

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku

10



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"Would
you like
some
miso
soup?"

Chihiro (Grade School)



“Don’t you think
it’s time we start
talking about it?”

“About what?”

“Like, marriage
and stuff!”



The Taiwan Signing Event

Bonus Story: The Birth of Chihiro Hashima



That Time My Little Brother
Became a Little Sister

Her Anxieties

The Manga Artist Is a
Little-Sister-Obsessed F██k

A Childhood Scene

Life with a Little Sister

The Stepsister vs. the
Sister Stand-Ins

Miyako's Choice

Age Twenty

Shopping with My Little Sister

The Desert

Xie Xie, Taiwan

The Akihabara Date II

The Grave Visit II

The Final Installment

I Wanted to Be the Protagonist...





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A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 10

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 10

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

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

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.

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A manga artist.

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A veteran novelist.

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A novelist who debuted alongside Kaizu.

HARUTO'S SISTER

Haruto's sister.

AYANE MITAHORA

The housekeeper's daughter.

NADESHIKO KISO

Yoshihiro Kiso's granddaughter.

NATSUME HASHIMA

Chihiro's mother and Itsuki's stepmother.

NOBUNAGA SHIROGAMINE

President of Branch Hill Ltd.

KEISUKE HASHIMA

Itsuki's father.

Bonus Story: The Birth of Chihiro Hashima

Keisuke Hashima was born the third son of a wealthy man in Gifu Prefecture. Raised sternly by his parents, he received a top-shelf education and was accepted into a fancy combination middle-high school in the Kanto region. Even away from his parents and living in a dorm, he still devoted himself to his studies, eventually getting into a leading university after passing the entrance exam on the first try. After graduation, he got hired at a large firm listed in the Tokyo Stock Exchange—the elite career track all the way down the line.

At the age of twenty-four, he married a woman three years younger than him after they were matched up by their families. She was from a famed clan with multigenerational ties to the Hashimas; her name was Nodoka. She wasn't a stunning beauty, but she had a charming smile and she wasn't afraid to use it, laughing at even tiny little things. Like a woman from a "good family," though, she was elegant in everything she did, and thanks to her advanced training, she handled all the domestic affairs with perfection. Keisuke loved her from the heart, and the feeling was mutual.

Itsuki, their son, was born about a year after the wedding. The couple also purchased their own house around that time, and they always spent the weekends together.

Itsuki was an intelligent child, if a bit standoffish, preferring to read at home rather than play outside. But when Nodoka packed some lunches and the three of them went out, he still laughed and played like any other kid. Keisuke's parents back home nagged him to no end about how to handle Itsuki's education, but otherwise, they were a happy family with a bright future ahead.

But right around when Itsuki began elementary school, Nodoka began to experience frequent bouts of illness. Eventually, she had to be hospitalized. Since Keisuke was a busy man and often couldn't get home until late at night,

he hired a housekeeper to take care of Itsuki while taking whatever time off work he had to visit Nodoka. But her condition grew gradually worse—and two years after that first hospitalization, she passed away.

After losing his wife, Keisuke devoted himself to his work like a man possessed. Concentrating on his job gave him at least a little distraction from the sadness. Once a year passed, he had grown accustomed to that sadness—not healed, but accustomed—while his workaholic ways had grown even worse.

Finally, a number of his coworkers, concerned about his aberrant work habits, all but forced him from his desk one evening to go out drinking.

“We know a pretty good place. Would you like to join us?”

“It’s so awkward whenever we leave the boss alone in the office while we relax.”

“Yeah! So just join us for a bit, okay? Help us out a little!”

Even before Nodoka’s death, Keisuke was seen as a man who, while never a social butterfly, would work harder than anyone in his department. When someone under him screwed up, he wouldn’t criticize them more than necessary; he’d always just say “That’s why the boss is around” and cover for it himself. That earned him tremendous popularity among his staff. He often enjoyed an evening drink back when his wife was alive, but since then, he had stopped drinking except when entertaining clients. If he turned to alcohol to forget his sadness, he felt, he’d probably fall out of control and drown in it. He still had Itsuki, the other part of his family, to take care of.

But:

“...Well, all right. For a little bit.”

He could tell his coworkers were sincerely concerned about him, so Keisuke decided to accept the offer.

...I really shouldn’t have come.

Keisuke was already regretting it. His staff had taken him not to a bar or *izakaya*, but to a hostess club, where each table had one or more women to serve as conversational partners. He had never been to one of these, either personally or as part of a business gathering, so he was new to all of this. With Japan’s laws related to such establishments tightening up in recent

years, he knew there was nothing as indecent about these places as there used to be, but he still didn't have the rosiest impression of them. Besides, he didn't really want to have a casual chat with any woman at all—he only wanted his late wife.

Still, this was how Keisuke wound up meeting Natsume, the woman he would eventually marry.

Keisuke's group was led to a table with three women: "Natsu," "Ririka," and "Megu." Natsu was a calm, composed beauty with a gentle smile, apparently the most popular girl among this club's staff. Ririka was more the kind of stereotypical hostess Keisuke pictured—a bit heavier on the makeup, a bit more revealing with her outfit. Megu was blessed with a beautifully well-formed face, but her smile was slightly awkward, and overall, she seemed harder to approach.

Keisuke's coworkers had arranged for these ladies in advance, and Natsu was the girl he wound up sitting next to and having most of his conversation with. At first, he just sat there sourly, drinking some hot *shochu* and occasionally chiming in with his coworkers' chats, but as Natsu actively brought him into the circle, he began to gradually loosen up.

Natsu, being the number-one lady in the club, was an excellent conversationalist. She never left Keisuke as an outsider to the table, but she carefully toed the line to keep from making him an irritated participant as well. Thus, between the alcohol and the way Natsu's soft smile reminded him of Nodoka's, Keisuke began to fully relax and enjoy chatting with her.

It was the first time he had so thoroughly enjoyed himself since the day Nodoka checked in at the hospital.

Two weeks later, Keisuke was invited by his staff to the same club. Natsu was there at the table, drinking and having fun. Last time, they mostly talked about work problems and other events at the office, but tonight, the main topic was his school years and the rural area he grew up in. Natsu's childhood home was just as out in the sticks as Keisuke's, and they hit it off talking about the ups and downs of rural life.

Two weeks after that, Keisuke went to the club alone and requested Natsu. He did it again the following week, then the week after that. Rambling

on with Natsu over some drinks made the exhaustion of his daily grind seem to melt away.

Natsu, as well, began to grow less guarded with Keisuke, talking more about herself. She'd married in her late teens, but lost her husband early on in a car accident. Their daughter was born after he died, but she, too, had been in the hospital for a number of years, so Natsu had daytime and evening jobs to cover her medical costs. Her parents had been against the marriage to start with, so she was de facto disinherited, unable to rely on her family for much of anything. Natsu was usually all smiles, but when the conversation took this turn, she looked somewhat pained in Keisuke's eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry... This conversation isn't very fun, is it?"

"No..."

Losing her beloved partner, working hard every day for the sake of her child—it was just the same as him.

Sensing a common bond with Natsu, Keisuke began to be more and more emotionally invested in the relationship—but he never invited her to spend time with him outside the club. He was just coming here to recharge after a long day; he had no ulterior motives. That's how he brushed off the guilt as he continued visiting the club.

Then one night, Keisuke, who usually paced himself to keep from overindulging, began drinking at an unusually fast clip the moment he entered the club.

The previous night, he'd gotten into a spat with his son, Itsuki, currently in his last year of middle school. Itsuki needed to start applying himself so he'd be admitted into a decent high school, but he still just whiled away his time in his room, reading.

"You need to study," Keisuke had warned him.

"Yeah, yeah," came the reply.

This had led to a confrontation in which Keisuke asked his son what he wanted to do with high school and his future.

But the responses he received were all the same:

"I don't care."

"It doesn't really matter which high school I go to."

"It's not like going to a nice school and joining a nice company would

make me happy.”

And worst of all:

“I don’t... I don’t want to have *your* life, Dad.”

Keisuke didn’t fully understand what Itsuki meant by “*your* life,” but it made him so furious his vision seemed to be whiting out.

Who the hell did this kid think worked late into the night for him every single day? He never once complained, always holding back the sadness after losing his beloved wife, and *this* was the thanks he got?

Keisuke’s urges told him to scream and shout and whack the ungrateful child on the head, but he somehow resisted, simply saying “Just study for me, all right?” before he left the room.

His emotions were still frayed a day later, and unfortunately, he had a meeting with a client he didn’t particularly like that evening—an arrogant man, part of the top management at a partner firm. Keisuke acted with the appropriate modesty and humility, drinking stuff he didn’t even like, and when it was done, he went to his usual club to kick back.

Now Keisuke was trying to get his buzz on again. Another girl was at his table, since Natsu was busy with other clubgoers, but she wasn’t as good a talker. Whenever their conversation trailed off, she’d just suggest another drink for him. Normally, he’d just leave if Natsu was unavailable, but today, he took up every offer this girl gave him, continually drinking until closing time at one in the morning.

With a wobbling gait, he made his way home. He could’ve just picked up a taxi, but in his clouded mind, he thought a walk would sober him up a little—but he had lost all sense of direction, and after about twenty minutes of wandering around, he whacked his shoulder against a utility pole and wound up draping his body around it as he passed out.

While this was happening, Natsume was leaving the hostess club and heading home. Her place was a fair distance from both the rail station and the entertainment district she worked in, so it involved walking down dimly lit streets without many people. She brought along some self-defense tools with her, but taking that way alone as a woman still made her anxious. If possible, she wanted to take a taxi, but she wasn’t financially stable enough to do that.

So, walking as fast as she could, she arrived at a point just before her

apartment building. There, from the corner of her eye, she suddenly saw a man in a business suit sitting against a utility pole. It made her gasp, then tense up.

Carefully, she examined him. He seemed to be unconscious—drunk, probably. A salaryman passed out and sleeping on the side of the road wasn't too uncommon a sight. Usually, if they were on well-populated roads, she let them be, figuring a cop on patrol or some Good Samaritan would help them out. Here, though, she decided to speak up and call the police if there was no response.

Natsume approached the man, then realized she knew his face. "Mr. Hashima?"

This customer had become a regular in the few months he'd been coming to the club. He worked for a large firm that everyone would know the name of, apparently. Ririka had been taking care of him tonight, and Natsume had been a little nervous about the drinking pace her coworker been encouraging...and, as she'd feared, here was the result.

"Mr. Hashima? ...Mr. Hashima?"

She tried shaking him a little as she called to him. He showed no signs of waking up.

So what should I do?

If he stayed here and the police hauled him in and charged him with public intoxication, it could damage his career. She couldn't call a taxi for him if he wouldn't wake up. It was December, so if he stayed here all night, he could catch a cold—or even worse, freeze to death. She knew he wasn't a bad man, either, even if he wasn't the most socially adept...

"Hmm..."

Natsume sighed. She had little choice, so she decided to take Mr. Hashima to her apartment. It was on the first floor, luckily, and Mr. Hashima was small and scrawny, so carrying him along wasn't all that difficult.

Keisuke woke up to the sound of birds singing.

"Um...?"

As he sat up, his head began to spin, his back and arm joints aching.

Where am I...?

It certainly wasn't home, at least. He winced at the pain and the cold as he looked around. It was a tiny Japanese-style room with tatami mats on the floor and a small window in the wall. A plastic cabinet with some clothing was on one side, along with a few pots of pea shoots.

Keisuke had been sleeping on a rather thin futon with two slightly dirty blankets placed on top of him. His coat, suit, and briefcase were by his pillow. Checking his wristwatch, he saw that it was past seven in the morning.

Suddenly, his nostrils picked up an appetizing aroma, and he stood up and opened the sliding screen door. There, cooking in the cramped kitchen, was a small figure—a child, actually. Her medium-length hair had one ponytail on each side, and she was wearing a skirt. She couldn't have been more than ten, but here she was, using a ladle to slowly stir a pot over a gas burner. Steam, and the smell of miso soup, wafted up from the pot.

Keisuke watched the child's back for a moment, confused. Then the girl turned off the gas and turned around. She was a cute child with big eyes. When they met Keisuke's, she looked a little fearful. He tried to say something, but didn't know what.

"Ah... Ummm..."

Then the girl bowed. "Good morning," she said, looking up at him.

"Ah, yeah... Good morning. Um... What's your name...?"

"Chihiro Kanou. I'm eleven years old."

"Oh. So...can you tell me where I am?"

The girl, Chihiro, gave him the address. It was on the other side of the hostess club from his house; he had gone the complete opposite direction.

"Mom found you lying on the road last night, so she brought you inside."

Keisuke went back through his dim memories of the previous night. He'd drunk enough to get thoroughly hammered, then passed out on a public street—a disgrace, as he saw it. The shame and self-loathing made his face feel hot.

"So...where is your mother?"

"Mom's changing clothes right now." Chihiro pointed toward a door—probably the bathroom or something.

"Oh..."

He couldn't open that door, so Keisuke just stood there awkwardly for a moment.

“Would you like some miso soup?” Chihiro timidly asked.

“...Ah, sure... Thank you.” He had zero appetite, but he nodded anyway.

“All right. Sit right there one moment, okay?”

Following her instructions, Keisuke sat on the floor by a low table. Chihiro took out a bowl from the dish drainer by the sink and ladled some miso soup into it.

“Here you go,” Chihiro said as she placed the bowl and a pair of chopsticks in front of Keisuke.

“Th-thank you.”

The soup was full of pea shoots and freshwater mussels in the shell. Picking it up, he had a taste—and reflexively opened his eyes wide. The savory flavor of the mussels melted into the soup to the most delicious effect. Despite not being hungry, he wolfed it down and felt it warm him from the core. He even noticed some finely chopped ginger mixed in with the shoots.

It was nothing like the instant miso soup Keisuke ate at times. This permeated his body, gently warming it up as it did. The nutrients in mussels are supposed to be good for your liver. Maybe this was made just for him? The thought was a little moving as he kept enjoying the soup. Then another plate was put down next to his bowl. It was a curry dish with chopped-up meat and more pea shoots and spices he could smell.

“That’s leftovers from yesterday,” Chihiro said, “but have some if you like.”

Keisuke looked at the curry, then at Chihiro.

“...I appreciate it, but I’m not that hungry right now...”

Then his stomach audibly growled, and Chihiro let out a cute snicker. “Mom always says that curry is the best thing for a hangover.”

“Is that how it works...? I guess there’s turmeric in it, yeah...”

He had a spoonful as he muttered to himself. It was on the spicy side, with a deep, rich taste that spread across his mouth. The meat and crunchy pea shoots worked well with the spices and stimulated his appetite.

“...It’s good. Very...very good.”

“Hee-hee! Thank you,” came the bashful reply.

“...Did you make this?”

“Oh, um, yes.”

“It must have taken a lot of work.”

“If you mix peach nectar into a regular box of curry, that adds a lot of

body really easily. I like to experiment with my spice mixes and stuff, too.”

“Ahh... What meat is this, by the way? I don’t think it’s beef or pork...”

“It’s tofu. If you freeze tofu, it dries it out and feels like meat.”

“Tofu? This...?”

Keisuke took a couple more bites, surprised. With every swallow, he could feel the energy return to his weakened body. Looking back, it had been a while since he’d had a truly decent meal like this. Convenience-store food and frozen dinners were about as good as his diet got; more commonly, it was energy bars and the like. He always stuck to alcohol and basic snacky things at the club.



As he was indulging in his curry:

“Oh, you’re awake?”

A beautiful voice entered his ears. He put down his spoon, then froze.

“...! You’re...”

A familiar woman had just come out of the bathroom.

She was from the hostess club he went to all the time. When he first went there with his coworkers, she had been seated at their table—one of the two other girls there with Natsu.

This was the cute one with the awkward smile. She had shared a table with him a few times when Natsu wasn’t available, but they never hit it off, and he usually excused himself in short order. Now, she wasn’t even trying to smile. In fact, her expression suggested she was kind of peeved at him.

“...Um, ‘Megu’?”

“Megu” winced a bit. “Please don’t use my stage name in front of my daughter. My real name’s Natsume Kanou.”

Natsume sat down across the table from Keisuke.

“I’ll heat up your curry, Mom.”

“Hold on, Chihiro. Would you mind leaving us alone for a little bit?”

“Okay!”

Chihiro opened the door and left the kitchen. Keisuke and Natsume then proceeded to stare silently at each other a few moments.

“...I’m really sorry for this,” he said with a bow.

Natsume sighed. “You really need to be more careful, all right? Because if worse came to worst, you could’ve died out there.”

“...I apologize. I promise I’ll pay you back for this later.”

“No, no, you don’t have to.” Natsume sighed a bit again. “...But—I’m sorry if this offends you, but I think you should really stop going to hostess clubs. I don’t think you’re really cut out for them.”

Keisuke looked daunted by this extremely blunt appraisal. “...I never thought I’d have a hostess say *that* to me,” he said, wincing.

“Well, I’m not on the clock,” she flatly replied.

“...I mean...I know it’s not exactly natural for me. I’ll admit to that. But I don’t really know how else to relax.”

“Why don’t you take up a sport? That’d be healthier.”

“That... That’s true, but...” Keisuke sputtered for a response.

“I don’t think you need to worry about Natsu, either. Okay, Mr. Hashima?”

She's got a lot more regulars than just you, and I doubt she's hurting for money too much."

This made Keisuke mentally flinch. She had read his mind. "B-but she has a sick daughter..."

"She made that up."

"Whuh?"

Natsume looked a little sheepish at the pain in Keisuke's yelp. "It's not exactly good manners to divulge this...but I guess we both played a part in it."

"Um...?"

"The life story Natsu gave you, Mr. Hashima, was pretty much copied directly from mine. She heard in advance that you're a widower, so she borrowed it to build a rapport with you... Oh, but my daughter's never been hospitalized for months at a time or anything. That part's all Natsu."

After dropping that bombshell, Natsume lowered her voice, looking a tad annoyed.

"...Listen. Our job is to give our customers something to dream about. If it helps with that, I don't necessary see falsifying your past as a bad thing... but I *do* think stealing my own private life for a story like that is going a bit too far."

Keisuke silently listened on, although he could barely make out her voice toward the end.

"Oh..." He paused for a while before coming to. "Really?"

On his face was a smile of relief.

It puzzled Natsume. "Mr. Hashima?"

"...Wow... So there's no daughter in the hospital? ...That's great."

Keisuke knew exactly how painful, how anxiety-inducing, how scary it could be to have someone dear to you suffering in the hospital. He knew how hard it was to keep supporting them. So when he learned that Natsu didn't have a sick daughter, the first thing he felt was honest, heartfelt relief. Oddly, there was nothing else—no resentment over being lied to. He was about to break at one point, and Natsu had saved him. That much remained as true as ever.

Natsume stared at him for a while, mouth agape. Then:

"...Hee-hee!"

She let out a soft snicker. It was the first time she had naturally smiled in

front of Keisuke. He found it charming.

“Ha-ha-ha! I can’t believe people actually say stuff like that. She totally tricked you, and that’s how you react? Like, who even is that nice?”

“...Aww, what do you want from me? I meant it, so...”

Keisuke blushed as Natsume continued to laugh at him.

The next day, Keisuke went to the club as usual—but asked for Megu this time, not Natsu.

Once at the table, Natsume flashed him the kind of ugly look no hostess would show a customer.

“...Didn’t I advise you to stop coming?”

“You did,” Keisuke replied in his usual emotionless tone, “but I don’t remember promising that I wouldn’t.”

“...Do you feel sorry for me with my home situation or something?”

“No. I just wanted to talk with you a little more.”

“...People say a lot that I’m the least sociable girl at this club. That it’s no fun to drink with me.”

“Well, what a coincidence. People around *my* office say I’m hard to talk to.”

“...”

Natsume glared at Keisuke for a while, then gave up and sighed. They began leisurely drinking. They didn’t try to make conversation, simply exchanging a few words every now and then. As the other tables around them erupted in laughter and shouting, things were markedly different with them. But it didn’t seem awkward to Keisuke at all. In fact, the time he spent that evening was extremely comfortable to him.

About a month had passed since Keisuke began having Megu join him. He’d go to the club and just spend an hour or two drinking—never too much—and go home. They never conversed much, and Natsume, next to him, never attempted any insincere smiles.

If anyone was puzzled and annoyed by this, it was Natsu. A regular of hers had suddenly shifted to another girl without warning, so that reaction

could've been expected. She confronted Natsume about it after closing one night, and Natsume frankly admitted the truth—she'd told Keisuke that the story Natsu concocted for herself was actually her own.

“Are you kidding?! Why did you do that?!”

“I just kinda said it,” Natsume flatly told her fuming coworker. “It flowed with the conversation. That’s okay, *riiiight?*”

It was the exact same excuse Natsu had given Natsume after she found out her coworker lied about her past to Keisuke.

“...!”

Natsu seethed at Natsume. “...Don’t expect me to take this lying down, okay?”

The harassment started the following day. Natsu would attempt to trip her up; she’d bad-mouth her to other clients; she’d hide her shoes or stain her dresses. The other ladies either did Natsu’s bidding or pretended not to notice, lest they become her next target. Natsume did bring it up to the manager, but he sided with Natsu, the club’s number-one earner, and warned Natsume not to rock the boat.

She put up with this for about a month before deciding to quit. She hated to, since it felt so much like admitting defeat, but fighting wouldn’t earn her a single yen of profit. It wasn’t like she was particularly popular there, and she had always at least suspected that this career wasn’t for her anyway.

The only people she felt sorry for were her daughter for having to live frugally again...and that one poker-faced regular she had.

Keisuke found out that Natsume left a week later. Only when he asked for Megu did the manager give him the news.

“Sorry, sir, but she actually quit the other day.”

The moment he heard that, Keisuke walked out the door and started running. After a little over ten minutes at full speed, sweaty and panting for breath, he rang the doorbell to Natsume’s apartment. With his unkempt hair, an eyewitness wouldn’t be blamed for thinking he was a criminal.

The door opened, revealing Natsume.

“...Good evening.”

“*Haah, haah, haah... Good... Good evening... Hrrk! Kafffgghh!*”

“Wh-whoa! Are you okay?!”

Helping the hacking Keisuke inside, Natsume promptly filled a cup with tap water. She gave him a few moments to drink it and calm down.

“...What’s up with you? Why’re you here this time of night?”

Keisuke thought for a bit, then averted his eyes. “Well...I heard you quit your job at the club, and the next thing I knew, I started running.”

Natsume chuckled at that. “What a piece of work you are... Always making me laugh out of nowhere.”

“I didn’t come here to make you laugh,” he groaned, a bit upset. “Can I ask why you quit without warning?”

“Because I realized I’m not suited for that line of work.”

“It took you this long to realize?!”

The unexpected rejoinder made Natsume feel embarrassed. “Well...okay, I lied. I just had problems with the rest of the staff.”

“Problems?”

“Yeah. Trouble between hostesses is pretty common in the biz.”

“...Um, was it because you told me about Natsu’s lie?”

“You’re pretty sharp,” a surprised Natsume exclaimed.

“...I’m sorry.”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about, Mr. Hashima. I was just angry that my profile got stolen.”

“...So what’re you gonna do now?”

“I have some money saved up, so I think I can get along well enough with just a day job for a while.”

“But you’ll have to go back to night work sometime?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think I’ll work as a hostess again. Anything else will probably involve a lot more physical labor, but...”

“...That sounds hard.”

“...Don’t have much of a choice. Life’s hard.” Natsume gave him a fleeting smile.

“Yeah,” Keisuke said, smiling back. “Will you marry me?”

It came out so naturally, like he was just chatting as normal. It was ridiculously sudden, but Natsume was equally unsurprised about it as she gave an answer that came out just as naturally.

“Sure, okay.”

So they were now engaged, but since each of them had a child, they couldn't immediately arrange things with their families and live together. They decided to date as a couple, on the assumption that marriage would come along soon, and see how things went.

Given that Keisuke had already met Natsume's daughter, Chihiro, it wasn't long before he began to be a regular visitor to her apartment. Chihiro was a well-adjusted kid, surprisingly so for a sixth-grader. She was a great cook, she was kindhearted, and she never acted scared of the sometimes daunting Keisuke. He didn't need long to conclude that they'd get along just fine as family.

The problem was Keisuke's son, Itsuki. He no longer sequestered himself from the world like he had when his mother passed away. There was more aspiration to his attitude now, Keisuke thought. But even in high school, he was still insular, not taking any extracurriculars. Instead, on days off, he just holed up in his room, messing around with his laptop and hardly communicating with anyone—not even his father.

It certainly wasn't a good time to introduce new family members, so Keisuke tried as he could to get closer to Itsuki. He'd ask him about his tests at school, or if he'd made any friends, or whether he was doing his homework—nothing heavy, but asked on frequent occasions. But Itsuki would just look irritated and give a reply like “nothing” or “just...whatever” all the time, and he never took the initiative to communicate. He couldn't have been less courteous, really—wonder where he got *that* from?

So time marched on with no progress, until a certain weekend day in September. Keisuke and Itsuki were silently eating dinner when out of the blue, Itsuki said, “I'm gonna be a professional novelist.” This sudden declaration startled Keisuke—but it was rare for Itsuki to talk to him at all, and this wasn't just about regular school events. It was his future dream, something positive for a change, and it gladdened Keisuke.

“A professional novelist...? ...Well, that's a great thing to aspire to.”

A professional novelist wasn't something just anyone could become, he thought, but he didn't think writing was such a bad hobby to have, at least. If it could add some drive to Itsuki's day, then all the better.

But Itsuki seemed puzzled by the positive reinforcement. “Oh,” he stammered, “no, um, not like that...”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not gonna *try* to be one,” he said, sheepish but with a bit of pride, too. “I’ve already *become* one.”

Now it was Keisuke’s turn to be puzzled. “Huh? What do you mean?”

As he explained to the thoroughly confused Keisuke, Itsuki had written a novel that placed in a publishing company’s new writer competition, and they were going to publish it. He’d received word a few days ago. They were having an award ceremony a couple months from now, and apparently, he’d earned a prize of half a million yen for placing. Normally, underage people like himself would need their guardian’s permission to submit a novel. Itsuki didn’t bother to get that, of course, until the editor had told him, “Well, you can’t work unless your parents agree to it.” Hence why he was forced to tell Keisuke.

“So...yeah... Oh, right, he also said I’m gonna need to open a bank account to keep my prize money and my royalties. You made an account to store my New Year’s gift money in, right? I’ll just use that, so lemme have the card and checkbook.”

Keisuke was dumbfounded by this one-sided barrage, but once he got his thoughts together, he began to grow angry. What was Itsuki doing, not telling his father about something so important? Which publishing company was it? Were they really trustworthy? What kind of novel did he write? Since when was he writing novels at all?

After a few minutes’ worth of these sternly worded questions, Itsuki rolled his eyes and said, “Ugh... What’s it matter to you?”

“What’s it matter to—?! It matters a *lot* to me! This is your *father* you’re talking to!”

“Whatever. Once I turn pro, I’ll live off my own money anyway.”

“Are you serious? You’re gonna support yourself your whole life writing novels?!”

“Yeah?”

“Only a small handful of people can do that, you know. People with special talent.”

That elicited a sharp glare from Itsuki. “...Well, that’s what I’m gonna be. A part of that special handful... My... My own protagonist...!”

Itsuki digested each word as he said it—and when he was done, he stood up and went to his room.

Keisuke, left in the dining room, stayed there for a while. There were so

many emotions mixing within him—anger and irritation at his selfish, egotistical son; concern for him as a parent; shock at this sudden unexpected event—that he couldn’t move.

Before that point, Keisuke and Itsuki had a relationship that, while distant, wasn’t unusual to see at their respective ages. Afterward, the obvious discord began. When he brought it up with Natsume, she said, “...Maybe he’s having a rebellious phase.”

“...Implying that Itsuki will be more up-front with me sometime in the future...? Because it feels like he’s been in his ‘rebellious phase’ since middle school, and now it’s getting worse.”

After some research, Keisuke found out that Itsuki had written a book in the “light novel” category—those books with manga-like covers he spent a lot of time reading in his room. The contest he entered was held by an outfit called Gift Publishing, an established mid-tier publisher that produced job magazines, general literature, manga periodicals, and so on. He had been awarded honorable mention, the least prestigious prize on offer.

Keisuke didn’t know much about entertainment in general, much less light novels, but he did know that Japan’s publishing industry had faced a slump in recent years. If he won the least valuable prize in a contest, it was no indication at all that Itsuki could hack it as a professional writer. Maybe he thought he was hot stuff right now, but chances were he’d face reality soon, and then he’d be forced back into finding a more decent path for himself...

“Um, so when am I gonna meet my new brother?”

As Keisuke and Natsume talked, Chihiro walked in with some tea and that aspirational question. She was already aware that the two of them planned to marry, and she was happy for them. Having never had a father in her life, she had a strong desire to live in a more traditional family setup. Plus, hearing that Keisuke had a son in high school excited her. “Wow, I’m gonna have a big brother!” she’d said. All her life, her mom had worked pretty much all day, so she never really had anyone to spoil her. A big brother would fit the bill perfectly.

“...Just a little bit longer, okay, Chihiro?”

Keisuke squinted a bit as he gave the kindly reply. Itsuki just wasn’t in the

right mindset to have a calm conversation right now. Keisuke had already decided with Natsume that they'd save the news for after his novel's publication, reasoning that he'd have cooled off by then.

It took a great deal more time than Keisuke expected for the novel to see the light of day. He didn't know at first, but novels didn't immediately get published after winning a prize; instead, Itsuki would be assigned an editor and go through several rounds of drafts. Light novels also required illustrations, which took time.

The editing and illustrating process for Itsuki's book was apparently slower going than for the other prizewinners that year; he was notified of the prize in September, but *Sister of the Apocalypse*, Itsuki's debut work, didn't hit bookstores until next June, nearly nine months later.

"...So you really got the book published."

Keisuke watched Itsuki as he held a copy of *Sister of the Apocalypse* in his hands and grinned. The moment he spoke, Itsuki frowned and gave him a deadpan "yeah."

"Can I read it to see what it's like?"

"...No way. You wouldn't understand it."

The flat refusal annoyed Keisuke, but he meekly stepped back.

Not long later, he stopped by a bookstore that stayed open late. Confirming that his son's book really *was* for sale on the shelf, he picked up *Sister of the Apocalypse* and took it to the register, feeling a little proud of himself. Then, back at home, he settled down on a chair in his living room and began to read.

"Phew..."

Somehow managing to slog his way to the end, Keisuke turned over the final page with a strained expression. A cold sweat erupted across his body. His hands were trembling slightly.

...*Did Itsuki really write...whatever this is...?*

Just then, Itsuki came down the stairs and into the living room. He took a glance at Keisuke, then at the book he was reading.

“Ah... Why do you have that?”

“...I just purchased it,” Keisuke said woodenly.

“...Oh.” Itsuki looked somewhere between uncomfortable and embarrassed as Keisuke kept choking out words.

“You... You wrote this *thing*?”

Picking up on the negative nuances of the question, Itsuki’s face hardened. “...I told you you wouldn’t understand it.”

“Of course I wouldn’t...! Who *would* understand this kind of thing?!” Keisuke raised his voice, making Itsuki reel back a bit.

“Well, I don’t *need* you to understand it! This... This is *me*! *My* novel! I put all of myself into it!”

This boggled Keisuke’s mind. “...Are you being serious...? This... This disgusting piece of...”

“...!”

Itsuki’s face turned red with rage. “...Just forget it! Goddammit!”

He stormed back upstairs. Keisuke heard the door slam loud up above, and then he threw his copy of *Sister of the Apocalypse* on the floor.

A few days later, Keisuke went to visit Natsume, a grave look on his face.

“I... I want to call off the marriage.”

Natsume, understandably shocked, asked why. It turned out, as Keisuke put it, that his son Itsuki was a deviant with an abnormal obsession over the concept of “little sisters.”

So she read the copy of *Sister of the Apocalypse* he’d brought along. Working at a hostess club, she had dealt with anime and manga fans before, giving her more insight into the culture than Keisuke—but the love for the little-sister trope etched into this novel was, even by her standards, way off the mainstream.

“...But it’s still just a novel,” she countered. “Itsuki may not actually think the way the guy in this novel does.”

“...But Itsuki told me himself. He said he put everything he had within himself into this novel. ‘This is *me*,’ he told me.”

“Oh... He did?” It stunned Natsume into silence.

“If I marry you,” Keisuke solemnly stated, “and Chihiro becomes his little

sister, he may very well do something we'll never be able to undo for all time. So... I'm sorry for this, but..."

"No!!"

The shout from Chihiro in the other room interrupted Keisuke mid-sentence.

"Ch-Chihiro..."

"You heard that, Chihiro...?"

The girl went up to the panicking pair, tears in her eyes. "Mom, you need Mr. Hashima! And I want him to be my dad! I want us to be a family!"

"And I want that for us, too...but I can't expose you to danger, either."

"If I can have a big brother, I don't care what he does!"

"No, um, Chihiro, I'm not sure you're understanding the potential issue here...!"

Chihiro's self-sacrificing ways gave Keisuke serious pause.

"I hate to say this as his father, but I... I'm scared of Itsuki. I honestly have no idea what's going on in that head of his. But one thing I do know: There's no way in hell I can let him have a little sister."

"Then I'll be a boy!"

"Huh?!"

"What are you talking about, Chihiro?"

Keisuke and Natsume stared blankly at the girl.

"...I'll pretend to be a boy when I'm around Itsuki. I think he'll act perfectly normal around a little brother."

"N-no, but... Pretending to be a boy? That's just crazy..."

"I'm serious! Please...! Please don't say you'll call off the wedding!"

"Ugh..."

Keisuke faltered under Chihiro's earnest pleas. He wanted to form a family with Natsume and Chihiro, too. The idea of his future stepdaughter posing as a boy around Itsuki was so ridiculous, so beyond the realm of common sense...but maybe it was at least worth considering.

"...Let's think about it, Keisuke."

With Natsume voicing her agreement, Keisuke decided to honestly consider how realistic Chihiro's idea was.

Her body shape would be the main issue...but even considering the fact that she was in her first year of middle school, she was uncommonly small

for her age. It was a trait she apparently shared with Natsume's mother, so chances were it was in the genes. As long as her breasts didn't start to rapidly grow, she ought to be able to fool him.

Next up was her voice. That voice was in the midst of changing at the moment, so it wasn't a big problem, but if it remained high-pitched in the long term, it'd seem pretty weird after a while. But some people's voices never changed, and some men naturally had high voices.

What about the name, though? It was pure luck, but *Chihiro* happened to be a name applicable to both boys and girls. Clothing? The middle school that Chihiro would be going to once she lived at Keisuke's residence actually had no uniform dress code.

Thus, after all their debate and discussion, they came to a conclusion. If all three of them worked together, it wouldn't be impossible for them to fake Chihiro's gender in front of Itsuki at home.

They couldn't do that their whole lives, of course. Maybe he'd find out sooner than later. But they'd just have to believe Itsuki would get over whatever was going on in his mind before then. And looking at the reviews of *Sister of the Apocalypse* online, Keisuke found that the majority of readers were just as repulsed as he was. He couldn't say what kind of mistake led to it winning a prize, but at this rate, there was no way Itsuki could go on as a professional novelist. He'd face reality, become a normal high school student, graduate into a normal college student, and once he experienced some normal love, that twisted desire for "sister-love" would simmer down. It was hopeful thinking on Keisuke's part, but it was all he had.

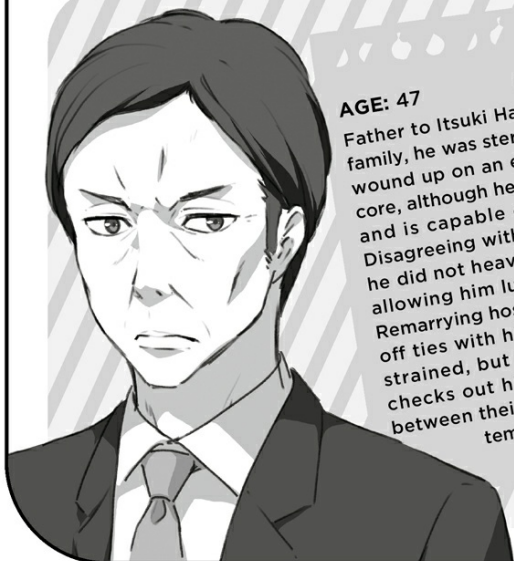
"...Are you sure about this, Chihiro?" Keisuke asked.

Chihiro resolutely nodded. "Yes. I'm a girl...or a boy...who wants a family."

Thus was born the secret that altered the life of not only Itsuki, but many others around him. Keisuke and Natsume were intelligent people, not the sort to dip their hands into such a harebrained idea from a child like this...but maybe the experience of reading *Sister of the Apocalypse* had loosened a screw or two in their minds as well.

It was about a month later when Chihiro, the "son" of his father's new marriage partner, met face-to-face with Itsuki.

KEISUKE HASHIMA



AGE: 47

BORN: August 20

Father to Itsuki Hashima. The third son of a rich Gifu family, he was sternly educated from a young age and wound up on an elite career track. Passionate at the core, although he has trouble expressing his emotions and is capable of some pretty reckless behavior. Disagreeing with his family's approach to education, he did not heavily push Itsuki toward intense study, allowing him luxuries like all the novels he wanted. Remarrying hostess Natsume caused his family to cut off ties with him; his relationship with Itsuki is also strained, but he keeps tabs on his son and always checks out his book releases. He may deny it, but between their clumsiness, passion, and hot-and-cold tempers, he and Itsuki resemble each other.

NATSUME HASHIMA



AGE: 36

BORN: May 11

Chihiro Hashima's mother. Intelligent and popular enough to serve as student council president in high school, she wound up falling so deeply in love with a schoolteacher that she dropped out to marry him, despite all the opposition. Her husband died in a car accident a short time later, and soon after, she gave birth to their daughter, Chihiro. As a single mother, she began taking jobs working day and night once Chihiro reached school age; it was at one of her evening jobs where she met Keisuke Hashima. Her stage name at the hostess club is a play on words between "Natsume" and "nutmeg."

That Time My Little Brother Became a Little Sister

“But I really am his little sister!!”

It was a day in late June, shortly after Itsuki Hashima had held a white box screening of Episode 1 of *All About My Little Sister*, followed by a six-character RPG session with the usual gang plus Ashley. After a pitched battle, Chihiro (Sen) triumphed against Deathmask (Nayuta)—but when Nayuta said, *You’re just a little sister in the game, aren’t you, Chihirooooo?* that triggered something within her. Finally, it all exploded into the light of day—the great secret she had been holding all this time.

The shouted revelation elicited varied reactions from the members of the audience. Ashley, who had known the truth all along, shook from head to toe with barely contained laughter. Toki, who was pretty sure of it but lacked solid evidence, braced for the maelstrom to come. Nayuta, Haruto, and Miyako gave puzzled “What is he talking about?” looks. And Itsuki, looking just as flummoxed, said:

“Huh? Chihiro... What do you...?”

But before he could finish the question, Chihiro said:

“Ah, um, umm... I-I’m...”

“You’re...?”

“I’m just kidding, guys!”

She grinned, trying to play it off.

“Uh? Huh?”

Itsuki helplessly blinked as Chihiro gave a weak laugh.

“Aw, c’mon, guys. I was just joking a little. You don’t have to take it seriously, Itsuki. This is the part where you’re, like, supposed to make fun of

me?”

“Oh, uh... Right! You were joking!” Miyako laughed. “You sounded so serious about it, you kind of threw me!”

“Yeah, that was pretty sudden! If you’re gonna play a joke on us, you need to make it more obvious!”

Chihiro smiled bashfully at Haruto’s criticism. “Ah, ha-ha-ha... I’m sorry. I’m not too used to it, so... Hee-hee...”

“Nya-ha-ha! Don’t surprise me like that,” Nayuta said, laughing. “I was just about to believe you really *were* his little sister!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Oh, come on, Ms. Kani, you know that’d never happen!”

So Miyako, Haruto, and Nayuta all saw it as a joke—and Itsuki was ready to join them.

“Oh... You were joking? Oh! Oh, I get it!” He wasn’t completely recovered from the idea yet, but he attempted to treat it the same way the other three did.

Phew...that was close...!

Somehow managing to pull together a smile, Chihiro realized that her heart was beating so fast, it felt ready to explode.

But then the doorbell rang.

“Oh, did I have a package?” Itsuki stood up and answered it.

“Eyyyy!”

Opening the door, he found light novel illustrator Setsuna Ena standing there.

“Ooh, Setsuna! You came!”

“Yeah, I saw your e-mail just now, so I rushed over as soon as I could!”

Itsuki had invited Setsuna to the screening, but regular e-mail was the only remotely reliable way to contact him, and even then, he could go for days without checking his inbox. Thus, Itsuki had assumed he’d missed the message yet again.

“Congratulations again on your anime, sir!”

“Thanks. Come on in. We just wrapped up our RPG session, so how ’bout we watch the episode again?”

“Sweet!”

Setsuna stepped into Itsuki’s apartment.

“Hey guys! My name’s Puriketsu, and I’m an illustrator for

aahhhhh?!!”

Before he'd even finished his introduction, Setsuna suddenly cut himself off, pointed at Chihiro, and started screaming.

“Aahhhhh?!” Chihiro, for her part, stared at Setsuna in wide-eyed surprise and let out a scream of her own.

“Wh-what’s wrong, you two?!” a surprised Itsuki asked.

“Um, umm, he, ah, ahh...”

Just when she thought she could play off the whole thing as a joke, *he* just had to arrive out of nowhere. Chihiro couldn't even form coherent speech to respond.

Setsuna, meanwhile, was beside himself with excitement. “Sir! It’s her! Chihiro! The girl with the Ass of the Millennium! I’ve been looking for her for, like, a year now! Oh man, what are the odds?! Like, am I really seeing Chihiro right in your apartment?! You two knew each other this whole time?!”

This ×××××× ×××××× son of a...!

Before she could stop him, Setsuna started yammering away. Chihiro cursed him with all the dirty words she could muster in her mind, her face turning into a mask of rage.

“Uh, uhh, Chihiro...?”

Itsuki, breaking out in a cold sweat, alternated between looking at Chihiro, then Setsuna.

“Um... Hello, ha-ha! Do you know my brother? I think you might be mistaking me for someone else.” With a smile, Chihiro attempted one final, desperate measure.

But Setsuna just gave her a strange look. “Huh? What’re you talking about, Chihiro?”

“That’s never gonna work,” a tense-looking Itsuki said. “He’s calling you Chihiro and everything...”

That was the death knell for her. With a low groan, she frowned, pouting a little. “...All right. Yes, I *am* his little sister. Are you happy now?”

“Why’re *you* angry at me...?”

Itsuki looked completely bewildered as he spoke. Then he took a few deep breaths and sat down next to Chihiro, studying her face and body close-up.

“Hmmm... So...you... You’re really a girl?”

The intense staring made Chihiro blush as she nodded.

“HMMMMM... That’s hard for me to swallow...”

“You mean I look nothing like a woman to you?” Chihiro had a mixed reaction to this.

“No, I don’t mean your looks... Like, I mean, we lived under the same roof until I moved out! Would I really never have noticed that whole time...?”

“Whenever you were at home, Itsuki, you were almost always up in your room, so...”

“Yeah, but...*hhhhmmmmmmmm*...” He was still not ready to accept this.

“Okay, um...,” Chihiro timidly began, “can I maybe show you some evidence?”

“E-evidence?!” Itsuki blushed and waved his arms. “That’s way too forward of you!”

“Wh-whoa,” Chihiro said, realizing how that had been interpreted. “What’re you imagining, Itsuki?”

“Like, if you wanna prove you’re a girl, then it’s either gonna have to be your boobs or—”

“Don’t jump to weird conclusions like that! I was talking about my student ID card! I go to school as a girl, so...” She took the card out from her bag and checked the information. “...Oh. My gender’s not on it...”

There was no “Gender” box on the card at all. Her photo was printed on it, but it didn’t show her girls’ school uniform, and she was wearing the same hairstyle she had right now. The card did nothing to help her case.

“Okay, um, I’ll go to city hall tomorrow and get you a copy of our family register, so—”

“Eh-heh-heh...” Ashley smiled as she interrupted the frantic Chihiro. “No need for that. I will personally vouch for the fact that Chihiro here is a young woman.”

“Ashley...?” Itsuki turned toward her. “You knew?”

“Yes, I caught her naked by accident once in my office.”

“Hold on. Why is a tax accountant stumbling upon naked student housekeepers in her office?”

“Oh, quit fussing over the details!” Ashley had no trouble overpowering Itsuki’s argument. “But I’ll attest to it, okay? Chihiro *definitely* doesn’t have a penis!”

“That—that’s so graphic...!” Chihiro blushed, turning a resentful eye to Ashley.

“...Hmmm... Well, regardless of Ashley’s testimony, if Chihiro insists it’s true, then I guess it must be... Setsuna would never mistake a guy’s ass for a girl’s, so... Hmm... Guess I’ll have to believe it...” Itsuki sighed deeply, finally accepting it. “*Haah*... But really... Hiding your gender? Why’d you have to do something as silly as that?”

He made an effort to keep his voice even as he asked.

Chihiro turned her head down a little. “...When Mom and Dad were talking about marrying, and your debut novel came out... Dad read it, and, um, he...got worried for me. So he started talking about calling off the wedding.”

“Oh? Wait a sec. I don’t get where this is leading. Dad read that book and he got worried about *you*? What for?”

Itsuki didn’t seem to understand the context of Chihiro’s story. He was the only person in the room who didn’t.

“Ohhhh.”

“Ahhh.”

“Yes, yes...”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

Miyako, Toki, Nayuta, and Haruto all looked extremely convinced, further confusing Itsuki.

“Why’s that make sense?”

“Well,” Haruto explained, “even to a light novel nerd like me, your first novel was pretty insane, you know. And your dad’s a total regular Joe, isn’t he? No light novels, no manga, no nothing? If he read *that* without building up any resistance at all...”

“Yes,” added Ashley, “I’ve read all your work, but *that* novel was the most incomprehensible one of all.”

“*Sister of the Apocalypse* is a divine masterpiece! Only the chosen ones can understand its glory!” Nayuta could always be counted on to back up Itsuki.

Toki looked pained as he shared the truth. “We knew from your submitted manuscript that people would either love or hate that novel. GF Bunko published it because we figured whoever latched on to it would latch on *hard*. But I have to admit, we never really thought about what the author’s parents

would think...”

“...Nngghh... I can’t believe people are criticizing my first novel five years into my pro career...”

Having all this feedback out of nowhere made Itsuki sulk a little as Chihiro continued.

“Um, so Dad talked about calling it off, and Mom read the book and seemed pretty open to the idea... So I suggested to Mom and Dad that I could pretend to be a boy around you.”

“Huh?! *You* suggested it?!”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you...? That’s so ridiculous...!”

“...Because I wanted a family,” Chihiro shakily replied. “...I didn’t have a dad growing up, so I always fantasized about having a family like other people... I could have a mom and a dad and maybe even a big brother, and we’d all eat at the same table... I really wanted it.”

“So you were willing to lie for that? Even if it meant lying to a *member of that special family*?” Itsuki’s tone was curt, almost judgmental, and her shoulders quivered.

“...!”

“Did you think you could have a real family if you were tricking the newest member of it the whole time? That’s so...shallow.”

“H-hang on, Itsuki...” Miyako was about to intervene, but then she stopped. Nobody could say anything. It was easy to see why Itsuki would be angry about this.

“Oh...” Large tears began to well out from Chihiro’s eyes. “...I’m—I’m sorry... Itsuki... I’m sorry...I lied...and tricked you... I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

She hung her head, apologizing repeatedly as she cried. Itsuki looked upon his little brother—no, sister—and, in a voice clear enough for all to hear, said:

“Okay, you’re forgiven!!”

“Hwehh...?”

Chihiro’s curious face rose, her reddened eyes looking at Itsuki.

Her brother gave her a bold smile. “You’re forgiven. So forget about it.”

“Ah... Are—are you sure? I lied to you for such a long time...”

Chihiro was more shocked than relieved, doubtful she’d ever be so readily forgiven.

Itsuki sighed back at her. “Well, yeah, I have a few things I’d like to say, and I’m really not a fan of how my dad and stepmom played along with that crazy lie...but it *did* allow me to meet you, Chihiro. You’ve been a huge help to me, and it’s not like discovering you’re a girl makes all those memories go away. Besides...”

His content smile complemented his lively voice.

“You just told me I had a sister all along! What have I got to complain about? Ha-ha-ha! Today’s the happiest day of my life! C’mon, guys! Time to celebrate the occasion with another toast!”

Chihiro stared blankly for a bit at Itsuki as he carried on. Then a smile came across her lips.

“Thanks, Itsuki... In that case, um... I’m glad to be your sister.”



“You bet! And I’m glad to have you...as my little *sister*!”

The term *little sister* made Chihiro’s eyes go wide open. “You got it!” she said in an overjoyed, girlish voice.



And so the *All About My Little Sister* screening party turned into a coming-out celebration.

In addition to the food she already made, Chihiro brought a hot plate over to the low *kotatsu* table and whipped up some more meat and shrimp. The “congrats” beer enjoyed earlier in the afternoon was augmented with more Belgian beer and Japanese sake, and everyone dove right in. Itsuki was running on all cylinders, rambling on and on about just how happy he was to have Chihiro as a sister...and even Chihiro, so wooden at first, climbed aboard his bandwagon and started to have fun.

...If the news was this welcome, I should’ve revealed it sooner.

“Hey, Chihiro! The meat’s ready!”

“Thanks, Itsuki... Oh, I’ll pour some sake for you all.”

“Oh, sweet! Man, nothing like some sake poured out by your little sister!”

“Er, it’s not gonna change how it tastes, will it?”

Meanwhile, everyone else in the room—especially Miyako, Haruto, and Nayuta, who never suspected once that Chihiro might be a girl—felt pretty lost at sea. The first question was how to address her.

“So, um...are you still fine with us calling you Chihiro?”

“Sure,” Chihiro told a hesitant Miyako. “My nickname around school is Chi-hee, so I’m pretty flexible to anything.”

“Hmm... All right. Boy, this’ll still take some getting used to...”

“Yeah, it’s kind of weird. Never thought I’d live through a plot twist like this.” Haruto gave a vague sort of grin.

“I’m fine with it, though,” Nayuta said.

“Yeah,” Miyako added, “and I think I’ll get used to that nickname pretty quickly.”

“Sure, that’s fine. Hee-hee... It feels kind of awkward to have someone call you something new...”

“Awww,” Miyako and Nayuta said at the same time as Chihiro bashfully fidgeted in front of them.

“Still,” observed Setsuna as he looked at Itsuki, “I had no idea Chihiro was your sister, Itsuki! Please, sir, can you tell her to let me look at her ass?!”

“No! I don’t care if it’s you asking, Setsuna; I’m not showing my sister’s ass to anybody!”

“But if I can take just one look at Chihiro’s Ass of the Millennium, I’ll be able to level up *so* much as an illustrator!”

Itsuki groaned. “...I’d like to help with that...but no! Even if you leveling up makes millions of people happier, and the mobile games and books you work on become megahits, and the impact pumps billions of yen to the Japanese economy, I *refuse* to let you look at Chihiro’s ass!”

“Oh, Itsuki... I’m glad you said that, but wow, that’s heavy...!”

Itsuki’s flat refusal was both moving and chuckle-inducing to Chihiro.

Meanwhile, Kenjiro Toki, watching them carry on, felt a pang of concern.

“...”

Chihiro revealing her true gender had been broadly accepted by her friend circle without major drama. Itsuki discovering he had a little sister all along didn’t seem to decisively change their rapport at all. It simply deepened the relationship they already had going—or so it seemed to his eyes.

But something still made him uneasy. What could it be? He hoped he was just worrying over nothing—but sadly, his concerns would turn out all too true in due time.

Her Anxieties

The screening-party-turned-revelation celebration wrapped up around nine in the evening. Chihiro, Miyako, Haruto, Toki, and Ashley left the apartment, leaving Itsuki alone with Nayuta Kani. She sat next to Itsuki, sidling up to him.

“What a surprise, huh?”

“Yeah, it was,” Itsuki replied.

“I’ve got one scary new rival to compete against now, huh?”

She tried to make it sound like a matter-of-fact observation, but on the inside, she was nervous. She stole glances at Itsuki’s face, but he just looked blankly back at her.

“Rival?” he asked.

“Well, Chi’s your little sister! Don’t you want to marry her or something? ...And not me?”

She had acted serene about it all evening, but ever since Chihiro made her revelation, Nayuta’s heart had been full of anxieties.

Itsuki gave her a wry grin. “Didn’t we cover all this when Aoba came around? My sister’s one thing, but my girlfriend’s another.”

He had indeed said this, back when the high school novelist Aoba Kasamatsu came over and buttered him up by calling him “Big Bro” repeatedly. Nayuta promptly came in to play defense, and Itsuki had assuaged her by describing how lovers and sisters occupied different parts of his brain.

“But if Ao’s a little-sister character to you, then what about Chi? She’s a *real* little sister, so...”

“That’s all the more reason why,” Itsuki declared to the still-anxious Nayuta. “Chihiro’s not just a character—she’s real family, so I could never

look at her from a lover's standpoint. That's where I draw the line. Real life is different from novels. And the main heroine in my *real-life* story is you and you alone."

"Itsuki...!" Nayuta's eyes grew glossy as she hugged him, her emotions surging.

"Wh-whoa, Kanikou—"

She silenced Itsuki by inserting her tongue into his mouth. Itsuki, answering the call, entwined his own around it. And once the deep kiss had left both of them gasping for breath, Nayuta looked at Itsuki, lust melting into her eyes, and whispered sweetly to him.

"I love you, Itsuki...so let's do lots of stuff you *can't* do with your sister, okay?"



The Manga Artist Is a Little-Sister-Obsessed F███k

Just as Nayuta and Itsuki were starting to get affectionate, Miyako was back at her apartment, taking a bath. As she soaked in the water, her roommate Kaiko Mikuniyama popped into the bathroom for a shower, trying to wake herself up a little.

“Hey, Kaiko. Still at it?”

“Oh, hi, Myaa. You’re back?”

Kaiko was at Itsuki’s place for the screening but left early, as she still had work to do—which meant she wasn’t around for Chihiro’s revelation. But when Miyako told her the story...

“Aaaaiiiiiiiiieeeeeee!! Nooooooooooooo!! I’m never gonna live this dowaawwnnnnn!! Oooooohhhhhh!! Gaaahhhhhhhh!!”

Kaiko all but began to cry tears of blood out of frustration. She herself was a great fan of the little-sister trope, enough so to keep up with Itsuki in conversation about it. Now she realized she had nearly been able to witness a little sister who had passed herself off as a boy for years *finally* revealing the truth to her big brother—a truly historical event—and she missed it by just a couple hours. The sheer disappointment was indescribable.

“Why did I have to put my work first *tonight*? Ahhhh, I’m such a stupid idiot!! Stupid, stupid, stupid!!”

The fully nude Kaiko rolled around the bathroom floor in agony, hands over her head.

“Well, I... I think that’s really professional of you. Nayu could learn a lot from that.” Miyako’s encouragement did little to quell Kaiko’s regrets.

“I’ve gotta go back! I need to see Chihiro as a little sister!”

“No, don’t! She’s gone back to her house anyway!”

“I’ll just get the address from Mr. Hashima!”

“You’re going to barge into his family’s house?! You *really* shouldn’t!”

It was only with a hurried full nelson that Miyako kept Kaiko from

jumping out of their apartment and sprinting down the street naked.

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!! I wanna
goooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!”

“You’re not a child, okay?!”

The naked Miyako did her very best to restrain the kicking, screaming, naked Kaiko.

“And if you did see Chi right now, what would you do to her?!”

“I’d strip her down!”

“You’d *what*?”

“I’d take her clothes off and check to see what kind of undergarments she had on! Then I’d have her model for me, and then I’d strip her *all the way* down, draw her from different angles, give her some of my own lingerie, and then we’d hold a little fashion show right there!”

Has she lost her mind?

“Have you lost your mind?”



“It’s been my dream for years to give a little sister my very own choice of lingerie!”

“Chi’s not *your* little sister!” she rightfully declared.

“Little sisters are a public asset!” Kaiko calmly replied. “Mr. Hashima’s little sister is just like *my* little sister!”

“No she’s not!”

“Nnnngh, it’s not fair! Why does only *he* get to enjoy one?! I love little sisters just as much as him, so why’s he the only one who gets one?! I’m gonna sue him for having a monopoly on little sisters!”

“Good luck in court...”

“Uggghh, I want one so bad... So baaaaaad! Even if it’s leftovers from Mr. Hashima! C’mon, just give me the leftoverrrrrrrs...” Before her ability to form coherent thoughts deteriorated any further, Kaiko finally burst into open weeping.

“All right, all right... Once you’re done with the chapter you’re drawing, we can go to Itsuki’s house together whenever she visits him next, okay...?”

“We can?!”

“Sure. So keep up the good work for now, all right?”

“All right!”

Miyako sighed. Somehow, she had managed to calm down Kaiko.

For now, though, she resolved to keep Chihiro at least an arm’s length away from her at all times.

A Childhood Scene

As she recalled, Chihiro Hashima had first wished for a big brother even before she started elementary school. Her mother had taken her to a department store—she needed to buy clothing for her job. Chihiro didn't expect Mom to buy anything for her, but just getting to go out on the town together was fun in itself.

The two of them browsed around the store for a bit, and then her mother sat her down on a bench in the store's waiting area—she needed a little time of her own to shop, she said. Chihiro was used to waiting by herself. She watched the people passing by—it was the weekend, so there were a lot of parents with their children. It didn't particularly stir her as she patiently waited for her mother.

Then she heard a child crying nearby. Turning her head, she found a girl about her age sitting on the floor and bawling. Next to her was a boy maybe a few years older than her, looking concerned. To Chihiro, they looked like a pair of siblings who had gotten lost in the store.

The sister, screaming for Mommy and Daddy at the top of her lungs, irritated Chihiro a little. *Can't she be quiet? She's practically my age. It's so childish*, thought little kindergartener Chihiro as she watched.

Suddenly, the brother sat himself down on the floor, brought his head up to his sister's, and made a goofy face at her. The sister watched blankly for a moment, then started crying again. The brother tried another silly face—no effect. Still, he kept trying, patiently talking to her with a big smile on his face to make her stop.

After some more time, the little sister gradually grew quiet. She took her brother's outstretched hand and stood up, still looking discouraged as the two of them began to walk off.

Suddenly, they both began beaming. The sister let go of her brother's hand and started running. Ahead of them were a kindly looking husband and

wife, presumably their parents. The mother held on tight to the girl as she burst into tears all over again. The boy took his time coming over, looking a bit bashful; his father patted his head, and then tears began coming out of the brother's eyes. He must've been aching to cry, too, but he'd held it in, smiling the whole time to keep his sister's spirits high.

Something about the whole scene seemed so sublime, so beautiful to Chihiro. *That* was what a big brother was. Here was a sister, a mother, a brother, and a father—a true family—and Chihiro watched them closely as they left in happiness, never even realizing that she was starting to cry herself.



Waking up in the morning, Chihiro noticed the remains of tears across her face.

Oh. Right.

Now she realized what she had been thinking back then. *"I want a big brother."* *"I want a normal, happy family."*

When she'd heard that Keisuke Hashima might call off the marriage with her mother, Natsume, she wanted to stop him. She even made a suggestion that she knew, despite her childish age, was questionable at best. But why? Why did she yearn so hard for a family, for a big brother?

Recalling that early memory in her life, Chihiro smiled. It was a tiny vignette of a scene—too tiny, really, to be called a traumatic or formative experience. It was nothing more, really, than a typical scene from a typical family. And she wanted it so bad. But for all her life, it just seemed that little bit out of reach.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

So are the three girls sharing the apartment generally naked the whole time in there?



Of course not! It's only Nayu who's "generally naked"!

She's right. It's only common sense to put on some undergarments.



That's *all* you've got on most of the time...

QUESTION

I was a loner in college, but did you see people like that at your school?

Well, sure, you'll find people with no friends in just about any college, I think. Me, for example.



Life with a Little Sister

It was the evening of the day after Chihiro revealed the truth to Itsuki, and now there was a spring in her step as she walked to his apartment, a bag full of fresh dinner ingredients hanging from her arm. Tonight would be the first time she cooked at her brother's place as a little sister.

She was dressed in a short-sleeved shirt and shorts—a unisex outfit not much different from what she used to wear. She gave some consideration to a skirt, but something about going full “girl” overnight met with resistance in her mind. She had made one change—nothing big, she thought—but her friends went nuts over it at school. (“Wow, Chi-hee’s finally discovered what the word *fashion* means!”)

Wonder how my brother will react...

She was a little nervous as she walked up to Itsuki's place and opened the door. The moment Itsuki saw her face, his eyes widened in surprise.

“H-hey, Chihiro. You changed up your bangs, huh? It looks good.” He smiled.

“Th-thanks,” Chihiro replied, cheeks glowing slightly red.

“What’re you gonna make tonight?”

She opened up the bag a little to show him. “I bought a lot of potatoes today, so I thought I’d use them to make beef stew and potato salad. Call it potato bliss from your potato sis.”

“Hmm... A little feast from my little sister, huh?”

“Y-yeah... I guess so.”

She’d wanted to make the pun, but having Itsuki react to it still embarrassed her. “Little sister, big taste, am I right?” he continued.

“Oh, stop!”

Chihiro bashfully smiled at her brother's big grin.



Dinner began as it always did, with Itsuki scarfing down the dishes Chihiro set out with his usual gusto. Chihiro, meanwhile, watched him eat away. It was like nothing had changed. At all, in fact. The situation left her a little confused, a little anxious...and a little dissatisfied.

If he knows I'm his little sister, I would've expected...like, something...

She'd be hard-pressed to say exactly what that something was, but seeing absolutely no change at all was a disappointment. So she kept wordlessly watching Itsuki, and then:

“Big Bro!”

“Grpphh?! ”

The interjection made Itsuki choke on his potato salad. He needed a minute to catch his breath.

“*Haah...haah...* What was that for...?! ”

“Oh, no reason... I just thought, instead of using your name like everyone else, maybe you'd enjoy something more family-like. I mean, didn't you have Kasamatsu and Nadeshiko call you ‘Big Bro’ a lot?”

“Y-yeah, uh, uhhh, I guess I did, but...but it's not like I necessarily think ‘Big Bro’ is better all the time or anything.”

“It's not?”

“Yeah, like, in a lot of my stories, sisters just call their brothers by name. It's true with *All About*, anyway. *Sisterly Combat*, too.”

“Oh, right...”

“So to me, it's not really a matter of who takes the ‘big’ and ‘little’ roles,” Itsuki declared. “The important thing is how closely it fits the character.”

Chihiro seemed a bit timid about this. “Then what do you think I should go for? ‘Itsuki’ or ‘Big Bro’?”

“For you... Well, I think either works fine in your case, but if you change your habits out of nowhere, it's kind of unnerving, so maybe stick with what you've been doing, all right?”

“Okay... I'll stay with ‘Itsuki,’ then.”

But Chihiro still looked a little dejected in Itsuki's eyes.

"...Did you wanna switch to 'Big Bro'?" he nudged.

"Not exactly..." Chihiro held her head down, a bit ashamed. "But I finally told you the truth, so I thought, you know, maybe I could act more like a sister now."

"More like a sister?"

"Yeah... I mean, is there anything you'd like me to do? As a little sister?"

"Whoaaaa..."

The sight of Chihiro looking at him so plaintively was almost too much for Itsuki to handle.

"That... That's *such* a knockout punch..."



“What?”

“N-nothing. But something sisterlike, huh? Hmm... Well, you’re already feeding me and cleaning my place... I think you’re already enough of a perfect sister.”

“Oh... Thank you.” She turned away a bit. “But that’s just the same as before, though... Can you think of something more?”

“More...? Well, if we’re talking about my work...”

Itsuki took a good look at Chihiro’s face. Then he started blushing hard.

Chihiro, recalling the kinds of things Itsuki wrote about, began to feel flustered herself. The little sisters in his novels were generally the main heroines of the plot—in other words, the chief love interests. That meant a lot of stuff wildly inappropriate for a maturing real-life little sister, like dating and snuggling up in bed and taking baths together and kissing and sexing.

“W-well, no dirty stuff, all right?!”

“I know that!” Itsuki shouted before taking a more serious tone. “...Why don’t we look to someone *else* with a real little sister?”

“Oh?”

“According to Haruto, his sister always says stuff like ‘shut up’ and ‘you’re gross’ to him. She’s always needling like that.”

“Ahh, yeah, you’re right. And doesn’t his sister make him go out and buy snacks and things for her?”

“Yeah. So a little sister can be like that sometimes, too—yelling at you and making you her errand boy. In fact, isn’t it more natural for the *brother* to devote his all for his little sister, instead of the other way around?”

Chihiro meekly nodded. “Ohhh... Okay, I’ll try to take some cues from Fuwa’s sister, then.”

“Cool.”

“All right. Um... Here goes.”

“Go ahead.”

Itsuki nervously swallowed, as Chihiro suddenly looked at him like he was a dung beetle.

“Y’know, Itsuki, your very existence is so incredibly disgusting to me. I’d take a squashed cockroach over you any day—at least *that’s* stopped moving around. How can you stand to keep living the way you do? Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

“That’s starting out kind of hardcore, isn’t it?!” Itsuki protested.

“Oh? But Ashley told me that the key to seizing the advantage in negotiations is to try and break the other person from the get-go, so... A lot of bankers and tax inspectors are spoiled rich kids, she said, so they’re pretty weak against verbal abuse.”

“Well, don’t imitate *her*, okay? A role model, she is not.” The expression on Itsuki’s face said it all. He meant it.

“All right. I’ll tone it down a little, okay?”

“Sure.”

“...Don’t look at me. It’s gross.”

“Oh, um...sorry.”

“Don’t talk to me. You’ll ruin my ears.”

“...”

“*Ughh*... Can you stop breathing the air in the same room as me?”

“...Um, can you tone it down just a *little* bit more?” Itsuki asked, anxiety clear on his face.

“Hmm... This is hard to fine-tune...” Chihiro puzzled over this a little, then refilled Itsuki’s empty beer glass.

“Ooh, thanks.”

“I—I didn’t pour it for *you* or anything, Itsuki!”

“Well, that doesn’t make much sense if you poured it right in front of me...”

“Yeah... It’s hard to kind of force a defiant attitude like that. Fuwa’s sister is pretty good at it.” Chihiro seemed honestly impressed. “...But I guess it’s normal for siblings to fight with each other, isn’t it?”

“I think so.” Itsuki nodded. “Why don’t we practice having an argument?”

“Yeah,” agreed Chihiro, “I’d like to try that. But how do you do that, exactly?”

“Well... Maybe we can start by trash-talking each other.”

“Okay, I already did that, so you go next, Itsuki.”

“All right.” Itsuki nodded, thought for a bit, and...

“.....I can’t think of anything. You’re a good cook, your cleaning’s immaculate, your grades are awesome... If you were a man, I’d be disgusted with how perfect you were, but if it’s my own little sister, all I have for you is pride. Thanks, Chihiro. I’m so glad you’re my sister.”

Chihiro blushed hard. “Oh, come onnnnn! Stop saying all that embarrassing stuff!”

“What do you want from me? I can’t think of anything to badmouth you about!”

“Ugh! You’re so *stupid*, Itsuki! Stupid, stupid, stupid!” She lightly bopped him on the shoulder with her fist.

“Hey, stop hitting meeee!” Itsuki complained in his best “beleaguered protagonist” voice. “You’re such a violent sister!”

“It-it’s your fault, Big Bro!” Chihiro replied in her best “main heroine” voice as she kept bopping away for a bit. In a few more moments, they were looking silently at each other.

“Hmm... Does that work as a sibling argument?” Itsuki wondered.

“Don’t you think so? It had verbal and physical abuse...”

“Oh. It just felt kind of awkward, though.”

“Yeah...”

“Maybe we’re just not suited for fighting like that. I’m amazed Haruto can put up with that farce day in, day out.”

“I guess it’s something you get used to if you repeat it enough.”

“Maybe... But I guess if siblings get along, that’s the best thing anyway, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I think so, too.”

They grinned at each other and resumed their dinner.

There’s no need to imitate other siblings. We can become our own brother and sister at our own pace.

That, at least, was Chihiro’s way of thinking about it.

The Stepsister vs. the Sister Stand-Ins

The next day was a Monday, and that evening, Chihiro went to Itsuki's apartment only to discover a pleasant aroma inside. It wasn't from what she cooked for him yesterday—it was another woman (or her cooking anyway)!

Standing in the kitchen was Aoba Kasamatsu, teenage novelist, still wearing her school uniform. A month and a half ago, Chihiro avoided coming to Itsuki's place in order to keep from seeing Setsuna, but during that time, Aoba volunteered to cook for him instead. It was the first time Chihiro had seen her since that escapade.

“Kasamatsu...”

“Oh, um...good to see you again...Chihiro?” Aoba's greeting seemed rather self-conscious.

“Yeah... You too... I guess you, um, heard about me?”

“Ahh, yes. Big Bro here just told me.”

The words *big bro* made Chihiro's eyebrows rise. It was the term Aoba used for Itsuki, her way of showing endearment for him.

Chihiro somehow managed to crack a smile anyway. “Kasamatsu, thanks for cooking for me. But as his sister, I'm going to be making dinner for Itsuki again, so you're fine now.”

“Oh, just one minute,” Aoba replied, taking all the *karaage* fried chicken she was cooking out of the oil at once. Then she turned toward Chihiro. “I'll keep coming here to cook for him.”

“Huh?!” The response left Chihiro confused.

“My big bro is helping me a lot with my novel, so I want to pay him back.”

“Pay him back...?”

When her debut novel was met with spiteful bashing online, Itsuki had stepped in to give her some much-needed encouragement. Ever since, she'd idolized him as a kind of literary mentor. His advice was effective, though,

and work was proceeding on her newest book at a rapid clip. It was only natural for Aoba to want to repay the favor, and Chihiro had little reason to deny her the right. But still...

“You—you don’t need to pay him back!”

“Well, that’s not really for you to decide, is it, Chihiro?”

“Ngh...” She flinched at the cold response.

“Besides, isn’t this your last year in high school? You must be getting pretty busy with college entrance exam prep, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I’m totally set for my exams!”

“You are?! You’re really confident... It takes a lot of guts to say that.”

Aoba looked surprised at Chihiro’s bravado, and Chihiro herself had to admit she’d gotten a bit carried away.

“...What’re you talking about?” Itsuki said as he poked in his head from the door to the living room.

“I-Itsuki! I’m gonna keep cooking for you, all right?”

“No, no, we can’t distract Chihiro from her studies. I’ll continue to handle dinner duty for you, okay, Big Bro?”

Chihiro rattled off her question, while Aoba maintained an elegant poise.

Itsuki thought this over a little bit. “Yeah, Aoba’s right. I can’t put all this trouble on you when your exams are coming up...”

“My studying’s going along just fine!”

“Didn’t you say your last test score was lower?”

“I—I already took care of that!”

That wasn’t a lie. When she got an unsatisfactory score on a test the other day, it made her ponder what the point of all this studying and striving was. But the chat she had with Haruto solved a lot of that. Her anxiety over hiding her gender from Itsuki—the main cause of that bad test in the first place—was gone, and she had no concerns about her school career now.

“Which universities are you trying for, Chihiro?”

“Well, for the moment—”

She told Aoba her first choice for a university and department.

“Really?!”

“Whoa...!”

She had namedropped a scientific major at a top-class school, throwing Itsuki and Aoba off guard.

“Wow, you’re really smart, Chihiro...,” said Aoba.

“Now I’d *really* feel bad having you wait on me like this...”

Chihiro raised her hands at Itsuki. “It—it’s fine! That’s my number-one school anyway, and if I don’t think I can cut it, I can switch to somewhere else...”

Itsuki frowned at this. “You know you can’t be so casual about this. Your future’s riding on it.”

Chihiro scowled back. “But, Itsuki, *you* didn’t prep for college at all. You just picked your schools on a whim, pretty much.”

“I—I had already debuted as a writer when I was in high school. I didn’t even intend to go to college, but Dad was on my ass about it, so I just went wherever would let me in without more studying. But you’re different. You don’t *have* anything more important than college exams right now.”

“...”

Chihiro fell silent for a bit and then blurted out her thoughts:

“I’d rather be with *you* than study for exams, Itsuki.”

“Huh?” said Itsuki, puzzled.

“I said I’d rather spend even a little more time with you than study for college exams! I told you the truth finally, so...”

“Chihiro...” Itsuki looked at Chihiro, his eyes a little lost.

Chihiro looked right back at him, making Itsuki avert his eyes. “...I appreciate how you feel, but if you don’t get accepted into your first choice because of that, I’ll *so* regret it.”

“Well, I’m working hard on my prep so that doesn’t happen. And if it does, then it’s *my* fault, not yours!”

“But he’ll still feel responsible for it,” admonished Aoba. “That’s what being a big brother’s about...”

“Why’re you taking my lines?” Itsuki asked, glaring at her. “...But yeah, she’s right. As your brother, I don’t want to do anything that’ll drag you down.”

“...”

That’s not fair, Chihiro thought. She had worked so hard to keep her secret safe up to now, even when it potentially meant exposing her rear end to Setsuna—all so she wouldn’t interfere with Itsuki’s creative endeavors.

Having that same logic thrown back at her stunned her into silence.

...Or it would have, but she spoke anyway.

“But I don’t want to leave everything I used to do for you to Kasamatsu. I don’t like that.”

“Chihiro...”

Itsuki was growing more and more puzzled until Aoba intervened.

“Then how about Chihiro and I take turns cooking for you, for the time being? And Chihiro, if your test scores take a dive, you can focus on studying after that.”

“Hmm...”

“Mmmmm...”

Itsuki and Chihiro chewed this over a little while—and, in the end, agreed to it.

“That’s a really good idea, Aoba!”

Aoba tilted her head to the side, bashfully accepting Itsuki’s compliment. “I have a younger brother and sister myself, so it’s always been my job to figure out the common ground that’ll make all three of us happy.”

“Oh, you have *older* sister genes, huh...?”

That impressed Itsuki all the more.

Chihiro, meanwhile, resented this a little—she had agreed to it, yes, but she couldn’t help but feel that Aoba had just taken her for a ride. Still, she didn’t voice her complaint. Aoba was younger than her, but cold, calculating, and mature. If Chihiro kept whining about herself, she’d look like a child by comparison.

“All right. So I’ll handle dinner tonight—it’s almost ready, so Chihiro, can you set the table for me?”

“Um, sure...”

She reluctantly followed Aoba’s orders, and in another few minutes, dinner was served—seasoned rice with a selection of wild plants, an okra and tomato salad, okra miso soup, and fried chicken. This was the first time Chihiro got to sample Aoba’s cooking; the rice was flavorful with the plants, and the twice-fried chicken had a perfectly crisp surface and incredibly juicy insides. The okra, meanwhile, was...well, okra. But between the tastes, quantity, cost, and nutrition, as much as Chihiro hated to admit it, there was nothing to gripe about.

As she stewed over this, Itsuki and Aoba were chatting away about

Aoba's new novel. He had read her latest manuscript while she was in the kitchen, and now he was digging deep into his impressions with her while eating.

"The plotline in the second half takes a surprising twist, which I like, but I think the school principal's characterization is too weak. Given how unique and novel the protagonists are, he feels like too much of a textbook villain."

"I wanted to keep him easy to grasp, though, so it'd be more cathartic when he was defeated..."

"Hmm... That'd make sense if this was meant as that kind of exhilarating thrill ride to the reader, but I don't think that matches well with the overall tone in this case."

"Yeah, good point..."

There was no space for Chihiro in this conversation. She pouted to herself a bit as she kept eating.



Two days later, Chihiro went to Itsuki's place to cook, only to find him playing with a little blond girl.

"Yaaay, I got all the gorillas!"

"That's a really good job, Nadeshiko. You're a genius!"

"Hee-hee-hee!"

The little girl in the kimono, sitting in between Itsuki's legs as she faced the table, was Nadeshiko Kiso. She was the granddaughter of Yoshihiro Kiso, the sixty-seven-year-old who recently made his light novel debut, and she was in the fourth grade. Itsuki met her when she had followed her grandpa all the way to the Gift Publishing building; she was a naive, innocent, and friendly little girl, and she instantly captured his heart. When she called him "Big Bro," he melted into a pile of goo.

Chihiro found Nadeshiko just as adorable as he did, but seeing her own brother fall head over heels for her brought up mixed emotions.

"Hello, Nadeshiko! You came to visit today, huh?"

"Oh, it's Chihiro! Hello, Big Bro." The little girl returned Chihiro's greeting with a big smile.

“Actually, Nadeshiko, Chihiro’s a big sis, not a big bro.”

“Huhhh??” Her eyes shot open as she stared at Chihiro. “You are?!”

“Um, yeah... I am.”

“How did *that* happen?!”

“Um... It’s a complex situation.”

“What does ‘complex situation’ mean?!”

Chihiro winced at the light of Nadeshiko’s sparkling eyes. “That... Um, it’s a bunch of family stuff...”

“Ohhhhh. I’m very sorry to hear about your complex situation.”

“N-no, um, it’s not *that* complex...” She gave the girl a vague smile and changed the subject. “So what game are you playing today?”

“We’re playing Ichigorilla! An’ I won three in a row!”

Ichigorilla is a rearrangement of the card game Concentration where instead of finding pairs of cards, players collect different-sized sets of tiles based on their icons—two carrots, four boats, and so on. There are fewer types of tiles than in a standard card deck, the icon counts balanced so you can enjoy a round without needing *too* much concentration.

Chihiro, with her good recall skills, had almost never lost a round of this.

“Yeah,” Itsuki said as he patted Nadeshiko’s head, “this kid’s got a great memory.”

“Hee-hee! You need to try harder, Big Bro Itsuki!”

“Aww, I could never beat you, Nadeshiko. You might be the best player in the world, even!”

“Whaaa—? Really?”

“Really, really!”

The simpering grin on Itsuki’s face irritated Chihiro a little.

“Why don’t you play me next, Nadeshiko?”

“All right!”

...It wasn’t the most mature thing ever, but she wanted the child to taste defeat at least once. She sat down facing the pair as she thought over this, flipping over the tiles and mixing them up.

“Nadeshiko’s...,” Itsuki muttered in a low voice. “Well... She’s *good*, you know. I think she’s literally a genius.”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Chihiro, assuming it was joke, laughed a bit. Then she looked at Itsuki. There was a bead of cold sweat running down his cheek.

“Oh... She is?”

“Okay, Big Sis, let’s play. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

They used a quick game to decide who went first before beginning. Once they did, Chihiro discovered just how correct Itsuki was. Nadeshiko was *ridiculously* good. The moment a tile was flipped, she instantly memorized it and always picked it out. Unlike normal Concentration, your turn ended in Ichigorilla after you made a correct pick—but since neither Chihiro nor Nadeshiko ever made a mistake, the match turned into a game of chance and intuition. The core challenge: How often were you lucky enough to find a high-scoring tile in the group that hadn’t been turned yet?

“...This is nothing like the Ichigorilla game I know,” a shuddering Itsuki whispered. “Just watching you guys, I’m already losing my concentration...”

After a close battle, it was Nadeshiko who eked out a narrow win.

“I...I lost...?”

“Yaaay! I win!”

Chihiro sat there, staring blankly, as Nadeshiko innocently celebrated.

“But you’re pretty good, Big Sis!”

“L-let’s play another round, Nadeshiko!”

“Okay!”

The second match was another high-level war of nerves, but this time, Chihiro edged out her opponent. “Whew... I won...”

“Wow, that’s the first time I lost! Let’s play one more time!”

Nadeshiko was all smiles despite her defeat. She went on to win match three.

“Ooh, that was a good game!”

“...Yeah. I think I’m getting my old knack for this back, so let’s try another round.”

Chihiro tried to act unaffected as she challenged the jovial Nadeshiko to a fourth game...and lost.

“I win!”

“...Phew. Okay. Now to play for keeps.”

With that, the fifth match began, ending in another close win for Chihiro.

“You really *are* good, Big Sis. That was fun!”

Just as Nadeshiko was about to put the tiles back in the box, Chihiro stretched a calm smile out on her face.

“It sure was. Let’s set up the next game.”

“*Another* one?!” exclaimed Itsuki.

“I’m two and three right now. I need to win two more.”

“You’re gonna play until you’re beating her?!”

“I wanna play a different game,” Nadeshiko said, looking a little pooped.

“That’s not very mature of you, Chihiro...”

The warning finally snapped Chihiro out of it. “I’m sorry... I got a little too serious.”

“Well,” said Itsuki with a grin, “I get it if you’re shocked after a grade schooler beats you in a game you’re good at.”

That wasn’t the only reason Chihiro was taking this so hard, but she just gave him a vague kind of smile.

“Okay, Nadeshiko, what do you want to play next?”

Nadeshiko stood up, looked around the game shelves, and took a box. “I played this with Grandpa before!”

She had picked Let’s Catch the Lion, developed by a *shogi* player to help popularize the game among children. This extremely simplified version used pieces with cute animal art on them.

“Hmm... I’m good at this one, you know.”

“Geh...”

Itsuki winced at Chihiro’s whispered threat. It may have been a simple, casual game—four pieces per player on a three-by-four board—but just like real *shogi*, there was no element of luck, making it what game-theory mathematicians called a two-player zero-sum logical perfect information game. Chihiro had never lost before, by the way.

“Okay, Nadeshiko, let’s do it.”

“All right! You first, Big Sis!”

So the match began with a jovial atmosphere...

“I’ll go here... Here... Here... Here... Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here—”

“Here... Here... Here... Here... Here... Here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here—!”

The atmosphere became far more serious—almost spine-chillingly so—than when they played the luck-driven Ichigorilla. Both sides peered intently at the board, waging battles incandescent with action.

“Wow! Amazing! What a great match! I’d be hard-pressed to tell you exactly *why* it’s great, but it’s so exciting! It’s just like real *shogi*, even!”

Itsuki's colorful commentary was certainly passionate, if not all that useful.

"Shh!"

"Itsuki, shut up a second!"

"Oh. Okay."

...And after a battle that lasted nearly an hour, Chihiro nailed down the win.

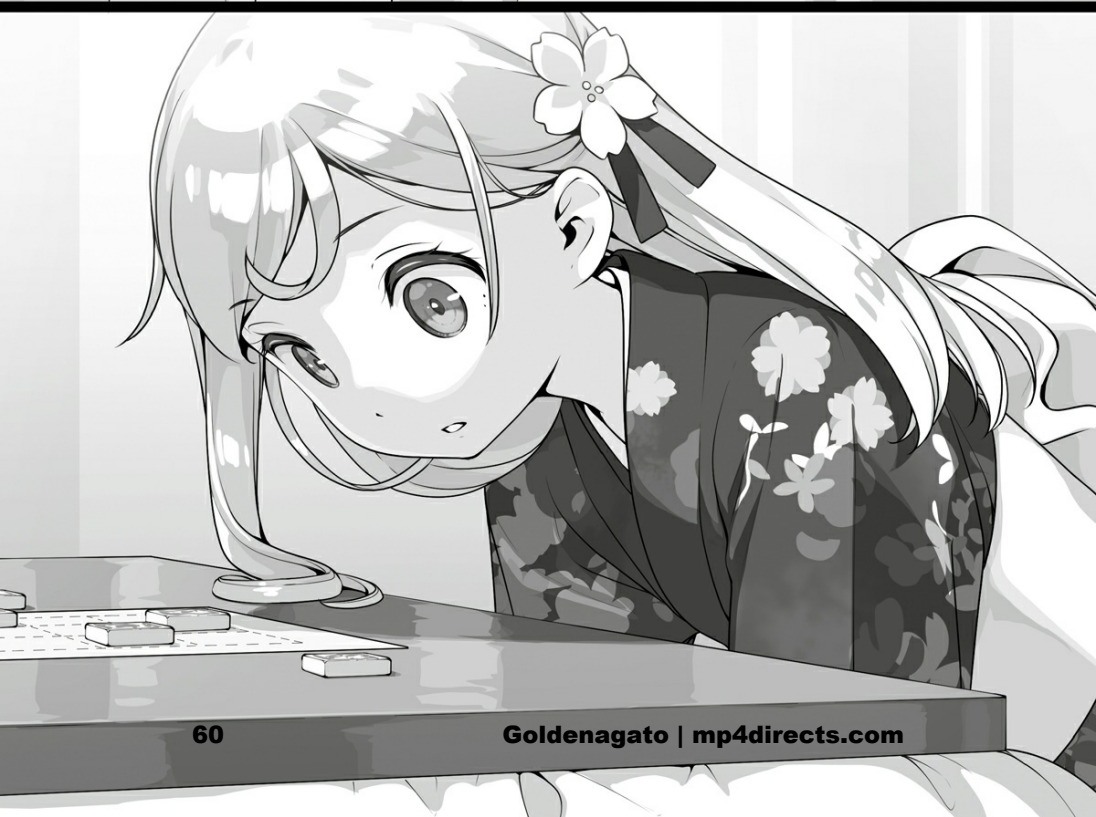
She took a deep breath, basking in the thrill of victory—just as Yoshihiro Kiso got back from his editorial meeting to pick up his granddaughter.

"See you later, Big Bro Itsuki! I can't wait to play again, Big Sis Chihiro!"

With a cute bow, Nadeshiko left Itsuki's apartment—

"By the way, Chihiro, what's for dinner?"

—which was when Chihiro realized that she had gotten so impassioned over challenging Nadeshiko that she forgot to prepare anything.



“...Well, how about we order pizza for a change of pace?”

“Sorry, Itsuki...”

She may have won the game, but now her critical error made her taste the agony of defeat.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Nadeshiko, what are your favorite things?



Playing, eating, studying, napping,
reading... Lots of things!

QUESTION

Wanna play with your big brother here, Nadeshiko?
(smirk)

**I sentence you
to death!!!**



QUESTION

What kinda undies does Nadeshiko have on?



Why don't I gouge out your eyes instead?

Miyako's Choice

But Itsuki and Chihiro weren't the only ones facing turning points in their lives.

Two days after Itsuki's late-June *All About* screening party, Miyako received a message in her inbox that made her heart leap. The subject said "Job Offer," and the "From" box read "Nobunaga Shirogami – President, Branch Hill Ltd."

Branch Hill was a small publisher that Miyako had interviewed for about a week ago, so it was with shaky fingers that she clicked on the e-mail and read it. As the subject suggested, the body confirmed that she was being offered a job at the firm. It was a little odd to have the company president himself send the e-mail, but as a tiny outfit without an HR department, maybe that was to be expected.

Either way, she was now finally freed from the endless drudgery of the job hunt.

"Yesssssss!!"

"What's up, Myaa?" the naked Nayuta asked, opening the door to her room.

"I finally got a job offer!" Miyako replied, grinning.

"Oooh, congratulations. Who is it?"

"A publisher called Branch Hill."

"Branch Hill... I think I might've heard that name before..."

"They're small; they only just started up."

"Ahh. But you'll be an editor when you graduate next year, huh? You and I should work together!"

The innocent remark threw Miyako for a moment. "But you write for GF Bunko," she said, smiling slightly.

Nayuta just looked blankly back at her. "It's not like I'm a salaried employee of theirs. If you invite me over, Myaa, I can work for you guys,

too.”

“...”

Nayuta might’ve been indifferent about it, but Miyako wasn’t. She thought back to a day not long ago—two days before her interview with Branch Hill, in fact. There at the GF office, she happened to be around when new author Soma Misaka got cut off from the company for peddling his work to another firm without permission.

Apparently, there was an unwritten rule in light noveldom that when a publisher picked you up as a new author, you were in their exclusive “corral” for three years, and Soma had broken that taboo. Considering the cost of running new-writer competitions and building up next-generation talents, maybe that rule was justifiable to some extent, but getting the boot because you weren’t aware of a rule that wasn’t written in the contest guidelines or publishing contract seemed incredibly unfair.

“How long has it been since you turned pro again, Nayu?”

“Umm... I think my first book came out December...so about two and a half years.”

“Ah...”

So by the time Miyako graduated next March, Nayuta would have served her three years at GF. By that custom, it wouldn’t be a problem—but how would editor in chief Godo and the rest of the editorial team at GF Bunko react if their number-one author got headhunted? Miyako couldn’t help but imagine the fallout.

“Myaa?”

Miyako looked at Nayuta’s puzzled expression and panicked. “Huh? Oh, um, umm... Well, if they *do* bring me on as an editor, maybe I’ll be calling on you, then.”

“Okay! I’ll look forward to it!”

Nayuta’s ever-innocent smile put a dull ache in Miyako’s stomach.



The next day, Miyako told Satoshi Godo, GF Bunko EIC and her current boss, about the Branch Hill offer. The situation with Soma Misaka had

cooled their relationship somewhat, but considering how many times he had invited her to join Gift Publishing, she felt obliged to tell him.

“...It had to be Branch Hill, huh...?” Godo’s yakuza face turned even more frightening as he breathed it out. “...Any chance you might reconsider still?”

“No, sir,” was her firm reply.

Godo sighed. “That place doesn’t have any marquee series supporting it yet. Being new, there’s no guarantee it’ll still be around in a few years, and I know we offer a better salary and work environment. But instead of a place you’re used to working in, you’re going out of your way to take a high-risk position. What’s the point of that? ...Were you that turned off by the thing with Misaka the other day?”

“It’s not related to that,” averred Miyako.

“So what, then?”

Miyako hesitated for a moment. “...I want to grab something all my own. Not something I got just because I happened to be friends with Itsuki or Naya, but a trail I blazed with my own abilities.”

“That’s a pretty rookie thing to say.”

“...I suppose it is.”

“And you think you can do that at Branch Hill?”

“...I don’t know.” Miyako held back the self-doubt and fear welling inside of her. “But I want to test myself. I want to be somewhere I can’t depend on others for everything.”

Godo gave this a resigned sigh. “...Well, do your best,” he begrudgingly said.



That night, as she walked down an office corridor at the end of her part-time shift, Miyako was stopped by Kenjiro Toki.

“I heard you took an offer from Branch Hill... Congratulations on that.”

“Thank you very much.”

“The boss was pretty depressed about it.”

“Mr. Godo was? Depressed, and not angry?”

“Yeah. With his face, I know it’s hard to tell, but...”

It was hard to believe, but Toki had known the editor in chief long enough that he couldn’t have been mistaken.

“I guess it’s one thing if you turned down his offer, but you taking a disliking to him came as kind of a shock, it looks like.”

“I don’t dislike him personally or anything. I mean, I still think Mr. Misaka got treated unfairly, but...”

Toki smiled a bit at Miyako’s pained expression. “Well, as far as I know about that whole thing, I think Misaka’s partly at fault, too.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, the whole reason he started peddling his work around to other publishers was because he wasn’t a success here and he didn’t get along with his editor...but practically from the moment he won his prize, Misaka pretty much did nothing but bark orders at his editor. It didn’t seem like he took any of that editor’s suggestions at all.”

“He didn’t?”

“Now, of course, it’s an editor’s job to work through that and put out a decent piece of work anyway...but they’re only human, too. Anyway, Misaka and his editor had a fatal lack of communication going on, and that’s probably connected to why he never got informed of the three-year rule. It’s something the editor usually fills them in on before their first publication, but for whatever reason, it didn’t happen with him.”

“...”

“And that’s on the editor for not telling him, certainly. So when we first learned that Misaka was going around to other publishers, the boss thought about letting it go at first. None of the other parties signed him yet, so he hadn’t *technically* done work for someone else at that point, besides.”

“He thought that?”

“Yeah. But when Misaka caught wind of that, he went up to the boss and asked for a change of editor, not even apologizing for hitting up other places. So the boss asked around for someone to pick up Misaka, but nobody volunteered, me included, so he had to turn down the request. That, however, wasn’t something Misaka was willing to accept, so that’s why we cut things off with him.”

Toki’s story gave Miyako mixed feelings. If it was true, Soma didn’t exactly get kicked out for breaking rules he wasn’t aware of, the way she had

pictured it.

"I'll never forget there's an editor out there who cried for me."

"I hope I can write a book with you sometime."

Soma's tears, and the words he said to Miyako before he left, still struck deep chords within her heart. She hadn't lost all sympathy for him, but Godo—the stand-in for all the unfairness of adult life in her mind back then—had his own circumstances. The situation wasn't as simple as a poor, pitiable young author and his cruelhearted editor in chief. It felt like she was gaining a glimpse of just how complex grown-up life could be, and the thought made her want to sigh.

"...But I really think you should write down these unwritten rules from now on, to prevent something like this from happening again."

"Well, that presents its own problems."

"It does?"

"If we made the three-year rule an official policy, that creates trouble if one person wins multiple new-writer prizes at the same time. The author would have to carefully choose which prize to accept, which is bad for both the publishers and the submitters. But even before that, putting in this ironclad rule that you can't write for anyone else for three years basically means we'd have them sign a non-compete contract, and that leads to all these other rules and bylaws we'd have to set up. And for the writer, not being able to leave for three years, no matter how dissatisfied they are, puts them at a huge disadvantage."

If the rule went that writing for other companies got you cut off, that also gave you the freedom to jump publishers—as long you didn't mind losing your connection to the first. Only now did that occur to Miyako.

"So having it be a 'custom' instead of a contract stipulation actually helps in some ways...?"

"Right." Toki nodded. "And that's not only true for the three-year rule. Putting all these immovable rules in place isn't great for a publisher, either, but really, I think it makes things even worse for the creators. Deadlines are the best example of that. In pretty much any other industry, delivering something late means you have to pay penalties and maybe even damages, but just try to apply that to writers and illustrators."

"...It'd be ugly."

There were tons of writers and artists who blew their deadlines all the

time—or even worse, fled somewhere and fell completely out of contact. If a new release from a popular author like Nayuta Kani got delayed, that had to mean pretty sizable losses for the publisher to eat, but GF Bunko certainly didn't ask her to pay a penalty each time. Not being contractually obligated did allow Nayuta to ignore deadlines freely, but it also let her take her time and write the wonderful novels she was known for.

“I hear a lot about people who enter publishing from other fields, only to be shocked at how loose the whole industry is. But it's definitely the kind of industry that works *because* of these fuzzy oral agreements, for better or for worse. Now, there *has* been momentum lately to tackle some of the collusion-type stuff in this business and protect creator rights more, but there's no telling how that will turn out...”

Toki gave his meekly listening audience an ambiguous smile.

“...But there's no such thing as an industry without stuff like that, I don't think.”

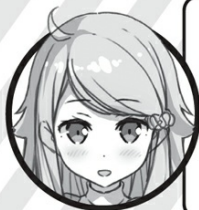
“...Yeah.”

She earnestly nodded. No, every industry had its own issues. Stuff that Miyako herself couldn't possibly picture in her mind—in the world, in society, in the industry, and in the human race. And starting next year, she'd have to face up to that reality as a full-fledged member of society. She was finally understanding the wide expanse of what she had only glimpsed before, and it made her head spin.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Question for Itsuki: It didn't seem like there were a lot of scenes last volume (Volume 9) featuring you and Nayuta making out. Have things cooled down between you two?



Oh, we're having a lot of fun—it's just not getting directly written about. For example, look at my sister Tsukiko's line from page 159. I think it's coming out between the lines in the dialogue and descriptive text, so try looking closer.

**Don't look
that close!**



QUESTION

How does Nayuta gauge the distance between herself and other people?



Well, it's always been kind of hard for me. My mother and father are the only ones I don't really have to think about it with.

Age Twenty

On a day in early July, an advance screening was held for the live-action film adaptation of *The Silvery Landscape*. It had a big-name director—the winner of internationally known prizes—and it starred a talented actor hailed as the number-one talent in his age class. That drive for quality extended all the way across the film’s staff list; it was one of the bigger projects to come from Japanese studios in the past few years.

Nayuta invited Itsuki, Haruto, and Miyako to watch from the friends-and-family seats, and they all agreed—the film did an excellent job of visualizing the unique atmosphere of the original.

“Nayuuuu! That was great! That was *so* great!”

Tears were welling in Miyako’s eyes as she sang the movie’s praises at a café afterward.

“Weh-heh-heh... Well, you know, as the creator, I wasn’t sure about a *couple* of things in it, maybe...but I think it’s safe to say they gave it a good treatment.” Nayuta was never going to sign off on everything, but there was a satisfied-looking smile on her face.

“A lot of live-action adaptations,” Haruto said, “turn into these cosplay things that don’t really hit the mark, but *The Silvery Landscape* was awesome. You could say it was ripe for adaptation anyway, but they really did a great job of capturing the essence of the characters—not just copying their looks and clothing. The staff really understood the book, and they optimized it for the film.” He nodded to himself. “...I guess a good piece of work has a way of attracting good people, huh? Like, having a series where the staff actually respects it... That takes power.”

Itsuki thoughtfully considered this. “...Now I’m farther from her than ever,” he blurted out.

“Oh? But *your* anime’s...” Haruto stopped before going any further.

He had only seen Episode 1 so far, but Itsuki’s *All About* anime had

actually turned out pretty well. A far cry from his own *Chevalier of the Absolute World*, for sure. But it wasn't going to console Itsuki at all. Knowing that some multimedia deployments just didn't work out well, or that it was stupid to compare two different projects with massively different production budgets, did nothing to cheer up the original creator. It was a matter of the heart—and if the creator thought he lost in the heart, all the impartial excuses in the world still made it hard to cover for that.



A few days later, Episode 1 of *All About My Little Sister* finally debuted on late-night TV. Itsuki had holed up in his apartment with Kenjiro Toki, both of them feverishly working their respective computer and phone to examine the response. The results:

“Faithful to the original books.”

“Sexy.”

“It was fun. I’m looking forward to Episode 2.”

“For a low-budget anime, I feel like they put in a good effort.”

“I came in knowing nothing, but it was pretty good.”

...Pretty positive impressions overall.

Once the episode ended and the real-time feedback died down, the two of them let out simultaneous relieved sighs.

“...Well, so far so good, huh?”

“Yeah...”

Itsuki nodded at Toki. Having watched the advance copy, he knew as the creator that it was well done, but until it aired and he saw how viewers reacted, he really couldn't afford to relax.

“Hopefully, we get some fans of the anime to pick up the books,” Toki said, phone in hand. “But I’m not seeing any change in your Amazon ranking yet.”

The anime reviews were important, yes, but to a book publisher, the big question was how much the anime boosted the popularity of the original work. Certainly, a well-reviewed anime often connected to better book sales, but sometimes you'd have an anime get trashed by fans of the original books,

only to have novel sales explode anyway. That or the opposite—a series praised by longtime fans and the general public alike, but causing barely a blip in book sales. A variety of complex factors besides anime quality affected this performance—airdate, time, advertising, broadcast network, market trends, the economy, the impact of other series in the same season, demographic differences between readers and viewers, and much more. It was impossible for anyone to guarantee that an anime adaptation would help popularize the original stories.

Right now, it was impossible to say whether it'd help *All About's* popularity at all. But one thing was clear.

“...All we can do is make the latest volume as engaging as possible.”

Toki gave Itsuki a satisfied smile. “See? You get it.”

“Hmph. Of course I do.”

“Well, to be exact, make it as engaging and *publishable* as possible.”

“Y-yeah...”

The seventh volume of *All About My Little Sister* was due to hit shelves in October, the month after the anime series ended its TV run. Volume 6 had just gone on sale last month, and that was the rule of thumb in this business—you needed one new volume just before the anime debut, and another new one either during or right after its run. The more other stuff you had to keep up the energy—a new volume of the comic adaptation, or any other kind of related book launch—the better.

There was no guarantee an anime would help popularize the books, but if you've got nothing to sell in the bookshops, you're setting yourself up for failure. Thus, for a publisher, all they could do was launch books, expand their presence in the shops, and give their all to push the series, trying to attract as many eyes as possible.

“...How's Volume 7 going, by the way?”

“Oh, um, going great, of course,” Itsuki said, stammering a bit.

“Really? Great, then.”

Toki didn't press any further before leaving.



A few more days passed, and then it was the night of July 10. Itsuki was in his apartment, sharing the dinner table with Nayuta. Between them was some seafood lasagna, meat pies, fried shrimp, Caesar salad, and potage. Aoba had made dinner tonight, but she left right after Itsuki ate, before Nayuta showed up—by the looks of it, she wanted to leave the couple some alone time.

Today was Nayuta's twentieth birthday.

"Nya-ha-ha! This looks really good. Ao is so impressive."

"Yeah," Itsuki told the smiling Nayuta, "it's a little more extravagant than usual...but are you sure you don't mind doing this at my place?"

He had suggested they reserve a table at a high-end restaurant somewhere, but Nayuta preferred to have dinner here alone.

"Of course not, Itsuki. Let's have a toast already." Nayuta brought her glass toward Itsuki.

"All right."

He slowly poured beer into it. Nayuta was now twenty years old, and by the laws of Japan, that meant she was legal to drink beginning today. The beer was Hoegaarden Forbidden Fruit, featuring a label modeled after Rubens's *The Fall of Man* that featured a nude Adam and Eve sipping beer. Nayuta had picked it out of the fridge herself—"Because of the sexy label," she said.

"Well," Itsuki declared as he poured it into his own glass, "happy birthday."

"Thanks."

They clinked their glasses together and took a chug. Hoegaarden Original White from the same brewery was a major brand in Japan, but unlike the fruity, refreshing White, Forbidden Fruit had a strong sweetness and heavy spice—tasty, but not for the beer beginner.

"Hwaahh... It's like my mouth and nose all got elevated! *Elevated!*" Nayuta used her hands to express it, gleefully smiling. "So *this* is what beer's like?"

She sloshed it around in her glass, staring at it.

"You know," she said, her voice full of emotion, "I've always dreamed of getting to drink with you like this."

Being underage, whenever she had a meal with Miyako, Haruto, and the rest, it'd always been with some kind of soft drink. The root beer she encountered in Okinawa changed her life, but still she felt excluded from the

gang because she couldn't have alcohol with them.

"I really feel like a grown-up woman now. We can try all *kinds* of different drinks, Itsuki."

"Y-yeah... You're right. I look forward to it."

That sincere, heartfelt smile made Itsuki blush, and he took another drink to distract himself.

Aoba had exercised the full extent of her skills to make all this food, and they enjoyed all of it along with a variety of beers. Nayuta seemed to enjoy things like Forbidden Fruit a lot—something heavy and sweet instead of tart and refreshing. Such beers were generally high-ABV, and Itsuki, matching Nayuta's drinking pace, soon began to feel inebriated—but Nayuta seemed unfazed, except for a bit of red on her face.

In time, Itsuki reached his limit, falling back and lying on the floor.

"Mmmmmngh..."

"Uh-oh..."

Approaching Itsuki—who was moaning with his eyes closed—Nayuta knelt down and placed his head on her lap. "Are you okay, Itsuki?"

"Mmmm, I'm fiiine..."

"...Guess I can hold my drink pretty well, huh? My dad's Russian, so I figured I probably could, but..."

"Hnhh... Hail...the motherland..."

Nayuta laughed at the joke. "Nya-ha-ha... I think we'll have to postpone our post-dinner bedroom session for another night, huh...?"

"...Sorry...Kanikou..."

"Please, don't worry about it. I'll more than make up for it another day."

But apparently Itsuki wasn't replying to what Nayuta had just said, exactly. ".....Sorry..." His voice was in a low, near-delirious mutter. ".....Sorry I'm so lame..... I keep making you wait....."

"...!"

Nayuta's eyes opened wide. Tears began to form.

"Itsuki...!"

".....But someday... I swear... I'm gonna..."

She gave him a soft smile, gently speaking to him. "...That's okay. I'm happy enough as it is now. I'll wait as long as you need."

Itsuki began lightly snoring. But Nayuta stayed there, lovingly watching his face.



Shopping with My Little Sister

On a Saturday in mid-July, Itsuki was suddenly asked by his tax accountant Ashley to come to her office “to address an emergency.” Chihiro worked at Ashley’s office on Saturdays, so she was there as well.

“Oh, what’s up, Itsuki?” Chihiro asked when he came in, looking surprised.

“Ashley called me in here.”

“Hee-hee-hee... You’re here, Itsuki.”

Ashley Ono appeared from the other room, surprising the confused pair of siblings. She was dressed not in casual home wear, but a red outfit suited for going out on the town.

“Oh, you were changing?” Chihiro asked.

“What’s the emergency?”

“Well, I’ve reached a milestone in my work, so Chihiro and I are going shopping right now. I want you to come with us.”

“Huh?!” Chihiro sounded as surprised about it as Itsuki.

“Shopping? That’s fine...but where are we going?”

“You’re going to buy some cute clothing for your sister, Chihiro.”

“A-Ashley?!”

“Me?!”

Ashley’s pout made her baby face seem especially childish. “What? Chihiro’s revealed her true self to you, her brother, but her fashion hasn’t changed at all, has it? She said she hasn’t bought any new outfits, so I want *you*, Itsuki, to buy her something cute and girly.”

Even after the revelation, Chihiro was still going around in unisex clothing and sweats. That applied not just at Itsuki’s place, but at home, during school, and in her workplace here.

“Cute clothing for Chihiro, huh...? All right. Let’s do that.”

“Y-you’re okay with that, Itsuki?!”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Ashley asked the reluctant Chihiro. “I told you to have your big brother buy you something cute someday. Well, the day’s finally here!”

“Um, you think so?! Isn’t this kind of...soon?!”

“Ee-hee-hee... You’ve already changed your hairstyle. That proves you want to look cuter than you did before, doesn’t it?”

“Th-that...” Chihiro choked on her words a moment, still trying to slip out of this. “B-but I don’t want to bother my brother...”

“No, Chihiro, let me give you a present. Haruto treats his little sister to stuff all the time. It’s a really big-brotherly thing to do... And don’t worry about the money. I may not look it, but I’m the creator behind a hot new anime series!”

Chihiro smiled a bit at her brother’s grinning braggadocio. “Itsuki... Well, I guess I’ll go, then...”

“Great! I’ll buy you whatever you want!”

Ashley gave Itsuki an alluring grin. “You know, *big brother*, I’d like some new clothing, too.”

“Buy it yourself,” came the quick, point-blank reply, turning Ashley’s smile upside-down.



So the three of them went to the same department store Ashley and Chihiro had visited almost exactly a year ago. Heading for her favorite section, Ashley gave Chihiro a gauntlet of outfits to try on.

Having her brother right there made Chihiro a bit bashful, but she tried on a few girly things, following the advice of Ashley and the saleswoman.

“Wh-what do you think, Itsuki?”

“Y-yeah... It looks good on you.”

Brother and sister were both blushing hard as the dress-up show continued.

“Wow,” Ashley said, beaming. “Everything just looks *great* on you, Chihiro! We’ll take this... Oh, this is nice, too.”

Now she was giving her choice of clothes to the saleswoman one after

another. Chihiro forced her to pare it down to three outfits, not wanting to bankrupt her brother, and changed into one of them before leaving the ladies' section. They all then took a break at a café inside the department store.

"Thank you, Itsuki... Buying all this stuff for me..."

"D-don't worry about it. You could've had more if you wanted."

"Hee-hee... Your face is all red, Itsuki. You falling in love with Chihiro now that she's all dolled up?"

"Not—not like *that*, no..."

The playful jab panicked Itsuki further. Right now, Chihiro had on a pink, frilly dress, almost cloyingly cute to him. The gap between this and the Chihiro he once knew was yawning wider and wider.

"Oh, Chihiro, you're just *sooo* cute now... Just like a living doll..." Ashley, meanwhile, was virtually in a trance, which dissuaded Chihiro a bit.

"What's gotten into you, Ashley...? You're acting even weirder than usual."

"Well, I mean...to tell the truth, I just love little girls with flat chests when they're dressed all cute..."

"Huhhh?!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Just joking with you."

"Are you sure...?"

Ashley's gaze felt deadly serious to Chihiro, which kept her on high alert.

"By the way, Chihiro, you've got on some cute undergarments. The last time I saw you, you used a plain sports bra."

"Wh-why were you looking at that...?" Chihiro blushed again. "Kaiko gave some to me earlier. She said she bought a lot for research purposes, so I could have them."

The manga artist storming into Itsuki's apartment with bags full of lingerie had surprised them both, but size-wise, only Chihiro and Ashley could use most of it, so she decided to gratefully accept the gift.

"Um, actually, Itsuki," she said, trying to steer the topic away from bras and panties, "do you shop at places like these with Kani at all?"

"Nah, Kanikou usually shops for her clothes with Miyako, so..." Then Itsuki blushed a bit. "So I've never gone shopping with her...but I *did* come here by myself recently."

"By yourself? What for?"

"I wanted to buy a birthday present for Kanikou."

“Ohhh... Wow, Itsuki, you all alone in this fancy department store... That must’ve taken a lot of nerve.”

Itsuki glared at Chihiro’s warm, understanding eyes.

“Who do you think I am? I can go in a department store by myself. You see middle-aged dudes in here with their families all the time. It’s not like I’m going to some high-end fashion boutique in Shibuya. This is *way* easier.”

“So what did you get for a gift?”

“A bracelet. With her birthstone.”

“Oh, that’s so nice! ...I bet Miss Kani liked it a lot.” Chihiro’s eyes sparkled with admiration.

“I wasn’t sure whether to go with that or this big king crab they were selling in the gourmet foods section...but the crab actually cost a little more.”

“I think you absolutely made the right choice,” Chihiro asserted.

“Ohhh?” Ashley gave him a snide look. “You’re being an honest-to-goodness boyfriend to her, huh, Itsuki? That’s a little surprising.”

“Yeah, I think before, I would’ve gone with the king crab for a joke...but I decided to get real about this, so... By the way, do *you* have anyone in your life, Ashley?”

The offhand question made Ashley freeze. “Not...not now, no.”

“...Oh, didn’t you take a taxi home with Mr. Kaizu after the cherry blossom party?”

“...What are you implying? There’s nothing in particular between us... nothing...”

“That’s a minefield, Itsuki,” Chihiro stealthily whispered to him.

“Oh?”

“There really *is* nothing between them. He hasn’t contacted her in the three months after that, and I think it’s eating at her. I don’t think she necessarily loves Mr. Kaizu, but being completely ignored kind of irks her.”

“Wow. The complicated heart of a maiden, huh?”

“Wait, maiden?”

“Why the questioning tone, Chihiro?” Ashley asked, overhearing her. There was a smile on her lips and a throbbing blue vein on her forehead. “What about you, hmm? Anyone in your class you’ve taken a fancy to?”

“Ooh, I’d like to know, too.”

Chihiro, seeing how eager Itsuki was to join in, reared back a bit.

“Th-there’s nobody like *that*, no!” she protested.

“You’ve been going to school as a girl all this time, haven’t you? No guy’s come up and asked to go out with you?”

“A few times, yeah...but I said no to them all.”

“Why is that?”

“I... I don’t really *get* love...and stuff...yet...”

“So you haven’t even had a first love?” Ashley asked.

“No... I don’t think so anyway... What’s being in love like?”

“It’s when you want to have sex with someone,” Ashley explained.

“Ah, s-sehh...?!” Chihiro’s face turned red as Itsuki winced.

“Can you not contaminate my sister with a thirtysomething’s wild views on love?”

“You tell her, then,” pouted Ashley. “You’re her brother.”

“Um...” The question made Itsuki self-consciously avert his eyes. “Well, when you think about someone, it’s like you feel a pain in your chest. Your heart races when you’re together, and you can’t stop thinking about them all day...”

“Well, along *those* lines, I think about you the most, Itsuki.”

“D-don’t spring *that* on me out of nowhere... You’re embarrassing me.”

The blunt reply made his face turn red.

“Boy, what a terminal case...,” Ashley growled. “But the more someone’s honestly like ‘oh, I don’t care about romance at all,’ the more likely she’ll steal someone else’s guy in the future, you know.”

“Did something like that happen to you, Ashley...?” Itsuki asked. The apparent years-long grudge in Ashley’s voice was worrying.

“No, nothing... By the way, Itsuki, if you love your little sister so much, what’ll you do if she finds a boyfriend later?”

“What’ll I do?” Itsuki thought for a moment. “...Depends on the guy. If he’s no good, I’ll kill him.”

“Oh, Itsuki...” Chihiro gave a troubled laugh. Itsuki sounded a little too much like he meant it.

Ashley squinted at him. “Does that mean you’ll welcome him if he’s a decent person?”

“Well, if he’ll make Chihiro a happy girl, then it’s my job as her elder brother to accept him.”

“Hmmm...”

Ashley looked closely at Itsuki’s face, appraising it, then sighed a little.

“...Well, that’s boring.”

“...?”

All Itsuki and Chihiro could do was glance at each other, puzzled.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Ashley, did you ever think about becoming a CPA instead of a tax accountant?



I did, a little bit, since CPAs get to handle larger sums of money...but I decided I like to deal with smaller firms and individuals more. I like seeing the faces of the people I work with.

QUESTION

I have a question for Ashley Ono. Tell me a fun story from when you were out with Kaizu!



I don't know if you're making fun of me or you seriously have the wrong idea...but there wasn't a single moment like that. Not now, not ever.

QUESTION

The "Ashley Route" drama CD was awesome! I wish she'd marry Itsuki in the main story, too.



Thank you! Hee-hee... Maybe there's a chance of that, huh?

No.



The Desert

One evening in late July, Haruto Fuwa was visiting the GF Bunko editorial department to confer with Kawabe, his editor.

“All right. We’ll put your deadline at the end of August, then.”

“Sure.”

The meeting went without incident, and soon they began chatting about other things—the *All About* anime running now, other series from the current season, new manga and light novels generating buzz, and then the six new authors who debuted from the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

The first author to come up in the conversation was, of course, Soma Misaka, whose dismissal had become watercooler conversation company-wide. Haruto knew about it, too, although not all the juicy details.

“...I wonder if it had to work out that way, though. I mean, we went through the trouble of finding that new talent and all...”

Once Kawabe filled him in, though, Haruto found the whole story almost unbearable. As a writer, he knew Soma was at fault here—but he still wanted to side with him, if he had to pick someone. There had been cases like this before on occasion, writers feuding with editors until one side or the other had to cut things off. Every time it happened, Haruto couldn’t help but think to himself, *Couldn’t it have worked out some other way?*

“Well, it was apparently Misaka who asked to sever ties if they wouldn’t allow him a new editor, so...”

“I still wish they could’ve talked it out in more depth, though. He’s still just in high school. Maybe he lost his temper and had trouble making rational decisions.”

“But if he’s working as a professional,” Kawabe flatly countered, “his age doesn’t matter. I can only assume that he wasn’t seen as valuable enough to overlook the problems he was causing.”

“You guys helped him make his debut, and *that’s* how you talk about

him? ...Ahh, I should just drop this.”

Haruto swallowed his anger. Kawabe wasn't Soma's editor, and it was the editor in chief, Godo, who made the decision to sever the relationship anyway. There wasn't any point griping at Kawabe about it.

“Well, Fuwa, if Misaka had the kind of cool head you have, maybe none of that would've happened, you know...?”

Kawabe seemed a little sad about it. Haruto smiled. Didn't an author need that, though? Enough brashness to just spit out whatever he wanted to say? The thought had crossed his mind as he watched Itsuki's *All About* anime.

“How are the other new authors doing?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Well, the biggest seller so far is *Karuma the Lawyer* by a long shot.”

“Ahh, yeah, it seems to be doing well in the rankings.”

“It is. In fact, we're already going forward with a manga version. And there's nothing official yet, but it sounds like we've gotten an offer for an anime.”

“Whoa, really?! But there's only two volumes out... I'll admit, though, it got way better. It's almost a different book now.”

Karuma the Lawyer, by Tadashi Kamo, was titled *Illegal Trial* when it won its prize. The characters, setting, and basic story line were all really appealing, but the writing was still pretty rough, so it was awarded the Special Judges' Selection prize instead of anything more prestigious. That being said, rough writing could be easily polished. Haruto read the published Volume 1 himself; all the flaws of the submitted manuscript had been fixed, and it was undeniably an excellent piece of work—surprisingly so, as he recalled.

Even with other labels, it was far from unheard of for a manuscript that received the Special Judges' Selection, or Silver Medal, or Honorable Mention, or some not-so-prestigious award in a writing contest to sell much better than the Grand Prize or Gold Award or whatever. The less polished a package, the more room it had to improve and grow, Haruto figured.

“Yeah, the editor for *Karuma* put a ton of work into that one... Like, he contacted actual lawyers and judges for input and feedback, he sent just about every classic courtroom drama novel there is to Kamo, and he really went all out with the revision process. I need to applaud Kamo for responding to all that and coming through, but I'd have to say that seventy percent of *Karuma's* success comes down to the editor.”

“That’s amazing...”

Haruto admired that, although not all his feelings were rosy about it. All kinds of authors rose up from their award pick. Sometimes, you had unemployed dudes who grew to become bestselling writers thanks to the full range of support their editors offered. Other times, you had high schoolers who got cut by their label for feuding with their editor too much. The industry all seemed so random, so absurd at times.

“After *Karuma*, the next-biggest seller is *Memories of the Sky*, but it sounds like the author’s writing a wholly new book for her follow-up instead of a sequel.”

That’s what Haruto had heard from Itsuki. Apparently, Aoba took a real liking to him, even calling him “Big Bro.” He had no idea why. Again, absolutely absurd.

“The first volume of *The Goddess Must Be Punished!* sold pretty well, thanks to Puriketsu’s illustrations, but sales took a nosedive with Volume 2. I think we’ll probably stick it out ’til Volume 5, but...”

“Ah... Tough market for spanking-themed light novels, huh?”

“Tough market for spanking-themed anything, really. I kinda liked it, but...”

“Me too.”

Even if you had no interest in that fetish, the author’s bubbling passion for spanking came through with almost frightening clarity. But the only readers who’d get into a genre they didn’t really care about—curious about the novelty, or the pure insanity—were people on the creative side like writers and editors, along with a small core audience. To the great majority of readers, not having an interest in the content is a lethal negative—and unfortunately for *The Goddess Must Be Punished!*, there was little done to make up for that negative, apart from Puriketsu’s art.

“Did you see the Amazon review page for *Goddess*, Fuwa?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“It’s kind of...like, frightening. It’s full of spanking fetishists across the country writing these spectacularly good reviews. There’s so much passion.”

“...Scratches an itch, I guess.”

“Yeah. It’s not just the illustrations that’ll likely take it to Volume 5. It’s the fact that the fans are so ardent, we’re not likely to lose many of them going forward.”

Haruto recalled *Sister of the Apocalypse*, Itsuki's debut novel. Most readers failed to understand that book, either, but it still received the near-fanatical support of a cadre of diehards. You saw that often with a novel—the more “out there” it was, the less mainstream support it received, but the more it wrecked you if it turned out to be your thing. Meanwhile, if an author tried *too* hard to appeal to the general public, it'd often result in a mediocre story that failed to grab anyone's hearts.

Striking a balance between personality and general appeal was a headache for any author, and Haruto hadn't found a good answer yet. Maybe *The Goddess Must Be Punished!* would've sold more if it went a bit milder on content, but would it have earned the rabid fanbase of spank-o-philes it had now? He wasn't sure. But even if an author couldn't produce a megahit, having a fanbase that provided predictable sales numbers with every new release was a real boon for a professional. If you were thinking long-term, adjusting your work to sell more copies wasn't always the optimal strategy to take.

So would Makoto Yanagase continue down his hardcore path, or switch gears and aim for more mass appeal? Whenever *Goddess* wrapped up, it interested Haruto to see where his career would take him next.

“And beyond that...*Tsurugi: Sword of Sengoku* is gonna wrap up with Volume 3. The people who've read it really like it...but Volume 1's sales didn't start off great, and we haven't been able to engineer a rebound.”

“Oh yeah...?”

No matter how great a light novel series was, if the package didn't attract readers, it'd get canceled before it even had a chance to enter the ring. That, too, was common to see.

“And also, the *big* surprise is *I Woke Up as the Demon Lord*, our top winner. We just decided today to cancel it at Volume 4.”

“...!”

Kawabe's revelation floored Haruto.

I Woke as the Up Demon Lord of Another World, so I Just Started a Harem, top winner of the 15th GF Bunko writer contest, had only just launched Volume 3 a few days ago. Those scant few days' worth of data must've been all they needed to decide not to continue.

Haruto knew it had sold slowly from Volume 1...but honestly speaking (and despite it not being his own work), it was a real shock. After all, Ui

Aioi, the author, was inspired enough by Haruto's rebuke at her school to keep going—and that earned her the grand prize. Given that history, he took a special interest in Ui's work. He knew just how important her writing was to her, because she'd told him herself.

He even ran into her trying to go undercover in a bookshop to see how Volume 1 was selling on its launch day. The memory of her shedding tears of joy when someone purchased her book for the first time was still fresh in Haruto's mind. He could feel something like a heavy weight on his chest.



Once he wrapped things up with Kawabe and left the editorial office, Haruto took the elevator down to the Gift Publishing lobby. There, he saw Ui Aioi leaning against the wall by the entrance all by herself. They made eye contact.

“Aioi?” Haruto approached her, and she gave him a bow.

“Working hard, Haruto?”

“Y-yeah...”

He didn't know how to handle Ui's friendly smile. Her eyes were red, after all, and he could tell she had been crying not long ago.

“I had a meeting with my editor today,” she said, “and I heard you were gonna be around as well, so I was waiting for you.”

“Oh...” He knew, of course, what that meeting had been about.

“Would you like to go have dinner somewhere, maybe?” she asked, all but forcing the smile onto her face.

“Sure,” Haruto replied, commanding himself to sound casual. He thought he'd stop by Itsuki's on his way home, but maybe next time. The two of them left Gift Publishing together and walked toward downtown.



“So they decided to cancel my series with the next book.”

They had walked wordlessly for a while, just after the sun set, when Ui finally spilled the news.

“...Yeah. My editor told me today.”

“Oh, he did...?” Ui smiled, looking about ready to cry again. “I had Volume 4 mostly written up...but I’m gonna have to rewrite a lot of it to shoehorn an ending in.”

“...”

“At least they let you write a final volume at all,” he almost said before stopping himself.

If a series gets canceled due to poor sales, it’s not uncommon to see a book end with an unresolved plotline, then just have nothing else come out. If you were allowed to pen an ending, no matter how imperfect, you were one of the lucky ones.

But “Hey, it could’ve been worse” would do nothing to console her right now.

“I had no idea how hard being canceled would feel...”

“...Yeah.”

Ui gave him an ironic smile at his agreement. “...*Your* debut series got an anime, didn’t it?”

“...”

She was right. Haruto had never experienced a series cancellation. He couldn’t understand how hard it was.

“Yeah, I’ve never had series canceled on me...”

He paused a moment.

“...But even I know how sad it is when you try hard at something and fail.”

The words came out naturally—those words that had saved him at one point. When the *Chevalier of the Absolute World* anime turned out awful and his heart was in tatters over it, a tearful Miyako said the same thing to him. It saved him. It was why he was standing here today.

“...!”

And those words that saved Haruto once seemed to have a similar effect on Ui. She sniffled, then began shedding large tears as she cried, not caring

about the people around her.

“Ngh...erhh... Mmgh...! Aah...! Aaahhh!!”

“...”

The passersby were making Haruto feel awkward, but he just waited for Ui to cry it out.

“...I *did* try hard. Ever since writing school, I kept my eyes forward, writing novels, reading them, studying them, submitting to all these contests and getting rejected... My heart nearly broke so many times...but I did everything I could to reach the same place you were at.”

“...Yeah. I know. You did great.”

“But...” The tears came back into her eyes. “...I tried so hard. I risked everything to reach this place, but it wasn’t the finish line at all... There’s so many people with more talent than me, and even with all the hard work *they* put in, they have no idea if they can survive in this... It’s like I’m in the middle of the desert...walking around, searching for this oasis when I have no idea where it is...and then falling...”

“The desert...?”

That sounded apt to Haruto. If you don’t have the knowledge, the skill, the special talent, you’re going to be lost—and even if you do have it, there’s no telling how long you can survive. Maybe there’s an oasis somewhere; maybe there’s not. And if you arrive at the oasis of an anime adaptation, maybe you’ll discover it to be just another mirage. And maybe you’ll be lucky enough to find a real oasis, along with enough buried treasure to put your whole life on Easy Street. It was possible. But if you stopped walking, you’d be soon forgotten, your footprints disappearing until they may as well have never been there at all.

“...You’re right. This industry *is* a desert.”

Haruto thought over all the people who had gone away and all the people still struggling with all their might. He nodded, sure that his feelings were true.

Then, suddenly, Ui leaned close to him.

“Ah, Aioi?!”

The soft feeling of Ui on him made Haruto frantic. But Ui just watched him with her glistening eyes, speaking in a weak whisper.

“Haruto... I can’t try at this anymore...” She closed her eyes.

“...!”

Even a virgin like Haruto could tell what she was seeking. His eyes fixated on her soft-looking lips. Even with her clothes on, he could see all of her attractions. His sense of reason was quickly melting. Plus, they were downtown in the big city. Turn a corner in a back alley, and they'd find lots of love hotels where he could help reassure her a little.

But Haruto fiercely resisted the urge to follow his desires and pushed Ui away with both hands.

"Ui..." He gave the saddened Ui a small, vague smile. "...I know how hard it is for you right now."

"Yeah... I feel like my head's being ripped apart."

"I know you think you can't keep going. You want to give it up and feel better."

"...So then..."

Haruto glared at her longing eyes.

"But you *need* to keep going."

Ui's face twisted up at that.

"I... I love you, Haruto!"

It was the first time she'd spelled it out for Haruto so clearly, and it sent his heart reeling. But he willed his face under control, refusing to let anything show.

"Thank you. But now's not the time to say that, is it?"

"...!"

"What you need right now isn't some man comforting you. No, you need to revise Volume 4 with everything you've got so you can give it the best ending possible."

"But... You *say* that, but...!"

Ui was clearly in so much pain, and Haruto's chest ached.

"Remember when someone bought your book the first time? How that felt?"

"Ah..." Ui's eyes widened.

Haruto warmly smiled. "This industry might seem like an oppressive desert, but if you keep on walking, you're bound to encounter fun, too. Happy times. And someday, you might find enough happiness that

everything before then will have been worth it.”

“...Have you experienced that before, Haruto? That...happiness that made it all worth it?”

Haruto nodded at the fervent question. “Yeah.”

“...When was that?”

He brought a finger to the tip of his nose, a little embarrassed. “The end of last year...at the Winter Comiket, in the GF Bunko booth. Miyako was cosplaying as an Avalon Chevalier Corps member while she helped run it. When I saw her...it was kinda like that.”

Ui gave him a blank look. “Why *that*...?”

Haruto nervously chuckled. “...Well, what can I say? It’s the truth. *Chevalier*’s given me a lot of bad memories, too, the anime top among them...but at that one moment, I felt like everything was worth it. I really thought deep down, like, ‘I’m glad I wrote this; I’m glad I became a writer.’”

She kept staring at him, unsure what to make of that. Then she asked, “...Do you think I’ll ever have a moment like that?”

“I’m sure you will. If you keep walking and never give up, you will.”

He had no basis for that, but Haruto still affirmed it.

“Oh...”

Ui let out a small sigh, followed by a smile that looked like tears would be joining it soon.

“I believe you, Haruto Fuwa, more than anybody else in the world... And if you’re saying that, it has to be true. So I guess...I’ll try a little longer.”

“Good... Keep it up.”

She bowed at him, then began walking toward the station. Haruto stayed where he was, watching her back until she disappeared.



Leaving Haruto and returning home, Ui went to the bathroom and removed her makeup and lipstick. Her plain self, freckles and all, looked back at her in the mirror. Untying her hair and changing into gray sweats, she took out her contacts and put on a frumpy-looking pair of black-rimmed glasses.

“...Right.”

She looked like a different girl from a few minutes ago, but now Ui sounded content with herself. She felt calmer this way. From now on, she wouldn't force herself to keep up appearances; she no longer needed to. He said that seeing the girl he loved cosplaying as one of his characters had made all the hardship seem worth it. And what point was there trying to look attractive to him after that?

“...You're so dumb, Haruto.”

Her series was canceled and she'd just been shot down in love, but Ui's heart still felt clear and refreshed. These thick horn-rims and wet newspaper-colored sweats she had used since her student years were now her battle uniform.

Leaving the bathroom, Ui faced up to her desk, booted her laptop, and opened her manuscript file.

Ui Aioi, novelist, was stepping back into the desert.



Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Can you tell me if the winners of the 15th GF Bunko New Writers Contest use pen names?



They all do except for Yoshihiro Kiso.

QUESTION

Did the authors in the story debut with their first contest submissions?



And Kiso and Kamo hit paydirt with their firsts, as well.

Kanikou and I both went pro with the first novels we ever wrote. I think Aoba did, too.



Impressive, huh? Half of that year's winners debuting with their firsts.



Yeah, it's rare to see three in a year, but you do see someone's first novel winning a prize pretty often. The real question is whether they can write at industry quality over the long run.

Xie Xie, Taiwan

It was a day in mid-August, and Itsuki was up in the air, traveling from Haneda Airport in Tokyo to Taipei Songshan Airport. He had a business-class seat and manga artist Kaiko Mikuniyama seated next him, and back in coach were Kenjiro Toki and Kohei Tokuyama, Kaiko's editor.

Itsuki and Kaiko had both been invited as guests to a convention taking place in Taiwan. It was held around this time every year—a very large event run by publishers and companies in the fields of manga, anime, light novels, and more. For every con, they'd always invite a bunch of guests from Japan—voice talent, singers, manga artists, novelists, game designers, and so on. It ran for five days straight, and on day four tomorrow, Itsuki and Kaiko would be holding an autograph session.

The convention staff selected the guests they'd invite every year. Generally speaking, Japanese publishers and talent agencies couldn't pick the people they wanted to push and have them appear at the con. Receiving an invite, in other words, was a sign from actual Taiwanese people that you really *were* a name-brand star down there—a great honor to have.

Gift Publishing had received invites for ten or so novelists and manga artists in the past, including Kasuka Sekigahara. They sent an offer to Nayuta, but she'd turned it down. Haruto never got one, and of course he was incredibly envious of Itsuki before he took off.

“Ooooh, I'm too nervous to eat...”

Kaiko's groaning was unconvincing, considering the rate she was scarfing down a meal the menu said was overseen by the chef of a first-class French restaurant.

“Is it really okay for a newbie like me to be a guest...?”

Itsuki grinned. “You know, Kaiko, I think I'm just the bonus garnish compared to you, so...”

This convention offer came about a month after the *All About* anime was

announced. This announcement was made at the same time as Volume 1 of the *All About* manga adaptation, which generated huge buzz after its launch and became a sales hit. It was probably only a matter of time before the manga started outselling the novels. A translated version was released in Taiwan at almost the same time as Japan, and Itsuki was told that it did well over there, too.

“No, no... I wouldn’t be here without your original work, Mr. Hashima. And they love the anime over there, too, don’t they?”

Itsuki’s eyes thoughtfully wandered upward.

“I wonder...”

The *All About* anime was getting streamed overseas pretty much simultaneously with the Japan TV broadcast. Japanese anime was illegally put on the net pretty much instantly, complete with carefully translated subtitles and everything, so a lot of series had contracts with distribution firms to stream the official translated versions ASAP.

According to what anime producer Tsutomu Oshima told him at a recording session the other day, the *All About* anime was getting good reviews outside Japan. Its performance in China was particularly good compared to other nations, even Japan—enough to maybe reach the top three in anime this season.

When he’d written his books, Itsuki knew they’d be translated and released in other countries, but he never considered a non-Japanese audience or adjusted his content for it. His target was Japanese readers, and he used his full Japanese language abilities to write for them. That’s why learning that his work was popular outside his home nation was honestly kind of hard to believe. Even in Japan, it was a love-it-or-hate-it kind of series—how could anyone elsewhere like it?

Did the translators do that good of a job handling it? And if they did, doesn’t that make it more the translators’ work than mine...?

This, among many other thoughts and concerns, was on Itsuki’s mind as his plane traveled toward Taiwan on schedule. The flight from Haneda to Songshan took about three and a half hours, no different from that impromptu trip to Okinawa a while back.



The plane landed at around three in the afternoon, and upon arrival, Itsuki's entourage was greeted by two editors from the Taiwanese publisher, alongside the (Japanese) director of Gift Publishing's overseas business. This trio would be attending to their needs during the trip.

From the Taiwanese publisher came Hong, a slim woman in her mid-twenties or so, and Wen, a tall man in his early thirties and apparently the editor in chief of his company's light novel department. Both were proficient in Japanese, and the Gift Publishing liaison was fluent in Chinese and Japanese as well, so communication didn't seem like it'd be an issue.

After a few introductions, they left the airport and headed for their hotel.

"Whoa... It's so hot...!"

The onrush of humid, tropical air made Itsuki groan. The temperature around Taipei in the summer was about the same as Tokyo, but the humidity was cranked up to maximum and made it all the more punishing. Itsuki didn't deal well with heat—his summers were mostly spent in air-conditioned rooms, and he made every possible effort to stay away from the outdoors—so this hit him hard.

They hurriedly climbed into an SUV and set off for the hotel.

Itsuki stared at the sights of Taipei out the window. The city didn't look terribly different from Japan, but he was surprised at how many motorbikes were all around him. They'd snake all over the road, and on the shoulders in front of industrial facilities, he'd see impossibly long lines of them parked neatly in a row. Taiwan is truly a motorcycle-driven society, with one bike for every 1.8 people; there are even shops specializing in helmets and anti-exhaust masks.

"It's kind of like Japan, but kinda *not* like it, too. It's so fascinating!"

Kaiko admired everything she saw as she pointed her digital camera to and fro. She always had one with her, as she never knew which photos might come in handy as art references.

After around fifteen minutes of taking in views they'd never see in Japan, Itsuki's group reached their hotel. This was one of Taipei's foremost hotels, a place that celebrity actors and famous artists would stay in, supposedly.

“...This... This is really *our* hotel...? They’re not confusing us with Mamoru Miyano or Nana Mizuki, are they? I’m just a Japanese light novelist.”

Itsuki’s head swiveled around the large, glittering lobby entrance. He was completely out of his element.

“Who’d ever confuse you with Mamoru Miyano? ...I heard about this from the others in editorial, but this *is* a pretty nice hotel... They’d never give me the budget for this...”

Despite the diss against Itsuki, Toki was just as surprised. None of his writers had ever come down here before, so this was his first Taiwan business trip.

“Well, if you’re right, I better get some pictures before somebody realizes I’m not Nana Mizuki.” Kaiko began snapping away at the lobby, whose European-style glitz probably would be useful reference material for a fantasy series.

As she and Itsuki worried over whether this was all a big mix-up, editor in chief Wen checked in for them, as well as Toki and Tokuyama. A hotel staffer led them to their suite—a massive one with two double beds, a luxuriant sofa, and a bunch of other furniture, with space to spare. Every person could have their own room if they wanted.

“...This is bigger than my apartment...”

If you put a bed from here into Itsuki’s one-bedroom studio space, you’d likely be unable to fit anything else. Now he felt even more out of place as he put down his luggage and checked the schedule.

They planned to stay here for two nights. In an hour’s time, the Taiwanese publisher would take them on a tour of Taipei 101, followed by dinner and a trip to Lungshan Temple and a night market before returning to the hotel. Tomorrow after lunch, the team would hold their signing event at the convention, beginning at one PM. They’d follow this up with visits to a few bookstores around Taipei, then another signing event at the main Animate otaku-goods store in the city. Dinner was planned with the president of their Taiwan publisher, followed by a traditional foot massage and then back to the hotel. They’d swing by the National Palace Museum on the morning of day three, then catch their plane back to Japan later that afternoon.

Itsuki was the kind of tourist who never really planned an itinerary, going

instead wherever his whims took him. This might be the first time since his last class trip in high school where he had such a rigid schedule in place.



After resting in their hotel room a bit, Itsuki headed for the lobby. The rest of the gang was already there, including their three attendants.

Their first stop was Taipei 101, a 101-floor skyscraper 1,671 feet tall—the tallest in the world until the Burj Khalifa in 2007. It was clearly visible from the hotel, but the closer you got, the more overwhelming its height became. Going inside, they decided to travel up to the observation deck. This was accessible via an elevator that went straight from the first to the eighty-ninth floor, traveling at speeds upwards of thirty-seven miles an hour (earning it a Guinness world record).

“Whoa... I don’t think an elevator ride’s ever excited me this much!”

The sensation of thrilling speed was like no regular elevator at all, wowing Itsuki as they hurtled toward floor eighty-nine. It wasn’t like a high-speed roller coaster, exactly, but the feeling of being on an elevator going far too fast for its own good was addictive.

“The people who work here must have so much *fun* with this every day!” Kaiko was just as excited.

“You like this?” a nervous-looking Tokuyama asked. “I’m not very good with heights, so this is hard... If I had to work here every day, I’d probably die...”

“Yeah, you were shaking a bit on the plane, too, weren’t you?” Toki grinned and turned toward Itsuki and Kaiko. “You know, I’ve thought this before, but you two really have similar personalities, don’t you?”

“Maybe so.” Tokuyama nodded.

Perhaps, if the gears were meshed some other way, Itsuki Hashima and Kaiko Mikuniyama might’ve become a couple. This what-if world can be enjoyed in the drama CD that comes with the *Sister* Blu-ray box set in Japan—on sale now!

After enjoying the views up high, they gawked at the giant tuned mass damper in the central atrium, the coral jewelry displays on floor eighty-eight,

and the shopping mall down below. From floor six to the basement, there was a huge variety of shops selling fashion goods, cosmetics, watches, jewelry, coral, groceries, Taiwan souvenirs, and more. It was full of food courts and restaurants as well, and a shopaholic could easily stay entertained the entire day in there.

Itsuki purchased a few things for Chihiro and Haruto, while Kaiko shopped for her family and roommates—not to mention herself, judging by all the brand-name lingerie she piled into her bag.

“Wow, Kaiko... You never change, do you?”

Kaiko smiled at the admiring Itsuki. “I bought some panties for Chihiro, too, you know. Kind of a sexy design, but just imagining her all blushing as she tries these on gets me so excited.”

“Can you stop thinking about people’s sisters that way, please?!”



After a fine dinner of Peking duck, Shanghai hairy crab, and chili shrimp, the group moved on to Lungshan Temple.

“Wow... This is almost as flashy as before.”

The shining LED-illuminated temple stunned Itsuki. It was a completely different image from the reserved, one-with-nature feel of Japanese temples. Vivid gold leaf, greens, and reds blared across the whole building, and it was all lit up after dark, so “eye-popping” wasn’t the half of it. The dragon statue on the roof had real presence as well, giving the whole thing a juvenile-fantasy feel. Itsuki loved it more than the temples back home.

The main building was devoted to bodhisattva, so it *was* a Buddhist temple, but still, it was a worship site for Taoism, Confucianism, and a good hundred or so gods and goddesses. Having this one-stop shop for all kinds of pilgrimages was pretty convenient, making it popular among both Taiwanese and foreign tourists.

Itsuki’s group paid their respects at a shrine devoted to Emperor Guan, the divine form of Guan Yu from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and a deity bringing good luck to businesses, and one popular in Japan, too. Kaiko, meanwhile, offered a prayer to Yue Lao, the Taiwanese god of marriage and

love, and purchased two good-luck charms themed after him—one for herself and one for Miyako, as she put it.

“Do you have any potential partners in mind, Kaiko?”



Kaiko bashfully shook her head at Itsuki. “No, no one like that...but looking at how happy Nayu is every day, I hope very much for someone like that to show up in my life!”

“...Oh.”

“I wonder if there’s anyone who shares my hobbies. Someone who I can pursue my dreams together with...” Then she snapped out of it. “...Come to think of it, Hashima, you’re pretty close to my ideal, aren’t you?”

“No, I got Kanikou, so...”

Kaiko smiled as Itsuki panicked a little. “I know that. I’m not out to steal you from your girlfriend... But, you know, if we had encountered each other in a different order or something, maybe I would’ve fallen in love with you, Hashima.”

“Yeah,” Itsuki said with a laugh, “maybe it worked out that way in some parallel universe.”

There was no point to hypotheticals like this; that’s why he could laugh at it. By this point, he had no option but to pursue *this* reality, the one where he chose Nayuta Kani.

By the way, the what-if drama CD where Itsuki *did* pair up with Kaiko is available now at [etc., etc., etc.]



Putting Lungshan Temple behind them, the group traveled about fifteen minutes by car to a night market. There were actually two others right nearby Lungshan, but apparently, they weren’t ideal for a first-timer.

A night market is a street of stalls, booths, and eateries that operates from evening to late night. They developed in the tropical and subtropical areas of Asia, taking advantage of the fact that people did more business in nighttime hours to avoid the heat, and Taiwan’s night markets in particular were popular tourist draws.

This one was packed end to end with people, like some kind of local festival, and the food aromas wafting from here and there were already whetting their appetites—spicy, sweet, fishy, even downright funky. All of these smells freely mixed together, thoroughly confusing the palate.

It hadn't been that long since they had enjoyed a pretty hearty dinner, so nobody was very hungry. Still, they made a variety of unfamiliar purchases, sharing them among each other. As creators, it was important they took in all the novel experiences they could get—things they could draw upon for inspiration later. Food especially was vital; your depiction of a dish could be a thousand times more persuasive if you'd actually eaten it before.

So Itsuki ate some fruit he didn't really catch the name of; he ate something that was kind of like a *gyoza* dumpling, but not exactly; he ate balls of batter about the size of a donut hole but filled with shrimp; he ate “world-famous” Taiwanese mango-flavored shaved ice; he ate a springy, pancake-like treat stuffed with meat and veggies; he ate fried frog; he drank boba milk tea that was touted as a “frog eggs drink” on the sign; he ate some *hujiao bing* pepper buns; he ate some stinky tofu; and he ate some fried chicken feet. Some of it took a little bravery to reach out to, but Toki, Tokuyama, and Kaiko all helped.

“You have a lot of guts, Ms. Mikuniyama...”

Toki watched Kaiko gnaw on a chicken foot with a mixture of admiration and repulsion.

“You know, I've never really been turned off by so-called disgusting food. I've eaten insects before, too.”

“Man. They grow 'em tough over in Gunma Prefecture, huh?” Itsuki shivered as Kaiko blushed.

“G-Gunma doesn't have anything to do with it! Besides, don't they survive mostly off bee larvae over in Gifu Prefecture?”

“That's just one region!” *[Editor's note: Bee larvae are mixed in with rice in the Tono region of Japan's Gifu Prefecture, but it's not their main sustenance.]*

This playful bickering was interrupted by Wen, the editor in chief. “You know, maybe the night market in nearby Lungshan would've been better after all.”

“You mean the one not suited to beginners?” Toki asked.

“Yes. You can eat things like rats and venomous snakes over there. Bee larvae, too.”

“N-no, um, this market's just fine! Thanks for looking out for us!”

“Snakes and rats are a little too much even for me,” Kaiko said, visibly a bit more nervous than before.

They also had an eye out for the clothing and home goods shops along the street. A lot of items featuring cute Japanese characters were on sale, some of which was clearly bootleg merchandise.

“Wow, this blue, catlike cartoon character [*Editor’s note: identity withheld*] doll looks like such a rip-off.”

Toki chuckled at it, as did Itsuki.

“Aw, too bad. If I was writing for Shogakukan Gagaga Bunko, I could’ve pretended not to notice and tweet out a pic like ‘I found D_____ goods at the night market! D_____’s super popular over in Taiwan, too!’”

“Don’t cause any more trouble for us than you already are,” Toki said, his tone serious. But it was soon forgotten as they all ate as much as their distended stomachs could bear before returning to the hotel.



The next day—after sampling a breakfast buffet with Chinese, French, Japanese, and Italian selections, then taking an impromptu nap to digest it all—Itsuki’s group left the hotel with their Taiwanese editors.

Together, they headed for Din Tai Fung, a world-famous restaurant specializing in dumplings. There was a line out the door, but someone from the publisher had lined up earlier in the morning to score them a table ticket, so they were escorted right in.

Din Tai Fung was best known for its *xiaolongbao* soup dumplings, offered in a dizzying array of variants—standard, truffle, crab paste, shrimp, and much more. They were all excellent, especially the “brown meat” crab dumplings—the soup inside gave the meat a melt-in-your-mouth consistency, a perfect harmony of flavors.

These were followed up with *shumai*, *gyoza*, wontons, and more, all brilliant and all making the group full to bursting once again. Every single creator who made the trip to Taiwan will tell you “they made us eat *so* much, and it was all *so* good,” and now Itsuki could see why.

Once they ate to their hearts’ content at Din Tai Fung, it was finally time to visit the convention. This was in a large hall filled with booths, including publishers, anime companies, figure makers, and more from Japan. Besides

the dealer's room, there were panels, autograph sessions, and mini-concerts held in this or that conference hall, giving the whole con a frenetic atmosphere.

"It's like the big-name booths at Comiket," said Toki.

"It sure is." Tokuyama nodded.

Neither Itsuki nor Kaiko had ever gone to Comiket, so they looked all around as they walked, fascinated by the sights as Wen and the others guided them.

"Huh. Which character was that again?"

Itsuki was pointing at a large poster on the wall of one publisher's booth. It was part of a line of posters depicting the biggest heroines from Japan's light novel scene, but there was one character among them that Itsuki had never seen before.

"Hmm...? I'm not sure. I don't think I've seen her."

Toki, who knew even more about light novels than Itsuki, raised a puzzled eyebrow.

"Oh," interjected Hong, "that's a character from an original novel series that we publish."

The market for light novels in Taiwan offered not only translations from Japanese works, but also a large number of original works by Taiwanese authors. The character Itsuki spotted was drawn with a quality that'd fit right in with any popular Japanese series—in fact, Itsuki could picture a series starring that girl hitting it big back home.

Their signing event was being held in a space right next to the publisher booth. Itsuki went in through the staff door, which led to a greenroom. He peeked out from it to look at the stage, only to find a pretty young girl cosplaying as *All About* heroine Ichika Akatsuki on it, holding a mic and chatting with the audience. He couldn't understand her, but presumably she was explaining how the autograph session would work.

The seats were fully occupied by attendees, which made Itsuki and Kaiko wince—then, as the MC's voice crescendoed upward, the audience erupted into applause.

"Wow, they're really into it," Itsuki said, his voice shallow. "This *is* just an autograph thing, right?" In his eyes, it looked more like a concert.

"Are you sure they're not confusing this with some voice actress event? I guess I really *will* have to pretend to be Nana Mizuki!" a similarly nervous

Kaiko said.

“All right. I’ll be T.M.Revolution, then! Time to shout to the world and start a revolution!!”

“Roger that, Mr. Hashima... Oh, I mean Mr. Nishikawa!”

“Calm down, you two.” Toki stepped in before their silliness got any further out of hand.

“But how can we? That’s a ton of people... How many are there, even?”

“Three hundred.”

““*Three hundred?!?*”” Itsuki and Kaiko shouted. This, by the way, was the first signing event for either of them—they had both signed copies of their work for giveaways and stuff, but never more than around a hundred at once.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get a break halfway through.”

“That’s not what I’m worrying about,” groaned Itsuki.

“We’re about ready to begin,” Hong the editor said. “So, creators, stand by.”

Itsuki and Kaiko gulped.

“...We’ll just have to dive in and do it.”

“I guess so,” Kaiko said as Itsuki nodded to himself.

Then he took out a mask and a pair of sunglasses from his bag. They were filming this event, and it’d show up on Taiwan media, but Itsuki had never revealed his face online or in magazines, so he thought it better to keep it hidden here. Kaiko, meanwhile, unfurled the pair of panties she wore as a ribbon and applied it to her face—just like when she was working.

“*Tian ah!*”

“Huhhh?!”

“Ms. Mikuniyama, what are you doing?!”

The three attendants didn’t hide their surprise at Kaiko’s bizarre behavior.

“Oh, um, don’t worry about it,” replied Tokuyama, resigning himself to his fate. “This is how Mikuniyama dresses in public events.”

Meanwhile, the MC on stage raised her voice high—and began speaking Japanese.

“*We love Mr. Hashima! We love little sisters!*”

All three hundred people in the audience replied in Japanese.

“*We love Mr. Hashima!! We love little sisters!!*”

“*We love Ms. Mikuniyama! We love little sisters!*”

“*We love Ms. Mikuniyama!! We love little sisters!!*”

The chanting made Itsuki and Kaiko delighted and ashamed in equal measures.

“This is the most embarrassing moment of my life...!”

“Yeah... Now I’m getting *super* nervous...!”

“Okay, you’re on.”

Pushed by Toki, Itsuki and Kaiko walked from the greenroom to the stage. Toki, Wen, and Hong, who were helping run the session, followed behind them. The MC took one look at Kaiko and visibly reared back for a moment, but quickly recovered her smile and prompted the audience to applaud—a real pro through and through.

Greeted with cheers and clapping, Itsuki and Kaiko went up to center stage. The MC gave him the mic.

“*D-dake ho... Wo shi Yudao Yiyue.*”

“*Wo shi Sanguochuan Tian.*”

They introduced themselves in their best broken Chinese (Itsuki’s especially so), earning roars of applause for it. The response made Itsuki wonder once more whether they were being mistaken for voice talent. But behind them on the stage were giant posters showing off Volume 1 of the novel and manga versions of *All About My Little Sister* (or *Meimeidi Yiqie*, to be fully accurate), and a banner hanging from the wall had their names and what they assumed was “Signing Event” in Chinese written on it.

Taking their assigned seats, they prepared for the session to begin. The way this was set up, Itsuki would write today’s date and his signature on a sheet of thick autograph paper, then turn it over to Kaiko, who’d add the recipient’s name and her own autograph to it. These autograph sheets came prefolded in half, like a somewhat large greeting card; the “cover” had a closeup of Ichika Akatsuki’s face, while half of the inside was taken up by an exclusive illustration of Yukiko Onizaki that Kaiko had drawn for the event. They’d be autographing the area next to this, writing in gold pen on a black backdrop.

One look at these sheets and it was clear they had to cost more than your typical paperback book or manga volume. To participate in this session, you were required to purchase X Taiwan dollars’ worth of *All About* books or merchandise—but between the airfare, the hotel, and how much these signing sheets had to cost, there’s no way anyone was making money off this.

And that’s why, thought Itsuki, I need to be serious about this.

The first autograph seeker to step before him was a boy, probably in his late teens.

“*Xie xie*,” Itsuki ventured.

“Mr. Hashima! Volume 6 was really good! The anime’s wonderful, too!”

Being answered in fluent Japanese threw him. “*Xie...*” he reflexively began, before correcting himself and replying “Thank you!” back in Japanese as he signed.

Accepting the signed sheet, the boy broadly grinned and said, “Keep up the good work!”—again, in Japanese. He extended his right hand; Itsuki accepted it, saying “I will, thank you!”

It wasn’t just the first kid, either. Nearly everyone in the audience gave Itsuki their kindest wishes in Japanese. Some of them had even imported Itsuki’s non-localized work and read it in Japanese, which amazed him. As they signed away, the MC kept the energy going, giving the audience quizzes, playing rock-paper-scissors with them, and talking about the answers Itsuki and Kaiko gave in the questionnaire they’d filled out earlier.

Three hundred autographs (and one break) later, the audience got a chance to ask them both questions.

“Mr. Hashima! I want to have Ichika!”

“Nuh-uh! Ichika is a little sister who belongs to everyone!”

Itsuki instantly responded to the fan’s request, Hong kindly translating. The audience laughed and cheered.

It was a long event, lasting over two and a half hours, but it was constantly lively, fun, and stimulating. To Itsuki, it felt over in a flash. At the end of it, they took a photo onstage, where an excited Itsuki had draped his arms over Kaiko and the MC’s shoulders.

This picture of Itsuki getting carried away was posted with the event reports across Taiwanese media, getting some buzz in Japan as well. Itsuki didn’t get bashed for it much, mainly thanks to the distraction of Kaiko wearing panties over her face. This was around the time when her nickname Panty Manga Sensei began to stick.



Leaving the convention, Itsuki and the gang visited a few bookstores before their next signing event at Animate Taipei.

“Kind of weird to see series published by different labels sharing the same shelf space, isn’t it?” Itsuki observed as he walked the aisles.

The shelves had a lot of titles familiar to him from Japan, but deals for translated editions were worked out by the individual series, not for a publisher’s full light novel lineup. Thus, for example, you could have *Haganai* (published by MF Bunko J in Japan), *No-Rin* (GA Bunko), and *Baka and Test* (Famitsu Bunko) all come out from the same publisher in Taiwan. You could also have the same author’s work be spread across multiple outfits—Yomi Hirasaka’s *Haunted!* and *Nekuroma*. were released by Tong Li Publishing in Taiwan, while *Haganai* got picked up by Sharp Point Press.

“These feel nicer to handle than the little paperbacks in Japan.”

Light novels in Taiwan were a measure larger than the *bunko* format normally used in Japan. Often, they’d have some fancy details added to them—matte covers, for example, or embossing on the title and cover characters. That made them a bit more expensive than their Japanese counterparts, but if you liked having a physical collection of light novels, these must’ve felt a lot nicer to own. Having the illustrations printed on a larger-sized page was another plus.

Books would often come with bonuses as well—a metal bookmark with color artwork from the series, a card illustrated with a heroine whose clothes disappeared when you warmed up the paper, and so on. These were high quality overall, and on occasion there’d be special-edition copies that came with desk calendars, keychains, and other freebies not available in Japan. Sometimes Japanese fans—and, for that matter, the authors themselves—would beg the publishers to release some of this merch back home for them. The convention had some exclusive goods on sale, too. Itsuki saw a poster advertising them; he couldn’t tell what it was, but the packaging was every bit as nice-looking as what he’d seen back home.

“Wow... They do a really good job on these...”

Toki picked up a Taiwan-original light novel, examining it carefully from assorted angles.

“You know,” Itsuki thoughtfully remarked, “maybe we’ll see a Taiwanese novel get translated into Japanese and hit it really big someday.”

“There’s a decent chance of that, I’m sure.”

“...I’ve got more rivals than ever, huh?”

From the new novelists debuting every year to writers toiling away on web novel sites to pros working in other countries... Let your guard down once, and you’ll fade from the front lines in an instant.

“I’ll sure need to brace myself...” Kaiko looked resolute. The manga business, of course, was even fiercer than novels, with many overseas titles becoming hits in Japan. With at least one series, *Magika no Kenshi to Vacileus*, a Taiwanese artist had successfully adapted a Japanese light novel into manga.

The bookstores were an eye-opening experience, one Itsuki and Kaiko were glad to have before their Animate Taipei signing. There, too, they were greeted by an electrified audience, writing autographs for about a hundred and fifty people. After that came dinner with the president of their Taiwan publisher, along with bird’s nest soup, shark fin dumplings, and other lip-smacking delicacies.

Immediately after that was their Taiwan-style foot massage, which—to Itsuki, at least—was painful enough to make him want to scream. Between that and the rest of the day’s events, Itsuki fell asleep the moment he made it back to his hotel room.



Day three began with breakfast, followed by an early checkout and a trip to the National Palace Museum. This was the largest museum in Taiwan, housing around seven hundred thousand pieces of art and ancient Chinese artifacts. The displays were broadly divided into properties, calligraphy, and literature; as Itsuki wondered which section to explore, Wen told them to follow him to the main showpiece before it got too crowded.

This showpiece was the Jadeite Cabbage, a piece of jade carved into the shape of a head of Chinese cabbage by an unknown artist. About seven and a half inches high, it featured a locust and katydid lurking within its leaves. The green-and-white color resembled an actual cabbage, but this was apparently the original color of the stone.

“Hmm... Yeah... It’s a cabbage, all right...”

Itsuki stared closely at the piece as he appraised it. It was pretty. All the intricate details impressed him, and it was neat how the artist took advantage of the jade’s original coloring. Beyond that, though, he couldn’t say much. He wondered a bit why it had occurred to anyone to carve a Chinese cabbage out of jade.

“Kaiko,” he asked as she peered at the carving, “as a professional illustrator, what do you think about this?”

“Oh?Well, how to put it?” She raised an eyebrow. “It..... It’s a beautiful cabbage, is all I can say.”

They looked around the other main exhibits after that, but Kaiko didn’t have much reaction to those, either. “All these intricate sculptures and paintings look really great to me, but...I dunno. They’re not shaking my soul or anything.”

“This one time,” replied Itsuki, “I went with Setsuna to the Picasso section of a museum, and all of Picasso’s art and sculpture work really got to him. His art even took on a cubist style for a little while. But nothing like that with you, Kaiko?”

“Puriketsu went Picasso?” Kaiko asked, surprised. “I’ve never experienced that with fine art, no. With manga and panties, though, many times.”

“Yeah, uh, I guess I’m the same with some novels...”

Top on the list was the shock he felt reading Nayuta Kani’s *The Silvery Landscape* for the first time. But he’d often be moved by novels that stood out from the pack—in terms of characterization, expression, foreshadowing, structure, readability, synergy between the text and illustrations, and so on.

“I guess you need to have a firm grounding in something before you really appreciate how great its best examples are. It sounds like Puriketsu has a keen interest in fine art, doesn’t he? Not just illustration.”

Kaiko seemed a little frustrated about that as she spoke.



After enjoying their last Taiwanese meal at the National Palace Museum

restaurant, the group headed for the airport. They said their goodbyes to Wen and their Taiwanese counterparts in front of the escalator leading to the international departure lobby.

“Mr. Hashima, Ms. Mikuniyama, thanks for all your hard work,” Wen said. “I hope you can come back here sometime.”

“No,” Itsuki said, “thank *you* for everything. You’ve been a huge help.”

Thanks to their assistance for the past three days, the trip went astonishingly smoothly for being in a foreign country. Having so little to worry about almost made traveling overseas without a guide seem like a hassle now.

“I’ll do my best to earn another invitation, certainly,” Kaiko said with a smile and a deep bow. “Thanks again.”

After Toki and Tokuyama said their own goodbyes, they all waved and went up the escalator. Upon checking in, they made just a few more souvenir purchases and hung out in the lounge until they boarded their flight. As on the departing flight, Itsuki and Kaiko scored business-class seats, while Toki and Tokuyama made do with coach.

“It’s such a nice place,” Kaiko said with a sad smile as she looked out the window.

“Yeah,” replied Itsuki.

“We really have to come back sometime...as invitees, of course.”

“You bet.”

Itsuki firmly nodded at her. He couldn’t say how many years it’d take, but if he remained on the front lines of his industry, the day would come sooner or later. Such was their shared resolve as they took off from Taiwan.

...And, of course, once he was back home, Nayuta interrogated Itsuki about the autograph session photo. Kaiko became immensely popular (in a way, at least) for her own photos—but when she saw the photoshops online of her be-pantied self starring in *Hentai Kamen*, appearing on the cover of *Shimoneta*, and standing tall as a *Fate/Grand Order* Servant, she fainted on the spot.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

My wife usually cuts the tags off her undergarments because she says they chafe her skin. Does Kaiko have this problem?



I don't remove them from panties I buy for collection purposes, but for my normal wear, I take them off, too—they prick against my skin. Be careful that you only snip off the threading that attaches the tag to the fabric, though! There are also some brands that come tagless, although not many Japanese ones do.

QUESTION

It's said that Japanese women in the distant past wore nothing under their kimono. What does Kaiko think about that?



I think it's sad.

That's all?! The moment underwear isn't involved, she immediately loses interest...



The Akihabara Date II

A few days after the Taiwan convention, Haruto visited Itsuki's place in the evening and had a few drinks, enjoying some *karasumi* (salted mullet roe) alongside them.

"Wow, this is what *karasumi* tastes like?"

"It's surprisingly springy. Kind of like cheese."

It was the first time either of them had tried this gourmet delicacy.

"But it's really good. Great job on it, Chihiro."

Chihiro gave him a bashful smile. "I've never had it, either, so I just looked up some recipes online."

On the menu tonight was toasted *karasumi* slices, accompanied by grated *karasumi* over pasta and little daikon radish pockets of *karasumi*—all traditional ways to fully savor what this fish byproduct had to offer.

"Oh, man," Itsuki said, "this *really* makes the sake go down well."

He was having some Dassai 39 sparkling sake; this kind of drink went better with rich, salty *karasumi* than beer. Having this in carbonated form further expressed the natural fruitiness of the Dassai brand, making it incredibly easy to drink, but it was still 14 percent alcohol (typical for sake), making it a hearty beverage suited for Eastern or Western cuisine.

"It was really more of a stage event than an autograph session," Itsuki recounted as they ate. "The hotel was four-star quality, too. I felt like a rock star or something. You'd never see that kinda thing in Japan."

"Yeah, I hear about that stuff, but man, Taiwan sounds awesome. Wish I could get an invite."

"Ha-ha-ha! Jealous, huh?"

"Yeah," Haruto said as he cowered under Itsuki's robust laughter. "Really jealous." Then his voice dipped down. "...I gotta work harder. For real."

"Fuwa?" a puzzled Chihiro asked.

Haruto just smiled, trying to laugh it off. "By the way, Itsuki, I'm gonna

buy the new GF Bunko releases at Akiba tomorrow. You wanna join me?”

Haruto went to the Akihabara neighborhood of Tokyo once a month, whenever GF Bunko released their latest books. It was his chance to catch up on purchases and do some street-level scoping out of the scene.

“Nah,” replied Itsuki, “I was just there last month, so I’m good.”

“Oh? With who?”

“Just me.”

“You went to Akiba alone? That’s rare.”

Itsuki hated big crowds and had little interest in the bonuses included with books and games when you bought them at the shops, so he didn’t go to Akihabara much and tended not to accept Haruto’s invites.

“I heard they had an *All About* tower going, so I had to check that out.”

“Oh, yeah, you almost never see that.”

A *tower*, in this case, referred to copies of a book stacked up high. It was a surefire way to draw attention to a book at the shop, but it required labor and a lot of excess inventory, so you didn’t see towers much except for titles the store was really keen to push. Just because a series had an anime on the air didn’t guarantee it a tower; only a store whose employees loved the series and were positive it’d sell well would commit to one, making it a kind of honor for the creator. Haruto’s *Chevalier of the Absolute World* had never received that honor during its own anime run, as far as he knew.

“Um, if you’re going to Akihabara, I’d like to join you,” Chihiro said.

“Did you have an errand there?” Itsuki asked.

“Not really, but I like looking at the new model sets, and there’s this one shop that sells goods from all across Japan that I’d like to check out again.”

“Sure thing,” Haruto replied. “We can stop by Yodobashi and Chabara and stuff.”

“Great!”

Itsuki looked at them both—and took a drink, even as he looked like he wanted to say something.



The next afternoon, Haruto met with Chihiro at the Electric Town exit from

JR Akihabara Station. Summer break was in full swing, so the area was full of what looked like middle and high school kids.

Haruto arrived first, reading a web novel on his phone while occasionally glancing at the turnstile to see if Chihiro arrived. But...

“Hi there.”

“Whoa?!”

He didn’t even notice her until she was practically beside him—to be exact, he didn’t recognize her at first glance. She was in a sleeveless knitted top and a skirt that ended above the knees—the first time Haruto had ever seen her in a skirt. He couldn’t help but take a moment to process the sight, making Chihiro blush a bit.

“Uh, um, Fuwa?”

“Huh? Ah. Ahh... I—I haven’t seen you like that before, Chihiro, so it was new to me.”

“My brother bought this for me.”

“Oh...?”

Impressed, Haruto gave Chihiro another once-over. “...You really *are* a girl, huh...?”

He couldn’t keep himself from saying it.

Two months had passed since her blitzkrieg approach to coming out. Itsuki, Nayuta, Miyako, and the others were surprisingly accepting of this, it seemed, but Haruto was still thrown by it. To him, Chihiro was more than just his friend’s brother—she was *his* friend, too. They had gone out together without Itsuki, even attending a social mixer once. And now her being a girl really confused him. He still wasn’t quite used to it—but she was 100 percent a woman, and it was his duty to accept that.

“...I’m sorry I lied about it, Fuwa,” she told him sheepishly.

“No,” he hurriedly replied, “with the situation you had, don’t worry about it. And even if you’re a girl, you’re still a valuable friend to me.”



“Thank you,” she bashfully said. “Um, if you want, you can keep on seeing me as a guy if that’s easier to picture. Ashley still does, pretty much.”

“Oh? Maybe I will, then.” Haruto smiled at her. “So, wanna go to Animate or Toranoana?”

“Sure!”



Every bookstore in Akihabara they went to had every volume of *All About My Little Sister* stacked up and on display, some of them setting up TV screens showing *All About* anime clips or promos.

“Scoring an anime really does make a difference, huh?” admired Chihiro.

Haruto gave her a knowing smile. “Well, not *every* anime series gets this kind of major push in the bookstores nowadays.”

“Oh no?”

“Yeah. Like, you have several dozen series debuting with each season, and it’s physically impossible to push all of them at the same time. Plus, anime or not, if the original novels don’t sell, that shelf space gets taken over by something else fast. If the shops are still pushing it two months after it started airing, that proves how valuable they think it is. They ordered a new emergency printing for all the preexisting volumes, too, so... In terms of recent anime adaptations of light novels, I think this one’s on the successful side.”

“Wow... Itsuki’s really talented, huh...?”

“Yeah...” Haruto eyed all the copies of *All About* on the shelves, a mixed expression on his face. “He is.”



So after picking up ten or so light novels and manga volumes at the bookstore—plus a few books geared for literary professions, including *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need* and *The Emotion*

Thesaurus—Haruto took Chihiro to Yodobashi Camera.

As before, they browsed around the model department. Unlike the light novel sections of the bookstores, the lineup available hadn't changed all that much since their last visit. But no matter how long they looked at it, the magnificent sight of so many robot model packages lined up against the wall never seemed to get old.

"Oh, right, Fuwa," Chihiro said as they walked on. "I don't think I mentioned it to you yet, but I decided to go on to college after all."

"That's great," Haruto replied.

A little bit ago, Chihiro had spoken with him about a worry she had—wouldn't it be better to find a job right after high school rather than move on to college without any real goal in mind? Haruto's advice, however, convinced her that college was the choice to take.

"I still don't have any real concrete dream for the future or anything...but I'd like to study a few different things and think it over."

"Yeah. Hopefully you'll find something you really want to do someday."

Haruto would give Chihiro casual pats on the head back when he thought she was a boy. Doing so with a girl who wasn't related to him seemed like a bad idea. With his hand finding nowhere else to go, it reached out for a shelf full of model kits.

He grabbed a model of the ARX-8 Laevatein, the protagonist's craft from the mech-oriented light novel series *Full Metal Panic!* He looked carefully at it.

"Oh, is that from *FMP*?"

"You know that series, Chihiro?"

"Yeah, I love it."

Volume 1 of the *Full Metal Panic!* light novels had come out way back in 1998, while the series had wrapped up with Volume 12 in 2011. It had multiple manga and anime adaptations over the years; the mechs even appeared in the *Super Robot Wars* video game series. Real-life model kits were also released, and even after the main story ended, a new side-story novel series carried on right where the original left off. No mech-themed light novel series enjoyed as lofty a reputation as this one.

"*FMP* sure is something, isn't it?"

"Something" didn't begin to describe it. Haruto sighed. If the *Chevalier of the Absolute World* anime had been a hit, maybe that would've led to some

figures and model kits coming out—but that was a pipe dream now. He put the Laevatein back on the shelf.

“You know... Once I finish *Chevalier*, I’m thinking I’ll try another mech series right after that.”

He had told no one about that before—not even Kawabe, his editor.

“Oh really?” Chihiro asked, curious.

“Yeah...and not a fantasy story like *Chevalier*, but maybe one set in the near future, or outer space like *Gundam*. I doubt my editor will accept it, but...”

Kawabe and Haruto had chatted casually about his next series before. The ideas his editor threw out included a series close in tone to *Chevalier*, or an *isekai* fantasy or school-themed story with less of a battle element. Mechs in light novels, Kawabe said, were a hard sell. Such series came out at a decent clip, thanks to all the authors into the genre, but you could count the number of real hits on your fingers. And if you’re talking about the kind of mech novel Haruto wanted to do—something more hard sci-fi as opposed to “hot chicks in powered suits” or “dark robots of mysterious origins” (*Chevalier*’s beat)—it was even more of an uphill battle.

Haruto was the sort of writer who carefully analyzed the market to aim for a hit—to him, working in a highly competitive field with little chance of success couldn’t have been that appealing a notion.

“But I intend to give it a try,” he declared. “I can definitely bring something interesting to the table.”

He couldn’t lose to Itsuki. After all the elitist stuff he had said to Ui, it was important for him to have a little courage as an author himself.

“I’m gonna create something incredibly gripping, bring it to tons of readers, get it out in anime and manga, and then have them make model kits for the mechs I crafted. That’s my dream right now.”

“Your dream...?” Chihiro repeated, wide-eyed.

“Yeah.”

Haruto’s expression was clear now, as if he had just shed a heavy weight. His mind had been a jumble lately—what with Itsuki’s success, the mixed fortunes of this year’s new authors, his own series, and his future as a novelist—but putting it into words like this really cleared the air. In the end, it was simple. All he could do was work hard and press for his dreams with everything he had.

“Right. I’m gonna buy this Laevatein as a symbol of my resolve!”

Beaming like a child, Haruto picked up the Laevatein box again...and neither he nor Chihiro herself noticed that Chihiro’s cheeks were starting to look flushed.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

If Aoba sees Itsuki as a big brother, would she be interested in a big sister at all? If so, what kind does she want?



Would I want a big sister if I already had a big brother, you mean? Hmm... I can already handle the cleaning and my two younger siblings well enough, so I think just a big brother is fine.

QUESTION

What did Aoba think about light novels before she encountered Nayuta's work?



I knew there were a lot of great series apart from Kani's, but they kept getting shoved out of the spotlight by all this garbage, which just enraged me. Like I was one to talk...

QUESTION

Aren't little sisters great, Mr. Hashima?!

Damn right!



The Grave Visit II

While Haruto and Chihiro were over in Akihabara, Itsuki was visiting the grave of Nodoka Hashima, his biological mother. He had been in Taiwan during Obon, the holiday in August when Japanese families traditionally pay their respects to the dead, so his visit came later than usual this year.

Clasping his hands together in front of the grave, he mentally gave his mother a report on the past year's events. This year was just as eventful as the last, but the biggest news was finding out Chihiro's true gender. It was hardly the only big event—there was gaining his first lover and the anime coming out—but it dominated over all the others.

It was a shock to think his father would actually go along with such a ridiculous idea in the first place. In Itsuki's mind, Keisuke Hashima was gruff, stubborn, and so cold that he didn't shed a tear after his wife died. But on the other hand, he also said out of nowhere that he was remarrying and then brought an ex-hostess into his house, so maybe he had his erratic, impulsive side as well.

Maybe it was time to face up to his father already.

Ever since Chihiro had revealed herself as his little sister, Itsuki had constantly thought about having a direct talk with his father. But despite that, he still hadn't gone back to his house once. He wanted to get himself together, to be a decent man and human being—truly, genuinely—but he still wasn't maturing at all. He felt pathetic.

Right now, though...there was another problem he had to do something about. Something even bigger than his father.

“...There's just no controlling it.”

He whispered the same thing he said last year as he departed. And he prayed that next year, for sure, he'd come back a better man...

The Final Installment

In the wee hours of a late-September night, Itsuki and Nayuta were together watching Episode 11 of *All About My Little Sister* on TV, the final installment.

The main plotline was over, culminating in the anime-original ending. Part C of the episode was a scene between Kazuma and Ichika that foreshadowed new beginnings for them. The credits rolled, followed by an ending card with the voice cast saying in unison, “Thanks for watching *All About My Little Sister*!” and that was the end of the anime broadcast.

“Haaaaahhhhhhhhhh...” Itsuki breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief.

“Great job,” Nayuta said, pouring some more Gouden Carolus Cuvée van de Keizer Red into his empty beer glass before topping off her own.

“Well, here’s to reaching the end!”

She had her glass pointed at him, so Itsuki picked his up and lightly clinked it before taking a sip.

“Nya-ha... That was a good anime. As a fan of the novels, I’m really happy.” She smiled as she spoke, despite the rather impressive amount she had already drunk.

Itsuki smiled back and meekly nodded. “Yeah... I think it was a good show.”

The *All About* anime was lucky enough not to have any canceled installments or art-direction disasters during its TV broadcast run. The visuals weren’t exactly breathtaking quality-wise, but they were stable throughout the run, start to finish. That, no doubt, was thanks to the tireless efforts of director Munenori Tarui and the rest of the staff, efforts the original novelist couldn’t even imagine. He wished he could meet every member of the staff and thank them personally.

As Itsuki basked in the glow of a job well done:

“Hey, Itsukiiii?” Suddenly, Nayuta put down her glass and draped her

body over Itsuki's shoulder.

"What?"

"You knowww," she said in a cloying tone, "don't you think it's time we start talking about it?"

"About what?"

"Like, marriage and stuff!"

"Th-that came out of nowhere..." Itsuki turned his eyes away a bit.

"Aw, come onnn! The anime got good reviews, and the novels are sellin' a lot, aren't they?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

Over the three months since Episode 1's broadcast, the *All About* novels had been reprinted several times—the number of copies were triple what they had been before the anime. The series wasn't a gigantic seller before that point, but that was still tremendous growth.

"So don't you think it's about tiiiime...? Don't you think we're more balanced nowww?"

".....Did I say I wanted you to wait until we were...?"

Itsuki reflected a moment.

...I'm not really anything yet, but when I'm 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.

Nayuta sounded like she was referencing something he once told Haruto.

"Nya-ha-ha... Ahh, don't worry about it. It's nothing big."

It certainly *was* something big, but Itsuki decided not to pursue it.

"Well, maybe it's selling, but it's still far below the *Landscape* series. Your movie got amazing reviews, you know."

The film version of *The Silvery Landscape* had premiered in July. It was an unusually big hit by Japan-made-movie standards, well-reviewed and still making money at the box office. You couldn't directly compare a live-action film with an animated TV series, but in terms of reputation, *The Silvery Landscape* was clearly the front-runner.

"Yeah, but I heard *All About* was doing crazy numbers in China, wasn't it?"

“...Yeah... That’s true.”

As much as *All About* hit it off with viewers, its popularity in Japan was merely “ahead of the pack,” and preorders for the Blu-rays were nothing too special. Meanwhile, it had become the number-two series of the season on China’s largest streaming site—an incredible feat that belied just how big its fanbase was. Even odder, it was happening despite *All About* putting up just average numbers in America, Europe, and the rest of Asia. Only in China was it racking up a huge audience, and given the differences in population, that audience was more massive than the rest of the world combined.

As Oshima the producer put it, thanks to the legacy of China’s one-child policy, the anime viewing audience over there included a lot of only children. This, apparently, meant that series with strong little-sister characters had an easier time hitting it big. But not even Oshima thought there’d be this big a difference from other countries; it had shattered his expectations, and he couldn’t be happier. The idea of a now-abandoned national policy affecting the fortunes of an anime was pretty funny to think about.

“Because *my* books only do just okay out of Japan, you knowww. From a worldwide standpoint, couldn’t you say that *you’re* more popular, Itsuki?”

“Hmm...”

Maybe she had a point. With Nayuta’s books, the big attraction was her literary expressiveness with the Japanese language. Still, while her series didn’t hit it quite so big overseas as it did in Japan, it was still popular, definitely. Wen and Hong, the Taiwan editors, both attested to that.

However, if you narrowed it down strictly to current worldwide brand recognition, Nayuta was right. Itsuki had an anime streaming across planet Earth, and maybe that gave him the edge. That edge would no doubt vanish instantly once the *Landscape* film and anime made their international debuts...but at this exact moment, Itsuki Hashima could, perhaps, be described as “equal” with Nayuta Kani.

If he didn’t seize this opportunity right now, it could be a long time before he could stand shoulder to shoulder with her again. In fact, maybe it’d never happen again the rest of his life. So right now, right here, when Itsuki Hashima the artist was at the pinnacle of his career...

...maybe this was the best shot he’d ever have at popping the question.

But...

“...No, not yet.”

After thinking for a bit, Itsuki sheepishly smiled and curtly denied it.

“Nyaaaa...” Nayuta let out a disappointed purr followed by a jaw-shattering yawn. “Well...I’ll keep on waitin’...”

Leaning up against Itsuki, she closed her eyes and fell asleep. Watching his lover’s dopey-looking face as she snored, Itsuki grimaced painfully, close to breaking down in tears.

I Wanted to Be the Protagonist...

It was now mid-October, and that meant the month's new GF Bunko releases were coming out today.

The big launch this month was undoubtedly Volume 7 of *All About My Little Sister*, whose anime ended its run a decent success. The first light novel volume after the anime's ending was extremely vital in the effort to make any anime-driven boost a non-transient thing. To a publisher, the volume was literally more important than how well the anime reviewed or sold.

In a way, no matter how good the anime was, if the publisher didn't put out a new volume right now, at this moment, then the whole project could be deemed a failure. To the novelist, as well, this was a key turning point, one that could affect their entire career. They couldn't afford to waste that chance.

But Itsuki Hashima took that must-succeed volume...and failed to produce it.

So Volume 7 of *All About My Little Sister* was delayed—not just to next month, but to “TBD” instead of any solid date. Why? Because he hadn't written a word of the Volume 7 manuscript yet. Nor had he written a single page for the new volume of *Sisterly Combat*, which he was writing in parallel.

Throughout Itsuki's career, he had broken deadlines and fled from editors on many occasions, but he always submitted his work in time for the final, almighty Deadline. Thus, none of his releases had ever been delayed before—and now he had blown the one date he could least afford to blow.

And this wasn't just a case of the manuscript not being in time. No, this was worse. He had become completely incapable of writing novels at all.

He could still write, of course. E-mails and texts weren't an issue. But the

moment he launched his word processor and tried to write a story, his mind turned blank, his fingers quivered, and he couldn't move. It was the first time anything like this happened since he began writing novels.

Things had begun to go awry about four months ago—the day after Chihiro revealed she was actually a little sister all along. Itsuki intended to tackle Volume 7 while the excitement over anime Episode 1 was still fresh in his mind, but absolutely no ideas occurred to him for it. He was in good physical condition, so not being able to write struck him as weird—but hey, writer's block wasn't that uncommon, so instead he played video games, read books, and relaxed until Chihiro showed up.

The days continued similarly for a while after that, until Episode 1 was broadcast on TV. Toki asked him how the volume was going, and Itsuki offhandedly replied that it was *going great*. Internally, though, he was tormented. He knew just how imperative the next volume would be—he'd said so himself. Maybe, he thought, that was causing him pressure that led to this writer's block...but deep down, he had a vague idea about the real reason.

And so time dragged on. He still had nothing by mid-July, and then he went with Ashley and Chihiro to the department store and bought a bunch of fancy clothing for his sister.

...She's so cute, as sisters are meant to be.

...As her brother, I need to keep cherishing her.

Such was the feeling in Itsuki's heart. He thought Chihiro was darling—as a *little sister*. And no matter how cute her clothing was—even if she went a little more daring with the skin she revealed—he *never once looked at her from a sexual standpoint*.

The slump continued into August, and now Itsuki was feeling the heat. He decided to read back through his novels, figuring they'd offer him some creative inspiration. He began with *All About* and *Sisterly Combat*, his current series, then went on in reverse chronological order—all the way to *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, his second series and the one he worked on with Setsuna. After that, he wrapped up his marathon reading session with *Sister of the Apocalypse*, his debut.

Every single book was written with the full force of body and spirit he could muster. Every one of them was a masterpiece, something he knew in his heart was spectacularly engaging. Or it should have been that way.

...But now, they seemed gross.

Disgust. That was emotion that constantly assailed him as he read his works. Because although the degree varied from book to book, each one featured the male protagonist having not-so-platonic feelings for his own little sister.

It's gross. Why are all these protagonists acting so gross? I have no idea why I empathized with these guys. A man who views a member of his family as a potential partner... How could that be anything but gross?

Every chapter, every word he'd written—they all seemed so revolting now. *Sister of the Apocalypse*, his first novel, was particularly sickening. It was like a poisonous pit of slime, the condensed summary of a boy just out of middle school and his dark, disgusting desires.

You... You wrote this thing?

Now he understood what his father said back then and the emotions behind his pained expression. If someone knew their own son wrote something like this, of course it'd give them grave concerns. He understood, heart and soul, why his father wanted to protect Chihiro from him, even if it meant asking his stepdaughter to pretend to be a stepson for years on end.

The work of Itsuki Hashima—a truly eccentric talent, one recognized by Kasuka Sekigahara and Kenjiro Toki, one who inspired Nayuta Kani like nothing else in her life—was now gnawing at the core of his mind. His very identity, as a novelist who loved little sisters from the heart, was now crumbled.

So the slump got even worse. Just sitting in front of his computer would blank out his mind and make his fingers tremble. And then, finally, he confessed everything to Toki, his editor.

Toki had predicted that Chihiro's unveiling of her secret would cause some kind of change in Itsuki. So despite knowing how much of a blow it was to have nothing *All About* to publish in October, he recommended that Itsuki take some time off. But that kindness only made Itsuki more stubborn.

"You don't have to go that far! It's just some writer's block! The Taiwan convention's coming up soon—an overseas trip is just the change of pace I need to dive right back into action! I promise I'll get Volume 7 written up for

you, so don't any of you worry about a thing!"

Then the Taiwan trip came along. Interacting with a foreign culture was incredibly stimulating, and between that and the unforgettable food he stuffed himself with, it was the perfect mental change of pace. He met literally hundreds of his fans, all offering words of encouragement. He wanted to answer to them, and deep down, he swore to himself that he'd work hard from now on.

He arrived home at the peak of his motivation. It was time to face up to his manuscript...and then reality hit him. He just couldn't write. Despair crashed upon him like a tidal wave.

Each episode of the anime was greeted with positive reviews. He'd search his name on the net and see the word *great* repeated over and over. Copies of *All About* were being stacked up high at bookstores, even into towers. At the voice recording sessions, Tarui the director, Oshima the producer, and the entire voice cast all told him, "I'm looking forward to the next volume." Toki e-mailed him about the new printings they ordered—and the anime eventually tripled their circulation.

He'd wanted to be the protagonist. That single desire drove him to come this far. And as a result of that, he had masses of fans and friends expecting great things from him and supporting him. And that was wonderful; he never doubted that. But...

I... I became the protagonist. All by myself. Or so I thought.

But Chihiro, his little brother, turned out to be his little sister. Faced with that blockbuster twist, as comedic as it was non-fictional, his senses were burned to dust. He wanted to be the protagonist, but he also wanted to be a decent man, a decent human being. There was Itsuki Hashima, the dazzlingly talented, little-sister-obsessed novelist, and then there was Itsuki Hashima, the sensitive, decent young man troubled over his family and love life.

It was a miraculous balance, one that could only have been established because he lacked a sister, and now it had all toppled over.

You just told me I had a sister all along! What have I got to complain about? Ha-ha-ha! Today's the happiest day of my life! C'mon, guys! Time to celebrate the occasion with another toast!

The day he learned about Chihiro, he shut away his internal panic with all his might. He held back tears that he didn't know what they were about, tears that could flow if he let up for a single moment. He faked his excitement, disguising his unstable mind through sheer force of momentum.

Now he recalled the words he shouted out back on that night. And now he understood the tears that almost got the better of him.

And so GF Bunko's October release date was today—a day that should've marked another chapter in his new and glorious advance, a day to remember. And now, helplessly looking at the still-blank page, Itsuki could feel his soul leaving him as he spoke out loud...

“I'm glad to have a sister?What a goddamn lie.”

Afterword

When I had a signing event in Taiwan in the summer of 2011, my impression was that Taiwan had a lot more younger fans than in Japan. My publisher there explained to me that Taiwan has a military draft, and that has the effect of pressing the reset button on people's nerdy hobbies. It made me appreciate how these kids were using their precious free time enjoying my work, and it also made me brace myself—I needed to create something worthy enough.

The situation has since changed over there, so I didn't use that anecdote in my story, but even now, in Japan and elsewhere, I think we all have only a limited amount of time to enjoy entertainment. And thanks to everyone who's used their valuable time on this series, it's finally reached Volume 10. I hope you'll continue to provide it your support.

■ Notes, etc.

- Perhaps you've noticed, but until the halfway point of this book, Itsuki's actions had mainly been described in the form of things you could actually see, such as laughing. I tried to avoid being an omnipotent narrator with him, describing what he's thinking. If you go back and try to imagine what's in Itsuki's mind as he speaks and acts, I think that could give you an entirely different impression of him.
- The story of Keisuke, Natsume, and Chihiro that kicks off this book conflicts here and there with "The Father" in Volume 8. Just picture it as Keisuke reaching middle age and getting his memories mixed up a little bit. The chapter also forms a duo with "The Origin of Itsuki Hashima" in Volume 3, and again, if you go back and reread it, I think it'll make it clearer just how at cross purposes Itsuki and Keisuke really are.

- People who know a lot about the light novel business might have lifted an eyebrow at the mech series references I made in this volume. I should explain that at the start of Volume 1, it's officially January 2015 in the plot, which makes it October 2016 at the end of Volume 10 here. I'm thus writing with an eye toward keeping pop culture references true to that time. I'm not being too harsh on myself, though; I'll reference modern stuff with my jokes and more trivial callbacks, and maybe I'll mention some beers and board games that weren't imported into Japan yet back then.
- Aoba's popularity in the surveys skyrocketed after Volume 9, and Nadeshiko—the series' official Lolita character, at long last—also generated buzz. Little-sister characters really are popular, aren't they?

Anyway, I'll see you in the next volume.

Yomi Hirasaka
Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist
Late June 2018

Afterword

This is Kantoku, the series illustrator.

I may start crying. At long last, the cute-looking Chihiro makes her debut! I've been itching to draw a girly Chihiro, hoping I could tackle more of her like that...so I have nothing but thanks for Yomi Hirasaka. Meanwhile, I understand all too well how Itsuki feels. For a creator, no matter how fulfilling your real life is, if your creative side isn't going well, you're more miserable than anyone else.

I'm not exactly sure how to describe Chihiro's new hairstyle—ponytails? Braids? Then I remembered that me and an old friend of mine called them brakes (as in bicycle brakes). Now I just want to grab them.

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KANTOKU

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