best!”

Haruto blinked. “Uh, that’s still cutting it close, dude...”

“Well, it sure beats all the crap I had to go through last time, doesn’t it? I mean, in a way, I’m shocked Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat* even came out at all...”

It’s worth noting that Volume 13 of Haruto’s *Chevalier of the Absolute World*

(which came out on the same day as *Sisterly* 5) was submitted to his editor three months before the release date. That fact didn't stop Itsuki from giving an emboldened grin.

"Ha! Bring me any ridiculous deadline you got! I'll break *all* of 'em, I promise you!"

"Oooh, yeah, you're *sooo* cool, Itsuki." Nayuta smirked.

"You really gotta stop breaking deadlines," Haruto warned.

"Either way, though, good job! I'll let you do whatever you like with my body as a reward."

"Screw that! I want some food and beer!"

"Screw that' is exactly what I wanted... (´• ω •`)"

Already on his feet, Itsuki opened the refrigerator door. "Want me to help?" Haruto asked, joining him. The fridge had a heaping amount of Haruto's beer and snacks, to the point that Haruto knew more about what was inside than Itsuki did.

"Hey, what's this bowl? Did Chihiro leave this for you to eat?"

"Yeah, it's potato salad. I got some croquettes and hamburger, too."

"What's in this box?"

"Uhh... I think some of the sausage selection I got from the hometown-tax offer I took."

"Ooh, nice. Can I have some?"

"Sure."

"Cool. Potato salad, croquettes... Hey, if we're eating potatoes and sausage, you gotta pair that with German beer."

"Whoa, yeah! The perfect duo!"

"I'll cook the sausage, so can you microwave the hamburger and croquettes for me?"

"Got it!"

Nayuta pouted at the two men as they raided the refrigerator.

“...What’re *they* going on about? Like only *they’re* allowed to share in the spoils...”



With the drinks and food laid out on the *kotatsu*, the feast quickly began. Potato salad flavored with anchovies; breaded croquettes with pollock roe inside them; hamburger cutlets made from fish; five different types of sausage.

“Well, here’s to Volume 4 of *All About*. Cheers!”

“Cheers.”

“Nyaaah!”

They all clinked their identical glasses against one another—Itsuki and Haruto enjoying beer, Nayuta orange juice.

Tonight, they were having Franziskaner Hefe-Weissbier, featuring unfiltered yeast for a white, cloudy pour and a beautiful head of tiny bubbles. They had Franziskaner-specific tall glasses for it, which made it look even more attractive. It had a fruity bouquet, reminiscent of bananas, and as that aroma suggested, it wasn’t heavily carbonated or bitter. It featured a gentle sweetness instead, making it refreshing and very easy to drink. Many people who claimed not to like beer enjoyed this one.

Given its status as a beer from the land of sausage, the two of them paired perfectly with each other. Snap off a piece of sausage, take a swig while the juices were still in your mouth, and the two tastes would amplify each other to create a powerful combo.

“Yeahhhhh! Gerrrrrmany! I have become Gerrrrrmany!”

Itsuki was so revved up from his achievement that he was already failing to make any sense.

“This potato salad and the croquettes are awesome. Chihiro is so talented,” noted Haruto, drinking at the same pace but still savoring the food.

“Argh, I wish *I* could become Germany soon,” Nayuta said as she filled her

mouth with sausage, potato salad, and croquettes at the same time. “Mphh, Itsuki’s sausage is so yummy... Mmph, rph, oonh... Hee-hee! It’s spurting this thick juice from the tip! Everything is getting soaked! What a lewd sausage *this* is! Hee-hee-hee!”

“Hey, that’s a good idea. Kinda like German potatoes. Lemme try mixing them up, too... Pahh! Nice!”

“(’•ω•`)”

Itsuki kept eating his way right through Nayuta’s dirty jokes. Whenever he was in serious deadline trouble, he deliberately cut down his food intake—to stay hungry, as he put it, so a full stomach didn’t put him to sleep—so this was his first serious meal in a while. He moved through everything Chihiro had prepared, including some mussels cooked in wine and a can of sardines in oil. It was all so supremely satisfying.

“Haaaaapphhhhh...”

They still had some sausage, beer, and snacks left, but now his pace was dwindling.

“Right...,” Haruto offered. “Now that we got *that* outta our system, you wanna play a game?”

“Nice,” agreed Itsuki. He and Haruto loved playing board games over beer; it made them feel like they were regulars at a pub somewhere in Europe, even though they were using a Japanese *kotatsu* table for it.

“I’m fine with anything,” said Nayuta. “I can’t wait to beat you drunkards into the ground.”

“Right. We got three novelists here... How about this one?”

Haruto rose up and took a box reading *Once Upon a Time* from the shelf.

“Hmm...”

“Ohh...”

Itsuki’s and Nayuta’s faces turned deadly serious.

As the name suggests, *Once Upon a Time* is a game where players become

the narrators of a story. Each player receives a number of cards, comprising the five elements of a story—characters, places, items, aspects, and events—along with a single ending card with text like “They all lived happily ever after” or “And then everybody was gone.” The player who uses up all their story cards first and can use the text on their ending card to bring the story to a reasonable close is the winner.

While someone is acting as the narrator, whenever something pops up in their tale that relates to an element in their story cards—for example, if a ghost or dragon appears in the story, and you have a “monster” card—other players can “take over” and become the new narrator. Thus, players spend the game stealing narration rights from each other, bringing the tale toward the conclusion *they* want. That’s the basic idea.

If a narrator runs out of ideas for a long enough time, contradicts themselves with past events, or just goes too crazy with their plot, the other players can protest. A successful protest forces the narrator to give up their turn and take another story card. The standards for a good protest, of course, aren’t very strict and change a lot depending on the situation.

Basically then, Once Upon a Time is a party game where people laugh at each other as they attempt to craft a story. It is a peaceful enough game, one that grade schools in the US have used as a way to develop the creative mind, and people of all ages and genders can enjoy it.

...Unless you’re a professional novelist, that is. Just like with Turtle Soup and Cat & Chocolate, when novelists play against one another, it turns into a game of life and death, with the players’ pride riding on every twist and turn.

“Okay, I’ll deal.”

Haruto passed out seven story cards and one ending card to everyone around the table.

“Hmm...”

“Rrrrgh...”

Neither Itsuki nor Nayuta looked too satisfied.

“I have to reach *this* ending...? This is gonna be a pretty stupid story...”

“Hmm... I don’t know how I’m gonna use a lot of these cards...”

The two stared at their cards, attempting to work out a plotline.

“Right. Let’s begin. Who’ll narrate first?”

“Why not Itsuki? He’s probably on fire after completing his manuscript.”

“Heh... All right.”

Itsuki nodded at the idea, and Haruto had no objections. Off he went.

“Ummm, once upon a tiiiiime...”

He played a place card that depicted a town.

“...there was a small town.”

“Right.”

“Hmm.”

“The town was surrounded by a very high wall,” Itsuki said as he played the second card—an item card showing a wall.

“I think I’ve heard this one before,” Haruto observed.

“Why was it surrounded by a high wall, you ask? Well, for many, many years —”

Already breaking into a cold sweat, Itsuki plunked down a character card featuring a classic fairy-tale giant.

“—this town has suffered because of attacks from giants.”

“This is just *Attack on T—n!*” Haruto protested.

“I—I don’t know what you mean, Haruto. Attack on *what* was that? Never heard of it.”

Haruto glared as Itsuki played dumb.

“Heh. Well, ripping off other people’s stories isn’t against the rules...but are you willing to do that? As a professional?”

“Oh, wait, I can butt in now,” Nayuta interjected as she played a “monster” character card. “Giants count as monsters, don’t they?”

It was safe to interrupt the narrator as long as you did so with something pretty close to the current subject, even if it wasn't the exact same thing.

"...Yeah, I guess."

"Okay."

Itsuki took one penalty story card from the deck and listened on.

"As the town lived in fear of the giants attacking them, there was a young child who lived within the walls. An orphan"—out came an "orphan" card—"named Itsuki."

"What? Why?"

Itsuki could protest all he wanted, but the narrator had the exclusive right to name characters.

"This orphan, Itsuki, was known as one of the meanest bros in town. He liked whining at people all the time, but one day, he was cursed by someone who disliked him, and his penis grew to over three feet long. Even bigger, you know, if he thought about anything sexy."

"What?!" Itsuki howled as Haruto cracked up, and Nayuta played an "enemy" character card and "cursed" aspect card.

"In fact, his dick was so enormous that even his parents were afraid of him."

"Whoa."

"Wait up."

Just as she had her "parent" and "scared" cards out, Itsuki and Haruto both swooped in to stop her.

"Itsuki's supposed to be an orphan, isn't he? Why's he got parents?"

"!" Nayuta reared back a bit after Haruto's observation. "Um, that... I mean, Itsuki's dick is huge now, and his parents were so scared of it that they abandoned him. Right?"

"No, no," Itsuki said. "The way *you* put it, its—um...Itsuki was an orphan from the beginning, and he got cursed because he was so mean to everybody. Your time line isn't matching up."

“Yeah,” Haruto agreed.

“Mmngh...”

Nayuta groaned and took back her “parent” and “scared” cards, taking a third penalty card from the deck as well. With that protest accepted, the narrator became the person to her left—Haruto.

“Umm... So Itsuki, this snot-nosed, long-schlonged bastard, had something that was really precious to him.”

“A little sister?!”

“His dick, right?”

“No. It was a ring he was said to have clutched in his hand when he was picked up by the orphanage.”

Out came Haruto’s “ring” card.

“Itsuki took tender care of that ring, always keeping it in his pants pocket.”

“Objection!”

“Wh-what?”

“...I told you, Itsuki’s dick is over three feet long. There’s no such thing as a pair of pants that can hide it when it’s that long! You have to picture Itsuki living with his dick out the entire time!”

“Oof...yeah...”

Itsuki yelled at the two of them. “You don’t have to picture anything! Like... I’m sure he can hide it somehow! With overalls or something!”

“Hmm... Maybe so, if you put it that way, but it’s fine. I’ll accept Nayuta’s protest if it means we get to say Itsuki is living his life naked.”

“Wh-wha?!”

Haruto laughed at Itsuki’s profound shock as he drew another story card.

“This is ridiculous...”

It was ridiculous, but it still meant Itsuki was the narrator again. He studied his cards carefully.

“Oh, well... Um, so Itsuki valued this ring a lot, wearing it at all times. He was always naked, except for the ring.”

“What a pervert.”

“Totally.”

“*You’re* the one who came up with that! ...So Itsuki was a naked, cursed orphan, but he still lived as strong a life as he could. But one day, a wicked old man tricked Itsuki into giving up all the money he had.”

Itsuki brought out two cards—“wicked” and “old man.”

“The old man said to Itsuki, ‘If you want some money back, sell me that ring of yours.’ Itsuki said no to him. Instead, he decided to take on the most dangerous job in the entire town. That’s right—he fought against the giants.”

“So *Attack on T—n*, then.”

“I’m telling you, I never heard of that... So just when Itsuki was volunteering to become a Yeager and fight the giants, they received a report that one of those giants was just beyond the wall. All available soldiers were ordered to take position, and Itsuki wound up joining them. He hadn’t undergone any battle training, but...”

Itsuki took one final good look at a card before resolving to play it.

“Sword.”

“...he was able to wield his enormous penis like a sword in combat.”

He didn’t sound very enthused about this, but it elicited simultaneous guffaws from Nayuta and Haruto. Face thoroughly red, he continued.

“So Itsuki went beyond the wall with the other soldiers and fought against the giant. However, the giant was so overwhelmingly powerful that his comrades were killed one after the other. Finally, Itsuki was the last one standing. Quivering in fear, he took the sword between his legs in hand—”

“Let me butt in,” Nayuta said, bringing out the “scared” card she had tried to play earlier.

“Ahhh, crap!”

“Heh-heh-heh...”

Chagrined by his mistake, Itsuki had to let Nayuta take over.

“Quivering in fear, Itsuki faced the full brunt of the giant’s attack. But his dick was a really amazing weapon. In normal mode, it was just a regular sword, three or so feet long—but it could also become a whip that expanded and shrank, and when erect, it was an enormous weapon like Guts’s Dragon Slayer or Cloud’s Buster Sword. It could even be divided into two swords for dual-wielding purposes. Isn’t that great, Itsuki?”

“I’m not some kind of monster!”

“So Itsuki wrapped his dick around a tree like a whip and soared into the air like a gibbon, toying with the giant. Then, leaping high into the air, he got erect right above the giant’s head. With a quick downward slash, he dealt a devastating blow to the monster. Then, with his second sword, he unleashed a strike worthy of Miyamoto Musashi. Soon, the giant was roaring and falling to the ground. As Itsuki approached the hulking mass to deliver the final blow, the giant opened its mouth and spoke to him in human speech.”

Nayuta played the “talking” aspect card.

“‘That ring,’ he said, much to Itsuki’s surprise. ‘You know this ring?’ Itsuki asked. The giant continued, ‘I am sure of it. I gave this ring to my child, the moment he was born. I am your father!’”

She placed the “parent” card on the table.

“Whaaa?!” Itsuki and Haruto both gasped at this sudden reveal, unable to wait for whatever might come next.

“.....Um, pass.”

Nayuta’s creativity had run out on her. She took a card from the deck and stepped down from the narrator’s role.

“Boy, this won’t be easy...”

Haruto examined his cards, then all the other ones played on the *kotatsu*, his face twisted in thought.

“Um... Right... So the giant said, ‘I used to be a human being, but I was turned

into a giant by a heinous curse.’ Itsuki gasped at that word. ‘Maybe it was the same person who gave me this massive cock,’ he said. ‘If they could make a person’s dick this big, maybe they could do the same to an entire person. It had to be the same culprit!’”

“I’m not sure I buy that logic. Though maybe I do...” Itsuki didn’t seem convinced.

“Yes!” Haruto said, pressing on. “The one who had cursed Itsuki into having a large penis was a beautiful princess.”

He laid out “beautiful” and “princess” on the table.



“Back when Itsuki was mouthing off to everyone, he stole the princess’s beloved horse as she snuck into town, earning him her ire.”

Haruto then played “horse” and “stolen” from his hand.

Itsuki interjected, “Who ever heard of a princess who curses people just because she hates them? Her heart must be really ugly, huh?”

“Hmm? Yeah, maybe...”

“Cool, I’ll take over.” Itsuki immediately played his “ugly” card. “Okay, um... The giant, his father, said, ‘I’m sorry, Son...,’ before breathing his last. It was the sad final moment spent between the two of them.”

His voice was forlorn as he played his “separation” event card.

“...So Itsuki decided to defeat the evil princess who made his dad huge and his dick really long and to destroy the entire kingdom for giving him such an unfair lot in life. Thus, Itsuki’s quest for revenge began.”

“I’m coming in,” Nayuta said, playing her “journey” card. “...So Itsuki was on a journey to defeat the princess, but he didn’t have any money, so he wound up collapsing on the side of the road midway. He was saved by a kind villager who passed by. ‘Maybe the world isn’t full of bad people after all,’ Itsuki thought. Thus, he pressed on in his journey, encountering kind people wherever he went, and before long, he could tell his heart was no longer driven by anger and hatred.”

Itsuki frowned as he listened. “Kanikou...are you trying to make this into a happy ending?”

Nayuta shot a glare at him. “It sounds like *you’re* trying to turn it into a sad one.”

The ending cards each player owned all had standard fairy tale–style conclusions on them. These ran the gamut from “They both lived happily ever after” to sadder tales like “The village was destroyed.” These ending cards were handed out at random, so you often found yourself pursuing an ending that went in a totally opposite direction from your opponents’.

Itsuki’s ending card, by the way, was “The fire burned, completely destroying

this wicked place.” Nayuta’s, meanwhile, was “So he forgave her, and soon, the two were united.” Itsuki needed a story that ended in annihilation for all; Nayuta, one where the princess (her name was also Nayuta, she decided) made up with the hero. There wasn’t much room for compromise.

Haruto’s, on the other hand, was more of a moral than an ending—“And all of you, too, should be careful when selecting your friends.” Trying to figure out how to keep his opponents from ending the tale, while somehow pointing the story in his own direction, had been giving him a headache this whole match.

“...Suddenly, an arrow shot out from behind. Remarkably, it was the villager who had helped Itsuki when he collapsed. He had thought the villager was a nice guy, but that wasn’t the case at all! *I’m never gonna trust in anyone again!* Itsuki thought. And so his drive to destroy the kingdom became even deeper than before.”

“...With that misunderstanding cleared up, Itsuki resolved to trust in the villager for good this time. Then he thought, *Maybe I got the wrong idea about Princess Nayuta due to some unfortunate encounter, too. Maybe she’s really a kind, gentle princess after all.*”

“...He was almost tricked by the conceit, but alas, nobody willing to turn someone’s penis into a giant, deformed tube could ever be kind and gentle. She was an accursed princess.”

“...Perhaps the brave, pure-hearted Princess Nayuta simply didn’t want any other women to take Itsuki’s dick away from him.”

“...And that’s a good reason for why she’d make it three feet long? That’s bullshit! ...Itsuki thought.”

Itsuki kept taking what looked like a good princess and plunging her into the darkness. Every time he did, Nayuta prepared an out for her, giving the hero some hope. The process repeated itself over and over again. That’s the scary thing about this game—the longer the story wears on, the more it gets bogged down and out of control. Longer tales mean more characters, more backdrop, and more players losing track of where they are. Contradictions and massive new twists become commonplace, with one narrator having to come up with ridiculous developments to explain the previous narrator’s leaps of logic.

It was getting crazier and crazier, until someone put a final period on the downward spiral.

“—And all of you, too, should be careful when selecting your friends.”

After over two hours stuck in this morass, it was Haruto who somehow forced this story to end.

Princess Nayuta’s soul had been transferred into Itsuki’s penis. The Over-Soul version of Nayuta in his wiener let her become a trustworthy companion as they rampaged over an entire army of giants—but then the princess grew jealous after Itsuki’s attention turned toward a beautiful young girl. So she extended it out like a snake and choked Itsuki to death with his own penis. Not a good scene. But at least it was an ending.

“Whew... It’s finally over...”

“Man, that was awful...”

“...Like, why do I have to work so hard on a story right after I just finished a manuscript...?”

Haruto was less than elated by his victory. Itsuki and Nayuta were less than sad they had lost. All they shared between them was a loose sense of achievement that they had put an end to it.

“That was a stupidly epic tale,” Haruto said. “We probably had enough for a paperback right there.”

“We did address all the things we foreshadowed, we had that whole scene where he learned the ‘Yamata no Orochi’ finisher move, all the characters figured in the conclusion...,” Itsuki mused. “Maybe we *should* publish it, just so we don’t waste all the effort. We could have it made into an anime.”

“I like that!”

Haruto laughed at the idea before letting out a self-deprecating sigh.

“...A whatever story like this, that none of us really cared about... Now if *that* got turned into a shitty anime, at least I could laugh at it. Better make sure there’s at least one battle scene where he whirls his weapon around like a helicopter.”

“You sure that’ll make it past the censors?” Nayuta asked. “It’s his dick.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Probably not.”

“And who’s the girl who made his weapon a penis in the first place, huh? How would they handle *that* in an anime?”

Nayuta turned to Itsuki. “Aren’t you the one who first said he could fight with it like a sword?”

“...Oh. Right. Well, it’s that f██k of a princess’s fault for cursing him like that in the first place.”

“No, Itsuki, it’s your fault for refusing to meekly accept my love.”

“I’m not interested in the kind of love that makes my cock three feet long...”

“If it’s *your* cock, Itsuki, I’m ready to accept all of it.”

“I’m gonna have to disappoint you there.”

“Nnnh,” Nayuta whined despondently before letting out an unexpected yawn. “Fwaaaah,” she groaned, her eyes sleepy. “Guys, I...didn’t actually sleep at all last night, so I’m getting really tired...”

“...Were you gaming all night?”

She shook her head. “I actually pulled an all-nighter writing.”

“Whoa! That’s rare.”

Nayuta grinned at the wide-eyed Itsuki. “Weeell, I kind of abandoned my publisher while I was writing Miyako’s gift novel. Plus, my editor found out I’ve been hanging here at your place all the time, since it was right by my hotel. He said they couldn’t keep me in there unless I gave them at least half my current project by this morning, so I stretched myself a little bit. Nyaaaah, I can’t believe how scary my editor is when he’s honestly angry at me...”

“...If you’re living in a fancy hotel on editorial’s dime without doing any work, I don’t think even *you* could get away with that, Kanikou.”

Nayuta replied with an enormous yawn and a wobble of the head.

“...So I’m done... I don’ feel like going back to th’ hotel, so I’m just gonna...”

“Use the bed,” Itsuki said. She really did look out of it.

“Yehhhs sirrrr...”

She staggered to her feet, then fell face-first on Itsuki’s bed. “Hyahh...” Then, within three seconds, she was fast asleep, snoring a little.

“Playing and playing until she finally passes out. What a kid...,” Itsuki lamented as he looked down at Nayuta, putting a blanket over her.

Haruto smiled warmly at the scene.

“Well! Wanna have a drink?”



The glasses washed, the sausages reheated, Haruto and Itsuki began cracking open beers again.

“Ahhh, this is nice...”

Itsuki was taking deep breaths in between the bites of sausage and swigs of beer. He was having a Weihenstephaner Vitus, another light-colored beer like the Franziskaner before. The two were similar, from the fruity aroma to the sweetness, weak bitterness, and refreshing finish, but this one had 7.7 percent alcohol by volume for a thicker, richer mouth feel. If you wanted something that tasted smooth but packed a punch, this beer was made for you.

So Itsuki and Haruto drank amid a nice, mellow atmosphere, and then:

“Hey, Itsuki?” Haruto asked out of nowhere, voice low.

“Hmmm?”

“...Why don’t you and Nayu just be a couple?”

Itsuki looked perplexed.

“Where’d *that* come from?”

“She’s a nice girl, you know? Nayu. She’s cute, she’s got big tits, she’s fun to be around, she’s got a sick mind...”

As Haruto ran down the list, Itsuki flatly said, “...I turned her down long ago. Did I forget to tell you that?”

“I know.”

“...So why are you rehashing this topic?”

Haruto downed his beer, looking a little uncomfortable. “...Well, I got my own stuff to deal with,” he murmured.

“Stuff?”

“You know. Stuff.”

“...I don’t. But why do I have to be with Kanikou for the sake of your stuff?” Itsuki began to look a bit irritated.

“But you really like Nayu, don’t you?”

“.....”

Itsuki fell silent for several seconds.

“.....Not particularly.”

Haruto sighed. His friend still wasn’t being honest with himself; he could tell.

“...What’s the big deal with liking her? Just go out with her. I mean, the way she throws herself at you all the time, and you just brush her off? That’s kind of mean to her, isn’t it? If you really can’t stand the thought of a relationship, you could at least make that clearer to her, so she can be rid of you.”

“...Man, shut up. I got my own stuff, too, you know.”

“Stuff?” Haruto asked this time.

“...You know. Stuff.” Itsuki threw Haruto’s own words back at him.

“Oh, come on, just tell me. What stuff?”

“...Don’t wanna. It’s not like there’s anything between me and Kanikou in the —”

“Aw, lay off that line already.”

“Mnh...” Itsuki grasped for words. “...What’s gotten into you today? You’re being really stubborn about this topic.”

“...Yeah, maybe.”

“.....”

Itsuki squinted his eyes at him, irritation giving way to concern. Haruto matched his gaze. It was too much for Itsuki to handle. With a heavy sigh, he put his glass down and leaned back, lying on the floor.

“.....All right, all right, I’ll admit it. I like Kanikou.”

“So, in that case—”

“—I like her,” Itsuki interrupted, “and I wanna be in a relationship with her. It’d kill me if she ever got in a relationship with some other guy. Honestly, to tell you the truth, it kinda pisses me off when you get overfamiliar with her, calling her Nayu and stuff.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And while I’m at it, lemme just say, I think I wanna marry her someday... But I can’t. Not yet.”

“Not yet?” Haruto wondered.

Itsuki continued, his face red. “...Let’s say I married Kanikou tomorrow. What would happen then?”

“Well, congratulations.”

“Shut up... Her getting married would be a big news story, wouldn’t it?”

“...Yeah, if you announced it publicly, I guess it’d get picked up. She’s a super-popular novelist, and she’s still just eighteen. She hasn’t shown her face to the media, but it’d generate a lot of buzz.”

Itsuki nodded lightly at this, still lying on his back. “And here’s what they’ll say in the news article: ‘Nayuta Kani, Eighteen-Year-Old Megahit Writer, Marrying a Fellow Novelist Two Years Her Elder!’”

“.....Yeah, maybe.”

“I wouldn’t be Itsuki Hashima anymore. I’d be a ‘fellow novelist two years her elder.’ So not yet. Maybe they’d use the name Itsuki Hashima in passing on the light novel news blogs, but that wouldn’t be any different. Right now, I’d just become some anonymous guy who was Nayuta Kani’s husband. The news

stories would paint *her* as the protagonist of the story, the beautiful writing prodigy Nayuta Kani, and I'd just be a minor part. And I can't deal with that."

He gritted his teeth.

"...I wanna be the protagonist."

His voice was as raspy as it was sincere. He had never revealed his feelings on this to anyone before, but now he finally was.

"...I'm not really anything yet, but when I become a protagonist on an even level with Kanikou...then I'm gonna tell her that I love her. And I know it's not fair to her, but I need her to wait until then."

"...All right." Haruto sighed after Itsuki had finished baring his soul. "Well, so be it."

In his mind, Haruto wanted a solid conclusion between them—either form a relationship already or break off everything. Miyako wasn't going to change at all otherwise—and since he had a thing for Miyako, neither could he. But "Well, so be it" still had an oddly convincing effect in his mind.

So he went with it. He went with it because he knew his feelings would keep burning in his heart for as long as he could foresee.



He knew a lot of people did away with feelings like these as they grew and matured—but if they could toss emotions like that in the garbage so quickly, neither he nor Itsuki would ever have become professional novelists.

“I wanna be the protagonist”—if you understood what those words meant, nothing could have rung truer. If you didn’t, you’d never get it. You’d have no need to. It was too strong a yearning for that, one that went far beyond the desire to occasionally mess around with a cute girl.

“...Y’know, though, Itsuki...”

“...Yeah.”

“...Bringing yourself to be on the same level as Nayu... I gotta be honest; that’s gonna be really tough. You could struggle all your life, and I’m not sure you’d reach that.”

“...I know,” replied Itsuki as he stared at the ceiling light.

Haruto sighed in response. “...It’s kinda hard to define what being ‘on the same level’ as another writer even is. Or beating them. I bet there’re a lot of readers out there who like your series more than Nayu’s. *They’d* put you on top of Nayu right now, wouldn’t they? I’m sure you aren’t trying to compete through sales or dumb things like that, but you gotta build a yardstick for yourself, or else you’ll probably turn old and gray before you’re sure.”

“...I know,” Itsuki whispered through gritted teeth. Then he sat up. “...So I wanna at least get up to the level where, when I marry Kanikou, I don’t have people telling me I’m a ‘fellow novelist two years her elder.’ One milestone I can think of for now is scoring an anime adaptation. Nothing beats anime in terms of PR, really. Once you’re up that high, things start looking a lot different to you, right? And when that happens, I’ll reconsider how I wanna approach Kanikou.”

“So getting an anime version is your ‘milestone’ ‘for now.’ Should I be offended?”

Haruto smiled weakly, recalling the ecstasy he had experienced when he first heard the news. He wanted to tell his old self what Itsuki had just said.

His friend didn't see an anime as the final goal at all. Maybe Haruto was a little bit ahead of him now, but in terms of the heights they were both trying to reach, it was well within the margin of error.

Hope he doesn't beat me, he thought as he gauged his friend and rival. Then he emptied his glass. Itsuki matched him gulp for gulp but couldn't quite drain it in one go, resulting in a fairly comical, almost cute little belch.

...And, of course, neither of them noticed that Nayuta, lying facedown on the bed, was blushing intensely from ear to ear.



Late the next morning, long after Haruto and Nayuta had left, Kenjiro Toki paid a visit to the sleeping Itsuki.

"Mngh," he said to greet his editor.

Toki calmly replied, "The manuscript for Volume 4 was good. No problems with it. I'll get it over to the presses pretty soon."

"Yeahhh...g'luck..."

"....."

For Toki, who had spent all last night working, the sight of a more-than-half-asleep Itsuki yawning in his direction was a tad irritating. He took a breath to calm himself down.

"...Also, I got some news for you."

"Mmagg?"

Toki struggled to retain his composure.

"...Congratulations, Itsuki. It's been decided that *All About My Little Sister* will be getting an anime adaptation."

(The End)



Q&A Corner



QUESTION

What are your favorite novels (regular or “light”) and manga series?



This was the second most common question after the one about the female cast’s measurements, but it’s kinda hard to answer... I got too many that I like. Just assume that if there’s a cute little sister in the story, I like it. Even if everything else about it is crap, a sister’s all I need to enjoy it.

I got a lot I like, too, but if I had to pick one, it’d still have to be *Record of Lodoss War*—one of the series that inspired me to be a novelist.



Itsuki’s work. That goes without saying.



I like *A Certain Scientific Railgun*.



Princess Knight, *The Rose of Versailles*, *Basara*, *Torikae Baya*... What? No particular reason, no.



I like most of Hashima’s stuff, yeah.



I love all the novels I edit. You won’t find an editor who’d say anything else.



Anno Dracula.



Extra Chapter: The Origin of Itsuki Hashima

Itsuki Hashima's mother was admitted to the hospital when he was in the sixth grade. His father often had to work late into the night, so they hired a housekeeper, a plump woman in her early forties. She was an appreciated talent when it came to cooking, laundry, and everything else, although she could be a little meddlesome at times, inquiring about Itsuki's schoolwork and encouraging him to go play outside more. She also kept putting lots of carrots and green peppers in their food, despite his protests.

Whenever she opened her mouth, from Itsuki's perspective, it meant trouble for him.

"...Look, Ms. Mitahora, you're a housekeeper. Can't you just do your job and stop worrying about me?" he finally said.

She gave this a hearty laugh. "Well, your father asked me to look after you, Itsuki! That's part of my job, too!"

"...I think he probably just meant you should watch to make sure I'm doing okay at school. I'm doing my homework every day, and I got a good score on my last test. I'm sure my dad hasn't been complaining. So there's really no need to keep worrying about—"

"Oh, there's no need for a child like you to act all thoughtful like that, ha-ha-ha!"

"It's not a matter of being thoughtful, ma'am..."

"You're so kind to me, Itsuki. Worrying about a lady like me!"

"N-no, this isn't out of kindness or anything..."

"I'll give you a special heaping helping of veggies with dinner tonight for that!"

“Huh?! N-no, no, that’s fine, I’m good!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, no need to be polite!”

“I *told* you, I’m not *trying* to be polite! I hate vegetables! I mean, it’s impossible to eat all the vegetables you’re supposed to anyway with regular food. It’d be a lot more effective to just drink vegetable juice, or take supplements, or—”

“You can’t grow up big and strong unless you eat up!”

“Ngh...”

Itsuki fell silent, his extended argument falling on deaf ears.

This topic was a source of anxiety for him. Compared to other boys his age, his body wasn’t maturing as quickly—in terms of height and everything else. He had classmates who already had all their pubic hair.

“...Could you at least stop mixing green peppers and carrots into the meat loaf?”

“Ha-ha-ha!” came the hearty reply to this attempt at light resistance. The peppers and carrots stayed in.



In his second year of middle school, his mother—who had been in the hospital the whole time—passed away. It sent him into a deep depression, and no matter what Ms. Mitahora did to cheer him up, he barely even spoke to her any longer.

The melancholy cloud around Itsuki at all times made it impossible for him to attract friends. He was always alone in school, and when class was over, he walked right home and read books in his room, every day. For the most part, these were light novels. His father never bought video games or manga for him, but when it came to money for novels, his wallet was open.

Itsuki had been a fan of children’s and literary novels ever since grade school, but after reading a story that he liked the anime version of, he wound up entirely switching over to light novels. It wasn’t like he was diving deep into them so he could forget his harsh reality. They just helped him relax, take a

mental break, and kill some time. But he'd get addicted to a series if it particularly struck his fancy, picturing himself alongside the heroes (many of whom weren't much different in age from him) as they faced off and struggled against powerful, fearsome foes and unfair situations. They reassured him, giving him courage.

Of course, he loved the sex scenes unconditionally. Whenever a book featured a nude illustration, that alone would slow his reading speed by 90 percent. He wasn't the little-sister-obsessed f██k he would eventually become, instead preferring a wide range of female tropes—the proud *tsundere* student-council leader who couldn't completely hide her feelings for the hero, the childhood friend, the big sister, the maid, the female knight, the dark elf. Little sisters were undoubtedly his favorite, however, and once he realized he had a serious thing for them, he would peek into the cast-intro page in the front of books before buying and prioritize those with little sisters first.

Still, while these sisters were cute and added color to any novel they appeared in, they were often just sub-characters or mascot-type presences, never the target of love for the protagonist. Often, he'd read a book, sigh, and say, "The sister's so much cuter than the main heroine, too..." That later evolved into fantasies like "If I were writing this, I'd portray her like *this*," but that still wasn't enough to make him want to write novels himself. He liked reading them, so he had a sort of reverence for the art of producing them, marveling at how hard it must be. It never occurred to him that he could do it himself.

In the midst of this, though, Itsuki's love for the sister trope grew and evolved with every new character he encountered.



One Sunday afternoon in September, Itsuki was in his room, reading as always. Despite the day of the week, his father was at the office, and Ms. Mitahora had Sundays off, so he was alone in the house.

Ever since his mother passed away, his father—always kind of a workaholic—had immersed himself even further in his job. Now, he was almost never home during regular off days. He hardly seemed to show any regret for his wife's

passing—if anything, he seemed to enjoy being relieved of the burden, so he could focus more on his work. It disgusted Itsuki.

As he read, suddenly, the doorbell rang.

Itsuki ignored it, irritated at getting pulled out of the novel world. Probably just some salesman. If it was a package, he could get it redelivered later.

But then the bell rang again. And once again, he ignored it. A fourth time, a fifth time... This was getting ridiculous. Most salesmen would've given up a long time ago. But it continued.

“Ugh, geez, shut up!”

Itsuki stormed out of his room in a huff, checking the front-door monitor on his way down. There was an unfamiliar girl there. Definitely older than him—maybe in high school. She had medium-length hair, pretty, refined looks, and strong-willed eyes that were staring straight into the camera... Plus, even on the little screen, he could tell she had a pretty big chest.

What's a stranger from high school doing around here? And why does she keep pressing the button when clearly nobody is gonna open the door? Frankly, it unnerved him—and as Itsuki warily eyed the screen, the doorbell kept ringing.

Finally, beaten down, he picked up the intercom receiver.

“Um, who is it?”

“Oh, there you are!”

The voice was just as cheerful as he imagined it would be.

“My name's Ayane Mitahora! My mom's your housekeeper!”

“Ms. Mitahora's...?”

“Yep!”

He looked closer at her face. It didn't resemble Ms. Mitahora's one bit, to be frank. But the only people who'd know that a Mitahora worked here were Itsuki, his dad, the guys at the employment center, and likely Ms. Mitahora's own family. She probably wasn't lying.

“Um, my father's not here right now,” Itsuki tentatively explained.

"This is Itsuki Hashima, isn't it?"

"...Yeah?"

"I'm here to see you, not your dad!"

"Me...?"

Great. Now he *had* to come out. Resigned to his fate, Itsuki nervously opened the front door.

"Hey there! My name's Ayane Mitahora. I'm in my first year of high school!"

He blushed at the girl's guileless smile. She was a lot prettier in person than on the video screen—and Itsuki had never in his life spoken to a girl this attractive one-on-one.

"Uh...Itsuki...Hashima. Er, how can I help you?"

Ayane laughed at the awkward question.

"I'm here to play with you!"

"P-play with me...?" Itsuki asked, unable to parse this.

"I heard you've been kinda down lately, so I thought I could help you cheer up a little! What do you wanna do? What kinda stuff do you like? Basketball? Table tennis? The arcade? Bowling? Karaoke? I'll pay for whatever! Oh, but we can just play games in your room, too!"

As she made her offer with a grin, a sudden chill settled over his heart. Her mother must've asked her to come over and help him feel better. Itsuki was used to his housekeeper's meddling by this point, but this was just one step too far. His emotion went beyond irritation and well into the realm of anger.

"...I think it's overstepping for a housekeeper to take a kid out of his house when she's not on the clock," Itsuki curtly stated.

"Oh, my mom didn't ask me to. I'm doing this myself!"

"Huh?"

"Mom told me about you, I'll admit, but I didn't tell her I was coming here today."

“...What’re you doing this for? You’ve never even met me.”

“Well, I mean, you’re all Mom ever talks about around the house. Like ‘Oh, Itsuki got a hundred on his test’ and ‘Itsuki always does his homework’ and so on. I know we’ve never met, but I’m always being compared to you, y’know? It’s kinda like I got a talented younger brother I didn’t even know I had.”

“Um, I’d rather you didn’t think that,” Itsuki said, flushing red.

“Ahh!” Ayane smiled again. “You’re blushing, you’re blushing!”

“...No I’m not.”

“Yes you are!”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are!”

“I *said*, no I’m *not*!” he said, raising his voice and getting even redder.

Ayane gave him a warm smile. “...But anyway. There’s this boy in my life who’s almost like a brother, and I heard that he’s feeling down. Why wouldn’t I be worried about that? So that’s why I ended up here!”

“Ended up...?”

...Really, he was still incredibly perplexed about all this. But somewhere in the midst of this conversation, Itsuki’s negative impression of this girl had all but disappeared—and, you know, that initiative to take action for somebody you didn’t even know? It struck him as something a hero or heroine from a light novel would do.



His father forbade him from going to arcades or karaoke places, and he wasn’t exactly the most athletic of teens, so Itsuki wound up inviting Ayane into his room.

It was your typical-sized room, about ninety square feet and outfitted with a desk, a bed, and two large wooden bookshelves. There was no TV or game console. The only playthings to speak of were what his mother bought him when she was still alive—a pack of cards; an Othello and a *shogi* set; Monopoly;

and *donjara*, a simplified, kid's version of mah-jongg. That was about it. The rest of the shelves were filled with about 10 percent textbooks, children's novels, illustrated reference books, and educational manga, and about 90 percent light novels.

"Wow, this is your room, huh?" Ayane asked curiously as she looked around, making Itsuki feel embarrassed. Apart from his mother and the housekeeper, this was the first girl he had ever entertained in here. "You keep this pretty clean, don't you? Just like my mom said. In *my* room, there's hardly any bare floor left to step on."

"I dunno about clean. More like I don't own anything I can mess it up with."

This wasn't humility on Itsuki's part. He really meant it.

"You sure have a lot of manga volumes," Ayane said as her eyes rested upon the shelves.

"Oh, those are novels...more or less."

"Really?" exclaimed Ayane as she took a volume out at random. Of course, it had to be one with a cover featuring the heroine clad only in her undergarments, complete with a color illustration of a bathhouse scene on the very first page.

"Wow... I didn't know they made novels like this."

She didn't seem to care about the risqué content at all as she flipped through the pages. Itsuki, on the other hand, was blushing a furious shade of crimson.

"P-plus, with these kinds of books, you see a lot of...um...stuff like that."

"Oh, am I embarrassing you looking at this? No need to worry. Sometimes I borrow some adult manga from my friends to read, too."

"R-really...?"

"Yep!"

Ayane nodded, returned the book to the shelf, and took out another one. This was more straight-up swords and sorcery, no outright fan service in it, and the cover was done up in beautiful watercolors. Itsuki breathed a sigh of relief as she paged through it.

“Since you read all these novels, do you get pretty good grades in language arts class?”

“Um... Yeah, that might be related, actually.”

Indeed, that was the one subject since elementary school that Itsuki never had to study for to excel at. No matter how simple and unadorned the language in these novels, it still did wonders for his vocabulary and reading skills.

“I’ve never been very much of a novel reader. Just reading the little snippets in my schoolbooks is enough to put me to sleep,” Ayane said, grinning. “I should probably fix that... Do you have any recommendations you could maybe lend to me?”

“Um... S-sure.” Itsuki nodded, still a little lost.

“Thanks!” Ayane replied, smiling her sweet, brilliant smile.

“Give me just a second...”

Itsuki stood in front of the shelves, pondering as he scanned the spines. A book for a teenage girl in high school who didn’t like novels and had never read a light novel before... That was a tough order. Maybe something like *Kino’s Journey*, *Ballad of a Shinigami*, or *Post Girl*, with lots of self-contained, bite-sized chapters to gradually pick through. Short-story collections like *Aru Hi*, *Bakudan ga Ochite* or *Calling You* could also work.

If she was a gamer, fantasy RPG-style tales like *Zero’s Familiar* or *Record of Lodoss War* or *Slayers* would fit well. In terms of worlds and characters that were easy to resonate with, maybe he should pick a modern-day youth romance like *Toradora!*, the *Joto* series, or *Gakko no Kaidan*. Or, if he wanted to focus on her distaste for regular novels, maybe a frenetic comedy like *MM!* or *Baka and Test* would dispel her notion that novels were tough going.

But she was a girl, too, right? Maybe she’d get deeper into a series if women were most of the main cast, like *Maria Watches Over Us* or *Ryuketsu Megami Den* or *The Story of Saiunkoku*.

“...If she likes mech stuff, she’ll definitely dig *Full Metal Panic!*... *A Certain Magical Index* and *Shana* are really exciting reads, too...hmm... This is hard...”

Ayane grinned at Itsuki, who had completely failed to realize he was now talking aloud to himself.

“You don’t need to put *that* much thought into it!”

“Oh, no, I want to. If I selected something, and you didn’t like it...”

“You can just lend me something else then.”

“...All right.”

Itsuki nodded, honestly relieved. That took a load off. But still, the first book was important. It could very well dictate the motivation she had for all future reads.

“You know, I’d like to read whatever you’re crazy about at the moment first.”

“...What I’m crazy about at the moment...?”

“Yeah!”

“.....”

Is that really the best idea? For a light novel beginner...? And my first recommendation to someone besides myself? Itsuki hesitated to press on, but regardless, he took out a volume from the series he was most looking forward to reading more of.

A Sister’s All You Need!

By Kasuka Sekigahara

This one had only come out two months before, and only Volume 1 was available for now. Itsuki hadn’t heard of the author before, but there was something so pure and blameless about the title that he bought it without reading the back-cover blurb. It turned out to be a great move.

As one could guess from the title, the book was a bright, bouncy romantic comedy featuring a little sister front and center—if it didn’t, the whole book would’ve been a fraud—who lived with her brother among a wild cast of other boys and girls. As far as Itsuki was concerned (not that he had anything to back this up with), if this book could get a second and third volume published, it could lead to a brand-new era in the industry. It just had that kind of aura

around it, in his opinion.

He wanted more people to find out how wonderful this book was.

So, as one of the few chosen connoisseurs who had noticed the joys this author brought to the world, he wanted to spread the word and throw him some support. He needed to. But...

“*A Sister’s All You Need...?*” Ayane accepted the book, giving it a hard look. “Do you have a sister, Itsuki?”

“...No.”

“Did you want one?”

“.....Maybe. A little,” he uncomfortably admitted.

This was the main reason Itsuki hesitated to recommend this book to other people. The title laid bare the fact that he was obsessed with the little-sister trope. Which was fine, since he didn’t have a real one anyway, but if someone who *did* bought this, and that sister found this on the bookshelf, what would happen to him? The mere thought made him shudder. Well, not shudder. Laugh a little, maybe.

“...It’s not that I like this book just because I like little-sister characters, though. I think the story content’s really excellent. The balance in the characters is really good, too. They’re pretty eccentric but still have their feet on the ground, and the weird twists in the writing might seem pretty childish at first, but it’s clearly got connections to the classic series *Slayers*, along with science-fiction giants like Alfred Bester and Yasutaka Tsutsui, and it’s got more than just visual impact; the readability is there, too; the writing might appeal to light novel veterans, but I think it’s still good enough to recommend to beginners as well.”

It sounded more like one long excuse than a synopsis. Ayane giggled.

“Okay, can I borrow this? I promise I’ll read it by next week.”

“...You’re coming back next week?”

“Is that bad?”

“...It’s all right,” he replied, trying to sound as curt as possible.

The two of them then spent the next couple of hours playing cards, Othello, The Game of Life, and so forth. He was worried that someone like Ayane, used to more modern types of play, wouldn't have fun with these games—*especially* playing someone like him—but she seemed to enjoy herself, spirits rising and falling with each in-game development. Seeing her made Itsuki feel like he was having fun, too, and before long, he was laughing right along with her.

I don't know how many years it's been since I've laughed with someone like this...

It was fun, but at the same time, it was a painful reminder of how dark his regular life was. It was miserable.



A week later, Ayane Mitahora was back at Itsuki's house.

"Hello, this is the Hashima residence," he said through the intercom, deliberately keeping his voice calm.

"Oh, Itsuki? It's your big sis Ayane!"

"...Please wait one second," he said, trying to sound like a stranger even as he rushed over to the door.

"Hello, Itsuki! How's the past week been for you?"

"...The usual."

Ayane came inside, just like last week.

"Hey, can I use the bathroom one sec?"

"Huh? Sure," he said, a bit confused as he showed her the way.

"I wanted to fix my makeup a little bit, so wait for me over in your room, okay?"

"Uh, all right."

The word "makeup" made his heart skip a beat. A beautiful older girl, fixing her makeup in a house with only Itsuki in it. It felt so grown-up. So sexy.

So Itsuki restlessly waited in his room.

“Sorry to keep you!”

The door opened, and Ayane came inside.

“N-no, um...huh...?!”

The sight of her stunned Itsuki into silence. She was in a low-cut dress, a frilly apron, and a horseshoe-shaped headband—the classic maid outfit.

“...Wh-what’re you dressed like that for?”

Her open chest area and pale thighs were so vivid, he could barely keep his eyes on them.

“A friend of mine’s sister works for a company that makes these, um, ‘cosplay’ outfits? So I borrowed one from her. Otaku people like maid outfits, don’t they?”

“I—I—I—I’m not an otaku or anything!” Itsuki protested, shaken by this to-the-point accusation.

“Really?”

“Really! The term ‘otaku’ doesn’t just mean someone who likes anime or light novels; they seriously love some genre or other, supporting it, spending money to contribute to it. Me, I’m just buying ten or so light novels a month, and I go to used bookstores and libraries for the rest, so it’d be kind of presumptuous for someone like me to call himself an otaku...”

“Hmm... So you don’t really like maid outfits...?”

She looked saddened about this.

“.....N-no, um, it’s...” Itsuki averted his eyes, speaking in a soft whisper. “It’s not that I don’t...”



“Well, great!” Ayane replied, beaming.

“...Um, but what made you want to wear one of those in the first place?”

“Hmm? Well, I really liked the book you lent me, so I figured I should pay you back somehow!”

“...!”

To Itsuki, Ayane’s words made him far happier than even the sight of a pretty lady in a miniskirted maid outfit. It sent his spirits aloft to surprisingly high levels. He had no idea making a recommendation and having the person love it would make him so happy.

“Is there anything you’d like this maid to do for you, Itsuki? Anything is fine!”

“Anything?!”

“Oh, but nothing sexy,” Ayane giggled as Itsuki’s eyes reflexively shot open.

“I—I wasn’t thinking that!” a blushing Itsuki replied. “Um...well... Would you mind wearing that outfit every now and then?”

This took Ayane aback for a moment. “Ha-ha-ha! Oh, you! You’re a little naughty, aren’t you?”

There was a twinge of red to her cheeks as she playfully tousled Itsuki’s hair.



Ayane Mitahora visited Itsuki’s house regularly for the next several months, talking about the books they read and playing games. They played *Monster Hunter* on the portable system Itsuki bought without his dad’s permission, and he even visited a karaoke joint, bowling alley, and video arcade with her. If his dad or Ms. Mitahora found out, they’d almost certainly scold them for it.

Itsuki kept lending Ayane light novels, and she repaid him by lending some of her favorite manga back. She wore that maid outfit again, as he requested, and even showed off some other cosplay—a bunny girl, a nurse, a police officer, Haruhi Suzumiya. Apparently, that maid thing had made her a fan of the whole cosplay scene. It was all thanks to this that Itsuki Hashima, never a boy with very good communication skills, developed a sort of immunity when it came to

dealing with the opposite sex.

So there it was. An older girl who came by every week to see him, playing games and borrowing books and cosplaying for him.

It was only natural that the middle-school-aged Itsuki Hashima would fall in love with her.

By the time of his third year in middle school, Itsuki decided to make his feelings known to her.

Ayane had started coming over in an effort to cheer Itsuki up, but by this point, they were close friends, and Itsuki was back to being a laughing, smiling kid. If she didn't like him, she wouldn't have gone out of her way to be with him. She must have enjoyed his presence. The logic seemed airtight. It *had* to go well.

So Itsuki waited for the right moment to make his confession, already imagining life with Ayane as his romantic partner.

One day, though, Ayane seemed different. She sighed a lot, seemed down in the dumps, and generally had trouble focusing. Itsuki had to ask why.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I'd hardly be a good big sister to you if you're all worried about me...," she said with a wry grin.

Another deep sigh. Itsuki resented being treated like a child but didn't have any clever comebacks to dispel that notion of hers, so he just whispered "no, it's fine" instead.

Seeing this, Ayane's eyes teared up a bit. She all but forced her lips to turn upward in a smile.

"I mean, I told this guy at school that I loved him, and he just *totally* gave me the cold shoulder. I guess I'm still not fully over the shock from that, you know? Ha-ha-ha... Sorry if I made you worry."

It felt like everything turned dark in front of Itsuki for a moment.

"...You loved him?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Yeah."

“.....What’s he like?”

“Ooh, you’re asking *that*?”

Ayane giggled a bit.

“...He’s this boy in my class. We’ve been in the same homeroom since last year; we were lucky enough to get assigned the same one this year, too. He doesn’t stick out that much. He’s short, and he’s not, like, *dashingly* handsome, but...pretty run-of-the-mill, I guess. He’s part of the library committee, he’s on the badminton team... It all started last October or so. I spotted him reading a light novel on the bus back home, and it kinda piqued my interest. It was one of the books I borrowed off you, actually.”

“...!”

It was like a knife through the heart. Itsuki’s chest throbbed.

“...So I began keeping an eye out for him more. Like, while we were preparing for the school festival, or all the boys were goofing around with one another. He was a lot more serious-minded than all of them, I thought, working and cleaning and being really thorough with all the little jobs other people just go through the motions on. But sometimes, when his assigned work was done, he’d head straight home, even if other people weren’t done yet... Some people were like, ‘hey, that’s rude,’ but for better or for worse, he doesn’t like going with the flow. I think I really like that a lot...”

“All right!” Itsuki shouted, cutting her off. He couldn’t stand it anymore, watching her blushing a bit as she talked about this boy who had rejected her.

“Hey, you asked...”

Ayane smiled, looking ever-so-slightly perturbed. Itsuki glared back at her.

“...You know, I like you, Ayane.”

“Huh?”

Ayane stared blankly back at him, clearly not expecting this. Itsuki turned beet red, trying to keep the tears from falling.

“I mean, I do. I want to be in a relationship with you.”

“.....”

Realizing Itsuki was serious, Ayane peered intently at him, trying to put the news as gently as possible.

“...I’m sorry.”

The blood surged into Itsuki’s head.

“...Why not? I read a lot more light novels than that guy, and I’m short and not handsome and pretty run-of-the-mill, too, but I’m pretty confident I don’t go with the flow, either. Just the other day after school, we were talking about going to karaoke as a class, as kind of an icebreaker thing, and I just went right home instead.”

“Mmmm...it’s not *that* kind of thing...”

Ayane smiled gently at Itsuki’s nasal-voiced, half-teary self-introduction. Then her face turned serious.

“...But I’m sorry, Itsuki. I’ve always thought of you as my younger brother... and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to see you as anything else. I’m really sorry.”

She sounded like she really was, from the bottom of her heart. She had it hard enough, losing a chance with the boy she liked, and now she was trying to be as kind as possible with Itsuki.

We aren’t equals in her mind. She sees me as someone she needs to look out for. A younger brother.

It felt like this was all crashing into Itsuki’s mind at the same time. And that was what finally triggered the tears.

“.....I’m sorry,” Ayane said again. Another heartfelt apology. “...I think I better go home today.”

Itsuki swiped at the tears with his sleeve.

“Then please, don’t come back again!” he shouted, turning his blurry eyes toward her.

“Huh...?”

Ayane’s face twisted into a mask of sadness. He hated himself deeply for

making her feel that way. But Itsuki couldn't stop himself from looking right at her and putting the words together.

The modern-day Itsuki, professional novelist, probably could've produced some harsher parting words like "You may treat me like a kid brother now, but someday soon, I'm gonna make you accept me as a man!"

But at the time, Itsuki was tragically lacking in self-confidence. All he could do was build a wall of rejection for her. Anything to protect whatever cowardly kind of self-respect he had.

"I don't need a big sister."

"Itsuki..."

He turned away from her sad eyes. They settled upon the latest volume, Volume 3, of one of his favorite series, which he had flung onto the bed earlier.

"A... A sister's all I need. A *little* sister."

"But you don't have one..."

Ayane's fleeting jab was something Itsuki chose not to reply to.

"...You should've gone to that karaoke meetup," she said. Then she fled Itsuki's room.

Itsuki flopped into bed.

"...Look at her. This beauty with big boobs, going crazy for some run-of-the-mill nobody just because he's serious-minded and likes books?! *Light novels?!'*"

And he *rejected* her for it. That *asshole*. As if anyone else would've loved him. Did he run into some kind of superhero girl instead? A magical sorceress keeping the streets safe at night? A blonde-haired elf from another world? The heiress to a powerful world-controlling conglomerate? A sword-wielding beauty fighting off a horde of monsters? A thousand-year-old vampiress who looked no older than fourteen? *That* sort of girl?

Itsuki had no way of knowing. To him, Ayane Mitahora was exactly like the heroes and heroines of his light novels.

If she was just another sub-character in the light novel of his life, then Itsuki

was just a nameless member of the crowd. And a kid from a home watched over by the mother of the girl the hero just dumped? He probably wouldn't even merit a one-sentence throwaway mention. The sheer size of the world, and his sheer tininess by comparison, overwhelmed him. And in the midst of it, one acute desire crossed his lips.

“...Goddammit... I wanna be the protagonist.”



Ayane texted and called him several times after that. Once Itsuki had ignored them long enough, the texts and calls eventually petered off. Ms. Mitahora was still beavering away at her job in the Hashima residence, the same as always. Ayane really must *not* have told her anything.

After that experience at lost love, Itsuki's tastes began to lean deeper into the realm of little-sister novels, little-sister manga, and little-sister games. His grades notably dipped, but his father—despite all the lip service he used to give to the importance of academics—didn't seem to pay it much mind for some reason.

Time flew by. Despite it all, he somehow managed to get into an above-average public university. High-school graduation was over, and in the interval between that and college, he was living his usual idle life. Then, in the latest volume of *A Sister's All You Need!* (with a bright ad inside touting the upcoming anime version), he spotted a notice in the back for a rookie-author contest. The book's author, Kasuka Sekigahara, was part of the judging team—and somehow, out of nowhere, as if receiving a divine calling...the thought came to him.

I should try to write a novel.

I'll put it all in. The undying love for little-sister characters. His own burning desire for one. That love, and hope, and fantasy. That sweet yearning; the bitterness of lost love; the pain of failure; the sense of inferiority at being unable to do what everyone else can; his irritation with himself; his rage at a reality that never went his way; his anger at an irrational world; his misspent, gloomy youth; his longing to become a protagonist; his hope, his overwhelming

desire to smash down all the absurd, outrageous things in his way; his dreams, his prayers, his shout from the soul! Everything inside him.

And if it went well, he'd be in the same world as his beloved Kasuka Sekigahara. Even if it didn't, he felt like he'd discover something at the end. At the very least, he'd escape all the daydreaming he did at home and school.

Luckily, from all those worthless days he had spent alone, he had a treasure trove of vague ideas to draw from.

Just one book to start with. And if that's not enough to satisfy me, I'll write another, then another.

He had given up on the idea before as impossible for him. But now he knew he could. He could write *tons* of them. That confidence might've been based on nothing, but it was now fully sprouted in Itsuki's mind.

So he took out his dad's used notebook PC, a gift after he wrapped up his high-school entrance exams. The dull start-up sound seemed like the trumpeting of angels to his ears.

Look out, world.

I—yes, I—am gonna be the protagonist.

Thus, Itsuki Hashima the novelist was born.

Afterword

Looks like I've managed to get Volume 3 completed without incident. May my editor Iwaasa's dick fall off. Hopefully you've all enjoyed it.

I should note, by the way, that a lot of the cast are either out of school or not attending it. I've written nothing but books starring groups of students up to now, but even if you set a story in a school without any unique characteristics at all, it still winds up playing a major role in the plot. The schedules the cast keeps are inherently dependent on their classes. If a girl confesses her love to someone on Friday, then there's gonna be that two-day gap in the weekend to deal with afterward. In *Haganai*, my last series, there was a period where I could pretty much fill up an entire calendar month with all the events that took place. These people are definitely making the most of their youth, no doubt about it.

Here, meanwhile, I have a lot more leeway with the story events since I'm not beholden to a school schedule. One downside to this, though, is I no longer have class trips, school festivals, and other useful events to decorate the story with. I have to take advantage of the rarity of a non-school setting instead—such is my aim, anyway, and I hope you'll join me for the ride.

Yomi Hirasaka

Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist

Late October 2015

*Now I'll answer a few questions I've received.

【Q】Are you modeling your characters after anyone?

【A】I turned to myself and other real-life authors for inspiration on some of them, but generally, they aren't related to reality.

【Q】Are the novels and anime that appear in the story the same as in our world?

【A】You can assume that anything besides *A Sister's All You Need!* that bears the name of a real-life property is identical in content to what you know.

【Q】Do you have any plans for new characters going forward?

【A】I've got a lot of unique writers, manga artists, editors, and more in mind. You'll see them when I get to them!

【Q】Do "Lockdowns" really exist?

【A】They...*mumble*.

*Itsuki and the gang play a game called Once Upon a Time in this volume. In real life, however, you aren't allowed to play multiple cards at the same time. I modified this a bit to keep the story up-tempo, but keep that in mind when you're playing. (Just don't tell anyone that I've been playing it this way with my writer friends for ages and only discovered my mistake when I asked Hobby Base, the game's Japanese rights-holder, for permission to use it in the story.)

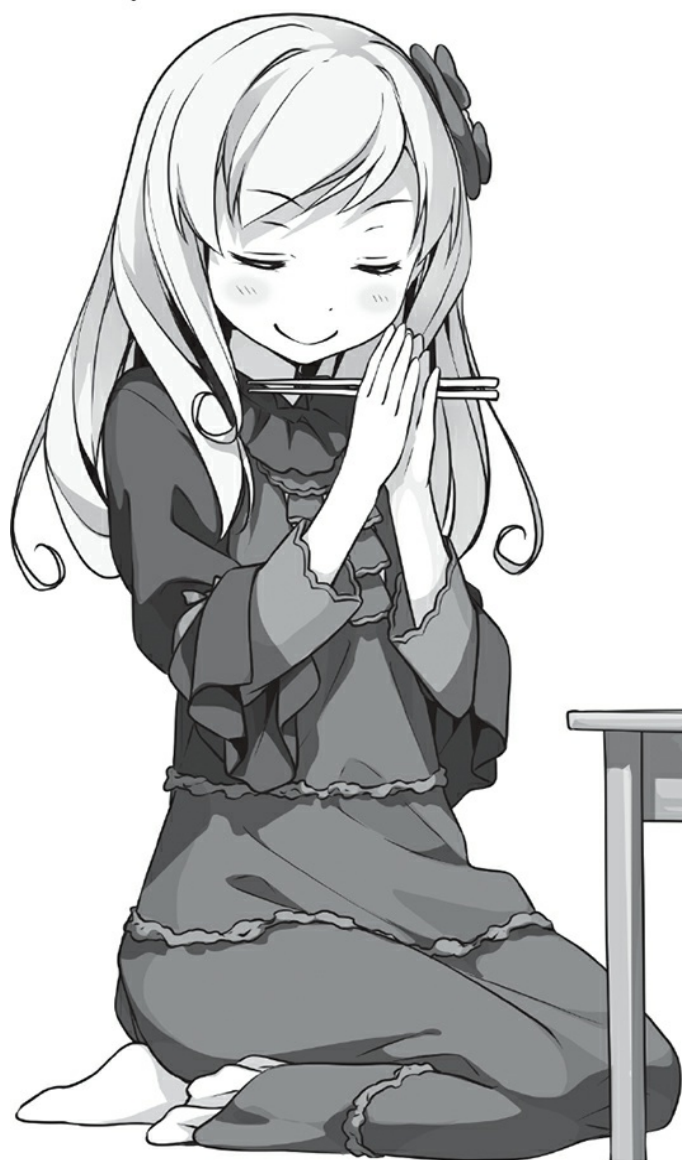
*The manga version of *A Sister's All You Need.*, drawn by Idu, will be premiering in the 12/19/2015 issue of *Sunday GX*. The shocking story concept from Itsuki at the beginning of Volume 1 will be there in its full glory, so I definitely hope you check it out.

Afterword

This is Kantoku, the series illustrator. With a lot of creative pursuits, the longer you're in the business, the more you start to get prideful about your craft—which, in turn, makes you start cutting corners in your approach. You can't let that happen! With all the developments here and in Volume 2, this series reminds me of the passion you have to bring to your creativity. I'm going to be the protagonist!

あまがき

KANTOKU



CUP NOODLE: SADIST (SPICY FLAVOR)

Ashley was on the cover this time, and she acted the same as always in the story—no major new developments with her. In other words, the covers in this series feature all sorts of characters from the overall tale, regardless of what actually happens in the plot... Isn't it fun?

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