



6

A "SISTER'S" ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

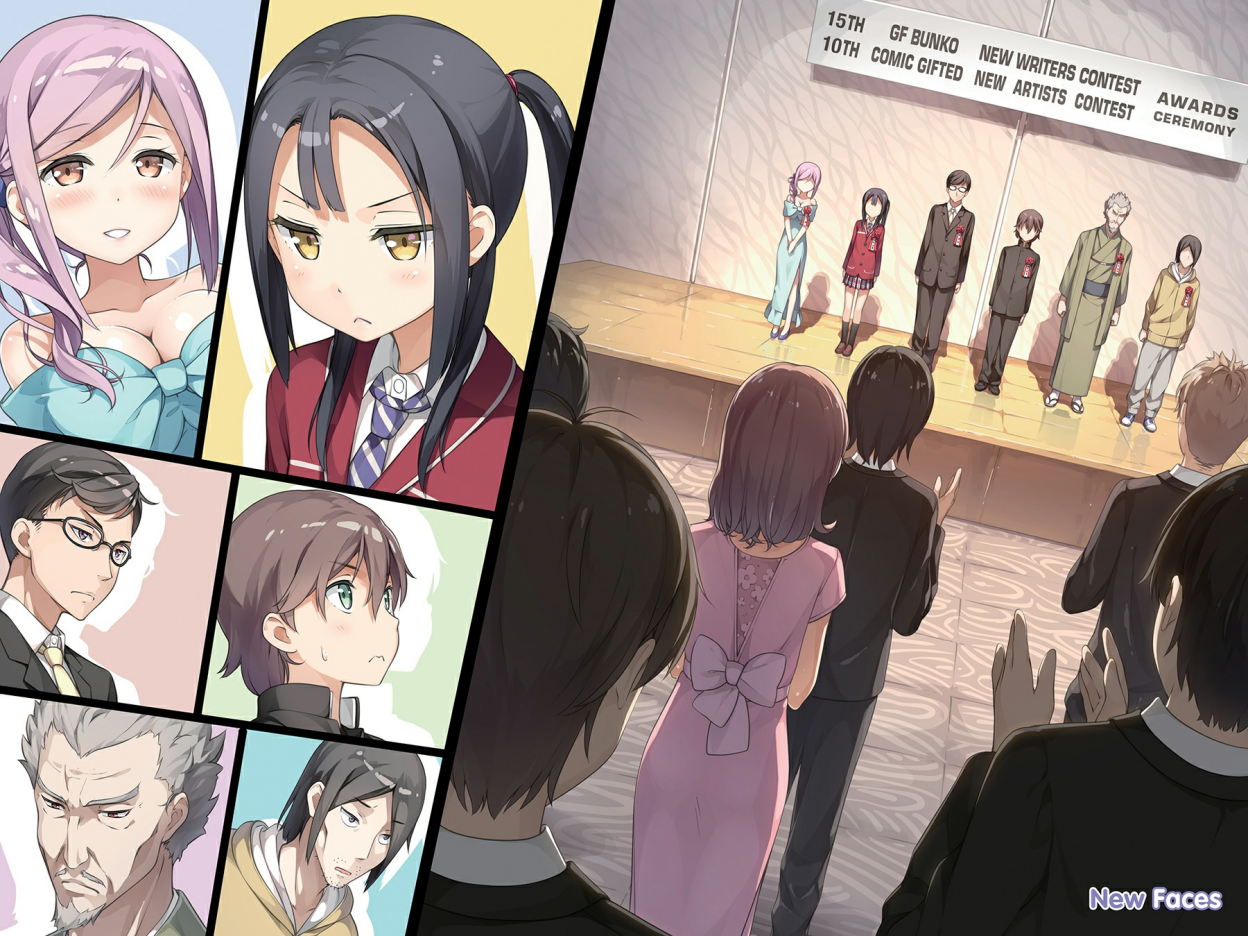
YOMI HIRASAKA

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15TH GF BUNKO
10TH COMIC GIFTED
NEW WRITERS CONTEST
NEW ARTISTS CONTEST
AWARDS CEREMONY



Person Power

The Protagonists

Male Friends

Dicks

A New Path to New Asses

Nayuta's Landscape

Miyako Shirakawa's Good-Bye Party

Chronica Chronicle
(Part 4)

The Casting Audition

Pablo Purikesso

Jealous Hearts

The Awards Ceremony

The After-Party

Meanwhile, in Her Mind

The Main Heroine



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Yomi Hirasaka

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Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.
Vol. 6
Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford
Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 6

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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Illustration by KANTOKU

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A "SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED."

ITSUKI HASHIMA

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

CHIIHIRO HASHIMA

Itsuki's younger brother. The perfect human being.

NAYUTA KANI

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

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant.

KAIKO MIKUNIYAMA

A manga artist.

MAKINA KAIZU

A veteran novelist.

SATOSHI GODO

Editor in chief of the GF Bunko publishing label.

KIRARA YAMAGATA

Nayuta's editor.

UI AIOI

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

MAKOTO YANAGASE

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

AOBA KASAMATSU

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

YOSHIHIRO KISO

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

SOMA MISAHA

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

TADASHI KAMO

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

MUNENORI TARUI

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

TSUTOMU OSHIMA

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

MASAHIKO HIRUGANO

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

KAKERU YAMADA

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

TAKURO NORIKURA

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

MASAKI ASAKURA

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

Person Power

It was an evening in mid-September.

*When will you finally notice, you dumbass?! I love you!
I've really liked you for a while now.*

Miyako Shirakawa, college student and part-timer at the GF Bunko division of Gift Publishing, finally let her feelings explode in the face of Itsuki Hashima, novelist and ex-classmate of hers. And he had given her his response.

*I'm sorry.
I'm in love with someone else.*

His answer came in no uncertain terms. And so the book had closed on Miyako Shirakawa's unrequited love.

It was, perhaps, a bit predictable. She knew that Itsuki already had his heart set on someone else, and she knew that his feelings weren't for her at all. She had never intended to confess her love in the first place, but something about the inadvertently heartless way Itsuki thanked her for helping with his novel project was too much for her to bear. She'd just blurted it out. Her confession was doomed from the start, and even if it somehow succeeded, that wasn't necessarily good for her. She'd have no idea how to explain it to Nayuta Kani, who worshiped her as the big-sister figure in her life, and she still hadn't given a straight answer to Haruto Fuwa's relationship proposal.

"Ugh... What am I even doing?"

Now Miyako was trudging back home through the nighttime sights and sounds of the city, grumbling to herself. Her chest hurt, and there were tears in her eyes—but oddly enough, there wasn't a trace of regret in her mind, no desire to take anything back. Now she wouldn't be sitting there, steaming, watching time slip away as Itsuki barely even recognized her as a woman. No matter how painful and grueling and sad it was, it was better for her to make her own way forward.

I quit school.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I just realized that to a writing genius like me, with a top-ten spot in the Oricon bestseller chart, going to school is just a big waste of time!

Miyako still remembered the frustration and powerlessness she'd felt, the sting of that phrase *waste of time*, when Itsuki had revealed out of nowhere that he'd quit college. She couldn't tell how much she'd improved since then, but she didn't think she was worthless, capable of nothing but being left behind. At least, she didn't want to.

So she walked on, deep in her thoughts, until someone called her name.

"Oh? Miyako?"

It was a handsome young man carrying a heavy-looking shopping bag—Chihiro Hashima, Itsuki's brother.

"Oh... Chihiro."

Chihiro gave her a soft smile and a light nod. "Are you coming home from work?"

"Oh, um, yeah." She nodded, awkward thoughts flooding her brain. How was she supposed to act around the brother of the man who had just spurned her?

"I'm heading over to my brother's place to make dinner. Would you like to join me?"

"Huh?! Um... Um, I—I better pass today."

Chihiro raised an eyebrow at this needlessly harried reply. "Oh... Hey, why are your eyes all red, Miyako?"

"I—I— It's nothing! See you later, Chihiro!"

She began to walk away, trying her hardest to cut off the conversation.

“Oh? Sure, okay.”

He watched her leave, unsure what it was all about.



Itsuki, meanwhile, was away from Miyako's place and currently agonizing over recent events at his *kotatsu*, head perched against the tabletop.

Miyako was a college student at the peak of her social life. She had the conversational skills to get along with just about anyone, and he thought she had a lot of male friends—and he'd believed he was just another one of them.

...Or was I just kidding myself?

Taking a good look back at his relationship with Miyako up to now, he was starting to think that there were some telltale signs he should've picked up on. She'd blush sometimes, get flustered for no reason, get sad out of nowhere...

...Maybe I was just putting Miyako into the "happy college student" box so much that I couldn't see her for what she really was? Because that was more convenient for me?

It'd be easier for him—easier to grasp, more natural, more realistic, more convincing—if she was just this socially well-adjusted, erudite college student who hung out with him as one of her many friends, rather than an intelligent, attractive woman who didn't know much about light novels or anime but had special feelings for him nonetheless. He had created this backstory for her in his mind—one that suited his needs the most—and tried to force it on her. Wasn't that exactly like the pricks who read his novels and used what they saw there to bash him as a human being?

“Aaahhhhhh, goddammit!” He banged his head lightly against the tabletop. “Shit... Why do I have to be so like...this...?”

He lashed out at himself, with words he couldn't quite piece together. He needed to get his act together...*like, as a person?*

“Ah, dammit...”

Somehow he had become a professional novelist, and he couldn't even clearly elucidate his own feelings.

“...I feel like such a coward,” he said in the most self-deprecating tone he could muster. Then the front door opened.

“Good evening!” came Chihiro’s soft voice as he entered. He gave his brother an odd look upon finding him slumped over the *kotatsu*. “Hey, what’s up, Big Bro? Are you hungry?”

“...Yeah, that must be it,” Itsuki replied, voice low and head still on the table.

Chihiro chuckled a bit.

“Well, hang on just a little longer. I’ll cook something up in a flash.”



Miyako was on her way to a hotel ten or so minutes away from Itsuki’s apartment, the site of Nayuta Kani’s now-long-term writing residence.

“Oh, hey, Myaa!” she said with a smile after opening the door, nude as always. “Come on in!” Then, in typical fashion, she started taking off Miyako’s clothes.

“Um, okay...”

Nayuta had already undone the hook on Miyako’s skirt and pulled it down before she came back to her senses.

“Wait! Today is *not* a naked day!” She pulled her skirt back up and turned to face a puzzled-looking Nayuta.

“What’s up, Myaa?”

Miyako stared straight into the confused Nayuta’s eyes. “Nayu, I...”

Words eluded her. She realized she was dangerously close to hurting her feelings. She took a deep breath. Maybe it *would* hurt her. But it had to be said. Not only had she been hiding romantic feelings for the man Nayuta loved, but also she had just gotten back from making them known to him. She had essentially tried to get a leg up on Nayuta without telling her. She couldn’t hide that any longer; if she did, she would have no right to be her friend.

And she wanted to remain friends with Nayuta. So, knowing full well it could hurt Nayuta enough to drive a wedge between them for good, she decided to be honest.

She looked Nayuta in the eye, even as the tears welled up, and spoke.

“I...just confessed to Itsuki.”

Nayuta’s eyes went wide. “Con...fessed?”

Miyako nodded. “Yes. I told him I love him.”

“Myaa, did you have a thing for Itsuki?” Nayuta bluntly asked, still clearly shocked.

“...Yeah,” she said with a nod, her voice growing more nasal. “For about a year now. Even since before I knew you, I’ve really loved him.”

“Myaa...”

Nayuta looked ready to cry herself.

So are you in love with Itsuki, Ms. Shirakawa?

She had asked Miyako that back when they first met. Miyako said no. She had lied—and she had been lying about it ever since.

“I’m sorry I kept it a secret all this time.”

“Fwehh...”

The first tear fell from Nayuta’s eye. Her face scrunched up, and Miyako felt a stabbing pain in her heart. Nayuta had to sniffle a few times before she was able to continue.

“...Zo den?”

“Huh?”

“Zo den whud did Izzki zay back?”

Recalling his response made Miyako smile a bit, despite herself. “...He turned me down immediately. Just like that... Almost instantly, he said he was in love with someone else.”

Nayuta’s mouth took the shape of an upside-down V. “...Um, Myaa?”

“Yeah?”

“This is a little hard for me to say, but this other person he loves...” Her face twisted up again. “It’s me.”

Miyako gave her a blank look for a moment. “You... You knew?”

“I overheard Itsuki saying it to Prince Manwhore once.”

Miyako was stupefied. She had a vague suspicion that Itsuki had feelings

for Nayuta, given the way he acted around her. Itsuki had all but said it himself back during a conversation they had on vacation in Okinawa. She had no idea Nayuta knew, too.

“I’m zorry, Myaa,” Nayuta said, crying.

“Huh?” Miyako asked, half in a panic. “Why are *you* saying sorry?”

“I mean, Izzki iz mine, zo...! I’ll never give him ub.”

“Um...” Miyako thought for a moment, perplexed. “So it’s like Itsuki said no to me because he loves you, and you’re sorry about that? Is that what you mean?”

Nayuta nodded. “I... I like you a whole lot, Myaa... I wan’ you to be habby, an’ I’m zorry I got in the way...”

The tears were flowing freely now, her face a mess as she sniffled her way through the apology.

Miyako sighed. “Don’t be silly... None of this is your fault.”



She was the one who lied. Who tried to get a leg up on the competition. She had to admit it; what she did to Nayuta was downright mean. But Nayuta wasn't angry at all; in fact, she was even thinking about Miyako's feelings.

What an incredible girl she is.

Miyako recalled Nayuta talking about her past once. She didn't go into much detail, but she had been bullied in her first year of high school over some love-related drama. This girl had a crush on this guy, but the guy was focused on someone else—Nayuta, in this case. The classic love triangle. Miyako could think of several cases from middle and high school involving people around her. But as classic as it was, it still hurt Nayuta deeply, enough that she stopped going to school. Maybe, to a girl like her, this was that classic love triangle repeating itself.

And once that realization took shape in her mind, Miyako embraced her with both arms.

“Hyah?!”

“It's all right,” she declared, tears streaming down her face. “You did nothing wrong, Nayu! There's nothing to apologize for!”

“B-but, Myaa...”

“I'm not gonna hate you or anything, Nayu! No hate, no resentment, nothing!”

“...Really?” Nayuta asked feebly from within her arms.

Miyako hugged her tighter. “Really! I swear!”

“...Zo, zo, you'll ztill be my friend, Myaa?”

“Of course I will! I mean, I should be asking *you* that! Can you ever forgive me, Nayu? Can you still be friends with me?”

Nayuta nodded, buried deep in Miyako's chest. “I wanna be fwriends, Myaa.”

“Okay...! Then let's stay friends, Nayu.”

She relaxed her grip, still crying. Then Nayuta tightened her own arms around Miyako.

“Fwaaaaahhhhhh! I luvvvvv youuuuu, Myaaaaaa!!”

Such a nice girl. So kind, cute, and as lovable as a little sister. Miyako truly did cherish Nayuta from the bottom of her heart.

...Later that night, Miyako and Nayuta enjoyed dinner together, took a

bath together, then cuddled in bed as they slept together—all in the nude, obviously.



“So, uh, Chihiro?” Itsuki hesitantly asked as the two ate dinner.

“Yeah?”

“Um, like, hypothetically speaking... If this girl you thought was your friend suddenly said she loved you, and you immediately turned her down, do you think it’d be possible for the two of you to remain friends?”

“Oh, did Miyako do that do you? And you immediately said no?” Chihiro seemed surprised, but nowhere near as surprised as Itsuki.

“Wha—? H-h-how did you know?!”

“So I *was* right...,” he whispered, face reddening a bit.

“Did—did you notice she had been feeling that way for a while now?” Itsuki dared himself to ask.

Chihiro nodded, a little ashamed. “I wasn’t one hundred percent sure, but it did kinda seem that way to me, yeah...”

“Oh man...” Itsuki was shell-shocked. “I’m less perceptive than a male high schooler...inarguably the dumbest, most dim-witted species on the planet...”

“You don’t have to be that sad about it... Also, I feel attacked by that second part.” Chihiro gave an awkward laugh.

“What are you talking about?” his brother countered. “When I was your age, I used to have all these baseless fantasies about other people and act like they were real. I never picked up on any of the subtle things in people’s minds at all...and okay, I think I still don’t, but anyway, I guess it was just *me* who was dull and dim-witted, not every high school male... Ugh, I’m sorry I was ever born...”

As his brother spiraled downward into despair, Chihiro quickly attempted to change the subject. “Um, but I wanted to ask about Miyako!”

“Oh...yeah...”

Chihiro thought for a moment. “If you want to stay friends with Miyako,” he gently said to him, “I think you’ll need to make an effort to achieve that.

And I'm sure it'll be kind of awkward, sometimes...but I'm sure she doesn't want to just totally cut everything off with you, either. So if you both decide you want to stay friends, and you work to make it happen, I'm sure it'll be fine."

"...Yeah, maybe."

He sighed, appreciating his brother's advice. *...Our relationship isn't going to automatically continue like it was. It's essential that I work to keep this going.* It made total sense to him.

"...You know," he said, pouting, "you have a lot of 'person power.' Like, you're really good at...being a person. You'll never be the protagonist of a harem love comedy that way."

Chihiro offered a light chuckle. "I'm not really looking to. Personally, I'd rather have a nice, normal, happy family than a harem."

"...Weirdo. Or are all high school boys like you now?"

If that's the case, Itsuki reasoned, you'd better reconsider what you're writing for your male teen audience, or you're gonna be left in the dust.

"Oh, I dunno," Chihiro replied. "I don't know what teenage boys are *supposed* to be like, really, but I don't think I'd be a very good point of reference... Nope, *definitely* not."

Itsuki gave him a look. That sounded a little too self-deprecating to him.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Has Nayuta been back home since she was put in that hotel room to finish her novel?



Yes, I go home about once a week. My mother and father worry too much otherwise.

QUESTION

Where does Nayuta's family live?



Kanagawa.

QUESTION

How many children does Nayuta want to have?



If Itsuki is the father, I'd want as many as possible, but I'd also want plenty of one-on-one time with him so we can get down and dirty. It's a tough call. I'll have to work it out with him first.

...Your deluded fantasies are way too specific.



The Protagonists

If you're interested, I'd kinda like to be a couple.

A week had passed since Miyako gave her response to Haruto Fuwa's offer—and two days had passed since Miyako tried her luck with Itsuki and failed spectacularly.

From the moment he voiced his feelings at that Belgian beer bar, and she left him at the rail station, Miyako had been seriously trying to figure out whether she could accept his feelings. It wasn't the first time a boy had said he loved her; she was relatively popular in middle and high school. She even received romantic confessions from boys she thought were her friends. She had turned them all down, even though refusing the goodwill of people around her—especially people she interacted with on a daily basis—was deeply painful to her. She never got used to it, no matter how many times it happened, and by the second year of high school, she was making a conscious effort to avoid dealing with boys in general. Even now, in college, she turned down every invite to casual drinking parties she received.

She didn't dislike Haruto at all. He was conventionally attractive, but he was actually super naive about this stuff. A virgin, in fact. And the passion he kept bottled up inside reminded her of Itsuki a little bit. The anime adaptation was a disappointment, yes, but he was still plenty successful as a novelist. He actually met his deadlines, unlike Itsuki and Nayuta. He didn't hold unsolicited, high-volume public strip shows, unlike Toki and the rest of the GF Bunko editing team. Among the people in Miyako's life, he was probably the most put together as an adult human being.

Plus...

You really saved me. Back then, I think you crying for me helped me stay

strong when I was on the brink.

It'd be so awful to live in this world, I think, if everyone was supercool or whatever. The only reason all those cool people can keep trying is thanks to really kind, gentle people like you, Miyako. Willing to cry for the sake of someone else.

Haruto had said that just before he confessed. She *felt* those words. The sincerity behind them had assured her that she wasn't at all empty inside; hell, they saved her more than anything she did for him. He had paid her back in full. This cool, handsome, gentle person—it sounded so hackneyed when put into words, but that's exactly what Haruto was to her—she really thought that having him as a lover and moving forward together would have been wonderful. If Haruto was all for it, she thought it would turn out pretty well. Maybe even better than if she started dating Itsuki.

But...

"I'm sorry, Fuwa. I just can't."

After she finished her part-time shift, she met up with Haruto—fresh from an editorial meeting at the office—at a nearby café to give her obviously nervous, shaky-voiced response. Haruto sighed a little.

"...Oh." He smiled, forlorn, as if he'd expected this answer.

"...I'm sorry," Miyako repeated, tears forming. Haruto replied with a smile she knew was just for show.

"Nah, I'm sorry to cause trouble for you. Thanks for giving it to me straight."

A pause.

"But...*boy*," he continued in a light tone of voice he strained to achieve. "I've been so worked up about this over the past ten days. I couldn't focus on work at all. It sucked. Now I can finally move on, I think. I *am* sad, don't get me wrong, but honestly, I'm a little relieved, too."

"Are you...?"

"Yeah. To tell you the truth, this is actually the first time I've told anyone in my life that I wanted to go out with them. Thinking about, like, how every

couple in the world has to go through this at some point? I finally understand. I guess I can't hate on normies that much anymore, huh? Ha-ha-ha..."

"A-ha-ha," Miyako replied out of politeness. "I actually just popped the same question to someone two days ago. First time in my life, too."

"Oh?" The contrived smile on Haruto's face disappeared as his eyes opened wide.

"Yeah. To Itsuki. And he said no instantly, ha-ha-ha."

The laugh sounded dry to Haruto. He blinked, unsure how to take the news at first. "Oh... Wow, I didn't know..."

"I'm just awful," Miyako continued with a frown. "Doing that before I even gave you an answer."

"Huh? N-no, I'm not upset about that or anything..." Haruto carefully examined her. "But, man, that's pretty gutsy. I mean, you realize who Itsuki's decided on, right?"

"...Yeah. But, um, I sort of got carried away, so..."

Haruto let out a chuckle of disbelief. "Carried away?" he asked, fully believing it. "Well, that's the way it goes, huh? Like, I knew you were into Itsuki, but I kind of got carried away, too, I guess."

"Wha—? You knew?!"

He smiled again at her abject surprise. "Yeah..."

"But—but how did you, um...?"

"Because I've always paid attention to you, Miyako."

"Oh..."

Haruto smiled warmly at Miyako. She averted her eyes, a little uncomfortable. He knew because he'd been watching her—because he liked her. It was the exact same way Miyako could read Itsuki's feelings.

"Well," he said with a sly grin, "if your first choice said no, you could say it's time to mentally switch gears and find your next love...maybe?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Yeah... I think that'd be more constructive. Like, maybe I should try a little harder..."

"Yeah. Well, like I said, it's a shame, but I'm glad you're being earnest about it. Like, in anime and video games, some characters lose a lover and immediately fall into another relationship, but it's the ones who have that kind of unrequited love for the protagonist who are more popular. Never experiencing another crush, even if she never gets noticed..."

Miyako gave this half joke a scowl. "I can't say the idea of being popular

as an anime character fills me with glee.”

“Ha-ha! I guess not.”

“And needing some time to recover is one thing, but never loving anyone else in my life? That’s a bit drastic, isn’t it? I’d feel bad for the protagonist and the girl he picked.”

“No, I mean, I like that kind of earnestness!”

As much of a dating-sim addict as Haruto was, he failed to see what turned off Miyako about that trope.

“That kind of goes beyond earnestness. It’s a little scary, actually! ... Wait, is that the kind of girl you like, Fuwa?”

Haruto found his eyes wandering away from Miyako’s accusatory glare.

“...Um, in the 2-D world, yes.”

“Really...?”

“R-really! I mean, in real life, I kind of wish you’d shake off your feelings for Itsuki and go for me instead!”

He paused, then turned a little red once he realized what he’d blurted out. Miyako did the same, punctuating the conversation with a forlorn “Oh... I see...” They fell silent for a few moments, feeling each other out with their eyes.

“Pfft...” “Ha-ha...”

It was unclear who started it, and they both shared the laugh equally.

“...But real life doesn’t work that way, huh?”

“No,” Miyako said, responding to Haruto’s honest feelings. She began to tear up again. “But... But I’m not going to let this defeat me. Ever.”

Haruto softened his expression, a flame burning in his eyes.

“Me neither.”

Thus began a new story between Miyako Shirakawa and Haruto Fuwa.





Two days prior, after Miyako revealed to Nayuta what she had done, the two were cuddling in bed, naked. She began to nod off a little, basking in the glory of Nayuta's supple body, when her friend suddenly spoke up.

"By the way, Myaa..."

"Yeah...?"

"...Have you completely given up on Itsuki now?"

The question made Miyako's heart skip a beat. To be honest, she hadn't fully decided. She had confessed her love and died nobly in the effort. Itsuki loved Nayuta...but while the feeling was mutual, they weren't officially a couple yet. Maybe, she thought, if she didn't give up the fight and kept pursuing him, there was a nonzero chance that Itsuki would come around.

"...What do *you* want me to do, Nayuta?" she asked, keeping her voice flat.

No, the chances of him changing his mind weren't zero. But it'd be tough. She had managed to salvage her friendship with Nayuta, but if she continued this extremely uphill battle, she could easily ruin everything. She had to avoid that at all costs.

"I think you should do what you want, Myaa," Nayuta replied calmly.

"...Do you really mean that?"

"Yes," she said, looking straight at Miyako. "I'm never going to give Itsuki to anyone else. That's already set in stone, so you can go ahead and confess to him and seduce him and give him all the sexual favors you want."

"I... I wasn't planning on the last two options," Miyako said, her face turning red. "But... Yeah, maybe it's too early for me to give up."

"Oh?"

"...You sure you're okay with that? You never know. Itsuki really could just change his mind."

"Well, you're a wonderful person, Myaa, and maybe that really could happen...but if it does, I'll just snatch him back. As many times as I need to."

Nayuta's voice was calm, but Miyako couldn't help but smile at the sheer

determination underneath.

“...Oh yeah? Well, you may think you’re so tough, but I won’t go down *that* easily, Nayu.”

Nayuta smiled back. “If Itsuki’s at stake, I’ll beat you any day of the week.”

For the first time, Miyako felt like she was facing Nayuta on even ground. They were in different social positions, different generations, different levels of talent—but here, they were both women in love.

...And if it wasn’t for this exchange, she just might have accepted Haruto’s offer two days later. But the conversation didn’t affect only Miyako’s future. It had a huge impact on Nayuta’s as well.

...The next day, in the early afternoon, GF Bunko editor Kirara Yamagata received a phone call.

“What?!”

She gasped at the contact shown on her phone screen. It was Nayuta Kani. Yamagata was her editor, on paper at least, but the author had almost never—not even once—taken the time to call her. Gingerly, she answered. Then came the second shock of the day. Nayuta actually wanted to talk about *work*.

“So you told me I’ve received several offers to adapt my series to other forms of media, right? If that’s still on the table, I’d like to hear more about it.”

She had received some. Actually, present tense. She was *still* receiving them. Anime adaptations, manga adaptations, video games, stage shows, live-action films, episodic TV dramas, spin-off novels, tie-ins with other games and novel series and restaurants and fashion magazines—if it had ever been done before in the world of light novel merchandising, the offer had reached Gift Publishing.

“...What made you change your mind?” Yamagata couldn’t help but ask.

“I’m thinking,” Nayuta replied, voice soft but burning with an indefinable fighting spirit, “that I need to start working a little harder.”

Yamagata didn’t ask for further detail. This was too big a deal to sweat the small stuff and risk letting the opportunity slip through her fingers. The editor in chief was instantly on the line, ready to hold a quick meeting over

the phone. Diversifying and expanding the *Landscapes* series was an urgent priority for GF Bunko—and really, Gift Publishing overall.

A while later, after the call finally ended, Yamagata sighed.

“Phew...”

“What’s up?” a puzzled-looking Miyako Shirakawa asked from a nearby desk.

“Oh, nothing,” Yamagata replied, completely oblivious to the fact that the part-timer in front of her was the whole reason why Nayuta made the shift.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

On average, how many books do you read in a month?



Around five to ten new light novels a month, plus twenty-ish volumes of new manga. I read my favorite series multiple times, so the actual number's bigger than that, though. I like reading art books and stuff, too, but I usually just check out the parts that interest me instead of reading them from cover to cover.

Between light novels and regular fiction, about twenty or thirty, plus fifty to a hundred manga volumes. I used to read more before I debuted as a pro (and a little while afterward), but lately I have my hands full just keeping up with my favorite series, plus whatever's hot at the time, so I can't explore as much as I used to...



It varies from month to month, but I don't really read that much. Like Itsuki, I tend to go back through my favorite series for rereads.

Maybe just a tad more than Fuwa. Unlike fancy-pants authors running around all day to work on their anime adaptations, I have a lot of time on my hands, so...



Male Friends

Haruto's next visit to Itsuki's place for dinner didn't come until late September. The menu was all stuff Chihiro prepared the previous night—rice with mackerel pike and mountain herbs, boiled greens with eggplant, and fried bacon, spinach, and *maitake* mushrooms sautéed in butter. This was accompanied by a few cans of Japanese lager Haruto had purchased at a nearby convenience store—which Itsuki didn't mind, but compared to the exotic beer he usually brought along, it was a bit of a disappointment. Given the hardcore autumn theme of the meal, a nice high-ABV ale would have hit the spot.

As they ate, they chatted about the usual topics—interesting new books and games, each other's work, and so on.

“By the way...,” Haruto casually began.

“Hmm?” Itsuki grunted as he took a swig from his glass.

“...I asked out Miyako, and she said no.”

“Pfffftttt!!”

“Wow, nice reaction,” Haruto replied, grinning as he handed Itsuki a towel. Itsuki accepted it with a judgmental frown.

“...You did that on purpose, didn't you?”

“Yeah. I couldn't resist. Sorry.”

The casual admission did nothing to lift Itsuki's spirits.

“...Well, I'm sorry you got rejected, but I don't appreciate you taking it out on me.”

“Ha-ha! Ah, give me a break. It's not like it's got nothing to do with you.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“You said no to Miyako, didn't you?”

“Ugghh...” Itsuki greeted Haruto's offhand observation with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. “How did you know...?”

“Miyako told me.”

Itsuki rolled his eyes. “Why did *she* tell you...?”

“Well, if we’re gonna keep being friends, it’d be a lot more awkward if she didn’t, you know?”

“...Yeah, good point.”

Haruto sighed, refilled Itsuki’s glass, and took a long gulp from his own.

“...You know, I’m glad I know the results, but it’s still pretty crappy, huh?”

The conversation with Miyako had ended on a lighthearted note—let’s face up to reality no matter how much it messes with us, yadda yadda—but it would take time for their hearts and minds to make that transition. Things were a lot better now, but Haruto had spent several days afterward wandering around his house and sighing, much to the frustration of his sister.

“...You’re glad you know the results?” Itsuki asked, guessing at what he meant. “So wait, did you know that Miyako, like...had those thoughts about me?”

“Pretty much.” Haruto nodded with a chuckle.

Itsuki was about to ask since when before he stopped himself. Back in May, the two had gone to the amusement park with Nayuta and Miyako, a day trip where Itsuki had promised to provide whatever support was needed for Haruto’s and Miyako’s relationship. On the way back, though, Haruto started spouting off about how he would work things at his own pace and didn’t need Itsuki’s help after all.

“...Since the amusement park?” Itsuki whispered.

Haruto’s eyes widened. “You’re more observant than I thought.”

“Not really,” he replied with a frown, which earned him another chuckle.

“But you can’t be the protagonist of a romantic comedy if you’re *too* good at reading people, right?”

“Hmph.”

Itsuki recalled saying something similar to Chihiro a while back. He didn’t much like hearing it pointed at himself.

“Don’t be stupid. I don’t want to be *that* kind of hero. I want to be the ideal hero. In a supercool adventure tale.”

“Aiming high, huh?” Haruto laughed a bit, then sighed again. “Itsuki... Have you ever been turned down by a girl you liked?”

“.....”

Itsuki greeted the question with silence for a few moments.

“.....Yeah,” he bitterly muttered.

“Oh yeah? ...How did you pick yourself up afterward?”

He wasn't too interested in bringing up memories of past failures in love, but Haruto was acting oddly serious all of a sudden, so Itsuki leveled with him.

“I ran away from reality. Spent all my time with little-sister novels and manga and video games.”

“That's pretty in character,” Haruto said, chuckling. “How long did it take you to recover time-wise?”

“I don't know how you define ‘recover,’ but going from ‘piece of shit’ to ‘barely functioning human’ took around a year, I guess.”

“A year... That's a long time. I kind of want to speed up the process a little.”

“Don't ask me about that,” scowled Itsuki as he recalled Ayane Mitahora, the girl who walked out of his life in the third year of middle school and left him an absolute mess. He tried to recall how he finally snapped out of it.

“...Write a novel,” he blurted out.

“Hmm?”

“Write a novel. Take all that bitter heartbreak, all those fantasies about what you should or shouldn't have done, all the twisted desires you have for Miyako, and throw them into your novel. Plus, you'll be doing work. Two birds with one stone.”

“I don't have any ‘twisted desires’ about Miyako...but yeah. That makes sense.” Haruto shook his head. “It makes sense, but I'm not too sure that's right for me.”

Putting one's personal experiences and emotions directly into one's work was typically something seen in “real” literature—novels as an art form. There were lots of more lowbrow novels that had literary elements, of course, including work from Itsuki Hashima and Nayuta Kani...but unlike those artistes, Haruto Fuwa was more of an architect, cleanly shutting himself away from his books. If *Chevalier of the New World*, his heroic fantasy, contained any of the emotions Haruto felt from being jilted, the series would turn into a warped mess.

“Well, that's all I got,” Itsuki bluntly stated.

Haruto let out a small sigh. “Guess I'll just have to figure it out myself...”

Then the doorbell rang.

“The mailman,” Itsuki muttered as he got up. “Or maybe Kanikou...”

At the door, he was greeted by Setsuna Ena, a young man whose hair was dyed three different colors. The rest of him was just as unique.

“Heya, sir!”

“Hey. Rare to see you stop by this late.”

Setsuna wasn’t in the habit of carrying a phone around and always barged into Itsuki’s apartment without warning when he visited, but usually he showed up in the late afternoon or evening, not after nightfall.

“I thought KenKen and I were gonna go out for dinner tonight, but I guess that was actually supposed to be yesterday, because I went to the office today, and he was gone. He said he was gonna take me someplace fancy, too. I was looking forward to it so much, I haven’t had anything to eat since this morning.”

“That’s, uh, one hundred percent your fault. You wanna eat here?”

Setsuna nodded, smiling broadly. “Yeah, man!” Then he looked at the shoes lined up by the door. “You sure, though? Do you have someone here already?”

“Yeah, another writer. Haruto Fuwa. Have you met him?”

He thought for a bit. “Probably not, no.”

“Yeah, because you never attend the awards ceremonies.”

“I always just kinda forget, y’know?”

Apart from parties and *doujinshi* events, for writers and illustrators who didn’t work with one another, the only way to meet and mingle was at awards ceremonies, thank-you parties, and other publisher-held events. Setsuna had never been to any of them.

Itsuki looked at him. “Well, it’s fine. I think he said he wanted to meet Puriketsu anyway.”



Haruto was incredibly personable, and Setsuna was hardly shy himself, so the two hit it off immediately.

“I’ve never eaten mackerel with rice before. This is super good!”

“Yeah. This is probably better than grilling the fish in the first place.”

They talked at a rapid pace, Setsuna tearing through the food and Haruto racing through his beer.

“You got jilted, huh? Boy, that’s pretty rough!”

“Yeah... That ever happen to you, Setsuna?”

“Oh, I’ve been dumped lots of times, but never when I really, like, *loved* them. You know, if it blows up in your face, it’s time to move on to the next one!”

“Whoa,” Haruto marveled. “You’re an advanced-level lover.”

“Oh, this isn’t exactly love, but there’s this one girl that I absolutely refuse to give up on.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been searching for her because I gotta see her ass one more time, but I just can’t find her.”

“Huh? Her ass?”

“You *still* haven’t given up on that?” a peeved Itsuki interjected. Setsuna had encountered what he called the “girl with the ass of the millennium” back in late March, nearly half a year ago.

“The ‘ass of the millennium,’ huh...?”

Haruto, face reddened after a lot of alcohol in very little time, nodded deeply. “Maybe she’s your true love, Setsuna.”

Itsuki glared at his clearly inebriated friend. “Are you just talking shit, now?”

“Nooo! I’m way serious!”

Itsuki had to wonder if Haruto was projecting his feelings for Miyako on this tenacious quest for the perfect ass, but Setsuna seemed convinced.

“Love... You know, I think it kinda feels that way! The feelings I have for that ass... Love’s the only way to describe it!”

“Ahh. Unrequited love. That’s hard...”

“It *is*!”

“Can you *please* keep that to yourself,” Itsuki said coldly as Setsuna began to sniffle.

“Oh! Hey! I know, Fuwa! Let’s go on a trip!”

“Huh? A trip?” Haruto replied.

“Yeah, whenever you’re feeling down, the best thing to turn your mind around is a vacation!”

“A trip... No, I haven’t been on one lately. The anime’s over, in more ways than one, so maybe I’m overdue...” Haruto’s interest had been piqued.

Setsuna smiled at him and shot a glance Itsuki’s way. “Great! Let’s do it! Where are we gonna go?”

“Whoa, am I going, too?”

He nodded at the flustered Itsuki. “Of course!”

“A guys’ outing isn’t so bad every now and then,” added Haruto. “I’m all for it.”

“Well...that’s fine by me... Oh, but I can only do one or two nights. I’ve got anime script meetings to attend every week. Also, I can’t go anyplace with no Internet.”

When in the midst of an anime adaptation, the novelist would often be presented with a mound of assets to approve on regular occasions, usually on very short notice. This was a new experience for Itsuki, but sometimes authors like him might get a request late at night for approval by morning.

“Hmm, better keep it close, then,” Haruto remarked.

“Maybe a hot spring?” suggested Setsuna.

“Ooh, I like that!”

“A... A hot spring...”

The last hot spring Itsuki had visited with Setsuna was mixed genders, and despite the allure of the possibilities, it was a living hell. Itsuki felt his neck muscles tensing up. That journey provided the perfect atmosphere for a scene he had to write, but it was a legitimate trauma for him.

“What’s up, Itsuki?”

“...A hot spring’s good, but not mixed gender, okay?”

“Aww...”

Setsuna tilted his head to the side. He had every intention of going back to one, didn’t he? The thought unnerved Itsuki.

“Well, if we gotta keep it close...how about Hakone?”

“I like that!”

“Hakone...” Itsuki looked up. “Is that close?”

“There are lots of locations that were used in *Evangelion*, so I went there in high school. I think you can catch a direct train from Shinjuku that gets you there in around two hours.”

“Hoh! That’s nice and easy.”

It was decided. Haruto immediately began to search for lodging—and just

like that, the three were off to Hakone the very next day.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Will Itsuki read any genre of fiction as long as there's a little sister in it?



Exactly...is what I'd *like* to say, but it's not like I'd enjoy anything *just* because there's a little sister. She has to be charming. If there's a character like that in the story, then I adore it. Of course, most little-sister characters are charming just because they're little sisters. On the other hand, if the sister winds up meeting some hugely unfair or cruel fate, it doesn't matter how good the story is—that's a hard pass.

QUESTION

Why is Itsuki such a fan of the naked body?



I don't understand the question.
Do I need a reason to like nudes?

Dicks

It was midafternoon when Itsuki, Haruto, and Setsuna met up at Shinjuku Station to purchase some express tickets and hop into an Odakyu Romance Car train. It wasn't long until the vast cityscape that usually surrounded them was replaced by humble farms and fields as they sat in their seats and enjoyed the box lunches they'd bought at the station.

"...You can get this far into the country an hour away from Shinjuku?" Itsuki asked.

"Don't call *this* the country." Haruto chuckled.

The view out the window cycled between bucolic farmland and the occasional regional town before the train reached Hakone-Yumoto Station. They walked through it, passing by the mounds of souvenir shops, and emerged outside, taking a quick browse through the EVA store before strolling to their hotel.

Itsuki was busily snapping pictures of the hot-spring town vibe as they kept going, a bounce in his step. "Hmm... Maybe I should use a town like this as a setting in the next *All About*."

"Sure must be nice to have a series set in modern Japan," mused Haruto, a little jealous. "You can take advantage of all your vacation experiences."

"Where do you get material for a fantasy novel?" Setsuna asked.

"Well, I'd really like to fly to Europe for research, but I browse through a lot of books and websites and Google Earth for towns that look medieval enough. That, and fantasy movies, and anime, and games. Travel shows are good, too."

"That's pretty much what I do when writing fantasy." Itsuki nodded. "But we can wing it a lot, writing in text. How does an illustrator like you handle that? You're pretty good at backgrounds, too."

Itsuki's *Genesis Sisters of the New World* series, with illustrations handled

by Setsuna, was set in a world that fused elements from fantasy and near-future sci-fi, but Setsuna never seemed to have trouble molding the vague images in Itsuki's mind into beautiful works of art. His illustrations had an overwhelming sense of photorealism, even as they portrayed cities that existed nowhere on Earth. Seeing them after submitting his first draft for the first volume helped build world details in his mind, vastly improving the story in future revisions. If Setsuna's art wasn't available before the book's release, it would have suffered for it, potentially even leaving the illustrations as the only selling point. That would have tanked sales for the second volume for sure.

"Backgrounds?" he breezily replied. "Ahh, I pretty much draw whatever."

"Whatever...?"

"I don't think about it too much. It's like, I read the story and think *I bet it's kinda like this*, and then I draw it."

"...Thanks for the non-explanation." Itsuki gave up trying to understand.

"That's genius for you," Haruto wryly commented.



After checking in, the three promptly headed for the hot spring.

"I can't wait to get into that open-air bath!" Setsuna half shouted as he tore his clothes off. He was small in size, but his muscles were supple and toned. And when the lower half of his body entered Haruto's line of sight, Haruto couldn't help but gasp a little.

"Holy—!"

"Okay, guys, I'll see you out there!"

"Uh, yeah..."

Haruto continued staring at Setsuna as he walked out of the changing room, humming the whole way.

".....Hey, Itsuki."

"...Yeah," Itsuki said, knowing full well what stopped Haruto in his tracks.

"...Am I crazy, or does Setsuna have a *huge dick*?"

"...You think so, too?"

Itsuki had experienced an identical sort of shock the last time he joined Setsuna at a hot spring. He didn't spend much time looking at other people's dicks, but even compared to those of his classmates in the locker room and fellow guests in changing rooms like these, Setsuna's dick clearly stood out from the pack.

"....."

"....."

The two silently removed their clothes, eventually stripping down to their underwear. Then they stopped.

"...So, uh, Itsuki, how big is *your* dick?"

"Uh...normal, I think."

"Oh... I, um, I think I'm normal, too..."

They both seemed to have difficulty reaching down to their undies, each stealing furtive glances at the other's crotch.

"...Well, my dick's not quite as long as other people's, but I'm already kind of short, so I can't do much about that."

Itsuki was already making excuses.

"Oh, I dunno about that," Haruto countered. "I don't think dick size corresponds to how big you are overall! I mean, look at Setsuna!"

"Urgh..."

They stole glances at each other again.

"...Dick check on three?"



“...Sounds good.” Itsuki nodded, mentally preparing.

“One, two—!”

They both lowered their underwear at Haruto’s count—and immediately sized each other up.

“.....”

“.....”

...After some intense penile scrutiny, the two seemed to measure out roughly the same.

Haruto gave Itsuki a grave look.

“What do you think? Wanna compare them...?”

“...Let’s not,” replied Itsuki, just as grave. “No matter who wins, I think we’ll just feel empty afterward.”

“Yeah... Not like we’re any competition for Setsuna...”

They sighed in unison, wrapped towels around their waists, and heavily plodded over to the open-air bath, taking in the lovely, free-flowing natural spring as their minds remained locked on the subject of dicks.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What import beer do you recommend for people who don't like regular beer?



I think the bitterness is the big hang-up for most people, but witbiers like Hoegaarden and Vedett Extra White—fruity beers without a lot of bitterness—are good gateways. They're both easy to find in Japan. Fruit beers like Lindemans Kriek and Mystic Cherry are super drinkable, too. They're like juice.

QUESTION

Why does Belgium have so many different varieties of beer?



One pretty common theory is that since you can't produce wine in Belgium, beer has to occupy that niche for alcoholic beverages in the 10 percent range. But in fact, they've made wine in Belgium for centuries—so, really, I don't know why. I guess it's just because Belgians like beer a lot, y'know?

[A New Path to New Asses](#)

The next morning, after a hotel breakfast and another dip in the hot spring, the trio hung out in their room for a bit, enjoyed soba noodles for lunch near Hakone-Yumoto Station, and headed for the Hakone Open-Air Museum. This is home to one of Japan's largest collections of sculptures, and sculptures naturally meant nudes. Itsuki spotted it in a travel guide he leafed through in their room, suggesting a visit because "2-D porn is nice, but sometimes I want to see more *artistic* porn." Haruto and Setsuna readily agreed, not having any other plans.

It wasn't long before they stepped off the train at Chōkoku-no-Mori Station.

"Whoa. It's colder than I thought."

"It sure is!"

Itsuki and Setsuna, both in short sleeves, shivered a little. It was clear and sunny outside, but up in the mountains, the temperature had dropped considerably.

"I *told* you to bring something besides a T-shirt," Haruto breezily admonished. He was wearing a jacket.

"Ahh, I'll get used to it," Setsuna replied just as breezily as he walked on.



The Hakone Open-Air Museum was the first of its kind in Japan; a large, lush park with views of the mountains around Hakone and loads of sculptures on display. According to the guide, being placed out in nature made the artwork present itself in numerous ways depending on the time, weather, and season.

"Wow, this guy has a pretty nice ass!"

Setsuna was having a good time near the ass of a statue of Hercules, naked with bow drawn. When it came to asses, he wasn't picky. Young, old, male, female, 2-D, 3-D, organic, or not—if they were beautiful, he loved them. The entire place was ass heaven for him.

“Hmm... A lot of nice nudes around here. Beautiful women, shedding their clothes on this wonderfully sunny day... I could use this kind of scene in *Sisterly Combat*...”

Itsuki continued to mutter to himself as he took pictures. As someone who enjoyed the fully nude form more, there were a lot of works that spoke personally to him. Even a more symbolic sculpture, not heeding the laws of reality, was enjoyable to both Setsuna and Itsuki as long as they were nude and had an ass.

Haruto, meanwhile, was not as into either of these topics as Itsuki and Setsuna. 2-D clothed girls were more his thing, so normal sculptures didn't capture his attention much. He wandered around, thinking, *Huh, Hercules had a pretty normal-sized dick, and I wish there was a sculpture of a maid giving me a panty shot*, and other nonsense. Then one of the more gigantic pieces caught his eye.

“...Wow. This looks like the last boss of a video game.”

This sculpture, called *Rupture*, featured a group of figures intertwined so they looked a bit like Neo Exdeath. For someone like Haruto without much artistic grounding, the piece was extremely stimulating, scratching an itch for the grandiose, nonsensical fantasy worlds a middle schooler might craft for himself.

Other pieces around the museum's main meadow were also large, or flashy, or beautiful, or too avant-garde to fathom, or just kind of cool for reasons none of them could put into words. Haruto was enjoying himself just as much as his companions.

As they explored the park, the path eventually brought them to the Picasso Pavilion, which (as the name suggested) was filled with the works of the European master.

“Oh, I think I've heard of Picasso!” exclaimed Setsuna.

“Well, duh,” Itsuki replied.

Inside, they didn't find *Guernica* or any of the other works that defined Pablo Picasso to the world, but it still boasted a large collection of sketches, ceramics, and more. Itsuki and Haruto browsed through the displays, not

knowing much about either art or Picasso but still going “Huh” or “Ohhh” as if they maybe understood anything they were seeing.

“This one’s called *Sausage and Egg*... Yeah...”

“That’s sure what it is...”

They both kind of squinted a bit at the ceramic piece showing a black sausage, a sunny-side up egg, and a fork on a plate. They had trouble figuring out what was so amazing about it or any of the other similar pieces showing fish, bugs, and more on plates.

“...Did Picasso make these in arts and crafts with his grandson during summer vacation?”

“Pfft...!”

Itsuki’s joke made Haruto crack up. It really did seem that way to him.

There were other head-scratchers—a tree with some kind of artwork on it, some metal bars adjusted to create a sort of chaotic pattern, some kind of abstract human face. They looked at them all, question marks floating above their heads, before Itsuki finally came out and said it.

“Hey...do you think maybe **Picasso didn’t know shit about art?**”

“That’s a pretty bold statement!” Haruto quickly blurted out—even though he had been vaguely wondering the same thing. He couldn’t understand what was so great about these crafts he made in the shed with his grandson—*not* because he lacked the capacity to appreciate them, but because Pablo Picasso wasn’t actually all that special.

“Like, I think *I* could make half this stuff.”

Haruto nodded. “You’re totally right... The world of art makes no sense to me. But what does this stuff say to a pro illustrator like Setsuna—? Uh...”

He turned around, then realized Setsuna was nowhere near him. They looked for him around the museum, only to find him a distance away, peering intently at another artwork. His attention had been taken by the museum’s cubist section—abstract paintings that take apart their subjects and express them as sort of squared-off facets.

“Hey, Setsuna?”

“.....”

“Puriketsuuu?”

Nothing Itsuki said could break Setsuna's concentration or elicit any kind of response. So Itsuki finally slapped him on the shoulder.

"...Oh, hey, sir."

"You look pretty into this painting. What do you like about it?"

"Sir," he said, as if in a fever dream, "Picasso was, like, the greatest artist ever...!"

"Uh, he was?" Itsuki vaguely asked, a little remorseful for dissing the guy a moment ago.

"His sketching and sculptures are great," Setsuna excitedly continued, "but this cubist stuff is awesome! I can't believe this stuff exists! I've finally found, like, the most incredible art style out there!"

"R-really? Well, um...great...?"

"Yeah! Really great! I'm gonna paint cubism from now on!"

"Whaaaa—?!" "Huh?!"

This shocked Itsuki and Haruto.

"Cubism... You're gonna change your art style to this?"

"Yup!"

"You can't do that!"

Puriketsu's career was mostly in illustration for light novels. He was successful at it, enjoying overwhelming popularity and skill. In a genre of art that emphasized cute characters and heart-pumping landscapes, cubism really had no place.

"Look, Setsuna, your style couldn't be more attractive. There's no need to change it up."

"Yeah, Setsuna. You have legions of fans looking forward to your stuff. I need you to keep the nerds of the world squealing with joy at the works of Master Puriketsu."

Puriketsu switching to cubism would come as a major blow to the industry. Itsuki and Haruto felt a serious need to talk him out of this blunder—but Setsuna sternly shook his head.

"But I've finally woken up to true art...! Not even you guys can stop me from feeling what's in my heart!"

"Setsuna..."

The passion in his eyes quieted the two of them. As they silently stood there, Setsuna went back to poring over the Picassos before him.

"This is...really bad, right?" Haruto asked, breaking out in a cold sweat.

“N-nah, I mean, light novel illustration and cubism are just too far apart. He can’t change his style that easily... He’ll get bored of it sooner or later and go back to being Puriketsu, I’m sure...”

He knew it was overly optimistic, but that was all Itsuki had to offer.

...This marked the birth of an artistic genius who would later be hailed in some parts as the second coming of Pablo Picasso. Pablo Purikesso, if you will.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What are your favorite brands?



If I had to pick one, Square Enix.

●●●●●, ●●●● and ●●● before the main staff left. (Yeah, I said it.)



AliceSoft.

Well, the ones I use a lot are Somi Foods, Kai Corporation, P&G, Lion, Seki Sonroku knives, and so on.



...Okamoto condoms.

Amabuki, Juyondai, Dassai, Kubota, Minogiku, Ninki-Ichi, Kamoshibito Kuheiji... So many sake brands, I can't narrow them down. Hee-hee-hee...



Um, guys, I'm pretty sure that wasn't what the interviewer meant...

Nayuta's Landscape

As the trio of men were thinking about dicks and being blown away by cubism, Gift Publishing was working at full speed on a top-secret project to get Nayuta Kani's *Landscape* series in as many media formats as possible.

About a week after she expressed interest in branching out to her editor, Yamagata, Nayuta was showing up at the office on a daily basis, poring through a massive pile of offers with Yamagata, editor in chief Satoshi Godo, and assorted higher-ups in the manga and product-development department. This was all strictly confidential, so part-timers like Miyako weren't allowed to join in.

"I'm seeing you a lot at the editorial office lately, Nayu. What are you up to?"

"Hee-hee-hee! It's a secret."

Nayuta never bothered making up excuses whenever Miyako asked her about it. And why would she? The motivation for everything she did was one hundred percent driven by her love for Itsuki, and it was that love, of course, that changed her mind after saying no to every multimedia offer that crossed her in-box.

As Itsuki put it, he wasn't going to respond to Nayuta's feelings until he deemed himself worthy. It was a difficult concept for her to grasp. Her novel, something she wrote after letting her emotions flow freely, won a prize out of nowhere and gave her a professional career. Her debut publication became a huge hit, and everything released since earned broad, dedicated support from her audience. But Nayuta's personal writing style and work ethic didn't change at all. She just wrote whatever she wanted, when she wanted, at the pace she wanted.

As a novelist, Nayuta Kani had never suffered. That was why she couldn't understand Itsuki's drive to claw his way to the top of the business.

Overseeing both a manga and anime adaptation at the same time, Itsuki looked overwhelmed with work—but in her eyes, he was radiant. And Miyako's work in the editorial office, her struggle over her love life and friendships, made her far more attractive than Nayuta herself. She wanted to shine like Itsuki and Miyako. She wanted to see what they were seeing—their landscape.

The reason she now agreed to the media launch was, to put it simply, to polish herself up.

After considerable deliberation, the first series of *Landscape* licensing would involve an animated motion picture, a live-action film, and a manga adaptation.

There were many, many people in the industry who'd gladly cancel their current jobs for a chance to be involved with a *Landscape* movie. In almost no time at all, they had the best of the best assembled—famous film directors with lots of awards under their belts, talented screenwriters involved with tons of popular anime, young actors with broad name-brand appeal. All first-class, sparkling talent. The sponsors came along just as easily, allowing the project to maintain an eye-popping budget. For the manga, they lined up an artist even more popular than Nayuta right now, one whose original works had sold in the millions.

And in the midst of all this, countless projects had their staffs and cast lists suddenly shaken up, their sponsors abruptly abandoning them, their launches delayed or slimmed down or canceled entirely.

Huge numbers of people, and huge amounts of money, were being moved around at the cost of swarms of unknown, hopeless, dreamless other projects, as this genius woman began to polish herself.

All for the sake of love.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Tell me about Nayuta Kani's *Landscape* series.



The first one was *The Silver Landscape*, which launched my career. It features a group of boys and girls, and there's lots of talking and stuff. It's set in winter, so I just sort of came up with that title. Next up was *The Golden Landscape*, and that has some different boys and girls from before, and they also chat a bunch. It's not a continual story or anything, so I adjusted the title a little instead of calling it *The Silver Landscape 2*. The third was...um, was it *Pale* or *Ashen*? Anyway, a bunch of stuff happens in that one, too. The latest one is *The Azure Landscape*, and it's got some new stuff.

.....The *Landscape* series is an ensemble epic depicting the changes and growth in the minds and relationships between boys, girls, and the adults around them. In terms of style, it picks up on the recent trend people are starting to call light literature. It's full of unexpected twists and turns, but its main attraction is the way the prose sucks the reader in—like magic, as it's often described. You could honestly say that reading lets you live the life of another person. Illustrator Mizuho's delicate art style has also earned the series praise from a broad cross section of audiences.



Oh, neat.



Miyako Shirakawa's Good-Bye Party

It was the end of September and also the final day of Miyako Shirakawa's stint working part-time at GF Bunko. After work, the team held a good-bye party for her a little past seven at a nearby restaurant—not the cheap *izakaya* the office's editors were regulars at, but a fancier place, praised for its fresh fish and voluminous sake selection. Gift Publishing's president often took famous authors and clients here when discussing work.

On hand were all eight members of GF Bunko's editorial team, along with manga artist Kaiko Mikuniyama (who happened to be in the office at the time) and Kohei Tokuyama, her editor at *Gifted* magazine.

“Shirakawa, you've given us two hard months of work. I want you to eat and drink all you want tonight, and I know you've got a great future ahead of you. Thanks for everything!”

Satoshi Godo, the yakuza-like editor in chief, was seated across from Miyako, the rest of the group wishing her well as they clinked their glasses against hers.

“Ha-ha! Thank you very much.”

Miyako blushed a bit as she drank her oolong tea, followed by a light sip of Kamoshibito Kuheiji's Betsu-atsurae, a top-class *junmai daiginjo* sake Godo poured out for her. It had a fruity flavor, bolstered by a light acidity almost like carbonation, and it felt good on her tongue. It paired well with all the appetizers brought out to the table—jellied sea bream, tofu skin, pickled octopus, jackfish tartare, and salted squid. Each one of these small dishes was expertly made, making everyone anticipate the main entrées all the more.

“Ahh... This is so good.”

“Ever the expert drinker, I see,” Godo said with a laugh.

Usually, the editors wouldn't all come out to hold a going-away party for someone who left or transferred elsewhere, much less a part-timer (and one

who had worked there for a mere two months, no less). But Miyako had gone above and beyond the call of duty, between bringing over Nayuta Kani's manuscripts and helping out with the *All About My Little Sister* anime. She was a go-getter, a stickler for details; she was never late or missing from work, she always stayed in contact, she asked questions if she didn't understand something, she was honest and apologized instead of covering up her mistakes... That level of dedication to her work was the biggest reason why everyone in the department trusted in her. These were all givens for normal grown-ups, perhaps, but a lot of people working in editorial weren't capable of it. (For example, Mr. ●●guchi, who used to work at ●●●●.) The sincerity of Miyako's performance had had a positive effect on the entire workplace.

Next to her, Kaiko turned and bowed her head, filling her sake cup.

"If it wasn't for you, Myaa, I never would've been able to continue my manga career. Thank you so, so much."

"Oh, I really didn't do anything," Miyako gently replied as she reciprocated with Kaiko's cup. "You're the one who changed your father's mind in the end. Keep up the good work, okay?"

Kaiko drank the cup down in one gulp. "Myaa, can you still model for me after you leave your job?"

"Of course. Call me anytime you need me."

She sweetly smiled, eyes shimmering a bit. "Aw, thank you, Myaa."

Godo scowled a bit, watching this unfold. "All that trust the writers and artists give her," he mused. "I'm gonna hate losing her so much."

"Huh? What was that?"

"Oh, have you decided on what you'll do after you graduate, Shirakawa?"

"No, not yet... I need to start looking soon, though. I know I need to think about it..."

"Then join us," he bluntly offered.

"You... The editorial team?"

"Yeah. We've hired on people from the part-time staff before. I could arrange that with HR."

"Oh, that'd be nice," one of the other editors chimed in.

"Yeah. Like, really, Miyako's way more useful than a lot of our full-time hires."

"Me, an editor...?"

Miyako wasn't sure how to take this unexpected offer. Part-time work at GF Bunko was fulfilling to her. Having an insider's view of Itsuki and Nayuta's world gave her a thrill. Maybe, she had thought before, she was suited for that kind of job. But what she was suited for wasn't necessarily what she wanted to become. Did she really *want* to be an editor?

As she pondered this, Godo's terrifying face softened into an ever-so-slight smile. "Well, no need to answer me right now."

"Oh right." Miyako sighed in relief. "Yeah, if you could let me think about it..."

"Shirakawa," Yamagata butted in from the side. "We're gonna need more temp helpers for the awards ceremony and Comiket and stuff. Could you come over to pitch in on that?"

"Oh, sure! I'd love to."

The edges of Godo's ponderous lips curled upward a bit. "Mmm. Feel free to think about it as you work."

"I'll contact you about that later," Yamagata told her as she began eating. It seemed that Miyako wasn't cutting off all ties to GF Bunko just yet.

"Weh-heh-heh! That's go great, Myaaaa!"

Kaiko suddenly squeezed her tight in a side hug. Her face was already red, her eyes having trouble focusing.

"Kaiko, are you drunk...?"

"I am soooo not dwunk!"

"You pretty clearly are..."

"Hee-hee-hee! Myaaaa, what kinda panties ya got on right nowww?"

"What are you, some kind of middle-aged perv?!"

When Miyako managed to escape her grasp, Kaiko simply turned her attention to Godo instead.

"Editorrrr in chief, sir, what kinda undies ya got on right nowww?"

"...I've been questioned by the police more times than I can count, but never in my life have I been asked about my underwear." Godo looked a little flustered, although his wicked grin indicated he was having a good time despite himself. "Well, you asked, and I'll answer...! I'm wearing a pair of golden boxer briefs...!"

It was not a revelation that would do any good for anyone. It certainly didn't for Miyako. Her face tensed up.

Kaiko, on the other hand, was overjoyed.

“Ee-hee-hee-hee! Thazzz my editorrr in chief! You gotta be super-tough and confident, a real man’s man, to wear that kinda thing!”

“Heh-heh-heh... Well, maybe so!”

Kaiko repeated the question to the other assembled editors.

“Yamagata, I saw yers in the bathroom just nowww... Mr. Toki, what about youuu?”

“Red boxer briefs, ma’am!!” came the drunken reply.

“Ooooooh, sexyyy! What about you over therre?”

“Oh, uh, just a plain pair of boxers...”

“Hoo-hoo-hoo! Your undies reflect everything about you as a person, y’knowww. You’re like a plain pair of boxers! What about you?”

“White briefs!”

“Ahh, the symbol of a pure, unblemished soul... You must have a beautiful heart inside of youuu!”



“Mikuniyama, I got a pair of leopard-print underwear on!”

“I got a dragon pattern on mine!”

And then it happened. One of the editors just had to remove his trousers to show them off. The rest quickly followed suit.

“Hyah-ha-ha!” Godo bellowed, not lifting a finger to stop them. “Okay, do it! Let’s see those undies you’re so damn proud of!”

“Ughhh...”

Yamagata and Miyako gave each other pained looks. But there was no stopping the festivities now. It was unfolding just like it always did at that cheap *izakaya*. It would later result in Gift Publishing employees (and Kaiko) being banned from the restaurant and Godo receiving an earful from the company president, but that’s another story.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What's your annual salary?



This question comes up relatively often, but proceed with caution, because it's kind of rude to ask out of nowhere. My work's getting reprinted a lot with the anime release, so it's, uh, at least a few times the average for my age.



...I get about half Haruto's wage. I've published more volumes than him, but...



A lot.

I don't know the yearly figure, but illustrating light novels doesn't make me *that* much. Artwork for mobile games from big companies earns me a lot more.



I'm still new with no collected manga volumes published, so the figure's pretty low this year. I hope you'll buy *All About*, Vol. 1, when it comes out.



About two-thirds what *certain* publishers give you.



I'm not at ten million yet.

Around the same as a salaryman my age.



About the going rate for a tax accountant. I could boost that if I did more consulting work for firms, but I prefer ~~tormenting~~ working and chatting with creative types, so...

Chronica Chronicle (Part 4)

One Sunday afternoon in early October, Itsuki, Nayuta, Miyako, Haruto, and Chihiro came together in Itsuki's apartment.

It was the first time Miyako had stopped by since Itsuki turned her down. They had seen each other whenever Itsuki went to the office for anime script meetings, but all they did was exchange some quick hellos. They had both told Nayuta and Haruto that they'd work to keep the friendship going, but it was hard to act all normal with someone you had just told to butt out of your life a little.

Haruto had seen her a couple times at the office as well, but since receiving Miyako's reply, he hadn't been able to talk to her very much. Itsuki, for his part, wanted to stay friends with Miyako, but when they were face-to-face, he just felt awkward. He was trying to make an effort to keep it going, like Chihiro had advised, but given his lack of communication skills, saying hi and acting as if everything was normal was about the best he could do. Along those lines, Haruto acted a lot like Itsuki around Miyako.

Now that September was past and Miyako's part-time gig had ended, they wouldn't even have the chance to run into each other at the office. The longer they went without seeing her, the higher the hurdles to bringing things back to normal would be. She could just drift away, and in time, she'd go from being a friend to being just another person. None of the three people involved wanted that—so they'd have to reach out and meet each other, and as quickly as possible. Not just to say hello, but to sit down, have some booze, and screw around a little.

The problem was that Itsuki's circle of friends rarely planned in advance to meet up on any particular day, at any particular time for drinks and gaming. People would just end up at his place at the same time, and before long, they'd be busting out food and games. Advance plans made it all seem

kind of unnatural by comparison.

They all needed a reason to meet. A natural one that wouldn't get everyone worked up. And all three of their minds arrived at the same conclusion.

An RPG campaign!

A game like that would force them to play over an extended time period, each session ending in a cliff-hanger. It was the perfect thing to structure a meetup around, and playing a character also separated the proceedings from real life enough that they could deal with each other like they had before the rejections. Maybe.

Wanna pick up where we left off with the RPG soon?

You mentioned you were preparing a few things for the RPG last month, but how's that going? I'm looking forward to it.

Itsuki and Miyako happened to send those messages to Haruto on the same day—the exact same day he finished up his prep work for the next session. All three were finally on the same page. It was time to role-play.

GM (Haruto): Well, after a long hiatus, it's about time to kick off the fourth session of our campaign.

Players: Can't wait to start!

GM: This will be our first session in three months, so how about we recap what happened last time?

Tsukiko (Itsuki): Heh. Sure. I barely even remember it now.

Sen (Chihiro): Come on, Bro... I mean, Sis...

GM: Okay, so the four Midfield sisters were fighting another band of adventurers when a strong, powerful waitress named Nina rescued you. You started to train with her, but as a former knight from the Empire of Horn River, she has assassins after her. You managed to defeat them, but after saving Nina from their boss's blade, Tsukiko passed away.

“Oh right, I died!”

“I forgot, too,” Miyako said, a little distressed.

One major goal for this session was to get the two of them casually talking, in order to repair their relationship. But Tsukiko Midfield, played by Itsuki, was dead. There wasn’t much he could talk about.

“What happens to players if they die in the RPG?” Nayuta asked Haruto.

“That depends on the scenario and the game system. Sometimes, you can cast magic or pay someone to revive you, like in *Dragon Quest*. Sometimes, that character’s out of the game for good until it ends, and you have to start playing with a new character.”

“A new one?” Chihiro said.

“Right. For example, maybe the character’s twin brother with identical stats comes running in, or the exact same character pops out of a treasure chest with no explanation and rejoins your party.”

“Oh! I see! That could work! So can you put a reincarnated Tsukiko in a chest somewhere for me, Haruto?”

“...You want a professional author like me to do something *that* hackneyed?” Haruto looked sincerely pained by the request. “I’ve thought about how to reintroduce you to the game, so just hang tight for a while, okay?”

GM: Deathmask, shocked by Tsukiko’s death, left the party and wandered off somewhere by herself. Meanwhile, Miyako, Sen, and Nina headed for the Elcadia Mountains. According to Nina, there’s a village populated by the Narow tribe that’s home to someone with the power to raise the dead. Will Miyako and her band manage to carry out the reincarnation?

Miyako (Miyako): So Deathmask is really on her own?

GM: Well, she ran off somewhere. It would only make sense.

Deathmask (Nayuta): It would only make sense. Hee-hee-hee...

Sen: I’m worried about what she might be plotting... But anyway, we’re starting out with Miyako, Nina, and me in a party of three?

GM: That’s right. Ready to begin the new story?

The Elcadia Mountains were a line of steep peaks spread across the northern region of the land of Chronica, home to countless powerful monsters evolved to survive in its harsh environment. It was hard going for a band of

three women, but Nina the NPC was ridiculously strong, so they made it. Chihiro also had some skills to make food from monster meat and local plants, so keeping fed was never an issue.

However, following an ambush by an Ashura Grizzly (a terrifying magical six-armed bear), Nina was gravely wounded. Deathmask, their healing monk, wasn't around, so there was no way to heal her with magic. Thus, Miyako and Sen were forced to protect the wounded Nina and the quite-dead Tsukiko as they proceeded up the mountain trail. Before long, their MP and healing items were exhausted, their bodies covered in wounds...

GM: Making it to the end of the trail, you find a vast clearing, a public square lined with man-made structures. This appears to be Betapolis, home of the Narow tribe.

Sen: Whew, we finally made it...

Miyako: If we had one more enemy encounter, we would've been toast...

Sen: I don't think we could've fled without your Lightning, Miyako.

Miyako: Yeah. Good thing I learned that.

GM: So you're in the village. What do you want to do now?

Sen: Before we search for this guy who can revive people, we need to heal Nina's wounds. Can you tell us a little more about the village?

GM: Okay. Um, there aren't many buildings in this village, but what structures you do see are very modern, with neat rows of low concrete buildings facing asphalt roads. It almost feels like you've stumbled into modern-day Japan. The temperature is low this high up, but the people walking around are dressed lightly. They look like they're from medieval Europe, but their clothing uses advanced, durable fabric like nothing they would've had in the Middle Ages. The people come in all shapes and sizes—some white, some dark; some elves, some beastmen, some lizardmen, goblins, even skeletons. You also see signs on the buildings written in kanji, reading TOOL SHOP, WEAPON SHOP, INN, and so on.

Miyako: Huh? Is this really a fantasy realm?

Sen: What is the Narow tribe anyway?

GM: I'll have you roll for Wisdom first.

Miyako: Four dice... , , ,  for 20.

GM: Pretty high... In that case, you know a certain amount about them. The Narow tribe is not a particular species or ethnicity, but people originally from other worlds who were reincarnated into this one. They have assorted special abilities, known as cheats, which give many of them superhuman magical or physical force, and they boast intelligence and technology well beyond the general level of the world. They appeared in this world through the Gate that exists in the Elcadia Mountains, and so they've built a village here. Some serve in other nations' governments or work as adventurers, but all are pretty major players in this world.

“...So they're a group of *isekai* protagonists?”

Itsuki chuckled.

“This village is *bad* news.”

By *isekai*, Itsuki was referring to a genre that had achieved great popularity on Shōsetsuka ni Narō (syosetu.com), a Japanese-language site where users post their own original novels. Basically, *isekai* novels star a hero who dies in the modern era, only to be reborn in another world while retaining their memories from the old one. Sometimes they were literally born as babies, sometimes their consciousness was inserted into someone already living there, and sometimes they were made into monsters, animals, even swords or vending machines or other inanimate objects—lots of different patterns existed.

Many heroes were reincarnated with unique skills or super-upgraded specs beyond anything known to the world they were in, but quite a few stories starred people with no special abilities at all, relying on their general knowledge of the modern world and specializing in things like cooking or medicine to survive. The hero's skills, and what they did with them in the new world, varied widely from story to story, so novels that fell under the *isekai* genre could have a vast amount of variety.

Sen: For now, let's find someone who can help Nina, like a doctor or a magic healer.

Miyako: Oh right!

Sen and Miyako tracked down a treatment center, quickly trundling Nina

inside. Her wounds were serious enough that potions and magic didn't work, but thanks to the nearly divine skills of a doctor who looked a lot like the actor Takao Osawa (who played Jin in the historical medical drama of the same name), Nina was miraculously saved.

"Um, Prince Manwhore, I don't think Dr. Jin was the star of an *isekai* novel."

"...I don't know what you mean," Haruto deadpanned. "This is just a super-talented doctor who happens to look a lot like Takao Osawa."

Miyako: Um, do you happen to have the ability to revive people?

GM: "Sadly, my medical techniques are not magical in nature, so I cannot raise the dead. Only the leader of our village can do that."

Sen: Where is your leader?

Having learned his location, Sen and Miyako hurriedly headed to his manor. The two were greeted by a skeleton wearing an ornate robe, festooned with jewels imbued with untold amounts of magical power. His sheer force of presence far outclassed any normal skeleton.

"Um," Sen asked, "are you the leader of this village?"

Despite the skeleton's lack of vocal cords, he opened his mouth. "Yes," he intoned in a low voice. "I have overcome the bonds of death. You could say I'm something of an Overlord."

Haruto's voice was an almost perfect imitation of a certain someone, but that's neither here nor there. Sen and Miyako quickly asked the person who was something of an Overlord to revive Tsukiko for them.

GM: "You've made it through an impossibly dangerous mountain range to get here... As a token of my respect for your powers and bravery, I will grant you access to my secret revival technique."

Sen: Thanks very much!

GM: "But that could come at great danger."

Miyako: Danger?

GM: "To revive the dead, you must travel to the land of the dead yourself and bring the victim's soul back. It is a perilous place, infested with all kinds of undead creatures. Fail, and you will join them. Are you brave enough to

continue?”

Miyako: Of course!

GM: “Very well. Then let me open the gate to this land at once.”

Sen: Oh, one minute.

GM: “Hmm?”

Sen: *Can we bring items into the land of the dead?*

GM:Let’s say that you can. You can’t use your equipment or weapons otherwise.

Sen: Okay, then give me a little bit to prepare.

GM: “All right... You had best prepare well, young lady.”

Miyako: My little sister’s way too talented...

Sen, ever the genius little sister, sold off all the monster claws and pelts and such she’d picked up from the mountain monsters, then used the proceeds to buy recovery items and the mithril pieces that Miyako’s skill Thor’s Bullet required.

In addition, Sen also negotiated with the doctor who looked a lot like Takao Osawa, having him whip up some medicine and provide some of the antibiotic known as penicillin, which he had successfully isolated in this world. Sen’s Jaldabaoth unique skill destroyed all potions and other magic-infused items, but this didn’t affect the medicine and other non-magic stuff she obtained. They may not have been as instantly effective as magic, but having a way to heal her party greatly improved their survival odds.

After preparing as best they could, Sen and Miyako spent a night at the inn to heal their HP and MP, then finally went back to the Overlord guy.

“Ah, you’ve returned. You have acted wisely, but shouldn’t you be more emotional about your mission right now? Your sister’s life is at stake.”

“I can’t afford to mess this up,” Sen declared to the skeleton, who had nearly died of boredom due to the long wait.

“...Heh. Very well. In that case, it’s time to set off for the land of the dead.”

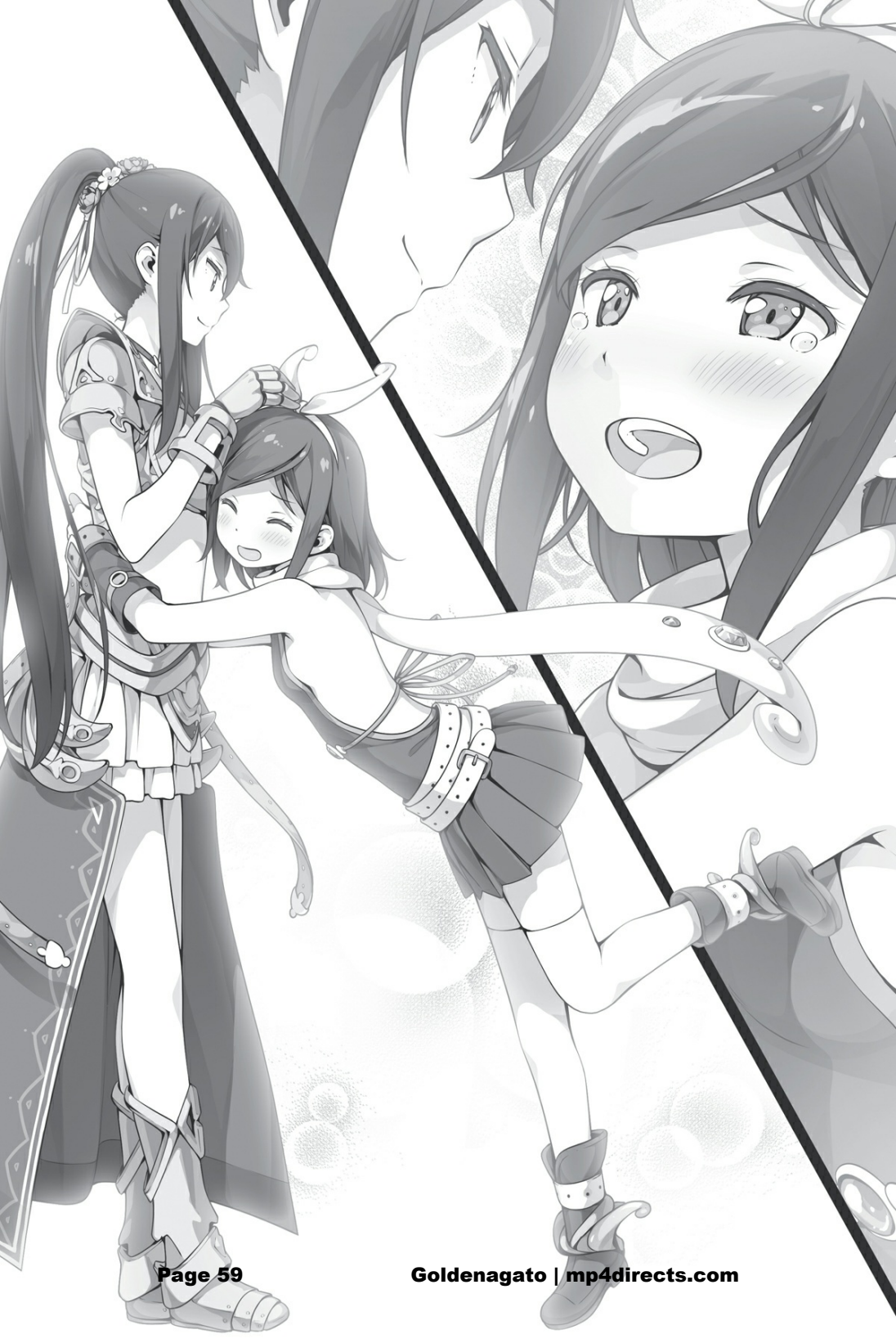
The Overlord guy waved his staff, and then a magical circle floated up from Sen’s and Miyako’s feet, enveloping them in an eerie black smoke and knocking them unconscious.

“Nngh...”

“Where are we...?”

When they awoke, Miyako and Sen were surrounded by broad, desolate, rocky terrain. A creepy purplish-red fog covered the region, the sky shrouded in a deep darkness. This was the land of the dead.

Staring blankly at their surroundings, the duo heard a familiar voice.



“Sen! Miyako!”

There they found a swordswoman with long black hair and a gallant-looking face—Tsukiko Midfield.

“My... My sister!”

Overcome with emotion, Sen embraced Tsukiko, who gently patted Sen’s head in return.

“Hee-hee-hee! Sen is so spoiled,” Nayuta said, laughing as she picked on her a little.

Chihiro’s face reddened. “What’s the big deal?” he muttered. “It’s just a game; what’s wrong with that...?”

Tsukiko: I haven’t seen you in a while. I never thought I’d see you again.

Miyako: It was really hard to reach you! You create so much work for us, Sis! Come on, let’s get you out of here and back alive.

Sen: Right. But how do we get out?

GM: Okay, Tsukiko, let’s do a Wisdom check. Try to hit... Let’s call it 12.

Tsukiko: Right, I have 9 Wisdom, so two dice... Wait, I need to roll two natural sixes?

GM: No, as a denizen of the land of the dead, you’ve got some base knowledge about this place, so I’m adding 4 points to your roll.

Tsukiko: Oh, I can achieve that, maybe... Um...   for 8... Just barely!

GM: Okay, Tsukiko knows how to get back... A little ways ahead, there’s a cave that connects to the living world. Make it through, and you’ll be back where you were.

Sen: A cave in the land of the dead? Something tells me that’s really dangerous.

Tsukiko: Don’t worry. I swear I’ll keep my sister safe.

Sen: Um... Thanks, Sis.

Miyako: Whoa! What about me? *I’m* a sister, too!

Tsukiko: You’re a *big* sis, not a little one. Figure something out yourself.

Miyako: Hey!

Tsukiko: Heh. I’m kidding. I’ll protect any kind of sister!

So the reunited trio set off into the cave. They quickly found a broad path inside, the walls emitting a pale light that made the environs fairly visible.





However, they could hear a continual cycle of groans and screams from afar, filling them with fear.

They spent nearly an hour navigating this winding path.

GM: Okay, time for an Intuition check for all three of you.

Tsukiko: Oh great, now what...? I got , ,  for 11.

Miyako: , ,  for 8.

Sen: I have four dice, so... , , ,  for 17.

GM: Damn! That's a crit. Well, so be it... Sen notices something unusual. Looking closely at the wall up ahead, she can see something wriggling on it. Soon, the three of you realize that humanoid things, several of them, are crawling out from inside the wall. Their flesh is burned, their bones visible in spots. They're clearly dead, but their eyes burn with life, guttural groans coming from their mouths. Each is armed, and they move briskly, like well-trained warriors.

Miyako: Are they...hostile?

GM: Pretty hostile, yeah! Since Sen noticed them, you avoided being pincer attacked from the sides, but the only way through here is to defeat them. Time for battle.

Tsukiko: Bring it on, you zombie freaks!




There were nine monsters in all—triple the players' party, but none were nearly as powerful as the creatures encountered in the Elcadia Mountains.

"I can defend against all your attacks!"

As Tsukiko served as a tank to attract the foes' attention:

"Now!"

"Energy Bolt!"

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J |
|----|---|---------------------|---|---|---------------------|---------------------|---|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | Undead 6 (club) | | Undead 7 (bow) | Undead 8 (sword) | Undead 9 (bow) | | Undead 10 (club) |
| 4 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | | Undead 4 (spear) | | | Undead 1 (sword) | Undead 2 (sword) | Undead 3 (club) | | Undead 5 (spear) | |
| 6 | | | |  | | | | | | |
| 7 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8 | | | | | Tsukiko | | | | | |
| 9 |  | | | Sen | | Miyako |  | | | |
| 10 | | | | | | | | | | |

Sen fired poison-tipped arrows, venting her anger after having to flee from the magical creatures on the mountain, while Miyako cast attack magic of her own. They took out the undead, one after another.

Miyako: Wow, fighting is so much easier with a tank!

Sen: Here, Sis, use this medicine.

Tsukiko: Ah, thanks.

Miyako: Okay, how about we use a finisher skill to take out the last one? I want to use my railgun!

GM: It's not a railgun; it's Thor's Bullet. Remember?

Miyako: Okay, for accuracy... ,  plus 10 for 17.

GM: That's a hit. Roll for damage.

Miyako: That goes for... , , , ,  plus 34 for 58.

GM: That, plus a 20-point bonus for rolling two sixes... 78 damage. That's...quite literally overkill.

Sen: Great job, Miyako!

Miyako: Thanks for buying me all that mithril.

GM: Okay, so the remaining undead is burned to cinders by the overwhelming electric charge and vanishes. Congrats, you win!

The party was attacked by several other undead hordes, but Sen's quick-wittedness kept them well-stocked on the item front, letting them fight without facing serious danger.

"...I thought I balanced this to be on the harder side," Haruto said, grinning at how smoothly it was going.

"Heh. That's my little brother... I mean, *sister* for ya!"

"Eh-heh..." Chihiro bashfully smiled.

Before long, the group reached the exit to the living world. All they had to do was proceed through the gate, bathe in the light, and Tsukiko would be revived. The three looked at one another, nodded, and held hands as they walked through. In the next moment, they were enveloped in a blinding light, and...

GM: When you open your eyes, you're at the Overlord guy's mansion. "Ah,

you appear to have made it back.”

Tsukiko: Oh, you’re the fellow who’s something of an Overlord? You have my thanks. Now I can be with my sisters again.

GM: “No need to thank me. While you were in the land of the dead, some rather...interesting things happened. Hee-hee-hee...”

The suppressed laughter was rather ominous, but the party nonetheless decided to visit the treatment center to see Nina. But Nina wasn’t there. According to the doctor who looked a lot like Takao Osawa, she had set off to track down her little sister. Her life may have been saved, but she was in no condition to be moving around again...

Then the doctor revealed another bombshell. A Narow mercenary visiting home said that Nina’s little sister, Tina, was spotted...about a year ago. Although Miyako and her sisters only spent a few hours in the land of the dead, over three years had passed in the real world.

Sen: Now what? Should we find Nina?

Tsukiko: No, I’m more worried about Deathmask. We gotta track her down now.

Nayuta beamed and hugged Itsuki.

“I’m so happy you’re thinking about me!”

He fought her off, face turning red. “N-no! I’m worried about Deathmask! Not the girl playing her!”

“But, Nayu... I mean, Deathmask, what are you doing?”

Nayuta gave Miyako’s question a mischievous smile.

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

Staying in the Narow tribe’s village wouldn’t uncover any new clues to Deathmask, so the trio decided to descend the mountain. The way up had been tough going, but the Overlord guy’s magic whisked them straight to sea level in a flash.

The group then spent the night at a nearby inn, where they caught up on the past three years.

“One year ago, the principality of Lightning suddenly declared war on the

Empire of Horn River. They conquered the empire's cities one by one, rapidly expanding their territory."

"Lightning...?!"

This came as a shock. The principality of Lightning was a vassal of Horn River awarded full autonomy, and their Lightning Army was lauded as the most powerful in the land. They were not cooperative with the empire's rapid invasion, often refusing to participate in their joint operations with other labels. Armies. Whatever.

The other nations, struggling in the face of imperial pressure, had begun to act in tandem with Lightning, setting off skirmishes across the continent... and in the center of all this was a single young girl who appeared in the principality three years ago. With her powers of persuasion and penchant for pornographic activity, she had cajoled most of Lightning's ministers into spurring the nation and its military to war, all but controlling them from the shadows. The principality was de facto under the control of a young trickster—by the name of Deathmask Midfield.

Miyako: Deathmask, what are you doing?!

Deathmask: "I Maxed Out My Charisma to Take Over the World"—hee-hee! Sounds like an *isekai* title.

GM: ...To tell the truth, Deathmask and I engaged in a quick private session over Skype yesterday, and this is how it turned out. I set the hurdles pretty high for her, but she kept rolling criticals on me...

Tsukiko: So you've taken over Denge—um, Lightning? That's crazy.

Sen: That's why she kept boosting her Charisma when she leveled up, I guess.

"This young girl turned to the dark side after her sister was killed, only to turn into the demon lord who destroys the world... Doesn't that excite you, Itsuki?"

"Heh..." Itsuki regretfully nodded at the beaming Nayuta. "Yeah. It's a good twist, I have to say."

GM: And that wraps up the story for this session! What will the sisters do when Deathmask has transformed so much in the past three years?!

Following a quick level-up round, the session drew to a close. Nayuta might've stolen the show at the end, but during most of the story, Itsuki, Miyako, and Haruto were chatting away like they always did.

Later, the five sat at Itsuki's table—no awkwardness at all—as they talked over what happened and what was waiting ahead in the campaign. The secret mission Itsuki, Miyako, and Haruto each had in mind had been carried out well enough, they thought.

“Oh, right, Itsuki!”

After they finished eating, Nayuta spoke up near the front door.

“My books are getting turned into an anime, a live-action film, and a manga, so I think I'm gonna be busy for a little while.”

“Wha—?!”

Itsuki was speechless, and so were Miyako, Haruto, and Chihiro, for that matter. Everybody in the room (except Nayuta herself) knew how much of a bombshell Nayuta Kani's work getting adapted into other formats was.

“I may not get to show up here as often, but don't start cheating on me with Myaa!” she admonished Itsuki with a frown.

“Um, okay,” came the languid response. And with that, Nayuta Kani—the ultimate trickster, making waves in the game world before triggering her *real* final weapon into real life afterward—headed home.

Tsukiko Midfield

PLAYER

Itsuki Hashima

AGE

17

GENDER ♀

External characteristics

A fetching, gallant young woman with long black hair.

Background

Second oldest in a group of four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Googling herself

Likes

Shrimp, crabs, etc.

Dislikes

Cut for length.

Parameters

LV: **5** / Max HP: **51** / Max MP: **30** / Movement: 3 / Strength: **18 (4d)**

Spirit: **12 (3d)** / Magic: **15 (3d)** / Agility: **18 (4d)** / Dexterity: **14 (3d)**

Luck: **14 (3d)** / Wisdom: 9 (2d) / Charisma: **13 (3d)** / Intuition: **15 (3d)**

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 70 / Bludgeoning: 80 / Piercing: 80 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: **50**

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Flowing Slash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +8.
2d+**15** cutting damage on a single target.

Horizontal Stab: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +7.
2d+**15** piercing damage on a single target.

Shield Bash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +6.
1d+**12** bludgeoning damage on a single target. Pushes target back 1 square.

Protect: Consumes 0 MP. Takes all damage dealt to **characters within two squares.**

Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy defined as Charisma +10.

Breath Shield: Consumes 5 MP. Automatically succeeds. Doubles heat, cold, and lightning resistance for 1 turn.

Unique skill

Phantom Smith: : Range 10. Accuracy defined as Spirit +5. Can copy any weapon she has seen at least once in the game and perform that weapon's intrinsic actions. The copied weapon disappears after the action is complete. Consumes MP depending on the weapon copied.

Currently copiable weapons: Longsword, Knife, Short Bow, Wood Mace, Club, Orcish Ax, Roper Tentacle, Dragon Lance, Claymore, Flame Staff, Morning Star, Steel Sword, Throwing Knife, **Staff of A●nz Ooal G●wn, Zombie Stomach Acid**



Sen Midfield

PLAYER

Chihiro Hashima

AGE

16

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Kind of girlish? She has a ribbon on.

Background

Second youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Cooking, sports

Likes

Cute things

Dislikes

Liars

Parameters

LV: **5** / Max HP: **33** / Max MP: **27** / Movement: 4 / Strength: **12 (3d)**

Spirit: **12 (3d)** / Magic: 6 (2d) / Agility: **25 (5d)** / Dexterity: **21 (4d)**

Luck: **20 (4d)** / Wisdom: **13 (3d)** / Charisma: 8 (2d) / Intuition: **24 (5d)**

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 80 / Leg Bind: 80

Actions

Arrow: Range 5. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +5. 1d+16 piercing damage on a single target. May consume a corresponding potion to add status ailments to the strike.

Knife: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +10. 1d+18 cutting/piercing damage on a single target. May consume a corresponding potion to add status ailments to the strike.

Unlock: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5. Opens the locks on doors and treasure chests.

Detect Trap: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Intuition +5. Discovers traps before they are set off.

Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy defined as Charisma +10.

Cooking: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5.
Cooks any food items in inventory. Compounding:
Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5.
Combines ingredient items to create potions.

Unique skill:

Jaldabaath: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3. Cancels all magic touched by her hand, whether attack or healing types. Automatically destroys any magical items touched.

Inventory

Penicillin 1, Holy Water 3, Sleep 4, Fire 2, Potions 2

Miyako Midfield

PLAYER

Miyako
Shirakawa

AGE

20

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Kind of like Mikoto Misaka

Background

Eldest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Shopping

Likes

People who try really hard

Dislikes

People who make fun of them for it

Parameters

LV: **5** / Max HP: **28** / Max MP: **50** / Movement: 2 / Strength: 5 (1d)

Spirit: **14** (3d) / Magic: **26** (5d) / Agility: **12** (3d) / Dexterity: 7 (2d)

Luck: **13** (3d) / Wisdom: **24** (5d) / Charisma: **15** (3d) / Intuition: **13** (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 80 / Cold: 80

Electrocution: 50 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 80 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Staff Strike: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. 1d+**6** bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Fireball: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+**13** heat damage to enemies within range.

Ice Needle: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+**18** cold/piercing damage to enemies within range.

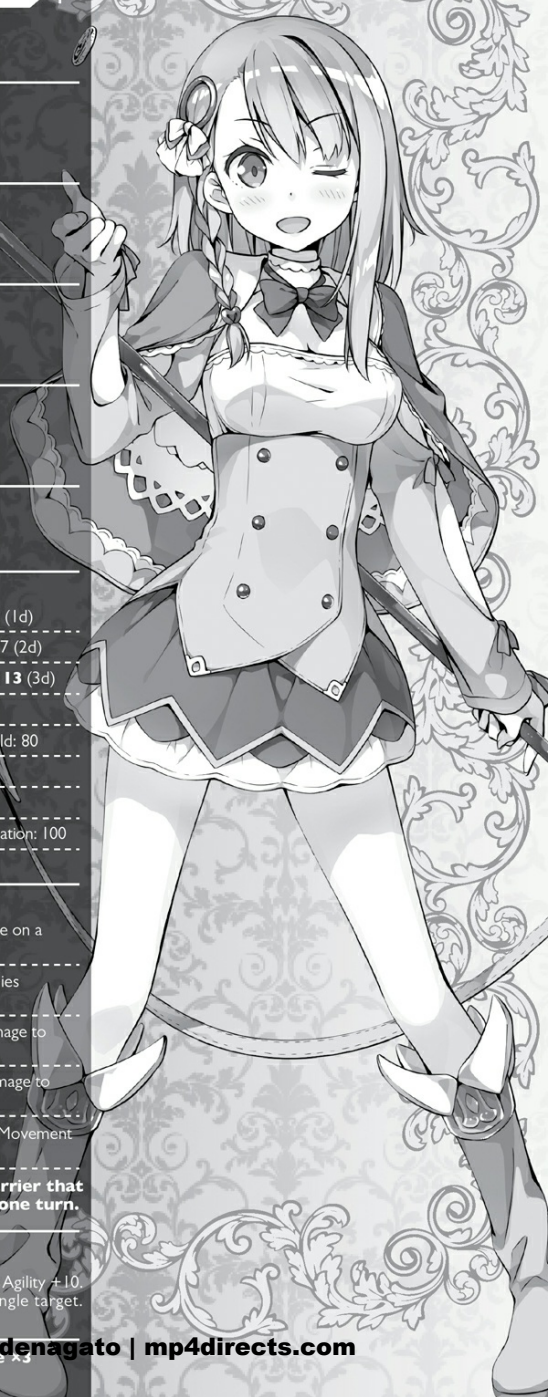
Energy Bolt: Range 3. Consumes 4 MP. 3d+**13** electrocution damage to enemies within range.

Light Wing: Range 1. Consumes 3 MP. Boosts single character's Movement by +2 for 3 turns. Not stackable.

Insulation: : Range 2. Consumes 5 MP. Creates a barrier that neutralizes lightning attacks on a single target for one turn.

Unique skill

Thor's Bullet: Range 10. Consumes 15 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +10. 5d+**37** piercing/bludgeoning/electrocution damage on a single target. Consumes 1 mithril piece.



Deathmask Midfield

PLAYER

Nayuta Kan!

AGE

10

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Silver-haired Loli.

Background

Youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Having sex with big sis Tsukiko

Likes

Sex

Dislikes

Those other guys

Parameters

LV: **5** / Max HP: **35** / Max MP: **36** / Movement: 3 / Strength: **18 (4d)**

Spirit: **21** / Magic: **13 (3d)** / Agility: 9 (2d) / Dexterity: **12 (3d)**

Luck: **14 (3d)** / Wisdom: **16 (3d)** / Charisma: **30 (6d)** / Intuition: **16 (3d)**

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 80 / Dark: 80

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 80 / Sleep: 80 / Confusion: 80 / Paralysis: 80 / Petrification: 80

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Mace: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3.
2d+**11** bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Heal: Range 3. Consumes 2 MP. Automatically succeeds.
Heals 1d+**17** HP on a single target.

Cure Poison: Range 2. Consumes 2 MP. Success defined as Spirit +5.
Eliminates poison effects on a single target.

Holy Light: Range 3. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+**13** holy damage on a single target.

Barrier: Range 2. Consumes 4 MP. Covers a single character in a barrier that absorbs up to **18** damage. The barrier's resistances are 100 for all stats.

Unlimited Media Works: Can use all magic in this world without consuming MP.

Unique skill:

Lilim's Kiss: Range 1. Consumes all MP and makes character skip the next turn. Automatically succeeds if target allows it; if not, accuracy defined as Dexterity +0. Strengthens the target via membrane-based contact. For the next 3 turns, all parameters on the target except HP, MP, and movement are boosted $\times 1.3$, and all resistances are doubled. Target can use 1 extra die while in effect.

Inventory

Lightning Staff, Angelic Robes, Goldenagator, Holy Dagger, Holy Coin

The Casting Audition

Mid-October had rolled around, and on this day, in a studio in Shinjuku, auditions were being held to determine the cast for the *All About My Little Sister* anime.

For this particular session, they would pick voices for protagonist Kazuma Akatsuki; main heroine Ichika Akatsuki; the hero's friend and fellow protagonist, Shingo Onizaki; and his sister, Yukiko Onizaki. This comprised the main cast. For the side characters, they'd hold auditions based on a demo tape instead of having the talent show up in person, or have the director, audio director, and Itsuki make requests. Itsuki was there now, standing nervously in front of the studio alongside his editor, Kenjiro Toki.

It went without saying that casting choices were extremely vital in breathing life into the characters. Itsuki had been asked in advance how he thought each character would talk; in response, he'd provided a few names or characters from other anime that he liked, and as he understood it, those actors would get priority in this audition. Otherwise, however, he had no idea who would show up until just before the audition began.

Upon entering the studio, he found a door with a sign reading TELEVISION ANIMATION—*ALL ABOUT MY LITTLE SISTER*—CAST AUDITION on it. Beyond it was a control room with all the audio recording equipment you could think of, plus a recording room complete with microphones, separated by soundproof glass. They filed into the control room, where director Munenori Tarui, producer Tsutomu Oshima, production assistant Kakeru Yamada, and a few other staffers were waiting for them.

“Good morning,” Itsuki ventured.

“Good morning!” they echoed back. (It was ten in the morning, so this was expected, but it was apparently a habit in the anime business to greet one another with “good morning” no matter what time of day or night.)

“Mr. Hashima,” Tarui said as he got up off the couch, “it’s gonna be a busy day.”

“Yeah, uh, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Hang in there,” he frankly replied. “It’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

They had been seeing each other at the weekly script meetings for a while now, so Itsuki knew him well enough.

“Okay, here’s a list of the people we’re auditioning today.”

The director picked up a stack of papers from the table and handed it to Itsuki. It was pretty thick. The first few pages contained a table showing times and voice-actor names—a schedule, no doubt. The audition was taking place over two days (today and tomorrow), and there were around fifty names scheduled for today.

The next few pages began with a character name at the top, followed by a list of actor names, about thirty for each one. Each name had the actor’s talent agency listed next to it. Then came the rest of the stack, which had material for every actor listed—ID photo, age, birthplace, special abilities, and previous voices or roles (if any). Thumbing through them, he spotted a few pretty big names auditioning, people that even Itsuki knew, despite not keeping close tabs on the voice-acting scene.

“Wow, so ●●●● is auditioning for Ichika?! And there’s ●●● and ●●●●, too... Whoa, didn’t this guy play ●●●?! This is incredible!”

The director smiled at Itsuki’s overjoyed reaction. “Starting to get fired up?”

“Yes!” he replied, smiling broadly.

Tarui answered this with an oddly expectant sort of look before whispering, “Well, hopefully you can keep that excitement going.”

Then the man operating the fancy-looking audio board with all the switches on it stood up and faced Itsuki. “Mind if I say hello?”

He looked fortyish, thin with long hair, and attractive in a black jacket. Itsuki was getting musician vibes from him.

“Good to meet you,” he began flatly. “My name’s Norikura, and I’m handling audio direction for this anime.”

His business card identified him as TAKURO NORIKURA—AUDIO DIRECTION/RECORDING, to be exact.

Itsuki handed him his own. “I’m Hashima, the creator. Nice to meet you.”

The next to greet him was a moody-looking man in his midforties with a medium build, black-framed glasses, and hair perfectly parted to one side.

“My name’s Asakura, and I’m the casting manager. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here. Um, I’m sorry, but what’s a casting manager do, exactly?”

“My job is to work out scheduling all the cast, negotiating with their agencies, and basically keeping everything cast-related running smoothly.”

MASAKI ASAKURA—SALES DEPT. #1, WANOUCI AGENCY, read his card. Itsuki accepted it, then said hello to a few more people—the audio staff, some people from the TV production department, and so on. After another fifteen minutes of chatting with the director and Toki, interspersed with some leafing through the audition materials, Norikura spoke up.

“Okay, it’s just about time. Ready to start?”

Asakura stepped outside the control room. After a few moments, a young woman appeared at the entrance.

“I’m Mika Ichinose from Nagara Productions. Good to meet you.”

Itsuki didn’t know the name, but he thought her voice carried well. She looked fairly beautiful, too. Looking at her profile in the printouts, she’d made her debut around five years ago and scored jobs for assorted games and anime, but never any very important characters.

In another few moments, she opened the door to the recording booth and stepped inside, standing in front of a mic. In the control room, Norikura turned on the mic next to the recording equipment.

“Okay, first off, give me your name, agency, and auditioning role.”

“Mika Ichinose, Nagara Productions, reading for Ichika Akatsuki.”

Her voice seemed to boom through the speakers across the whole control room. Then, holding a stapled printout, she began to act.

“I’m Ichika Akatsuki, class president. If you have any problems, just come to me, okay?”

“Ooh...”

Itsuki was audibly astonished. It was the same voice she used to state her name, but the impression it gave was totally different. She really sounded like a teenage girl, someone dynamic and popular and who cared for her classmates. So *this* was professional acting.

“Hey! You know I keep telling you not to act all familiar with me in front of other people!”

“I absolutely refuse to believe that you’re my big brother...!”

“Tee-hee-hee... Hey... You wanna have a little...fun with me...?”

“Ahn! N-no, brother, you... You’re... Ah! It feels so good...”

In order: the crabby voice she only lets her brother Kazuma hear; more complex emotions as she struggles to accept her feelings for him; a sultry tone for when she’s consumed by bloodthirst and goes into super-slutty mode; and lust-laden panting as she sucks Kazuma’s blood and reaches ecstasy.

...Having an attractive voice actor read his R-rated dialogue back to him was *extremely* embarrassing. Itsuki’s cheeks turned red. But despite that, Mika Ichinose’s acting was excellent. She exhibited a broad range of emotion, but more to the point, every line she read accurately captured Ichika Akatsuki as a character. Maybe she read the novels to research the role beforehand? Honestly, Itsuki would’ve been fine just going with her. He placed a big check mark in red pen next to her name on the sheet, writing *Good!!* next to it.

“Okay,” Norikura said, “we got it. Thank you very much.”

“Thank you,” Ichinose replied, bowing to the control room and leaving the booth. Then another woman entered through the control room entrance.

“Azusa Makita from Nangu Agency! Nice to meet you!”

She was younger than Ichinose, about the same age as Itsuki. A refined, pretty woman. He didn’t recognize her name, either, but her profile said she’d been acting for five years and had four main-character roles in anime series Itsuki had watched.

“Oh, she was *that* voice...?”

She headed into the booth. Norikura gave her the same instructions as before, and after giving her name, agency, and potential role, Azusa Makita began performing as Ichika.

“I’m Ichika Akatsuki, class president. If you have any problems, just come to me, okay?”

“Hey! You know I keep telling you not to act all familiar with me in front of other people!”

“I absolutely refuse to believe that you’re my big brother...!”

“Tee-hee-hee... Hey... You wanna have a little...fun with me...?”

“Ahn! N-no, brother, you... You’re... Ah! It feels so good...”

...This was good, too. She was a little brighter-sounding than Ichinose’s

performance, but this also matched Ichika's image pretty well. Plus—he couldn't put a finger on why, but to Itsuki, she seemed more dignified and confident in her performance than Ichinose. He added a check mark to her name, along with ↑ *Brighter. Also good* next to it.

Next up was a man, about thirty or so, auditioning for both Kazuma Akatsuki and Shingo Onizaki. He was a big-name VA playing the protagonist for a light novel-based anime that was currently airing. Itsuki knew him. His acting was excellent, of course, making Itsuki oddly excited. *The voice of ●●● and ●●● speaking for Kazuma and Shingo!* Another check mark by his name, *Wonderful* next to it.

Following this was a very popular actress, one whose name would be known by any fan of anime. She was reading for Ichika, but her take brought in a lot of the *tsundere* characters she had played before now, girls who were cold to the hero at first but eventually softened up. She probably didn't read the *All About* novel—but while it veered slightly from Ichika as a character, the performance was a level above Ichinose's and Makita's.

"What do you think?" the director, Tarui, asked.

"Hmm... It doesn't say Ichika to me... I feel like it's kind of the standard *tsundere* treatment."

"Yeah." Tarui nodded as he turned to Norikura. "Um, I think that take had a little too much energy to it. She sounded kind of delinquent. Can she try to sound a bit more serious?"

Norikura thought for a moment, then leaned over toward the mic.

"Try it like you're wearing glasses."

Itsuki cracked up, as did some of the staff. But apparently the intent came across, because her second take was much closer to Ichika's image than the first. It left Itsuki blinking helplessly in amazement—at her for fixing up her performance so perfectly, and at the audio director for his pinpoint remedy and communication skills. The realization that he was working with professionals was starting to get to him, emotionally.

So the line of people continued, one after the other—famous actors, popular actors, talented actors, beautiful actors, handsome actors; all portraying the characters Itsuki created and promptly leaving. A few of them simply lacked the right voice for the role, regardless of talent, but Itsuki had to award four or five stars to almost everyone else.

After twenty or so auditions, the team took a break. Itsuki looked over the

profiles as he had a somewhat late lunch of a convenience-store rice ball and sandwich.

“What do you think, Mr. Hashima?” Tarui asked, coffee in hand.

Itsuki took a deep breath. “They’re just... They’re all so amazing.”

“Sometimes, if the original creator isn’t too interested in voice acting, it’ll start to grate on them since it’s the same lines being repeated over and over. What about you?”

“Oh, I’m having fun. Having all these actors say *big bro* and *big brother* for me is just so awesome.”

He meant that from the heart. It made Tarui laugh.

“Ha-ha! That’s the Mr. Hashima I know.”

“Hey, can I keep the audio data from this audition?”

“Sure.”

“Sweet!” Itsuki almost shouted.

“Yeah, audition files are pretty sought-after by VA fans. I heard that the files for *Shimoneta* were pretty incredible. All these actresses talking about sex and pu●●y and so on.”

“Really?! Wow... Now I’m jealous of the author... But what’s surprising to me is that we have a lot of famous people here, and they’re getting auditioned just like everyone else.”

Tarui nodded. “Yeah, sometimes they can receive offers based on name alone, but generally they’re gunning for roles with everyone else.”

“Wow... It must be, like, a pretty competitive world. For a novelist like me, it would be like having to submit my work to a new-writers contest every single time.”

The thought made Itsuki shudder. Even with Mika Ichinose, the first woman, Itsuki had absolutely no problem with her taking the role of Ichika—but she had scored no major roles in her whole career, and several people better than her had already auditioned this morning. Incredibly gifted veterans and super-popular stars alike showed up for these auditions, all to win a single role for themselves. It seemed impossibly difficult.

“Yeah,” Tarui said with a nod. “It’s a pretty scary world.”



The first day of auditions ended sometime after eight PM that night, continuing for over nine hours, including breaks. The second day ran at roughly the same schedule.

For the first few hours of day one, the novelty of seeing famous people and talented actors file in gave Itsuki a shot of adrenaline every time the cycle repeated. Over time, though, his stamina and patience started to wane, and once they hit the afternoon of day two, no matter what big name or hot talent showed up, he just sat there and wrote out his comments and ratings. But as tepid as his reactions had become, he was still paying attention, focusing and listening to every syllable of his dialogue. He knew this was a vital part of nailing down his characters' voices—but also, to the actors coming in here, this was all-out war. The people making the choices couldn't get complacent about that.

“Thank you very much.”

The last actor on the list for day two left the booth. “That’s all of them,” Norikura said, the entire staff around him breathing a sigh of relief. It was past nine in the evening.

“That was so long,” Itsuki found himself muttering. It was long, but it was over. The pressure off, he slumped down on the sofa as Tarui next to him flashed a crafty smile.

“Oh, no. To us, the *real* work starts now.”

“Does it?”

“We have to select four people out of over a hundred.”

“Oh, right...”

Stress lines appeared on Itsuki’s face at the mere thought.



After a late dinner of takeout, the staff lined up some chairs in the recording booth to hold a casting meeting. Itsuki and Toki represented the GK Bunko side; they were joined by director Tarui, audio director Norikura, producer Oshima, and casting manager Asakura.

“Okay,” Asakura dispassionately began, “let’s start by making our pick for the main heroines, Ichika Akatsuki and Yukiko Onizaki.”

“We’ll pick the heroines before the protagonists?” Itsuki asked.

“Well, the two main actresses will be forming a mini-group to sing the opening and ending themes, and we’ll have them handle radio promotion as well, so I’d like to get them squared away first.”

“Oh, all right...”

Itsuki didn’t mind, but this was the first time he had heard about either of those things. Asakura, not picking up on his puzzlement, continued on.

“All right. Mr. Hashima, what are you picturing?”

He took out his list of the actors who read for Ichika, recalling their performances. He had given a full check mark of approval to ten of them; now it was time to figure out which one was *really* the best. He named three actors who had particularly impressed him.

“I see.” The director nodded, turning toward the control room. “Can you play back those three for us?”

He could see an audio staffer nod beyond the soundproof glass; apparently, he could hear everything said inside the booth. In a few moments, the recordings from the three actors Itsuki mentioned played on the booth’s speakers.

...*Mmm.* Itsuki lightly nodded to himself as the playback continued. *Simply wonderful.*

One of his picks was a popular actress who had worked on the front lines of this business for over fifteen years, and her experience obviously showed in her steady performance. She was thirty-five, but her voice was still a perfect fit for a girl of seventeen. The second had worked for seven years, playing the main heroine in a slew of anime, including a few Itsuki had seen. The third was the least experienced at just about three years, but despite being in her early twenties, she had already proven herself with leading roles in multiple series.

“...Yeah, these are good.” Tarui nodded, shutting his eyes as he listened.

Oshima, meanwhile, looked a little distressed. “Hmm, they’re all people with proven track records, huh...?” It unnerved Itsuki a little. Would experience and proven talent be a problem somehow?

“Okay,” Asakura said, “let’s get the director’s take.”

“All right...”

Tarui named three of his own picks. One was the girl Itsuki picked for his second choice, and the others all earned check marks in Itsuki’s notes.

Listening back on the two Itsuki didn't pick, he had a point—they didn't lose out at all to the first three recordings.

"They all sound pretty good," Itsuki said, impressed. *This director gets it.* He could trust in Tarui.

"I don't think we'd have an issue with any of these five," Norikura commented. "I suppose Midori Yokoya's in the lead, since you both picked her."

And that was really all it took...or so Itsuki thought, until he spotted an awkward grin on Oshima the producer's face.

"Hmm, Ms. Yokoya, huh...? I think she's really great, but, um, I think events are gonna be difficult with her."

"Difficult?" Itsuki parroted back.

"Midori Yokoya can't sing at public events," Asakura flatly explained. "She's more of a straight 'actress' type; she sees voice acting as more about being in the role than singing and working events. I think she's fine as far as recording character songs and stuff, but I'm one hundred percent sure she'll turn down any singing gigs for events. She isn't taking much radio and TV work lately, either."

"....."

A voice actor caring about acting seemed like a good thing to Itsuki, but even he knew that an actor in the modern anime business couldn't spend her entire career reading lines in a booth. If she couldn't be relied on for singing, events, and other PR duties, that did make her difficult to bring on as a lead actress.

"Hmm... Well, let's put her on the back burner," the director concluded. "What about the other four?"

Oshima's awkward smile came back. It turns out he had issues with all four. One of them had signed with a music company separate from the one involved with this anime, which would lead to complications for events and the opening song.

One already had several recurring roles in place for other series starting alongside *All About My Little Sister* in July (two of which were based on light novels); this meant scheduling hassles, and having the same people handle too many leading roles at once wasn't generally considered a good idea.

One was in her midthirties and frankly not up to par looks-wise.

The final one had played the protagonist and sung the opening theme for

another anime produced by the outfit behind *All About*, but the DVD/BD release this past spring (including a ticket to a public event in the first pressing) bombed in the marketplace, which branded her around the company as an actor who couldn't attract paying customers.

.....

ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!

Itsuki had to work hard to keep from screaming at the annoyingly flat-voiced Oshima. He was crossing out all four candidates for reasons that weren't any of their faults. If singing an OP was tough for them, Itsuki reasoned, why force them to sing at all? If she had a busy schedule, didn't that prove how talented she was? This whole idea that voice actresses needed to have a certain age and look was ridiculous anyway. And she "couldn't attract paying customers"? *Way to pass the buck there, man! How far do you have to reach to start blaming a voice actor for bad disc sales?*

Oshima, perhaps picking up on Itsuki's seething rage, stepped up to soothe him.

"Now, I can definitely understand why the creator and director want to go with proven talent, but that creates obstacles with organizing events and singing groups and such. It's also a bit lacking in originality. Let me suggest...bringing on a few **fresh faces**, perhaps?"

Itsuki visibly winced. *Oh god! There it is! The word fresh!!*

Several days before the auditions began, he had asked Haruto for some advice on picking actors. The first words out of his mouth, spoken with earnest, grave concern, were these:

"Above all else, watch out for the word *fresh*."

"*Fresh?*"

"Yeah," Haruto had groaned. "I mean, hiring an actor who doesn't match your image for the character can make things seem fresher for viewers. Maybe it makes it easier for the producers to put bands together and stage live events and TV appearances and podcasts or whatnot. There are advantages to that approach. I know full well that music and events and stuff

are just as important to modern voice actors as voicing. But if you're so focused on 'fresh' that you hire people who just don't have the talent, there's no point."

Haruto's *Chevalier of the New World* anime had featured an ensemble cast with four main female characters, all of them rookies and none with any recognizable credits to speak of. They were put into a singing unit, headlined the ending theme, pushed the show on radio and TV, and held a string of live events. But their acting and singing just weren't up to par. The results were wretched.

"...They told me it was important to give new people more work to build up their experience, that it's something the industry needs to do. And I bought that line. But when you really think about it...it's like **Do you really need to do that with my series?** Why does this precious creation of mine have to serve as some kind of training dojo for voice-actor wannabes? Maybe you guys got a bunch of projects running at once, but this is pretty likely a once-in-a-lifetime shot for me...!"

Haruto bit his lip, the regret plain on his face.

"...So watch out for the word *fresh*, Itsuki. If they're pushing a nameless actor with actual talent or ability, that's worth considering, but if they're just trying to cram some girl into the spotlight at your expense, don't let them. Fight if you have to. That's my take."

Recalling the advice, Itsuki took a deep breath, trying to keep the emotion from seeping into his voice.

"Mr. Oshima... When you say *fresh*, who would you suggest, for example?"

"Well..." Oshima brought a hand to his chin. "How about Saori Fukujima or Yui Kiyomizu?"

Those names didn't ring a bell to Itsuki. He looked them up in his dossier. Saori Fukujima had a question mark next to her name, along with the phrase *kind of wooden*, while Yui Kiyomizu had no mark at all next to hers. Peeking at their profiles, nineteen-year-old Fukujima had graduated from the voice-acting department of a vocational college this year and only just joined an acting agency, playing unnamed bit parts in just two series. Kiyomizu was seventeen and, judging by her bio, more of a magazine model than a voice actor. She had no credits in animation. Both, however, had cute faces.

Tarui raised an eyebrow ever so slightly. "...Can we give them a listen?"

The guy at the sound panel played Fukujima's audition, then Kiyomizu's. Just as Itsuki wrote, Fukujima's stab at Ichika was...kind of wooden. The style of her voice wasn't a perfect match for the character, but it wasn't totally outside the realm of possibility. Kiyomizu's try was, to be blunt, awful. If there was an attempt at acting as opposed to reading from a sheet of paper, Itsuki didn't hear it. She had a weirdly husky voice as well, a complete mismatch for Ichika.

...No way in hell.

Before Itsuki could open his mouth, Oshima cut him off at the pass. "Now, um, these two are still pretty new to the industry, so I think their performance may sound a little awkward in the audition stage, but we can always provide them with further direction going forward. But they're young, they're fresh, they look good, and I think they'd really pop onstage."

"...Well," Norikura half muttered, "yes, I do think they could make a pretty fresh impression."

"Right, exactly," Oshima eagerly agreed.

If they're pushing a nameless actor with actual talent or ability, that's worth considering, but if they're just trying to cram some girl into the spotlight at your expense, don't let them. Fight if you have to.

Tsutomu Oshima definitely fell into the latter camp in Itsuki's mind. Itsuki spoke up, trying to amplify his voice so Oshima couldn't take over the conversation again.

"I don't think either of them could play Ichika. Absolutely not."

Oshima's face tensed up. "Um, absolutely not?"

"Absolutely not. I mean, they sounded like robots, didn't they?"

"Well, no, I mean, they've got room to grow and mature in—"

"I'm sorry," Tarui said before Oshima could build an argument, "but I have to agree with Mr. Hashima here."

"I see... In that case..."

Then Oshima brought up the names of three more "fresh" actresses. Playing their files back, they were maybe decent compared to Saori Fukujima, but nothing more. Itsuki and Tarui immediately rejected them, but Oshima stuck to his guns. Each time he saw he was getting nowhere with one

suggestion, he'd just bring up another wave of "freshness."

"Considering the events we'll need to run, I do think we need to choose someone fresh."

"And I think we need to prioritize making a good anime before we think about events," countered Itsuki.

"Plus," added Tarui, "we've got the ●●●●● Vocational School as part of the sponsor package in this project, right? Is that why a lot of the candidates you're pushing for are from there, Mr. Oshima?"

"Yes, there is that," Oshima freely admitted. "Even if they aren't in the main cast, having some of their grads in regular roles is gonna be a must. But even if that wasn't the case, it really is my opinion that we need to pick someone fresh."

Itsuki and Tarui brought up some other talented candidates besides the five they discussed first. Oshima responded by bringing up more freshness. Norikura, the audio director, strove for neutrality— "No matter who we pick," he said, "I'll just do the job I'm assigned to." Asakura, the casting director, stuck to giving out factual advice—"●●●● can't sing live," "○○○○ already has a regular role elsewhere this season," "X X X X's agency is a pain in the ass," and so forth—but most of his observations served to shoot down Itsuki's and Tarui's suggestions.

"I know this is exaggerating the point," Oshima said, "but in this industry, a 'good anime' is an anime that makes money. No matter how high quality a series it is, if it winds up in the red, then it's not a *good* anime."

"But the vast majority of the audience doesn't even *care* about live events! Making the anime suffer because we're obsessed with events is totally ass-backward!"

"The thing we need to prioritize the most, Mr. Hashima, isn't the ninety-nine percent of viewers who watch the TV broadcast. It's the one percent who actually buy the DVDs and Blu-rays and come to the events."

"But fans like that only buy the packaged releases because they enjoy the main series in the first place," Tarui calmly but passionately debated.

"If this was based on a property that's sold millions of copies, had all the budget it wanted, and was guaranteed to be watched no matter what we did—if it was *that* kind of earth-shattering project, then, yes, maybe high quality would be enough to turn a profit. But this isn't the kind of project we're talking about. We need to maximize the added value of what we offer outside

the show, and we need to advertise as much as possible, for as low a cost as possible, or it's going to be buried without anyone noticing it."

Itsuki and Tarui were creatives, hoping to make the series the best it could be. Oshima was a businessman, prioritizing overall profits above everything else. Neither of them were in the wrong; both understood that any difference in opinion was chiefly due to the different roles they played in the project. But understanding that didn't mean they gave any ground.

The debate continued anon, with nearly everyone who read for Ichika getting replayed in the booth. In the end, they made a compromise.

She was twenty-five years old, a four-year veteran of the industry. She had voiced main characters in several anime and games, none of which made a big splash at all, so she wasn't hugely popular. Her looks were moderately beautiful, her singing decently good; she had formed musical units with other people, and she was okay with running events and audio programs. A true middle-of-the-road choice. Itsuki had put a check mark followed by a ? on her name, along with the phrase *sounds a little young*.

For Yukiko Onizaki, they went with a similarly experienced woman, so they'd be a match in the unit they'd form together. Kazuma Akatsuki and Shingo Onizaki would be played by men in their early twenties, both of whom had been getting more main-character roles as of late. They weren't "fresh," but they weren't *not* fresh, either. Their names wouldn't make anyone starstruck, but a dedicated enough fan might recognize them. Rather pedestrian casting but pretty acceptable. Yukiko's voice *did* belong to the Wanouchi Agency that Asakura worked for, though, whether on purpose or not.

Were these the right casting choices to make? Nobody could really know yet. But at the very least, this two-day marathon session, one of the most important steps in animation production, had come to a close.



Voice Cast Profiles

Kazuma Akatsuki

Name:
Seiji Higashitani

Age:
24

Agency:
Nangu Agency

Birthday:
July 6

Birthplace:
Shiga
Prefecture

Hobby:
Bouldering

Favorite food:
Ramen



Ichika Akatsuki

Name:
Mai Tomoe

Age:
25

Agency:
Ichii Productions

Birthday:
September 16

Birthplace:
Fukuoka
Prefecture

Hobby:
People watching

Favorite food:
Curry



Shingo Onizaki

Name:
Tsuyoshi Wara

Age:
23

Agency:
Raicho
Enterprise

Birthday:
March 19

Birthplace:
Toyama
Prefecture

Hobby:
Go

Favorite food:
Japanese sweets
(especially dorayaki)



Yukiko Onizaki

Name:
Miho Akaike

Age:
26

Agency:
Wanouchi
Agency

Birthday:
November 4

Birthplace:
Tokyo

Hobby:
Biting my
fingernails

Favorite food:
Fingernails



Pablo Purikesso

It was another day in late October when Chihiro set off for Itsuki's place.

The journey was some twenty minutes from the family home by bus. Getting off at the stop nearest to her brother's apartment, Chihiro carefully scoped out her surroundings. She had run into this sexual deviant who asked to see her ass and then physically assaulted her back in the spring, and she had seen the guy a second time in this area around four months ago. Whenever she was in the neighborhood since, she had been keeping a watchful eye out for the criminal.

Between the bus stop and the nearby supermarket lay a fairly large public park that Chihiro sometimes cut across when she had the time. It was nice and green, with lots of trees to look at as you strolled along. It also had a futsal field, a basketball court, and a climbing wall, so it was almost always filled with young people. Seeing them sweat it out on the fields made her want to exercise a bit herself.

Chihiro was no slouch when it came to staying fit, but she had never played sports before, either officially for school or as part of a club. There hadn't been much money to spare around the house until her mother remarried, so Chihiro had helped her with chores and some of her side jobs instead. Things were more comfortable now, but Chihiro still didn't like extracurriculars that kept her away from home for long periods of time. She had a new family, and she wanted to cherish them.

...*Huh?*

Walking down the path, she noticed a crowd gathered at a stretch of asphalt used as an event space. You occasionally saw musicians and street performers there, so it was probably something like that. Chihiro approached out of curiosity, close enough to hear some of the onlookers.

"I don't get it, but it's pretty awesome."

“Is he imitating Pablo Picasso?”

“It’s like he has this crazy aura. It’s making my sixth sense tingle.”

The feedback was positive, if a little jumbled. Chihiro stood up on tiptoe to peer through the crowd—and then let out a stifled yelp. The deviant was right there. His back was turned to her, a French beret perched on his head, but there was no mistaking his unique hairstyle.

He was facing a large canvas, all but slamming an artist’s paintbrush against it. His strokes were broad yet delicate and carefully aimed. What he painted wasn’t immediately clear at first—maybe a tree, maybe a human figure. There were a few trees behind the canvas, a young couple or two making out underneath them, so maybe that’s what he was portraying.

Chihiro, lacking any understanding of art beyond what she’d learned in school, couldn’t judge his art skills or technical ability, but she was drawn to his work nonetheless. No one would ever mistake it for a photo, but it was so raw, with its own reality that seemed to jump off the canvas.

“Hmm... I think that oughtta be good for today... Huh?”

The man made an odd face. He must have just realized he had an audience.

Oh crap!

Turning on her heels, Chihiro tried to get away. It only made her easier to notice.

“Aaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!”

He pointed at Chihiro, screaming.

“Eep...!” Now Chihiro was trying to dash away at full speed. But:

“I’m sorryyyyyyyy!!”

The pervert leaped toward Chihiro, only to land on the asphalt, head and forearms rubbing against the ground. He was prostrating himself before her, and in extraordinarily acrobatic fashion.

“Huh? Huhhh?!”

Chihiro was too flummoxed to keep running. The pervert stayed on the ground.

“I’m really sorry that I tried forcing down your undies back then!” He was still shouting.

The audience began to murmur.

“Her what?”

“Forcing...?”

“Is this some kind of lover’s spat?”

“S-stop shouting that at the top of your lungs!” a visibly reddened Chihiro protested. “And stop bowing like that!”

The deviant looked up. “Listen, I was willing to do anything to see you again! I wanted to fully apologize, and I wanted to ask you for one more favor!”

“F-favor?”

“Let me see your ass!”

“No!”

Chihiro darted away from the event space. The criminal gave chase.

“You never give up...”

She ran until fewer people were around, then stopped.

“Let me see your ass!”

“I said no!” Chihiro sighed. “Why do you want to see, um, my butt so badly?”

“Because you’ve got the ass of the millennium! It’s divine!”

“You’re making zero sense...”

The pervert looked the bewildered Chihiro straight in the eye. “If I can use your ass as a model, I would totally hit max level as an artist!”

“An artist...? Do you paint for a living?”

“Well, I make money off it! I have some books out!”

...Certainly, his performance in the park was pro-level. It drew Chihiro in, as it did the rest of the crowd. Maybe he was somebody really famous.

“Um, what’s your name?”

“Pablo Purikesso.”

The man was clearly Japanese; that had to be a nom de plume. Chihiro knew that a lot of illustrators used them. Did “real” artists do that, too?

“Um... Okay. So you want to use my butt in your art, Pablo?”

“Yes!”

“...Why my butt?”

“Because I love asses!”

He was dead certain about his preferences, at least. Chihiro had to marvel at the pure, unadulterated passion in his eyes. It reminded her of her brother—and that stoked her curiosity.

“How old are you, Pablo?” she asked.

“Sixteen. Seventeen next month.”

Just as she thought—nearly the same age as her.

“Where do you go to high school?”

“I don’t!”

“You quit?”

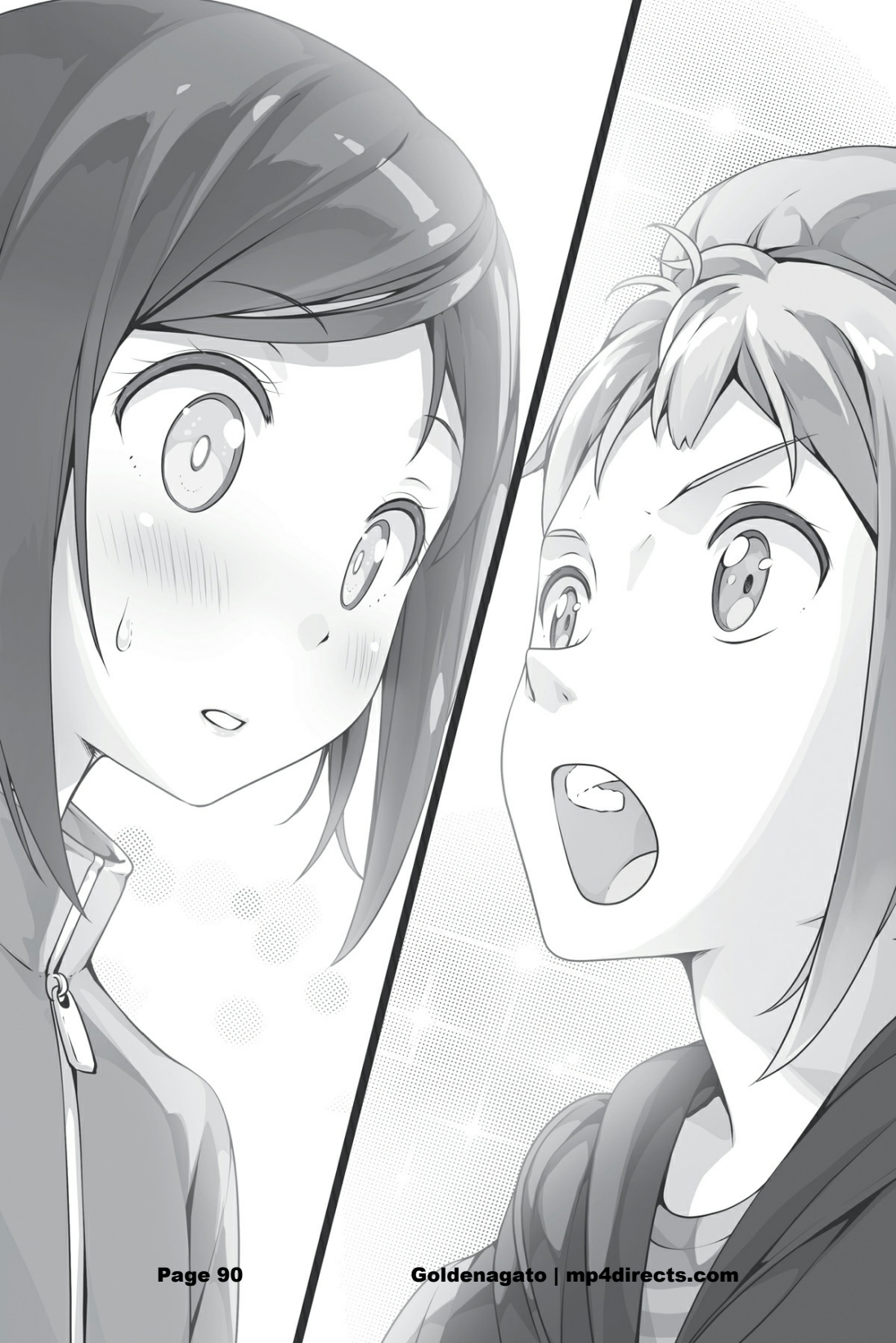
“Ah, it was just, like, I didn’t think I really needed to go. I never went in the first place.”

Itsuki quitting college without any warning had been enough of a shock. The idea of so many people abandoning things that felt so important to Chihiro without a second glance... She could never do that.

“...Wow. I’m kind of jealous actually. Being able to do what you want for a living.”

“You think so? Why don’t you do what *you* want?”

“...You know it’s not that easy. You don’t even know what I have to deal with.”



This sounded harsher than Chihiro intended at first. But Pablo wasn't deterred. "Yeah, I guess not," he casually replied. "By the way, can I see your ass now?"

"What do you mean 'now'?!"

"Oh..." Pablo seemed oddly confused. "Well, like, we're getting along and stuff now, so I thought, hey, maybe it's ass time."

"We're *not* getting along!"

"We aren't?! Well, what do I have to do to see your ass?!"

"You don't have to do anything! I'm not showing it to you!"

"Can't you...reconsider?!"

Pablo's eyes remained locked on Chihiro, who was instinctively rearing back a bit.

"I'm never going to, all right?!"

"I'll pay you!"

"I don't need your money!"

"I'll do anything!"

"It's all right, thanks!"

"You can just give me a quick down-and-up flash!"

"I'm not gonna flash you, okay?!"

"Okay, halfway down! You can show me half your ass, right?!"

"Not even half!"

"Why now?! You see girls showing off half their asses in low-rise swimsuits at the beach all the time! It's the same thing!"

"I don't wear those!"

"Please! I'm begging you!" Pablo leaped straight into another flying bow.

"Y-you can beg me all you want, but I'm not budging! I need to go, all right?"

Chihiro turned around and jogged away from Pablo.

"W-waaaaaaaaait!"

His face contorted in agony, Pablo reached out and grabbed the waist area of Chihiro's tracksuit. The pants, along with the underpants below, slipped down, revealing much of the top half of the Ass of the Millennium.

"~~~~~!!!"

"Ohhh..."

Pablo's eyes bugged out. He looked like he was experiencing nothing short of a religious epiphany.

Chihiro blushed intently in shame, eyes tearing up as she slapped Pablo's hands away and hiked up her pants.

"You...*creep!!!!*"

A rage-driven roundhouse caught Pablo right on the cheek.

"Grrpphhh!!"

With a loud groan, Pablo's body bounced against the ground.

"Don't ever come near me again!" Chihiro shouted as she ran off.

Pablo, head resting against the ground as he watched, still had a blissful smile. "I saw it... I saw the ultimate ass..."

Then he passed out.

Several days later, the cubist painting Pablo left standing on his easel in the park was spotted by a passing art dealer. It generated buzz among certain circles, valued at several million yen despite the lack of artist credit, and Setsuna "Pablo Purikesso" Ena would never know.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

When Toki takes an author he's editing for to a sex shop, does the company pay for it?



They didn't.

...You tried?



...Awful.

QUESTION

What kind of guy does Kaiko Mikuniyama like?

Someone who adores panties!



QUESTION

Who is Itsuki's favorite anime character?



I love more little-sister characters than I could possibly count at this point, but if I had to pick one, it wouldn't actually be a sister, but Lelouch from *Code Geass*—a great hero who fought the entire world for the sake of his little sister.

Jealous Hearts

One night in early November, Nayuta Kani paid a visit to Itsuki's apartment for the first time in a month.

"Nya-ha! Sorry it's been so long, Itsuki!"

She hugged him the moment she stepped inside, making Itsuki's face redden.

"L-let me go, Kanikou!"

"Weh-heh-heh! Aw, Itsuki, this past month must've been so lonely for you!"

"Pfft. Don't be stupid. It let me focus on work for a change." He *was* pretty lonely, but he wasn't about to say that.

"Really? You didn't miss me even a little?"

"Well...maybe a little," he whispered as Nayuta looked right up at him. She would stop by at least twice a week before now, so time spent with Nayuta had become part of his everyday life. "Even if you are the biggest pest in the world," he quickly added, "of course I'm gonna wonder a little if you stop showing up! It just feels wrong! It's like that with any stray cat!"

"*Me-yowww*. By the way, I was so lonely that I pleased myself multiple times every single night while thinking about you. Let me replenish my Itsuki supply!"

"I'm not some special ingredient!" yelled Itsuki as he pried Nayuta off himself before she could sniff him and rub her face against his T-shirt any further.

"Anyway, you hungry?"



Itsuki and Nayuta heated up the vegetable-and-shrimp curry Chihiro had made for them earlier and began eating. Nayuta tended to pick at her food, taking her time, but tonight she was wolfing it down.

“You’re really putting it away today, huh?”

She flushed a bit. “I haven’t eaten anything since morning.”

Itsuki winced. “You gotta make sure you’re eating three meals a day.”

“Are you worried about me, Itsuki?”

“...Yeah,” he blurted out, looking distressed.

“...All right. I’ll make sure to eat properly.” She continued packing away the curry, cheeks still a little flushed. “By the way, have you been busy?”

“Kind of.” Itsuki nodded. “I’m writing the script for a drama CD.”

“Oh, you’re doing one of those?”

“Yep. Volume 6 of *All About* is coming out in January, and the special edition is gonna include one.”

Drama CDs are just that—CDs with an audio drama recorded on them. Some were fully original, but for the most part, they were produced as part of a media-mix franchise. They were cheap to make, could be turned around fast, and even if the property wasn’t too well-known, fans of the voice cast could be counted on to purchase them, resulting in a fairly easy profit. Megahits were hard, but the risks were low, and they didn’t require much from the original author—some of whom dreaded the idea of anime or games based on their work but enthusiastically participated in drama CD productions. Low risk, beloved by all—truly, the best part of a successful media-mix production! (✕ Editor’s note: All opinions are strictly those of the author.)

“Is writing the scripts for those hard?”

Itsuki solemnly nodded. “...I figured it’d be way easier than a novel since you only have to write dialogue, but it’s actually kind of hard to depict a situation with nothing but talking and sound effects.”

“That *does* sound hard.” Nayuta smiled. “But if it’s your original script, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Of course.” He flashed a bold grin. “I’m writing the kind of awesome tale only the original author could come up with.”

“Have you picked the voice cast yet?”

“Yeah. We auditioned for the four main characters last month, and the sub-characters and regular cast are pretty much set in stone, too.”

“The same actors from the anime?”

You often see drama CDs using different voice casts from the anime version, because *reasons*. Drama CDs generally paid a little better and required a less hectic recording schedule, so it was common to see some pretty impressive names.

“Of course.” Itsuki nodded. “We’re announcing the anime in the ad materials for Volume 6, so this drama CD’s kind of a preliminary for the full series.”

“Wow, that’s a big responsibility. And how is Volume 6 coming along?”

Itsuki’s eyes darted away. “...I’ll just have to try to get it in on time.”

When releasing a special edition like this, with a drama CD and maybe a bonus novella in pamphlet form, you naturally needed a custom-made package to sell it all in. This meant the deadline—the “real” one that not even the most famous authors could get away with breaking—came a lot earlier than usual. You also had far more people involved, which made extensions even more impossible. For an author like Itsuki who strung out his deadlines as much as humanly possible, a bonus edition like this was an extremely dangerous risk to take.

“Wow... You’re really working hard, Itsuki. I guess I better, too.”

There was something really earnest about Nayuta’s admiration. It caught Itsuki a little off guard.

“It’s rare to see you act interested in your own work, Kanikou.”

“Mm? That’s mean. I’m always working, like, super hard.”

“Liar,” Itsuki shot back, squinting at her. Nayuta may have been a red-hot bestselling author, but she wrote at a pretty slow pace. She tended to work fast once she found some inspiration, but starting up the engine took forever, and it’d run out of gas almost immediately. She had been living in that hotel room for about half a year now, allegedly so she could crunch on her novel, but considering all the time she spent in Itsuki’s room and playing games, her work hours had to be on the short side.

She puffed her cheeks out a bit. “Aw, I really *am* right now, though.”

...Well, she hadn’t been around in a month, right? Maybe she was telling the truth.

“Is all the media-mix work keeping you busy?”

“Oh, I guess you could call it that. There are lots of meetings for the anime and live-action films, and I need to check up on the manga sketches.”

“...That sounds harder than what I got.”

“Oh, but the meetings themselves aren’t that painful. Everyone on the staff is really talented.”

“Are they? Who are you working with?”

“Well...”

She then named the manga artist handling the comic adaptation, the directors of the anime and live-action films, the duo writing the anime, and the lone screenwriter for the live-action release. Itsuki was floored.

“.....That’s, like, the best possible set of people I could think of...”

The manga artist was incredibly famous, more overwhelmingly so than Nayuta herself at the moment. The anime director was a genius-level talent with a string of proven hits. His live-action counterpart was a name big enough that even a non-movie buff like Itsuki knew it. Both the anime screenwriters were responsible for several hit series; Itsuki had even fantasized about having them write scripts for the adaptations of his novels. The guy writing the live-action version was fresh off penning a drama series that earned a 40 share in the TV ratings. It was the perfect lineup, eminently befitting a genius author’s first foray into multimedia adaptations.

“Yeah, they’re pretty good. And they all know a lot more about my novels than I do. I guess they read them really carefully. The two anime screenwriters argue a lot over parts of it, they told me, but the things they’re debating are so high level that I can’t keep up. I mean, do they think I’m considering subtle differences in emotion because people are eating in a different order from usual when I’m writing? Nooooo.”

She seemed to be enjoying herself.

Itsuki recalled his dealings with the *All About* anime staff. He had raged at them after being presented with an outline that treated his story like garbage, only to have the screenwriter Hirugano call his writing “fucking boring” to his face. Nayuta was working in such a different world, it made him want to cry.

“I also got to meet the lead actor for the live-action film, and he knows the series better than I do, too. It’s amazing. As busy as he is, he still found the time to read my novels, not just the movie script.”

“...Um, who is it?” Itsuki asked, attempting to banish the sinking feeling in his stomach.

“It’s a guy named Yuma Takashina.”

“Are you serious...?”

Yuma Takashina was a superstar, one of the biggest names in the younger generation, who was at ease leading comedies, action films, and serious dramas. He was nineteen, the same age as Nayuta, but he had worked as a child actor before then, including in a few series Itsuki watched. He was known for being a consummate professional—handsome but willing to gain forty pounds to take on a role, then spend three months getting back in shape for the next project. That anecdote really impressed Itsuki. Some people really *are* just that amazing.

“Plus, he said that he spends pretty much his whole private life polishing his roles and training. I figured someone as pretty as him would be out having sex day and night, but I guess not everybody, huh? He just had this aura; it was amazing.”

“...Really?”

Itsuki could feel his chest ache a bit as Nayuta sang the praises of a dashing man who wasn't him.



“It really made me want to work on my writing, you know? I can’t lose out to Takashina or the rest of the staff. Work is fun for me right now. It hasn’t been like this since I made my debut.”

She reddened a bit, acting adorably bashful. But it was true. Nayuta Kani, a novelist who used her outstanding genius to live life strictly at her own pace, was getting serious about work. And the fact that it wasn’t Itsuki, but all these other actors and creative types inspiring her, made him unbearably frustrated. He felt a sudden urge to fight back.

“Well, things are pretty intense with me, too. We argue all the time in our weekly script meetings, but the director and screenwriter read my novels down to the last word, so it’s worth fighting all that stuff out. I’m noticing a lot of things I didn’t when I wrote it, so every week is like a shot in the arm. It’s kind of like this chemical reaction, people bashing against one another to create something new.”

“Ooh. That sounds kind of fun, too.” Nayuta looked honestly impressed.

“Yeah... When I got this offer, I was really anxious more than anything else, but now I’m feeling like this could actually turn out well.”

That was the honest truth. When it came to the story, at least, he was confident it wouldn’t crash and burn like *Chevalier of the New World*.

“I look forward to it,” Nayuta said with a smile. “What’s the voice cast like?”

“Kazuma’s played by Seiji Higashitani... He was the main guy in ●●●●●●.”

“Ohhh...”

It was the title of a series broadcast just a bit ago. Nayuta didn’t seem to recognize it.

“...Ichika’s gonna be Mai Tomoe. Um...she was the heroine in a few different games.”

“Mai Tomoe... I think I’ve seen that name before...” She took out her phone and looked up Mai Tomoe’s Wikipedia page. “Oh! Yeah, I have! She’s ●●●● from ●●●●●●!”

Now it was Itsuki who didn’t understand the reference. He was pretty sure it was an RPG for smartphones, at least. Either way, at least Nayuta knew it.

“Hmmm... She’s playing Ichika, huh...?”

“Yep.”

Nayuta left Wikipedia and performed an image search.

“.....Hmmmmmm.....”

She looked concerned. It made Itsuki doubt himself.

“Uh... Kanikou?”

“.....She’s pretty,” she blurted out, clearly peeved.

“Huh?”

“Look at her. She’s incredibly beautiful. She’s got style; she’s got big boobs... Why does a voice actress like her have such good looks?”

Itsuki leaned over to look. The phone showed a photo of Tomoe speaking at some event or another. He compared it to his own memory.

“.....I think she was even prettier in real life.” Tomoe in the photo was nice, yes, but he thought she left an even better impression in the recording booth. “I guess you could say she had an aura around her, too. Like, she was glowing.”

“Mmmm,” Nayuta sullenly replied. “...Is this the kind of girl you like?”

“N-no!” he hurriedly shouted. “I mean, I think she’s pretty, yeah, but there were lots of prettier actors at the audition. If I was picking them based their looks alone, I’d have gone for...”

Nayuta’s face was growing more dour by the second, and he stopped cold.

“.....There were lots of even prettier girls?”

“I mean, among the people who came over for the audition, yeah! A lot of them were pretty much straight-up pop idols, at least a few were more like photo models than anything, and so... Yeah. Of course they were pretty.”

“.....Well, who’s playing Yukiko?”

“A girl named Miho Akaike.” She promptly tapped the name into her phone.

“.....Pretty.”

“.....Yeah.” Itsuki nodded, despite the looming awkwardness. It was the unvarnished truth.

“...When you start recording,” Nayuta said as her lips visibly turned down, “you’re going to see these pretty women week after week, aren’t you? They’re going to say ‘Ooh, Itsuki, Itsukiiiiii’ and fawn all over you, aren’t they?”

“Um... Well, yeah, I guess I’ll see them, but I don’t know if they’ll ‘fawn’ over me...”

“...And when you’re done recording, you’ll go out to dinner and have drinks, and then you’ll pretend to give them acting lessons so you can make

them say *dirty* things to you, and then you'll be all like 'Ee-hee-hee, let's simulate what Ichika is feeling in this scene, Mai' while you rub her tits...?"

"S-since when do I live in the world of dating sims?!" Itsuki sighed as Nayuta flushed red and let her fantasies run wild. He looked down at her, stern-faced. "...Listen, Kanikou. How pretty or ugly the voice actors are isn't important at all to me. I chose these people because I felt safe in letting them take care of Ichika and Yukiko, two of my most precious creations. And... yes, when you see voice actors in real life, they have this radiance around them, I'm not gonna lie. But I don't think that's because of their external looks. It's because they gave everything they had to land their roles. They're totally sincere. So to turn around and judge people like that based on their face... Well, don't."

With a humbled expression, Nayuta listened to Itsuki. He looked away, not meaning to rant like that.

"...All right," she whispered, a bit sullenly.

"...Great," Itsuki replied, giving her a vague nod before returning to his curry.

".....I need to shine, too..."

The irritated whisper was too soft for Itsuki to hear.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Which academic department is your focus in college?



Economics.

QUESTION

What inspired Toki to become an editor?

...I dated a manga artist in college who said she wanted me to work at her publisher. My past might get covered in this story sooner or later. When it does, I hope you'll laugh at least...



QUESTION

Is Ashley just as sadistic with her female clients?



I only pick on people who are worth picking on, regardless of age or gender. But sometimes I can be a little more...*mischievous* with women if they're well-endowed.

QUESTION

Does Ashley have a boyfriend?



...I have in the past.

The Awards Ceremony

One day in mid-November, Miyako Shirakawa found herself on the second basement floor of a downtown hotel, about a twenty-minute walk from the Gift Publishing building. There was a large event space down there, set to house the awards ceremony for both the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest and the 10th *Comic Gifted* New Artists Contest.

The event, as the name suggested, offered a chance for industry newbies to claim their prizes and celebrate their potential new careers, a kind of informal get-together and commemorative party in one. Different labels handled these events in different ways, but they were usually large affairs, hosting winners, judges, recipients from past years, writers working for the label, people working for spin-off projects, and more. It was a valuable mingling event for authors who lived in rural areas or had full-time jobs in other industries, and it also served as a kind of career milepost, a way to prove to your contemporaries that, yes, you've survived another year in this business. (Not that these all took place on a strict annual cycle. Depending on scheduling, they were usually either scheduled for early fall or toward the end of the year.)

GF Bunko's awards party was held in tandem with *Comic Gifted*'s, which meant you saw people like assistant manga producers hanging around. The guest list totaled five hundred, and given the amount of prep work involved, there was never enough help to go around. This was why the editorial department contacted Miyako to assist as a temp to get everything ready for the show. She had been setting up the room since morning, and now, at five PM, she was starting to guide the award winners from the hotel entrance to the show's greenroom.

"Award winners, I need you to put on these ribbons, please!"

Dressed in her finest business attire, Miyako gave each winner a red

ribbon with their name on it to fasten to their lapel. Miyako had bought her own suit when she started college, figuring she'd need one for job searching, but she hadn't worn it since her college entrance ceremony. A white ribbon name tag, indicating she was part of the staff, was on her chest.

GF Bunko had awarded six prizes to new authors, all varying ages and genders. Some were dressed up for a formal gathering, but from there it ran the gamut—stiff-collared student uniforms, blazers, kimonos, sexy dresses, even hoodies and sweatpants. Being there for the light novel judgment sessions, Miyako was curious about what kinds of people these authors were. They certainly came in all shapes and sizes.

“Okay, we’re going to have you wait here until the ceremony begins.”

Leaving the greenroom, Miyako made her way to the lobby, chatting a bit with the other part-timers and editors. The crowds began to file in—registration began at five thirty, with the event itself starting at six. After making a stop at the coat check, the guests went up to the desk and accepted name tags. As with the award winners, they came in every imaginable age and appearance you could think of, and while this crowd dressed more formally overall, some went for eye-catching looks, while quite a few had clearly just tossed on whatever was in the closet.

So this is an awards ceremony...

It impressed Miyako, never having attended anything like it.

“Oh! Miyako?!”

The greeting came from Haruto Fuwa, with Itsuki right next to him. He was in a casual jacket—not too stiff, not too informal—while Itsuki went for a straight-up black suit. Being a judge, Haruto had a red ribbon as well, except without a name printed on it; that was printed on an attached name tag. Itsuki had just the regular tag.

“Are you still working for us, Miyako?”

“No, just helping today.”

“Oh, I see.” Haruto nodded, then took a closer look at Miyako’s outfit. “You look good in a business suit.”

Itsuki nodded his agreement. “Yeah, it totally screams ‘I’m not a slut!’”

“I’m not a slut!” she protested, frenzied eyes fixed on Itsuki. “And you don’t look right in a suit at all. Is this even the right size?”

Itsuki blushed. “Ah, shut up... I went up a size so I could fit in the same suit all the way to graduation, but I haven’t grown at all since my freshman

year.”

“Wow. So you bought this for the entrance ceremony, too?”

“...Yeah. Total waste of money now, of course,” he grunted.

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

“No?”

“...We ran into each other thanks to you getting into that school, so I don’t think it was a *total* waste.” Now Miyako was blushing a bit.

“Y-yeah... Well, I guess so,” he said guiltily.

“Okay, okay,” Haruto interjected with a strained smile, “enough with the gushy memories right in front of me, thanks.”

“Uh, oh, I didn’t mean anything by it...!” Miyako grew redder as she looked around, searching for a change of subject. “Oh, by the way, where’s Nayu?”

“Kanikou isn’t here,” replied Itsuki.

“No? Why not?”

“Because she doesn’t like big crowds apparently.”

“She didn’t come last year, either,” Haruto added with a grin. “I think she really *doesn’t* like crowds, but there’s also the trauma, so...”

“Trauma...?”

“The puking incident,” Haruto immediately replied.

“Ohhh...”

“Don’t remind me,” Itsuki said, wincing.

Two years ago, at the awards ceremony where she accepted her prize, Nayuta’s spiraling stage fright caused her to throw up all over Itsuki. Miyako had heard about it.

“That reminds me,” continued Haruto, “one of the winners this year was a huge follower of Nayuta’s, but do you know who it is?”

“I just guided the award winners to the greenroom, but we didn’t talk too much, so I don’t know who wrote what. Do you know their age or gender?”

“Mmm, their pen name didn’t give me any clues...”

The winning titles, plots, and author pen names were released on the web and in the little flyers tucked inside novel volumes, but their ages and genders were kept a secret.

“Ah, well. We’ll find out soon enough.”



Itsuki and Haruto chatted with Miyako a bit longer. Once the editors called her back to work, they headed for the event space. They each accepted a glass of sparkling wine at the door before heading for a random table.

The awards party was a stand-up affair, with several circular tables dotted around the room and a larger one in the middle holding a buffet spread. There was a stage at the front and a long banner reading 15TH GF BUNKO NEW WRITERS CONTEST—10TH COMIC GIFTED NEW ARTISTS CONTEST—AWARDS CEREMONY hanging from the wall. Below it was a large screen, used to introduce the award winners and play highlights from the GF Bunko and *Comic Gifted* properties made into anime in the past year. Right now, it happened to be showing the opening to *Chevalier of the New World*, which had launched this past April.

“...Maybe I shouldn’t have shown up, either,” Haruto deadpanned, staring glassy-eyed at the screen.

“I know it’s the custom, but this is just torture.”

Itsuki pitied him. Then he realized this same screen would be showing the *All About* anime next year, and his chest suddenly clenched.

Then a man approached them, a thin, hunched-over unhealthy-looking figure with bags under his eyes—Makina Kaizu. He had on the same worn-out jacket from the judging session, along with a red ribbon tag and a glass of oolong tea in his hand.

“Hey...you two...”

“Oh, hello, Mr. Kaizu.”

“Hey there.”

“It’s been quite a while, Hashima. Doing well?”

“Oh, pretty much...”

“Have you gotten your physical?”

“...No.”

Kaizu frowned. “That’s not good. Have *you* had a physical since then, Fuwa?”

“Not yet...”

“You two ought to go together. I know a good clinic.”

“Oh, uh, yeah...thanks...”

Itsuki awkwardly nodded as Kaizu texted each of them the URL of his recommended site. It apparently specialized in health diagnostics, filled with all the latest equipment and handling physicals at a speedy pace.

“You can make an appointment on the Net, but they’re more accommodating on the phone, so go for that. Call them tomorrow, will you?”

“Um, okay,” Itsuki said, nodding despite himself. Kaizu was always in the habit of bugging other authors about their health, but he was particularly meddlesome with Itsuki. He appreciated the thought, at least. Too bad the same wasn’t true for someone else in his past.

“Make sure you do,” Kaizu added before turning to Haruto and grinning. “By the way, Fuwa, how’s it been going with Miyako since then?”

“.....She turned me down.”

“.....”

It came so quickly that even Kaizu felt obliged to avert his eyes.

“...Ahh.....I’ll buy you something, okay?”

“I don’t need your sympathy!” Haruto took a swig from his drink. “Plus, I haven’t given up yet.”

Kaizu smiled at this. “Hee-hee-hee... That’s the spirit. Don’t give up, and there’s always a chance.”

“Yeah! I’ll do my best with her, okay?”

The three talked a while longer until the ceremony was about to begin. A young man and woman were onstage now, by a lectern on the left side—voice actors, apparently, from one anime or other based on a GF Bunko novel this year.

“All right, it’s time to begin. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the awards ceremony and celebration for the Fifteenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest and the Tenth *Comic Gifted* New Artists Contest!”

The next host to appear was Satoshi Godo, GF Bunko’s editor in chief.

“Ahh, thanks for having me up here. My name is Satoshi Godo from GF Bunko.”

At his low, raspy voice, the remaining chatter among the audience ceased.

Godo’s speech touched on his elation at the New Writers Contest reaching its fifteenth year before diving into an assessment of the current light novel, manga, and anime scene. He expressed his pride at introducing so many new people to the industry this year before thanking the authors gathered in the

room. It was pretty much the same speech given by every MC at every awards ceremony like this. For more details, I would recommend winning a prize and attending for yourself.

It was now time to present the awards. First, all the winners went up at once, sitting on six chairs lined up on the right. They were greeted by Yoshifumi Gizan, president of Gift Publishing, a medium-sized man in his early fifties whose long mustache did little for his looks.

“The winner of the GF Bunko New Author Grand Prize... Ui Aioi!”

Upon being named by the male MC, the winner stood up and walked to Gizan.

“Ooh...” “Whoa...” “Hey...”

The crowd, particularly the men, chattered among themselves. She was a woman, maybe in her early twenties, and she was both beautiful and busty, a fact that was only accentuated by her alluring evening dress.

“I’m surprised a woman wrote that,” whispered Haruto. He had a right to be. Her prize-winning novel featured a male protagonist with a harem of hot girls swarming around him and lots of sex scenes—definitely built for a male audience.

“Heh-heh-heh... I knew I had a good eye... I better go tell her all about how hard I pushed for her to win it all...!”

“Did you, now?” Haruto glared at Kaizu, who was currently exhibiting the sleaziest smile known to humankind. “Because I remember it more being a very reluctant process of elimination...”

The president, obviously taking careful note of the winner’s breasts, read the award certificate aloud. “Ah, the Fifteenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest grand prize, awarded to Ui Aioi. This is to certify that your novel, *I Woke Up as the Demon Lord of Another World, so I Just Started a Harem*, has been awarded the prize above based on its exemplary quality.”

...And when Aioi accepted the certificate and took a bow, Gizan’s eyes were pointed straight at the valley running down her chest.

She returned to her seat, and the next winner was called.

“The first runner-up prize goes to... Aoba Kasamatsu!”

Another murmur across the audience.

“Aha,” an admiring Kaizu said. “I *knew* she was a teenager.”

She wore a wine-red blazer and a checker-patterned skirt, clearly the formal uniform of one school or another. She was maybe sixteen and had her

long hair tied back. Her looks were impressive, but the lines on her face clearly indicated stage fright or maybe even displeasure.

“...Was that the Kanikou follower?” Itsuki softly asked.

“Yeah.” Haruto nodded.

“Ah, the Fifteenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest Runner-Up Prize, awarded to Aoba Kasamatsu. This is to certify that your novel, *Memories of the Sky*, has been awarded the prize above based on its exemplary quality.”

Kasamatsu accepted the paper as the next runner-up stood up behind her—a serious-looking career man, around thirty, in glasses and a business suit.

“Ah, the Fifteenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest Runner-Up Prize, awarded to Makoto Yanagase. This is to certi— Bppphhh!”

The president did a spit-take midway through reading the certificate, and the mic screeched.

“Excuse me... Um, this is to certify that your novel, *The Goddess Must Be Punished! I’ll Save the World for You, so Just Show Me Your Ass!* has been awarded the prize above based on its exemplary quality.”

Despite his trembling lips, he somehow managed to make it all the way to the end without stumbling again. The *Just Show Me Your Ass* part of the title elicited a laugh from the audience. This happens, sometimes, with titles that have a certain kind of impact. Something similar occurred in the ceremony for the grand-prize winner of the 6th MF Bunko J Light Novel Awards. *Publishing company presidents have it tough sometimes*, Itsuki thought.

Regardless, Yanagase silently accepted the certificate and solemnly returned to his seat.

Following closely in his footsteps, Soma Misaka came up to accept an honorable mention for *Maken Wars*. He was an indifferent-looking boy in a school uniform who was perhaps fifteen. Meanwhile, Yoshihiro Kiso, author of fellow honorable-mention prize *Sengoku Kenpuden*, was a well-built man in his late sixties, with the face and kimono of a swordsman right out of his own story.

The final prize recipient was Tadashi Kamo, who won the Special Judges’ Selection prize for *Illegal Trial*. He turned out to be the hoodie-and-sweatpants dude from before, a young, unshaven man who looked like he didn’t get enough to eat. He had trouble standing still onstage, always swaying around or playing with his hands, and he even stumbled a bit on his

way to pick up the certificate.

Once he was done, all the winners gathered at center stage.

“Let’s give a big hand to these six winners, the authors building the future of GF Bunko!”

The audience followed the MC’s instructions, and the winners all bowed to the crowd before filing off.

Itsuki leered at them as he clapped. “Heh-heh-heh... Let’s see how many of them actually survive...”

“Whoa, whoa,” admonished Haruto with a smile.

The chances of a prizewinner like this releasing another novel, much less building an extended professional career, were not very encouraging. The 10th GF Bunko New Writers Contest featured five winners, but only Itsuki and Haruto among them remained in the business.

“Better make sure they don’t surpass us,” he said, shrugging.

“Heh.” Itsuki’s brazen smile was back. “I’d like to see them try...!”

They may have been fellow prizewinners, the whole group of them. But they were also comrades in arms, fighting on the same level—and at the same time, rivals duking it out in the same industry.

Kaizu let out a depressed sigh. “Oh great, yet another crop of talented new writers... Now there’s an even smaller piece of the pie left for me... Hope their books don’t sell too well.”

“But don’t you always buy the winners’ books when they come out, Mr. Kaizu?” Haruto said, chiding him. “Including ours? Like, three copies each if it’s their first release?”

Kaizu eerily grinned. “If any of ’em have actual talent, I wanna be sure their books are off the shelves as soon as possible...”

“They’ll just reprint them, you know...”

In other words, Kaizu was just being mean for no reason again.

With the GF Bunko winners off the stage, it was now time for the *Comic Gifted* team to pass out their prizes to new manga authors. Four stepped up, president Gizan handling duties once more. Kaiko Mikuniyama, author of the *All About* manga version, was not among them, as she had approached the editors directly with her work instead of entering the contest. (GF Bunko, meanwhile, did *not* solicit manuscripts outside of their rookie contest, mainly because novels take a while longer to read.)

“Okay, another big round of applause for the future of *Comic Gifted*

magazine!”

Once they left the stage, the female MC spoke up. “Now, everybody, we’re going to hold a meet and greet session on the event floor. We have a lovely dinner spread available for you all, so feel free to dig in!”

Now the formalities were over. It was time to eat, chat, and exchange business cards. To the majority of the crowd, the awards ceremony didn’t really matter—*this* was the main event.

“All right, let’s get some food...” Haruto looked around. “Hey, where’s Kaizu?”

“Hmm? Oh.” Itsuki looked around, failing to find him. “Ah!”

He spotted Kaizu first in line for the dinner buffet, a large plate in one hand and already using the other to grab several cuts of roast beef at once with his tongs.

“Damn, that was fast...”

Haruto and Itsuki stared at him, eyes bulging, before deciding to wait until the line died down. They stood around, drinking wine and checking things out around the buffet, until Kaizu returned. Every square millimeter of his plate was full, the juices from multiple types of food intermingling with one another and even seeping into the sushi.

“Heh-heh-heh... First one outta the gate *this* year, too...”

The two of them gave the satisfied Kaizu incredulous looks.

“...This is all mine. You can’t have any.”

“Keep it.” Haruto sighed. “We should probably get in line, too, Itsuki.”

“Yeah.”

The buffet had already been cleaned out of most of the choice dishes—roast beef, steak, sushi, caviar, foie gras, crab, lobster, and so on. Sighing, they picked over what was left (mostly starches like pasta, rice pilaf, and paella) and went back to their table. Kaizu was already gloating at them when they arrived.

“Hee-hee-hee... A stand-up party like this is all-out war, you know.”

Somehow he had obtained two more plates for himself. One was focused on desserts like cake and strawberries; the other featured ham, canapé, spring rolls, tandoori chicken, and other not-quite-marquee-but-still-decent picks.

“Now I get it,” an astonished Itsuki said. “First, you jump straight for the popular stuff on your preliminary run, then you take your time picking up the minor-league stuff. You even make sure to rifle through the dessert picks

before people's attention turns to it. What a pro..."

"You call *that* professional?" lamented Haruto.

"Heh-heh-heh... They've called me the Wolf of the Dinner Party for fifteen years now... That's how I've been in the business for so long..."

"Um... Mr. Fuwa?"

"Oh! ...Hoh?!"

Hearing his name called, Haruto turned around and found a massive pair of breasts filling his field of vision. It was Ui Aioi, the beauty in the sultry evening dress, fresh off winning the grand prize.

"Ummm, Ms. Aioi, right? It's nice to meet you!"

Haruto had trouble figuring out where to direct his eyes as he said hello, but Aioi paid it no mind. She looked a little forlorn at first but then broke into a soft smile, as if smitten.

"Thank you so much for picking my novel for the grand prize."

Kaizu sidled up to Haruto. "A-*hem*! Um, my name's Kaizu; I'm one of the other judges, and let me tell you, I was pushing *hard* for you in the final selection—"

"I never would have made it this far without you, Mr. Fuwa."

Aioi wholly ignored Kaizu. Her eyes were on Haruto, her cheeks blushing a tad.

"Huh?"

"I suppose you don't remember me?"

"Um...ummm... I apologize, where did we meet...?"

Haruto raked through his memory but ultimately drew a blank. If he talked with a girl as sexy as her, he was pretty sure he'd remember.

"Ah, well, you came to my school to speak one time."

"Your school...?"

He *did* speak to a class of aspiring novelists at a vocational school once, about half a year after his first book. One of the more old-school novelists at GF Bunko begged him to. But was there someone *this* attractive in the class...? *Oh wait!* He didn't recall the face, but he *did* think he recalled that chest a little!



Yes, there was that one girl, wasn't there? She was really snotty, with black hair and glasses, wearing nothing but black (which made the breasts stand out even more). She totally tuned out Haruto, just sitting there reading a *Boogiepop* novel instead. Haruto told her to pay attention, and she had replied "I don't want to write novels like yours, just riding trends and doing yet another 'overpowered *isekai* hero' thing without a shred of originality. I want to make something better, more original and engaging, like *Boogiepop* and other light novels from the glory days." This angered Haruto enough that he went on an epic tirade about how shallow her mind was and how she lacked the technical skill she needed to ever be a pro, and how she didn't *really* want to buck the trend so much as she was too slow to read trends and take advantage of them, and also new *Boogiepop* novels were still coming out, so it wasn't right to name that as a "glory days" brand, you dumbass. He was perfectly flat and logical with the argument, but it still ended up making her cry, and then, just as the school bell rang, he capped it off with a flippant "Light novels aren't some kids' game, got it?" The faculty, and the novelist who asked him to speak, were *extremely* unimpressed.

Yeah... I was pretty young, too, then, wasn't I?

He had just ventured into the professional realm, still struggling with money and his career, and he hadn't developed a thick skin against criticism yet. Even now, he didn't think he said anything wrong, but that was beside the point.

"Oh... Wait, were you in that class...?"

Aioi's face brightened up. "Yes! I was the student who started crying after we got into an argument. My teacher begged me to back off, but I just couldn't let it slide... I barely had the energy to speak in class after that for a while. Hee-hee... I guess I was pretty clueless, but you really made me into a grown woman, Mr. Fuwa."

"Um, people are gonna talk if you phrase it like *that*...!"

Her cheeks were bright red now, flustering Haruto. Itsuki and Kaizu stared coldly at him.

"Wow, you really *are* Prince Manwhore...", Itsuki murmured.

"Fuwa...," Kaizu complained. "How 'bout we go up to the roof for a bit... For the first time in a while...I'm honestly pissed off at you..."

"No, it's not like that—"

Itsuki and Kaizu weren't the only ones staring him down. Miyako, in her

business outfit, had just appeared out of nowhere.

“M-Miyako?!”

“...I guess I kind of had the wrong idea about you, Fuwa.”

“No, you *do*! You really do! You have the wrong idea about having the wrong idea!”

She had already turned around and stormed off, while Haruto desperately pursued her.

“I was only joking a little. I didn’t expect *that...*,” whispered Aioi, watching them leave as the flames of competition burned in her eyes.



“You gotta believe me, Miyako! I’m a virgin! I’m really a virgin!”

“A-all right, all right! Stop shouting it to the world!”

After somehow managing to convince Miyako that she had the wrong idea, Haruto went back to chatting with other writers and exchanging contact info. After a while, the male MC turned his mic back on.

“All right, everyone, pardon the interruption, but I’d like to hear a word from Haruto Fuwa, one of the judges for the GF Bunko New Writers Contest, about his overall take on this year’s entries.”

...The time had come. Haruto sighed lightly and headed for the stage. This was something one of the three judges had to do every year, and Godo, the EIC, always left the job to the other two. Kaizu beat him at rock-paper-scissors, so it was Haruto’s burden to bear.

“Fuwa made his writing debut in the Tenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest with *Chevalier of the New World*, the hit novels that got adapted into a TV anime series just this year. Truly, he represents everything GF Bunko is all about!”

Daahahhh! Stop iiiittttt!!

GF Bunko had tons of other popular series, to say nothing of Nayuta Kani way up in the clouds. Saying that *he* was “everything GF Bunko is all about” seemed beyond presumptuous.

Swallowing the shame, he took a few jotted notes out of his pocket. “Ahh, hello. My name is Haruto Fuwa, and as you just heard, I was one of the

judges for this year's GF Bunko New Writers Contest. It was a great honor for someone as young as I am to be given this job, not to mention a little daunting, but none of the other authors who represent this label accepted the offer, so I was forced into the role."

The audience giggled a little.

The rest of his speech was little different from the inoffensive summary evaluation GF Bunko posted in the results page. The overall level was very high, but many of the entries were "strongly influenced" by previous works. Some of them were more unique, but many of these were torpedoed by the author's own complacency and lack of insight. It was important to find some weapons of your own and keep your readers fully in mind when writing. And so on.

"So... Yeah. Sorry it's the same kind of unoriginal summary that you hear from every label's rookie prize judges."

Another laugh. He was hoping for that.

"Congratulations once more to this year's prizewinners. Your careers as novelists begin here. I want you to consider all the other writers in this room your rivals, and I want you to try to surpass them if you can...because that will create a stronger GF Bunko—and a stronger publishing industry in turn. Thank you."

He gave a nod to the winners, then a deeper bow to the audience. Both applauded as he wiped a sheen of sweat off his brow. He had managed to sound smart and witty through the whole speech without slipping up once, but he had never spoken in front of such a large group before, so his mind was a mess. He didn't tell anyone, but he had practiced this speech over and over again at home.

His eyes met Aioi's as he stepped down from the stage. She smiled sweetly at him. He pretended not to notice.

Itsuki, who had deliberately camped out in front for the speech, grinned at him. "Heh-heh-heh... Nice one."

"...I'm so tired. Get me out of here..." He meant it sincerely.

"Now I'd like to hear some comments from each of our winners. Will the GF Bunko contest winners please step up!"

Guided by the MC, the six winners went back onstage. Ui Aioi was first. She talked about how, back when she was at school, a certain person taught her how hard being a pro really could be. It changed her whole outlook. *I*

studied hard...and now I'm here, a grand-prize winner. Haruto was sweating the entire time, all but expecting her to name him (judging by how she kept stealing glances at him), but she never did.

Next on the mic was runner-up Makoto Yanagase, who didn't just dress like a salaryman but actually *was* one, too. His comments were perfunctory, polite, and unremarkable, especially compared to the impact *Just Show Me Your Ass* was already having on the people assembled.

He was followed by fellow runner-up Aoba Kasamatsu, who still looked kind of peeved. "Thank you for awarding me the runner-up prize in this contest," she began before lowering her voice.

"...But I can't accept this."

That got the attention of everyone in the bored-looking audience, Itsuki included. Kasamatsu lifted up her well-sculpted eyebrows and glared at Aioi, seated on the right side of the stage.

"Instead of a novel about someone becoming the demon king of an alternate world and building a harem—like, the biggest trend-whoring template of a novel ever—I believe my novel is far more worthy of the grand prize!"



Being dissed by name seemed to bewilder Aioi a bit. She managed to smile as Kasamatsu continued.

“To be totally honest, all I can say is that the judges don’t know what they’re doing! Did they select such a by-the-book template novel because all *they* can write are trend rip-offs of their own, without a shred of originality to them?! And I hate how the other runner-up prize was awarded to this perverted filth going on and on about people’s butts! If people *that* untalented are judging this contest, then light novels are just going to get even trashier and more rehashed!”

“Wow, there’s about ten million people just like her on Twitter and 2ch, huh?” Itsuki muttered. He wasn’t unhappy or angry—just tired of it.

Haruto, meanwhile, chuckled a little as he turned an eye toward Ui Aioi onstage. She was red all the way to her ears, staring at the floor and quivering a bit. She was probably recalling herself before she met Haruto, and it must’ve been killing her.

“Now is not the time for that! Now is the time for work like mine...or work like Nayuta Kani’s *Landscape* series. High-minded, *authentic* work. We need to push these books as boldly as we can and rescue the light novel industry from the commercialism that’s putting it in a downward spiral! When *I* make my professional debut, I’m going to be shoulder to shoulder with Nayuta Kani at the top of the hill. And in this era infested with cutesiness, with pornography, with *isekai* reincarnation, with harems, with little sisters, with demon kings, with overpowered heroes, with all these ridiculous things coming out, we’re going to put an end to it and build an age of books with deeper themes. Books worthy of readers’ evaluation. Books that are *good*! Thank you!”

Haruto, not to mention a hefty chunk of the novel, manga, and anime creators in the room, had based their careers off cutesiness, pornography, *isekai* reincarnation, harems, little sisters, demon kings, and overpowered heroes. Aoba Kasamatsu’s abusive speech basically slammed the entire audience at once. But while some of them looked troubled, the majority greeted her with smiles and applause.

Why? Because most of them had a time when *they* felt that way, long ago. They truly believed the values they nurtured were universal, that individual likes and dislikes or “right and wrong” were just artificial constructs, that what *they* liked had more inherent value than anything else. They were naive,

and it was painful to look back at, but that naïveté taught them that truly creative urges weren't necessarily a bad thing. They knew that if you didn't like current trends, just buck them with your own work—and maybe, just maybe, that naively burning flame in your mind will create a masterpiece that really *does* change the world.

“Uh...?”

Kasamatsu, expecting a shower of boos, clearly didn't expect this. She gave the crowd a confused look, followed by a cute little bow, and then she briskly returned to her chair.

“I'd love for that kid to meet Kanikou,” Itsuki slyly commented. “I don't think she's ever thought of a theme her whole life.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Haruto replied with a dark smile. There were no lofty themes, no deep insight Nayuta strove to express in her work. She was just a genius, so she wrote genius-level novels. Faced with someone like that, how would this girl—brutally high-minded but so far capable of nothing aside from copying her idol—even react?



The speeches from the two honorable mentions and one Special Judges' Selection winner ended without incident (except a couple jokes that failed to land and people talking too softly to be heard). The *Gifted* manga artists came and went soon after, and before long, it was time for the final event—a raffle giveaway, using the numbers handed out to guests at registration.

The prizes included a big-screen TV, a new game system, a road bike, a robotic vacuum cleaner, a steam oven, a night at a fancy hotel, and other big-name stuff. But there were only fifteen prizes in all, which kept the odds of winning pretty low, so Itsuki was too busy eating and drinking to pay much attention. But after a few drawings:

“Number 126! Do we have 126?” The MC looked around.

Haruto poked Itsuki. “Dude, I'm 125. Weren't you right after me?”

Itsuki looked at his number. “Whoa! Hey, hey, me! I'm 126!”

He whipped his hand upward, waving it around. “Congratulations,” the MC responded. “Come on up!”

This made Itsuki beam as he walked over. It *had* to be a good omen for his anime.

It turned out that he won the robotic vacuum, the latest model, capable of cleaning up even the little nooks and crannies older types couldn't manage. *That ought to make things easier for Chihiro*, he thought, glad to win something so perfectly suited for his life instead of a bike or TV that'd just take up space.

"All right," the MC said, pointing the mic his way, "what's your name?"

"My name's Itsuki Hashima, and I debuted with the Tenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest! I'm writing *Sisterly Combat* and *All About My Little Sister* right now! I'm gonna build a whole new era! And I'm *not* gonna let the new guys zoom right by me any longer!"

Cheers and applause greeted him. He didn't mean to boast like that, but these things happen.



With the drawing over, the party came to a close, and the chief editor of Gifted Publishing rounded things out with a speech. When he wrapped it up, there was one more tradition to carry out—an *icchojime*, where everyone in the audience claps once at the same time to wish GF Bunko and *Comic Gifted* good fortune for the next year. With that, the party was over. The attendees would now either be returning home or going out drinking or singing karaoke with their friends, but otherwise, there were no particular plans.

"Itsuki," Haruto said, "I'm gonna go out drinking with Kaizu and the gang. You're coming, too, right?"

His friend shook his head. "No, I gotta get home."

"Really? Something up?"

"I'm in pretty deep shit for Volume 6."

...And Nayuta was no doubt writing her new novel now, too. He couldn't let her get ahead.

"Ah. Well, best of luck."

"Thanks."

Haruto walked toward Kaizu. He had a group of ten or so with him,

including Ui Aioi and a few other newbies.

“Oh, Itsuki Hashima?” came a sharp voice behind him. It was Aoba Kasamatsu, still in her high school uniform. She glared at him, eyes smoldering with energy.

“I’m going to build that new era! ...Excuse me!”

With a quick bow, she trotted off. Itsuki blankly watched her go for a while. Then he smiled.

“...Prove it, you little shit.”

I’m the only one who can stand shoulder to shoulder with Nayuta Kani. Neither Aoba Kasamatsu, nor the other prizewinners, nor any other writer out there can beat me. This brazen little girl mouthing off at me really lit a fire. Let’s take that passion and throw it into my work.

Burning to write, Itsuki left the event space.

15TH GF BUNKO NEW WRITERS CONTEST RESULTS**GENERAL COMMENTS**

We received a total of **1,068** entries for the commemorative fifteenth year of the New Writers Contest. Our deepest thanks go out to everyone who submitted their work.

Looking at the overall trend of the entries, we've seen a startling array of variety, from works that clearly researched current trends to more literary-oriented efforts and those where the author stuck to their guns and blazed their own trail. The six prize-winning entries we chose come in an equally impressive variety of genres, from youth romance and gag fantasy to samurai drama, otherworld reincarnation, battle action, and legal drama, each offering their own charms and attractions. Opinions were heavily split during our deliberations, and in the end, *I Woke Up as the Demon Lord of Another World, so I Just Started a Harem* was chosen as grand prize for its overall completeness and quality.

It's worth noting, however, that despite the wealth of genres seen in the entries, many of them seemed greatly influenced by already-existing novels. Being inspired by masterpieces and other works you like is hardly something to avoid, but we'd like to ask writers to think more about the weapons only they bring to battle, the charms that only they could provide with their stories.

We look forward to seeing even more uniqueness and charm in the work submitted to the 16th New Writers Contest. Everyone in the editorial department can't wait to see your next entry!



**I WOKE UP AS THE DEMON LORD OF ANOTHER
WORLD, SO I JUST STARTED A HAREM**

Ui Aioi



The After-Party

After the awards ceremony and party ended, Haruto and Kaizu joined a few other writers for an after-party. These were sometimes officially held by the publisher during awards events like these, and while GF Bunko themselves didn't organize anything, there was a tradition of the new winners going out with the judges to network and chat about cutting it in the industry. Aoba Kasamatsu and Soma Misaka, being underage, had to go home, but the other four winners were in the group.

The after-party was held in a private room in an *izakaya* that was open all night. The walls between rooms were thick enough to make serious conversation possible, allowing writers to vent and spread gossip without worrying about people outside the circle listening. There were ten in all—Haruto, Kaizu, the four winners, and four of Kaizu's and Haruto's male writer friends.

Haruto sat down at the table, only to find Ui Aioi, who had walked behind him the entire trip over, sitting right next to him. She had been after him this whole evening. It was frankly scary, as were the stares Kaizu and the others were giving him.

Once they were all seated with drinks, they kicked off with a toast. Haruto ordered a Hoegaarden Original White; Aioi did the same.

"Listen, Mr. Fuwa, let me thank you again for that talk in my class."

He shook his head lightly. "No, no, I really didn't do anything..."

This wasn't modesty on his part. He meant it. Even if his tirade in that school classroom roused her into changing her life, winning the grand prize was entirely the result of her own efforts.

"Boy," Kaizu said with another unsettling smile, "I sure wish you could tell me the whole story, Fuwa. About how you got all your pieces in place with her, you know...in detail..."

“Pieces? It’s really not like that.”

A distressed Haruto looked at Aioi. She was blushing a little, making a meaningful smile.

“I first met Mr. Fuwa when—”

She went into the full story. Kaizu was impressed.

“Well, dang. *I’m gonna have to teach at a vocational school, too. Then I can freak out at my students and whisper ‘Light novels aren’t some kids’ game, got it?’ into her ear in the sexiest voice I got. That oughtta trigger all the flags I need...*”

“I didn’t whisper it into her ear!”

Haruto was bright red now. It was an embarrassing memory to recall, and having a group of other people hear it made him wish his head could explode. He tried to paint a happy smile on himself.

“But—but hey, what about you guys?! Like, what inspired you to become a writer? What works influenced you?! How about you, Yanagase?”

He decided to address Makoto Yanagase first, mainly because he was seated across from him—the man behind the bombshell *The Goddess Must Be Punished! I’ll Save the World for You, so Just Show Me Your Ass!* and all the craziness inside it.

“Me?” he asked once the topic was thrown his way, looking dead serious.

“I wrote that book because I like spanking.”

Well, at least he didn’t beat around the bush.

“Ah, uh, um, wow... Neat... Uh, so...”

“May I go into a little more detail?” Yanagase asked, cutting off Haruto before he could ask someone else.

“S-sure, of course,” he replied, since saying no was out of the question.

Yanagase used a finger to push the bridge of his glasses up. “I was sexually aroused by spanking a woman’s rear end for the first time on the night of my fifteenth birthday...”

...It was like he was giving a presentation to his office. With clear, logical speech, peppered with occasional bouts of passion, he discussed his attraction to the spanking scene, bringing up anecdotes from his personal life and data from fellow enthusiasts. The seminar lasted a good fifteen minutes or so

before he wrapped it up. Haruto and the rest give him a spontaneous round of applause. They couldn't empathize with all of it, but his passion certainly came across.

"...Thank you very much," he said solemnly, using a wet towel to wipe his brow. "I was expecting you to be put off...but you all seem more open-minded than that."

"Oh, no, I'm pretty put off," admitted Kaizu, "but you won't find anyone here who'll criticize your personal hobbies."

"I can see that... Now I'm glad I decided to write that novel."

An ever-so-slight smile materialized on Yanagase's face.

"Um, so how about you go next, Mr. Kiso?"

Yoshihiro Kiso, the sixty-seven-year-old author of *Sengoku Kenpuden*, who looked like a living, breathing samurai himself, was the most elderly prizewinner in GF Bunko history.

"Well, I finished the novel I wrote to pass the time after I retired, and this just happened to be the nearest contest time-wise... That was all, really," he said in a calm, sober voice.

"Um, did you know it was a light novel contest?"

"No. I'd never even heard of light novels until after I was notified."

"Really...?" Haruto was shocked. "...So do you have any ideas for your next novel?"

"Well, setting foot into a completely unknown world at this age must be fate at work, I'd say. I don't know how far I can dive into it, but I'm prepared to fight it out in the light novel world until my strength fails me."

Damn... This is the coolest grandpa ever. Kiso's philosophic approach deeply affected Haruto. "That's great. So... Mr. Kamo?"

Tadashi Kamo was the thirty-something stubble-bearded author of *Illegal Trial*. The judges liked his themes and characters, but the prose itself was rough in spots.

"Ah, um, uh... Well... You know, I'm out of work..." His subdued speech came in fits and starts. "...I was out of money, so I kind of sent this as...you know, my last chance..."

He offered nothing else, instead returning to his beer.

So there was a straitlaced, spanking-obsessed salaryman, an aloof-from-the-world retiree, and an unemployed bum. The busty beauty and haughty, high-minded high schooler's impact attracted most of the attention, but the

others were real pieces of work as well. *And with their debut*, Haruto thought, *hopefully they'll survive in this industry for a while to come.*



With the final trains of the night coming soon, the after-party drew to a close. Kaizu and Kiso went home, while Yanagase, Kamo, and the other four friends announced their intention to drink 'til morning. Haruto was intending to retire himself, but just as he was leaving the restaurant, Aioi called him over.

“Mr. Fuwa... Do you want to be together a little longer? ...Just the two of us?”

Her cheeks were faintly red, her eyes moistened, her chest enormous. Haruto thought he would be sucked right into her before regaining his composure.

“Sorry, I need to get home.”

“Oh...” She let out a disappointed, bewitching sigh. “Well, can we exchange information?”

“Oh, sure... All right.”

They gave each other business cards, along with phone numbers and online IDs.

Splitting up with the crowd at the station, Haruto boarded the train and sat down, only to find that Aioi almost immediately sent him a text. It thanked him again for her big break, expressed joy at seeing him today, and invited him to meet her some other time.

She sure is pushy, he thought, smiling as he read through the long message—before tensing up at its final sentence.

I won't lose to that cute lady in editorial! ♥

...Damn, she's really gunning for me. Am I gonna be okay...?

Haruto (the virgin) felt the telltale signs of a new romantic comedy on the horizon—and shuddered.

PRIZEWINNER COMMENTS



*I WOKE UP AS THE DEMON LORD OF ANOTHER
WORLD, SO I JUST STARTED A HAREM*

Ui Aioi

It's an incredible honor to be awarded the grand prize in this year's awards. My sincere thanks go out to the editors, as well as Mr. Fuwa and Mr. Kaizu in the judging committee. I've made it this far thanks to a teacher I ran into when I was in school and I can't thank this person enough in this text, but hopefully I'll get to personally in the future. I'll make a constant effort in my novel career not to disappoint him, and I look forward to entertaining all of you as well!



*THE GODDESS MUST BE PUNISHED!
~ I'LL SAVE THE WORLD FOR YOU, SO
JUST SHOW ME YOUR ASS! ~*

Makoto Yanagase

I am filled with deep emotion to see my novel—filled with tastes that frankly cannot be described as mainstream—be honored in such glorious fashion. It truly feels like a saving grace to me, one that reminds me that I do, in fact, belong somewhere in this world. I am currently rewriting it in hopes of making it beloved by readers everywhere. If you see my final work in bookstores soon, I am hoping you will see fit to pick it up.



MEMORIES OF THE SKY

Aoba Kasamatsu

PRIZEWINNER COMMENTS

***SENGOKU KENPUDEN***

Yoshihiro Kiso

It fills me with great delight to receive such a prestigious honor, even with my lack of experience. Until my editor telephoned me to tell me about the award, I was wholly unaware of what a light novel was, but if I've been placed in battle as a new recruit like this, I intend to fight it out until death takes me. I thank my editors, and my potential new readers, in advance for their guidance and encouragement.

***MAKEN WARS***

Soma Misaki

I've always loved reading books and playing games, and I always thought about writing something of my own. This is the first time I've done it in my life, and maybe I'm biased, but I think it turned out really great. I very much look forward to it becoming a book and reaching readers across the country.

***ILLEGAL TRIAL***

Tadashi Kamo

O-okay... I'll tell you the whole story. One day, as I wallowed in unemployment, I received a phone call from editorial—and the next thing I knew, I was an author... And on that note, hello, everyone! This is Tadashi Kamo! Thanks to the total max to everyone involved in the New Writers Contest for picking a story just as riddled with problems as I am! I'm gonna aim to turn my life around just like Karma Sakazaki in the story!

Meanwhile, in Her Mind...

[illegible]

The Main Heroine

It was four PM on a late November day. At a recording studio in Tokyo, the vocal session for the drama CD included with the *All About My Little Sister*, Vol. 6, special edition was about to begin.

The anime would be formally announced in January alongside Volume 6's release, and the main cast would also be revealed. The same actors were appearing in the drama CD and main series, which meant this session would be a kind of warm-up for the anime. The dramatic choices fleshed out here would be reflected in the anime, and if the drama CD turned out well, everyone could expect big things from the TV series. If not, the negative buzz could doom the anime before it began.

After the recording, the cast, staff, and original author were slated to participate in a sort of before-party—the opposite of an after-party, where everyone would go out drinking to build teamwork before the project began in earnest. (After-parties were common in this business; before-parties were not.) As a result, all the main staff were on hand at the studio—director Munenori Tarui, screenwriter Masahiko Hirugano, producer Tsutomu Oshima, production assistant Kakeru Yamada, and casting manager Masaki Asakura. The people on the anime's audio side, including Takuro Norikura, were handling the drama CD as well. A few people from the record and TV company also showed up. From GF Bunko, there was creator and drama CD writer Itsuki, his editor, Kenjiro Toki, EIC Satoshi Godo, manga author Kaiko Mikuniyama, her editor, Kohei Tokuyama, and another young manga artist who'd be drawing a report in comic form for *Gifted* magazine.

Having a dozen or so people in the control room at once made for pretty cramped conditions. The recording booth, on the other hand, only had to hold the seven people appearing in the CD, and they had ample space to work with. Looking at the cast through the soundproof glass, Itsuki could see them

silently preparing in all the ways they saw fit—checking the script, playing with their phones, eating some *oden* from the convenience store.

“Um,” the manga reporter furtively said, “during downtime like this, does the voice talent ever chat or look over the scripts with one another?”

“That depends,” audio director Norikura replied. “The cast here hasn’t really worked together before, so this is about what I’d expect at the start.”

“They’ll get friendlier once they spend more time recording together... depending on the project.”

The portent to Tarui’s final remark unnerved the reporter. “I—I see... I was hoping I could depict them goofing around with each other in the manga, so...”

“Nah,” said Tokuyama. “You just need to write it like ‘All the actors got along great even before recording began, making them a solid team from the get-go!’”

“Huh? I can do that?”

“...*That’s how it works*,” Godo intoned.

“Um, okay,” the entirely cowed reporter said.

Kaiko giggled a little. “It’s sure feeling ‘behind the scenes’ now, isn’t it?” she said to Itsuki—but Itsuki was too fixated on the script to respond, checking right up to the end for typos or oddly worded dialogue. A lot was riding on this drama CD for him, and Kaiko, picking up on this, decided to let him focus. (The script for this drama CD ran for about twenty A4 pages, the equivalent of thirtyish pages in a paperback. In terms of time, this should be enough to produce fifty to sixty minutes of audio drama.)

Soon, it was time to start. This being the first time everyone in the anime project was on hand, Tarui, Oshima, and Itsuki entered the recording booth to say hello to the cast first. The director and producer were certainly used to this, smiling as always and saying stuff like “Let’s work together to make this a great anime—and start off by making this drama CD a success” and so on.

Itsuki, meanwhile, was much more halting.

“Ahh... Um, I’m Itsuki Hashima, the creator. This is my first anime and my first recording session, so honestly, I don’t know what I’m doing yet... Um... But as the original creator, I’ll do my best for you... S-so please, I hope you’ll respect all my beloved children and work together to make them shine even more. Thank you!”

He bowed his head as the rest of the cast said thank you in return. Then he

stumbled back to the control room, wiping away the sweat.

Toki chuckled at him. “That sounded kinda...suspicious to me. But at least you strung it together.”

Itsuki frowned.

“All right,” Norikura said into the booth mic, “let’s just go ahead, starting with page one and ending on page ten, line five, when the chapter ends.”

“Okay,” the cast replied in unison, the two actors with the first lines standing up and taking the scripts to their mics. As professional as they were, there was no guarantee they’d be perfect from the very start, so audio directors usually started with having them play it out to a certain point, then used that to decide how to proceed.

Ensuring that everyone was in place, Norikura flipped a few switches. A light on the booth’s wall turned on. That was their signal.

“Big brother, you’re sooooo stupid!!”

Out of nowhere, Ichika’s actor raised her voice in front of the mic. Her brother Kazuma had just seen her naked, and she was angry about it—a pretty typical scene from the main story.

“Wait, Ichika. You can’t go around like that; you’re indecent.”

“This is your fault! You blew up the bathroom, Kazuma!”

The actor’s voice for Ichika had sounded a little young to Itsuki during the audition, but now she sounded much closer to the image he had of the character. Her voice was naturally high, so it was kind of a stretch, but her manner of speaking was spot-on. He could tell she had been studying the novels. Kazuma, meanwhile, sounded a little too laid-back to Itsuki. The character was handsome and reserved but prone to eccentric turns of phrase, so he wanted the actor to up the silliness a bit. He wrote all this down in the script, placing check marks next to misspoken lines as he listened to the action.

When they reached line five of page ten, Norikura spoke up once more. “Okay, we’re good. Thanks a lot for that. Take a break for a bit.” Then he turned to Itsuki and Tarui. “So how did that grab you?”

“Well... How about I let the creator begin?” Tarui suggested.

“Oh, sure,” Itsuki said.

Ichika was fine as is, but if possible, he wanted her just a smidge lower in tone. Kazuma needed more emotion, along with more hysteria for the gags he delivered. Yukiko sounded overly domineering, so she needed to rein that in

a bit. Shingo needed this and that...and so on, and so on.

"I agree with Itsuki about Ichika, Kazuma, and Shingo," Tarui commented, "but I think this direction is good for Yukiko."

"Oh, you think?" Itsuki asked.

"I think that if we rein her in any further, she's gonna be totally swallowed up by the rest of the cast. She won't stand out at all."

"Hmm... Maybe so... No, but it just doesn't feel right like this..."

"True," Hirugano the screenwriter commented, "she sounds a bit haughty to me right now. But I'm with the director on this one—clamming her up would thin out the character. Maybe we could apply a fix in some other way..."

"Yeah."

"Hmm..."

"Why don't we try changing her panties?"

This out-of-left-field suggestion was offered, of course, by Kaiko.

"Yukiko's acting reminds me of a pair of black full-lace panties, but maybe we could have her imagine being more adventurous, with a Brazilian or something?"

"I have no idea what that means."

Itsuki, Tarui, and Hirugano all gave her confused looks. Only Norikura looked convinced.

"Ohhh, I see. Let's try going with that."

He began directing the cast. And he really *did* say that to the actor playing Yukiko.

"Instead of elegant lace briefs, try picturing yourself secretly sporting a daring Brazilian thong or bikini bottom... Okay, we're rolling. Let's take it from the top to page ten, line five, one more time."

He turned on the signal. It was time for take one.

Ichika performed even better than in the test take. Norikura's direction visibly improved Kazuma's performance. And after Yukiko received that total mystery of an instruction:

"...I will gladly serve as your foe. On guard!"

"...How in the...?"

Itsuki couldn't help but groan in shock. The logic behind it was an utter mystery to him, but she sounded far, far better than before. Exactly how he pictured Yukiko would talk. He glanced at Tarui and gave a proud nod,

accidentally peeking at Kaiko's eyes along the way. She had an "Aren't I just the *best*?" sneer, which he wasn't the biggest fan of, but if it turned out this well, he had to accept it.

They ran up to page ten, line five, then went back to clean up lines with acting issues, incorrect wording, or noise in the mic before taking a break. The tension around the control room loosened up, and the cast now harmoniously talking among themselves, a far cry from before the session began.

Itsuki hadn't been to any other sessions before this...but he liked this atmosphere. The audio director seemed to know his stuff, and despite all his misgivings at the audition, the voices and acting were both free of issues. Unlike *Chevalier of the New World*, which was full of groan-inducing deliveries, *All About My Little Sister* now seemed like a safe bet on the voice front.

First, we put everything we have into making this drama CD good.

Just when Itsuki was reaffirming his confidence in himself, Godo's phone started to vibrate. He left the room to pick it up...and when he came back a little while later, he looked tense. He always looked kind of scary, of course, but now it was more so than usual. For a change, he looked truly upset.

"...I got a fire to put out. KenKen, you watch over things here."

"Huh?"

Godo was in too much of a hurry to explain matters to Toki, tossing his script and pen into his bag and preparing to go.

"What's up, boss?"

The editor in chief thought for a moment or two before opening his mouth.

"...Ms. Kani's fallen ill."

His face turned white the instant the words reached his ears.

"Nayu?!" Kaiko cried in alarm.

"...Kanikou...?" Itsuki stood up to confront Godo. "What happened? How is she? Is she okay?!"

"...I don't know the details," Godo gruffly replied. "They're examining her at the hospital right now. She didn't come to her regular meeting, so

Yamagata went to the hotel and found her unresponsive in her room. I'm heading over now."

"Let me join you!" Itsuki reflexively shouted.

"You can't, Itsuki! If you leave here right now..."

"I *know* that!"

Itsuki lost his temper at Toki. This drama CD was the preliminary round for the whole anime project. Its importance couldn't be underestimated. Toki, Kaiko, Tarui, and Hirugano knew the novels well, but without the original creator (not to mention the drama CD's writer) on hand, they wouldn't be able to cover all the little details. The quality would have to suffer, and that could adversely affect the anime as well.

But still...

"But what do you *want* me to do?! I'm more worried about her than the drama CD!"

Toki didn't have an answer to that. Tarui and the others looked on silently.

"You should go to her, Mr. Hashima." It was Kaiko's gentle voice he heard first. "If you can be there for your beloved, I'm sure Nayu will be just fine. Leave the rest of this to us!"

"Kaiko...!"

Godo sighed. "...Come on. Let's get going."

"Thank you, sir...!" Itsuki turned to Tarui, face concerned. "Sorry. Something urgent came up. I leave the rest to you."

"Yep, I'll take care of it," Tarui replied, as detached as always.

Itsuki bowed deeply to him, then left the control room.



Itsuki Hashima had lost two people he held dear in the past. The first was his mother. The other was Kasuka Sekigahara—the "other person," the one who inspired him to become a writer. The author of *A Sister's All You Need!*, one of his all-time favorites.

And of course, people die. Suddenly losing someone important to you wasn't a matter for the far future. It wasn't a work of fiction. It was something that happened in real life, to everyone.

He hadn't forgotten that. He hadn't, but...for some reason, maybe he thought, *It'd all wait for me*. And now he was gritting his teeth in the taxi to the hospital, both hands balled into fists.



The taxi took about half an hour between the studio and Nayuta's hospital. They met Yamagata at the lobby.

"...How is Ms. Kani?"

"They said she needs to stay here for three or so days, but she'll live."

Godo breathed a sigh of relief as Itsuki threw himself on a seat.

"...She's diagnosed with overwork, lack of sleep, and a light case of malnutrition. I was too careless with her. I'm deeply sorry." Yamagata bowed her head down to Godo.

"What room is she in?" her boss asked.

"702."

Godo looked at Itsuki. "I'll head up after talking with Yamagata a little. Can you go see her first?"

Itsuki stood, snapping out of it. "Thank you, sir...!" And with that, he all but ran into the ward.



"Kanikou!!"

Reaching Room 702, Itsuki threw open the door without knocking.

"Hyahh?!"

Nayuta, sitting on her bed and leaning against the reclining back, let out a surprised yelp. She had a hospital gown on, an IV drip attached to her left arm, and a smartphone in her right hand. She looked a little strained but overall healthy.

Itsuki sighed a little.

“I-Itsuki...?” She turned toward him, legs dangling from the bed. “Why are you...?”

“...I came to see you,” came the blunt reply.

“But isn’t the drama CD recording today?”

“I left.”

“You...left? Is that okay?”

“I...I really don’t know. But it doesn’t matter!” Itsuki wrested back control of the subject. “What happened? Why are you here?”

With a vague smile, Nayuta awkwardly averted her eyes.

“Wellllll, I once went without sleep three nights in a row playing this video game, so I thought I’d be fine working like that for a little bit, but we both can see how that turned out. Guess I’m not as young as I used to be, ha-ha-ha... I went to the convenience store for some snacks every now and again, but I guess that wasn’t super healthy, huh...? The doctor was pretty mad at me.”

“Of course he was, you dumbass... Hmm?”

Itsuki winced...then noticed the phone in Nayuta’s hand. He approached her, grabbed her arm, and looked at it. It had a text editor with a novel open. She was working in here, too.

“...Look.” He removed his hand and glared at her. “...Why are you working yourself so hard like this? This isn’t like you at all. Do you want to be recognized that badly? Like by the movie staff, or...or the stars, or...”

He practically spat out the words, his face contorted in pain.

“No!” Nayuta shouted back, just as angry. “I only want *you* to recognize me, Itsuki!”

“Huh?”

He had no idea what she meant. *He* was the one struggling to get anywhere near Nayuta’s level.

“I mean...” Her face scrunched up. “...Itsuki, you’re working so hard. Not just in novels, but in manga and anime work, too. And Myaa’s working so hard part-time. She’s so cool, so pretty, so radiant... If someone that wonderful confessed her love, then *anyone* would love her back...sniff...nnggh...”

Tears started to form.

“Zo I thought I hadda work hard, too... Zo I did... Buh—buh I mean,

when I *don'* work hard, you never pay *attenshun* to me! Zo I wannid to work hard, so I'd shine like Myaa did! I needed to be a good auffer, or else you won't love me...! *Fwaaahhhhhh!*"

She was crying like a child now. Itsuki's eyes floated around the room. He felt terrible.

"Ugh, damn it all!"

He raised his voice, scratched his hair, and finally looked straight at Nayuta.

"All right! Kanikou, listen to me!"

"Huh?"

"The only person I love is *you*! Even if you don't do any work at all, even if you act all lame, even if you aren't shining at all! Even if you were never a good novelist in the first place, I would, and I do! I love you!"

He shouted it out, face turning red.

Nayuta, tears in her eyes, stared blankly at him for a while, blushing straight across to her ears.

Itsuki grabbed her by the shoulders, bringing his face closer to hers. The emotions running across his flushed face weren't shame, or love, or something just as sickly sweet. It was *anger*. A dangerous look, one totally unsuited for confessing one's love. It was anger at how he was straying from his own beliefs and resolve here. Anger at being such a coward that, right now, he had no other choice.

"I want to be with you. I want you to stay with me forever."

...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.

That resolve, as stated to Haruto long ago, was shattered. He could feel a blade being thrust into his dreams. The pain made it feel like his chest would burst open. But even if it meant bending his resolve—even if it meant killing

off his beliefs—he wanted to be with Nayuta. He didn't to give her up to anyone else. He didn't want to let go. Not until he died. This love, to him, was more important than his anime's success—than *his* success. He was more scared of losing her than losing his dreams.



...*Guess I can't criticize Dad anymore*, he thought, laughing to himself. And Nayuta's response to Itsuki's request had been decided long in advance.

"Okay."

The smartphone in her right hand fell to the floor. She took that hand, and her left arm attached to the IV, and wrapped them around Itsuki, burying her face in his chest.

"But," she said, her voice anxious, "are you sure, Itsuki...?"

"About what?"

"I... I'm a pretty big pain to deal with..."

"I know that."

"And... I... I'm probably really heavy..."

"Huh? In what way?"

"The weight of my love."

Itsuki squinted with a warm smile as his tears welled up.

"You're the main heroine of my story. And any good story needs weight."

Itsuki enveloped Nayuta in a passionate embrace. And with that, Itsuki Hashima and Nayuta Kani had become lovers.

A new story begins.

Afterword

The girl you thought was the heroine turned out to be the last boss but was later revealed to be the heroine after all. That's Nayuta Kani in a nutshell. I hope that you enjoyed Volume 6 of *A Sister's All You Need*.

As an author, this is a relief for me, because I've finally reached my first milestone with this one. If this was a classroom rom-com with a single protagonist, I could've easily ended it here, but this has more of an ensemble cast, a real "our *true* wonder years start now!" kind of thing. Plus, there's still the matter of Chihiro the ticking time bomb.

Volumes 5 and 6 had a lot of gritty, serious work scenes, so I'd like to get back to basics in the next volume—board games and demented tax accountants are both set to show up. They're *set* to anyway. My style's all about treating love, and work, and play, and everything else as equally important. Hopefully, I'm also pulling that off in real life (not that I am)!

■ Q&A Corner

[Q] Your female characters have a lot of Japanese words for numbers hidden in them—Nayuta, Chihiro, Miyako, Mikuniyama, Mitahora. Why is that?

[A] It's a total coincidence. My first reaction upon having it pointed out was "Oh yeah, you're right!"

[Q] How many books do you read in a month?

[A] It varies wildly between busy months and freer ones, but on the average, about as many as Haruto.

[Q] Are there really editors in chief out there who look like yakuza bosses?

[A] Not up to Godo's level, but there are some hard-faced dudes out there,

yes.

【Q】 I'd like to get into tabletop RPGs. Any recommendations?

【A】 This really depends on personal preference and who you're playing with. I'd recommend reading a few replays and rule books and picking whatever has an interesting world setting or game system. The sessions in this story are run by Haruto, a seasoned pro at adjusting things on the fly (including fudging dice rolls) and making sure everything works out great for everybody, but I wouldn't recommend playing with original rules from the get-go.

【Q】 Have you tried all the alcoholic beverages that appear in the story?

【A】 I select the ones I've liked to show up in the novels.

Yomi Hirasaka
Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist
Mid-November 2016

Afterword

Thank you for reading up to the end. This is Kantoku, the illustrator.

With the cast's relationships rapidly developing and new characters coming left and right, the world is expanding, and nothing can stop it! This series is amazing. Working, and loving, with everything you've got... What better way is there to feel fulfilled in life? These guys are so hot, they're blinding—and the way Chihiro hasn't developed at all is, in its own way, interesting as well. I'll wait as long as it takes!

The character design for the prizewinners in this volume went pretty smoothly. Male and female characters are starting to be about the same difficulty-wise for me to draw, so it's fun to think about characters without being bound by gender. In a title like this, the male supporting cast is key, and I'm really glad I got to be the illustrator and have fun doing this. Maybe it'll be even more fun if I get better! I'll try to keep my ideals high, just like Puriketsu.

あま
がき

Stop
staring
at
me.



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