

11

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA Illustration by Kantoku



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11





"NO,
THIS IS
YOUR
REAL
LITTLE
SISTER!"

"This
is your
little
sister,
Itsuki!"



CONQUEST OF THE SILVER DEMON
BY YOSHIHIRO KISO, ART BY KANTOKU

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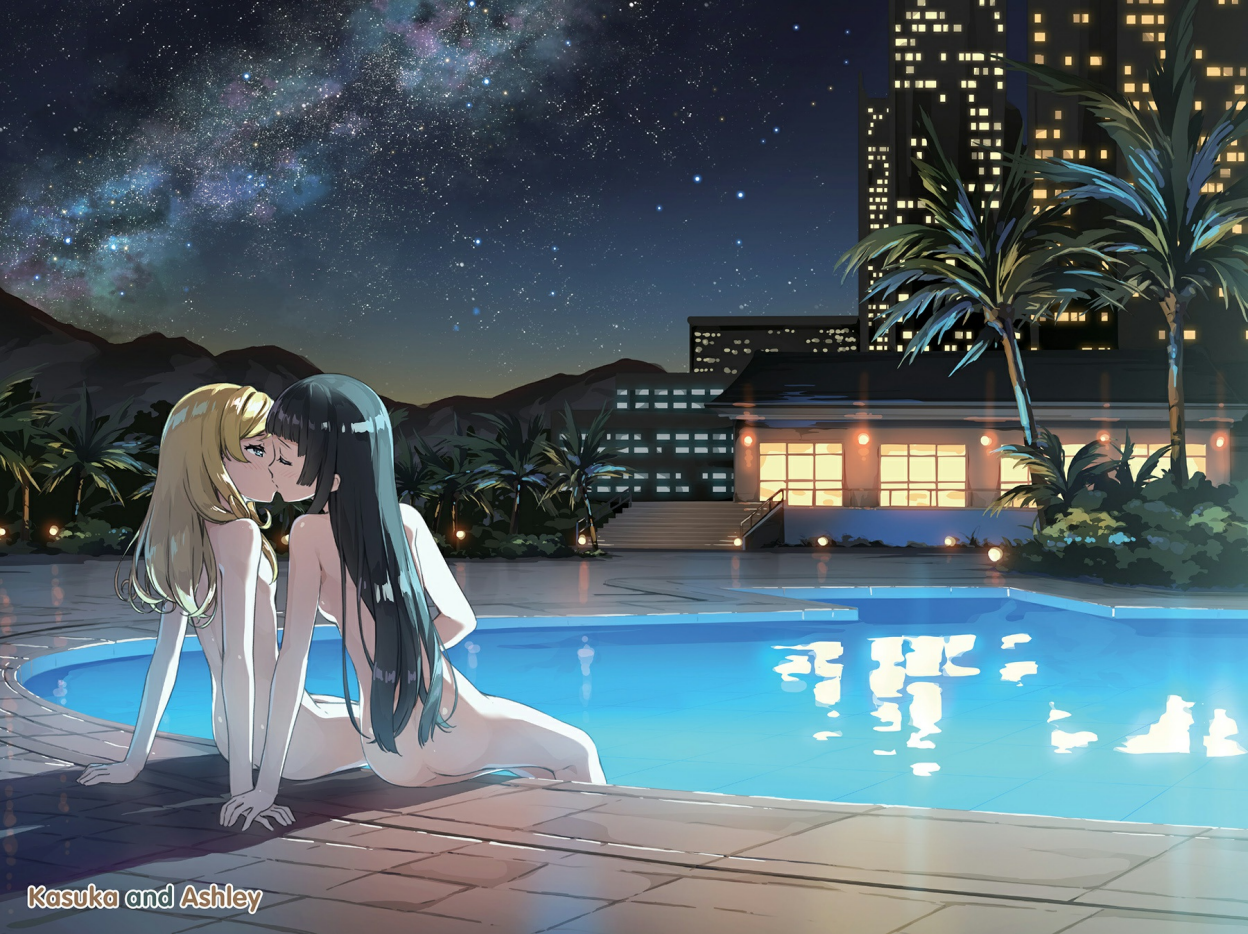
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Considering the Obi



Kasuka and Ashley

How to Fix Up an Author with Writer's Block



🔥 The Novelist Was a Little-Sister-Obsessed F---k

🔥 The Kamakura Trip

🔥 Too Many Sisters.

🔥 Fall from Grace

🔥 Considering the Obi

🔥 The Antithesis

🔥 Ui and Miyako
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🔥 Chelia

🔥 Chihiro Hashima's First Love

🔥 The Result

🔥 The Little Sister

🔥 Becoming Family

🔥 The Phantom Sirius

🔥 No Matter Who Forgives It, the Main Heroine Never Will





A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

Yomi Hirasaka

illustration by Kantoku

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Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 11

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 11

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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Illustration by KANTOKU

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

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

CHIIHIRO HASHIMA

A girl.

NAYUTA KANI

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

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant.

KAIKO MIKUNIYAMA

A manga artist.

MAKINA KAIZU

A veteran novelist.

SATOSHI GODO

Editor in chief of the GF Bunko publishing label.

KIRARA YAMAGATA

Nayuta's editor.

UI AIOI

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

MAKOTO YANAGASE

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

AOBA KASAMATSU

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

YOSHIHIRO KISO

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

SOMA MISAHA

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

TADASHI KAMO

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

MUNENORI TARUI

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

TSUTOMU OSHIMA

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

MASAHIKO HIRUGANO

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

KAKERU YAMADA

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

TAKURO NORIKURA

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

MASAKI ASAKURA

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

KASUKA SEKIGAHARA

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.

How to Fix Up an Author with Writer's Block

"I'm glad to have a sister?What a goddamn lie."



"Huh? It got delayed...?"

It was mid-October when GF Bunko's new releases were due out. The day came and went without the latest volume of *All About My Little Sister*, Itsuki Hashima's rom-com series that just had a successful anime—and Chihiro didn't learn about the delay until she went to the bookstore by the rail station to purchase it on the way to her brother's apartment. She didn't see Volume 7 of *All About* among the month's GF Bunko releases, and it didn't appear sold out or anything. A little perplexed, she checked GF's release schedule on her smartphone and came across the delay announcement:

Volume 7 of All About My Little Sister, originally scheduled for publication in October, has been delayed due to production issues. GF Bunko apologizes to all the readers eagerly awaiting the next volume and will update the release list once a new date has been decided.

This notice had been published on the website a good month ago, but Chihiro didn't make a habit out of checking it and Itsuki hadn't been acting unusually, so she hadn't noticed until today.

The fact that the site still essentially said "we'll let you know" instead of "it'll be out next month" or something unnerved her. Did that mean they still had no idea when it might be released? Did Hoshiimo, the illustrator, have an illness or something?

Or...

Chihiro promptly left the bookstore and marched right over to Itsuki's apartment.



“Hey, Chihiro.”

Itsuki greeted Chihiro at the door to his place. Nothing about him seemed any different from usual.

“Oh, hey...” Chihiro stepped inside, still perplexed. Part of her remained hesitant about the whole thing, but she decided to take the plunge regardless.

“Um, so I saw that Volume 7 of *All About* got delayed, but what happened?”

Itsuki's shoulders twitched. “Ohhh,” he said, suspiciously carefree. “I just kinda let the deadline go by, is all.”

“That's ‘all’? ...You sound so casual about it.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes these things happen, so...” Itsuki gave his sister a broad grin.

“...But you've never had one of your book launches delayed like this before, have you?”

“Oh, sure I have. Like, if I'm not making any progress on a book, sometimes they'll rearrange the schedule for me. It's happened lots of times.”

“Right, but that's before there was any *official* release date, right? Because I don't think you ever delayed a book after the release date was announced.”

“Y...you sure know a lot about that...” Itsuki scowled awkwardly at Chihiro's observation. “But, you know, between my anime work and the con in Taiwan, I've been really busy. I couldn't really help it this time.”

“Yeah, I guess that other work might've kept you busy, but...”

But it didn't add up in Chihiro's mind. Despite everything else, Itsuki *did* act like a professional. He was a writer who'd never want to disappoint his expectant readers. Now he was saying, in essence, “My book got delayed 'cause I was busy.” And he didn't even seem to care. It just seemed out of character.

“...So when’s Volume 7 coming out? Next month?”

“Ohhh...” Itsuki hemmed and hawed a bit. “Well...um, pretty soon...I think...”

“Does that mean you’ve got eighty percent or so of it written?” Chihiro wasn’t letting Itsuki talk his way out of this.

“Oh, of—of course! Like, the writing’s going so smoothly, it’s almost like I haven’t been able to write it at all!”

“Huh? What’s that mean?”

“Ahh, don’t worry about it! Listen, I’ve been trying to work a whole lot today, so I’m starving! Go ahead and make something for me.”

“Okay...”

Thoroughly steamrolled, Chihiro began preparing dinner. And even as they ate together, she couldn’t get anything out of Itsuki about the novel.



It was eight in the evening.

After she did the post-dinner washing up, Chihiro left Itsuki’s place and made the five-minute walk to Gift Publishing. Taking the elevator up to the fifth floor, she took out her phone and called Kenjiro Toki’s office line.

“Hello?”

“Oh hi, Mr. Toki. This is Chihiro Hashima.”

Toki’s voice immediately jumped a notch. “Oh?! Oh. Um, good evening, Chihiro. What’s up?”

“Sorry to call out of nowhere. I just wanted to ask you something...”

“...Ohhh..... Well, can you wait a moment?”

“Sure.”

After a couple of minutes, Toki emerged from behind the editorial office door. He took Chihiro to a small meeting room, and the two sat at the table, facing each other.

“So if you wanted to ask me something...I’m guessing it’s about Itsuki?”

The pace of Toki’s speech seemed oddly slow to Chihiro as she nodded back. “That’s right... I learned his new book got delayed, so I asked him about it...but he kept dodging the question. Is he doing all right?”

“...” Toki greeted the question with silence for a few moments. “From what I understand...he’s barely written anything for Volume 7 yet. So, frankly, no. I can’t really say he’s all right.”

“Ahh, I knew it...” Chihiro’s face clouded over as she stared at Toki for a second.

“...Sometimes, you know, things like this happen.”

“Hmm?”

“Like, a writer hitting a mental block after he scores an anime adaptation. It’s actually not that rare.”

“Really? ...Why is that?”

“Well, sometimes all the work and stress tires them out. Body and soul. Sometimes the sudden change in work environment throws them out of whack. Sometimes having that financial windfall causes them to lose their motivation. It really depends on the author. In Itsuki’s case, I think it’s just the rebound from giving everything he had to the anime... He’s suffering symptoms of burnout, in other words.”

As Toki explained it, Itsuki’s slump was something commonly seen in authors who’d made the plunge into anime—and he was careful to not imply it had anything to do with the discovery of Chihiro’s true identity as a little sister.

“Burnout, huh...? And it’s not that rare a thing?”

“Not at all.” Toki nodded.

Chihiro looked relieved for a moment. She was beginning to draw the conclusion that Itsuki’s issues weren’t her fault after all.

“Um...but *is* my brother all right?” she nervously asked.

“Well, I believe he’ll recover. After a little rest, anyway. I’m gonna do what I can as his editor, too, so I don’t think you need to worry.” He tried to sound as upbeat and encouraging as he could, but that only made Chihiro more concerned. Still, she didn’t press.

“I see... Well, Mr. Toki, I hope you’ll do what you can for him.”

“Absolutely.”



“Okay, well, I gave an answer, but now what...?” Toki couldn’t help asking himself after taking Chihiro back to the elevator.

Authors *do* often lose their groove after an anime project wraps up—that much was the unvarnished truth. But there was no single foolproof approach an editor could take to deal with such a writer. If there was, no hit series would go unfinished, and no novelist would fall off the map.

When he pinged his boss Godo and the rest of editorial, he got a variety of feedback in response—“Just leave him be for a bit. No e-mails, nothing”; “Take him out drinking or to a club for a change of pace”; “Send him some good books or Blu-rays for inspiration”; “Talk about next year’s tax bill with him to scare him straight”; “Fake some fan mail”; and so forth. But although each of these approaches had worked with at least one author in the past, there was no palpable effect with others. And those writers subsequently faded from existence.

Besides, Itsuki was a *seriously* special case. What do you do with a weirdo who wrote about nothing but strong, eye-catching little sisters, and the moment he finds out he’s got one of his own, he can’t write anymore? That’s never happened in the industry before, Toki was sure. And it wasn’t like Itsuki personally told him that all the Chihiro stuff was the cause. Maybe it really *was* just the classic sophomore slump after his first anime adaptation... But given the situation, and given what he knew about what made Itsuki tick, Toki’s instincts were telling him it was something else, and he didn’t think he was wrong.

He had chosen to trust Itsuki when he said “I promise I’ll get Volume 7 written up for you, so don’t any of you worry about a thing!” but there was no sign of a return to form. At this rate, it wasn’t just the *All About* series in danger—it might be the end of Itsuki Hashima, writer, for good. As his editor, Toki needed to do something about this—but he had no idea what.

Then:

“Mr. Toki?”

As he stood there, pondering this, he was greeted by Miyako Shirakawa, the office’s part-time assistant.

“Ahh, Shirakawa... Done for the day?”

“Uh-huh,” she said with a nod. “That was Chi who just showed up, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah... She asked me about the *All About* delay.”

As part of the editorial staff, Miyako naturally knew of *All About* Volume 7's delay and murky fate. Toki had given her the same explanation he'd given Chihiro just now. Miyako had brought it up with Itsuki, but he'd just said he was "not quite running on all cylinders right now" and changed the subject.

"...Itsuki's writing issues probably don't have much to do with being tired of work or burned out, do they?"

"...Probably not." Toki shook his head. No need to hide anything with Miyako. Then he took on a more joking tone. "...Do *you* have any good ideas, Ms. Future Star Editor?"

Starting next year, Miyako was set to join Branch Hill, a new publishing start-up. Toki was disappointed she didn't join Gift Publishing, but nonetheless he was sure she'd become an asset to her firm.

"I—I haven't been assigned to editorial there yet, you know!" Miyako blushed a bit, then took a moment to think. "Um... Maybe he could go on a trip to clear his mind a bit?"

"Going to Taiwan didn't help him at all," Toki replied with a chuckle. "But attending a convention is kinda part of his job, I suppose. Maybe he could use a chance to completely forget about his work while traveling."

"All right. In that case, I'll talk to Nayu and suggest she invite him somewhere."

"If you could. Thanks."

Miyako thought a bit more. "Um, also...maybe he could change his work environment?"

"You mean outside of his home?"

"Right. Don't a lot of writers say they can focus better if they're writing at a diner or café or something?"

Toki shook his head at Miyako. "I guess he's already explored that route."

"Oh yeah...?"

He had tried a lot of things, Toki heard, and nothing worked. The diner. The café. A private karaoke room. In a train. On a park bench. At a cheap hotel room. Itsuki's "environment" certainly *was* the problem, but...

"I don't think Itsuki's *writing* environment is the issue. It's more his *family* environment."

"Yeah, and you can't change that too easily..." Miyako frowned. "Hmm... In that case, why don't you have him write something besides *All*

About?”

“Well, apparently he tried making some progress on *Sisterly Combat* instead, but that was a no-go, too.”

“Oh, no, I meant like a totally new series. What about that?”

“Hmm?” Toki raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Like, a long time ago, didn’t Itsuki want to try writing something where the heroine wasn’t a little sister?”

“Oh... You’re right.”

As Toki recalled, the topic came up nearly two years ago. Itsuki was frustrated by the slow sales for his work, and Toki had suggested he try something without a sister trope front and center. The result—titled *Crimson Jägers* (tent.)—made it up to the plot outline before the little sister in the cast, formerly a secondary character, turned into this huge monster, and the protagonist became a perverted f—k who relished eating her lingerie, and so on. It was promptly shelved.

“If he can’t write little-sister genre stuff because Chi turned out to be a girl...then maybe he can write something non-sister now, huh?” Miyako said.

“...!” It was a revelation. “You’re right... That might just be the case...”

The first volume after the anime—arguably the most important one for any light novel series—was on hold. But it never occurred to Toki nor Itsuki to veer off into something else—not *Sisterly Combat*, which they had worked on in parallel for a while, but a completely new piece of some sort. Toki was sure *All About* readers (to say nothing of the anime and publication staff) would scream at him (“Is this really the time?!”). But that didn’t matter. Right now the very existence of Itsuki Hashima, writer, was in mortal danger. Maybe what he needed now, more than anything, was to regain the ability to write a novel—any novel.

“Thanks, Ms. Shirakawa. I’ll suggest that to him right away.”

“Oh, okay. I hope it works out...”

Once Miyako got in the elevator, Toki hurriedly took out his phone and called up Itsuki.

The Novelist *Was* a Little-Sister-Obsessed F███k

It was the year 794 in Godstar reckoning, the nineteenth day of the month of Kelnunnus the Ruinbeast. A Varandian Empire force of 32,000, led by General Valmadeth, known as the “Dark Protector,” was situated on the Great Slope, facing off against the 22,000 Granvarea Republic troops commanded by “Thunder God Fang” Vaxido.

After several days spent staring one another down, it was ultimately Granvarea’s 4th Division, led by the brave general “Dark Lightning” Honda [TEMP. WILL THINK OF NAME LATER], that triggered the battle.

“Our enemy may outrank us, but if we fight our own battle, I think we have a chance at victory.”

Ignoring Commander Vaxido’s plan to focus on defense until reinforcements arrived from neighboring lands, Honda led his own force in the attack on the twenty-fourth day, launching a surprise ambush on the Varandian force in a 3-2-5 attack formation.

“*Yaksashiiin!* (Move up!)”

Honda’s trusted friends, Commander A [WILL THINK OF A NAME LATER] leading the 2nd Division and Commander B [NAME TK] of the 5th, followed soon after him. The attack temporarily threw the Varandian Empire into chaos, but Imperial Staff Officer Yasushi [TEMP NAME] promptly put an end to the confusion, fighting off the Granvarean advance with well-ordered precision.

Following a pitched skirmish, the momentum of the battle teetered toward the Empire and its superior numbers. But morale remained high among the Granvareans, soldiers and officers alike rousing one another as they struggled to fight their own war. “Keep your voices high!” “And your morale!” “Other side, other side! The other side of the

V formation is open!” “It’s open! The right wing’s open!” “Clear, clear!” “Nice trap! Lure the tiger off its mountain lair!” “Stay onside!”

The fight extended on for several hours. While Vaxido stood by at first—“No need to rescue those who defied orders,” he’d said—he finally decided to deploy the supporter, the so-called 12th Division of the force, into the fray.

“Ohhh, oh, OH-OH-OH, ohhhh, ohhhhhh!!” [CHANGE THIS A BIT IF TOO CLOSE TO COPYRIGHTED LYRICS]

The oratorio provided by the supporters rocketed the morale of the Granvareans to yet-unseen heights, their soldiers turning into azure samurai with the strength of a thousand. Soon, they laid waste to the Varandian Empire’s force. “Those guys are crazy!” General Valmadeth kept repeating to himself as he fled back to his home nation.

Thus the decisive battle at the Great Slope ended with the Republic of Granvarea victorious—and General Honda, the leader who had engineered this grand feat, was heralded by the people as the savior of his nation. But this merely set the stage for a new conflict looming on the horizon...

One late October day in Itsuki’s apartment:

“Mmmmmnnnnngngggghhh...”

Kenjiro Toki placed the printout on the low *kotatsu* table and groaned ominously. Facing him, Itsuki frowned and gauged his expression.

Ten days ago, after hearing Miyako’s bright idea, Toki immediately called Itsuki and said, “Anything is fine, so just write something that’s not a little-sister novel.” Itsuki wasn’t too enthusiastic about this (“I don’t have the time to write something new when *All About* Volume 7 is on hold!”), but later reconsidered, figuring it better to write *something* instead of nothing. He didn’t have the time or the means to write a full project proposal or plotline, so he reused a fantasy-battle plot pitch that had been shelved around the same time as *Crimson Jägers* (tent.).

He had gotten started on the novel before—but it had been nearly four months since he discovered that his brother was actually his sister, and he hadn’t written a thing in that time. His very ability to piece sentences together had atrophied, or at least it felt that way. It took him ten whole days, in fact,

to write the twenty-ish pages that composed the prologue.

And as for the content...

“...How should I put this...? It’s certainly unique.”

Normally Toki would immediately dash Itsuki’s hopes with a verbal rejection, but given the slump his writer was in, he chose his words rather carefully.

“...I turned on the TV and there happened to be a soccer game on, so...”

Itsuki made the awkward admission, knowing how dumb it sounded as he said it. That, apparently, was the reason the battle description veered into Premier League territory.

But that wasn’t the only strange part about the sample. When one knight dueled another, it took the form of a boxing match for some reason—and the scene where the protagonist’s father, Johann, fell in love with his mother, Rosaria, was taken straight from a recent TV drama. At one point, Rosaria (a Euro-style fantasy-world noblewoman) even called Johann (a muscly knight captain) “Hiramasa” by accident.

In twenty short pages, there was so much to riff on—and judging by how clearly “inspired” the text was by whatever Itsuki had on TV, one could see how much he must’ve suffered as he strayed way off course from his intentions. This was still better than his previous failure to write down a single word...but one could hardly call it a return to professional form.

“*Haahh...*”

Toki hadn’t meant to sigh, but Itsuki grimaced and hung his head.

“Oh, uh, no,” Toki said, trying to make up for it with too-bright cheeriness. “B-but, hey, at least you can write novels again! And this is just fine for now, so let’s keep this going until you find your voice again, okay?”

“.....Right, yeah...” Itsuki nodded, smiling weakly.

Toki saw fit to give him another boost. “I know! Now that we’re making some real forward progress, how ’bout I take you to a sex shop? Nothing like a quickie to get your blood pumping again!”

“I already got enough of that, thanks,” Itsuki replied flatly.

“Aww, don’t be that way. Here, I’ll introduce you to the best girl I know! She’s the one who got Hoshiimo all fixed up when the anime project leak crushed him.”

“Oh, *hell* no! I don’t wanna share a prostitute with Hoshiimo!” Itsuki shouted despite himself.

“Well,” replied Toki, hiding his internal anxieties with a smile, “if you ever wanna make the connection, just lemme know.”

BOOK PROPOSAL

THE AZURE WAR GOD AND THE FLYING DRAGON STAR (tent.)

○CONCEPT

Traditional battle fantasy

○SETTING

A world of swords and sorcery. Set in one of the world's five continents, divided evenly between two superpowers (the Varandian Empire and Republic of Granvarea). These nations have fought each other for over a hundred years.

○SYNOPSIS

The story begins after Granvarea notches a major victory against the Empire on the Great Slope. As the Republic seeks to carry this momentum toward a full-scale invasion of the Empire, protagonist Luke is tapped by the Republican force for his strategic skills, eventually participating in a number of battles.

○CHARACTERS

Luke

The hero. Joined the military at age fourteen. Average at best in both swordsmanship and horsemanship, but a happenstance encounter causes Honda to discover his tactical might.

Honda (temp)

Hero of the Republic of Granvarea's forces.

Miranda (temp)

The heroine, a beautiful girl disguised as a man.

Celis (temp)

The rival, a beautiful girl disguised as a man.

Editor Comments

It's... Well, it's rough. I can tell you're not enthusiastic about this one.

Keep going with the other project, *Crimson Jägers* (tent.)

The Kamakura Trip

It was now early November, and at the strong urging of his lover, Nayuta Kani, Itsuki decided to go on a trip with her. In fact, they hadn't been somewhere together in some time. Their journey began in Shibuya Station, where they took a transfer to the Shonan Shinjuku Line. Their destination was Kamakura, the medieval capital of Japan and a popular tourist site—although to them, anything an easy train ride away would've been fine.

Over the past two months, Itsuki had made zero progress on *All About* and had been taking Nayuta out less often than usual, so it really had been a while since their last journey with an overnight stay. He was now growing able (if barely) to write novels again, but he was still far away from returning to form, and frankly, going on vacation right now made him feel incredibly awkward. Still, Toki had given it his stamp of approval—"I'm sure you need a chance to enjoy life and forget about work sometimes," he'd said—and most of all, Itsuki didn't want to neglect Nayuta just because his job wasn't going well.

So he resolved to take Toki's advice and forget about work during this trip as the train jostled him around.

"Nya-ha-ha! It's our first overnight trip in forever, isn't it?" Nayuta was acting all bashful on the seat next to him, leaning her head against his arm.

"It sure is. Last time was Hakone back in February, wasn't it?"

"That's right!"

"Well, we've both been pretty busy, so..."

Itsuki had been occupied with *All About*-related work. Nayuta, meanwhile, was being pulled in all directions—writing a bonus novel for moviegoers who'd bought a ticket to the *Silvery Landscape* anime movie (due out later this month), working on the next *Landscape* volume, joining script meetings for the second live-action film, and on and on and on. They could make time to mess around at Itsuki's apartment or go out to eat or

shop, but it had been tough to find twenty-four straight hours for just the two of them.

“...But you had the time to go visit a foreign country with a bunch of girls.”

“*Phbbt!*” Itsuki burst out at the whispered accusation. “I—I went to Taiwan for work! It was totally a business trip, start to finish!”

“Oh yeah?” Nayuta showed her frazzled boyfriend her phone. “Looks like a lot of monkey business to me.”

The screen depicted Itsuki with his arms wrapped around Kaiko and a female cosplayer. This was from his autograph session in Taiwan; the pic had spread across Japan after being posted on Chinese-language media sites, which was how Nayuta found out about it.

“I—I told you a million times, I was just wound up! It was a really exciting panel!”

Itsuki’s face reddened as he defended himself. Nayuta had cornered him with this photo the moment he’d returned from Taiwan. She forgave him eventually, but still reserved the right to bring it up again when she felt like it.

“Nya-ha-ha! Aw, I know, Itsuki,” she said, laughing and enjoying herself. Then her voice took a sweeter tone.

“Let’s do a lot of making out today, okay?”



After an hour on the train, they were at Kamakura Station.

“Phew... I haven’t visited Kamakura in a while.” Nayuta stretched after they exited the turnstile.

“You’ve been here before?”

“My class took a trip here once in grade school.”

“Oh yeah, you grew up in Kanagawa Prefecture, didn’t you?”

“I did. My parents actually live a lot closer to Kamakura than your apartment, Itsuki.”

“Oh really...?”

Nayuta now lived in a larger apartment near Itsuki, but even before she’d started living in that hotel room in March of last year, she had been visiting

Itsuki's place several times a week.

"Wow. Thanks for doing all that travel for me."

"No, no, it wasn't hard at all. Not when I thought about how you'd be waiting at the end."

"...I wasn't exactly waiting for you," Itsuki flatly replied, hiding his embarrassment as Nayuta bashfully looked at him.

"I'm hungry, by the way. Do you want to have something?" she asked.

"S-sure. Yeah."

It was eleven in the morning, and they hadn't decided on what to do for lunch yet, so they opted to buy some local sausage and Shonan beer to go from a nearby shop and enjoy it on a bench in the square around Kamakura's clock tower. Itsuki went with an herb-infused sausage and an *altbier* (a brown, fragrant ale), while Nayuta chose a curry-flavored wurst and a darker beer. Every bite of the fat sausage brought with it the flavor of aromatic herbs and a helping of dense, rich juices—to say the least, it went great with the beer.

"Ahh, this is way too good..."

"Itsuki, Itsuki, this curry sausage is really good, too!"

"Yeah, that's currywurst, right? I had one with Haruto at this German beer hall he took me to."

The appetizing aroma of curry wafted up from Nayuta's hands. Now Itsuki wanted another one.

"Would you like some?" Nayuta held out the sausage.

"You sure? Then by all means." Itsuki took a bite with no restraint.

"Let me have some of yours, too."

"Okay." Itsuki did the same, holding up his sausage for Nayuta to chew on.

"Mmmph...mmph... Eh-heh-heh... Your sausage is so yummy, Itsuki. Even better than your *real* one." Nayuta basked in the utter hilarity of this joke as she gulped down her dark beer. "Ahhh... Nothing like a good beer in the daytime, huh?"

"You said it, but don't make it a habit, all right?"

She quaffed her beer with gusto, a remarkable feat for someone who had only been legally able to drink for four months. It made Itsuki chuckle.

"So," she said as she tossed her beer cup and the sausage wrapper in the garbage, "what now, Itsuki?"

“Hmm, what now indeed...?”

As per his usual custom when traveling, Itsuki hadn't made any particular plans for today. Their hotel was about a ten-minute walk from Kamakura Station, but it was too early to check in.

“Well, wanna check out the Great Buddha?”

“All right.”

Itsuki suggested the most famous site in Kamakura, not really thinking any more in depth than that, and Nayuta casually agreed.



Taking the local Enoden train line, the pair soon arrived at Hase Station. From there they walked to Kotoku-in Temple, home to the Great Buddha of Kamakura, stopping by souvenir shops and the like along the way.

One business they passed by had a sign reading MAKE YOUR OWN POTTERY. Peering through the glass door, they saw a man seated there, around thirty years of age and wearing a *samue* outfit, the type monks put on when they were engaged in physical labor. A schedule printed by the entrance noted that a session with an electric potter's wheel was set to begin at noon.

“Hmm... A potter's wheel, huh...?”



For Itsuki, the phrase “potter’s wheel” reminded him of a well-known Japanese meme that pointed out how business leaders and IT entrepreneurs tend to make the same pose in PR and press photos—hands out, slightly cradled, trying to look intelligent but positioned like they’re molding a clay pot.

“Wanna try spinning that thing, Itsuki?” Nayuta offered.

“Yeah, it’d be neat to find out what it’s like to run a start-up.”

Itsuki nodded and opened the door. They asked the would-be monk if they could join the noon session, and the man said it was perfectly all right. There weren’t any other reservations, so Itsuki and Nayuta immediately put on aprons to begin a private ceramic session.

Their teacher in the *samue* prepared some clay to mold. “Do you have something in particular you’d be interested in crafting?” he asked.

Itsuki thought for a moment. “Um, how about a beer mug?”

“That sounds good for me, too,” echoed Nayuta.

“All right,” nodded the teacher.

So the two of them sat at their respective wheels, learning how to use them. It ran using a pedal at their feet—push it all the way down to spin it fast; ease up a bit for a slower speed.

“All right... Whoa?!” Stepping on it way too hard, Itsuki marveled at how fast the wheel went.

“Try not to push the pedal all the way down, all right?”

“O-okay...”

Once they learned the controls, the teacher pulled out enough clay to make the mugs, directing Itsuki and Nayuta as they worked their hunks of clay into cylinders. The stuff was tough to mold into much of any shape unless you put real muscle into it, making for some hard labor—but the slippery clay felt surprisingly satisfying to work with, making the process itself kind of fun for them. Itsuki had figured it was like playing in the mud or modeling clay for kindergarten arts and crafts, but this was totally different.

After nailing down the basic shape, they stuck their fingers into the middle to create the hollow part of the mug. Grabbing the edge of the clay with their thumbs and first two fingers on each hand, then starting up the wheel, opened up a hole in remarkably quick time as the cylinder became a longer, taller tube. Instead of putting the whole of your palms into it, like that stereotypical start-up’s CEO photo, it was more important to use your

fingertips to slowly stretch out the clay.

“Ah, ahh...?!”

“This is going more and more diagonal...!”

Both Itsuki and Nayuta had no problem lengthening their clay mugs out at first. Over time, however, the shape of the hollow began to warp, the mouth opened up way too much, and their tubes took on a notable diagonal.

“It gets those distortions if you don’t keep your posture perfectly straight,” the teacher pointed out.

They both quickly tried to fix their posture, but things still weren’t working out as planned. A bit more time, and their mugs were now distorted beyond what they could repair themselves, requiring the teacher to step in.

Reflecting on their original failure, the two of them tried their hands at a beer mug once more, only to run into the same problem. Only after take three did they successfully craft something that could feasibly be called a beer mug, despite its off-kilter balance and the occasional sagging edge. Their time expired soon after that, so they washed their hands and took off their aprons.

“They look more like flower vases than beer mugs,” Itsuki said as he eyed his work on the table.

Nayuta had been similarly humbled. “I think this is a really unique work of art...or maybe not...but either way, I look forward to using them.”

These molded mugs would then be dried and fired by the business before arriving in the mail after about a month.

“Well, making a tall vessel can be pretty tough, so you did a pretty good job for your first time.”

As the teacher offered some encouragement, Itsuki looked around the classroom. All kinds of pottery were up on the shelves—teacups, pots, rice bowls, dishes, flowerpots, thin vases... He had no idea what made for good porcelain, but they all looked pricey enough to him.

“Did you make all of this pottery, sir?” he asked.

The instructor nodded. “For the most part, yes.”

“Wow... That’s amazing.”

Maybe he was born into an illustrious family of potters or something, honing his craft over years and years of training.

“How long have you been working with ceramics?” ventured Nayuta.

“Um... Around five years.”

“That’s not very long!” Itsuki couldn’t help but blurt out the first thing that came to mind.

The teacher chuckled at him. “Well, I quit my job at the office and went to a ceramics school. After I graduated, I worked for another potter for two years, and then I opened this classroom two years ago.”

So much for the “illustrious family of potters” theory.

“What inspired you to get into ceramics?” Itsuki casually asked.

“Well,” the teacher replied, looking off into the distance, “I think most people who leave the daily grind to pursue this world are looking to find solace in the earth, so to speak... Ha-ha-ha...”

“...”

This unexpected glimpse into darkness made it impossible for Itsuki and Nayuta to ask him anything else.



“That got kinda grim in the end, but making pottery’s fun, isn’t it?” Nayuta smiled cheerfully at Itsuki as they strode out of the classroom and toward Kotoku-in.

“Yeah,” he said with a nod. “...I kind of get what he meant by finding solace in the earth. Maybe I should go to ceramics school, too...”

“Itsuki...” She looked up at him, anxious at his unexpectedly serious tone of voice.

“Kidding, I’m kidding!” he hurriedly added.

“Oh yeah, no doubt,” Nayuta said, smiling despite her lingering anxiety.

Then Itsuki noticed another shop. It seemed like just another souvenir store, with a big sign reading SANKAIDO—KAMAKURA SOUVENIRS on top of the door, but the inventory arranged up front included Japanese swords, shuriken, *kunai* and other weapons, *sandogasa* straw hats, traditional hand towels, and stickers with the character for “samurai” on them.

“Is Kamakura known for samurai stuff?” Itsuki asked.

“I dunno,” Nayuta answered dubiously. “But if it says ‘Kamakura Souvenirs’ that big on the sign, I guess so? The shogunate used to be here and all.”

“True... I guess it wouldn’t be unexpected, then, maybe?”

It seemed convincing enough to the two of them as they went inside—only to find a surprising sight.

“Is—is this a samurai shop...?”

“It’s more of a weapon shop...!”

Nayuta was right. “Weapon shop” was the only way to put it. The selection didn’t stop at katanas and shuriken; it included Western-style swords and lances, rapiers, twin-bladed axes, large shields, crossbows, maces and morning stars, cane swords, Indian kukri knives, guns... Weapons from every region and historical era occupied every inch of the walls and shelves. Not all of them were realistic, either—some of the more irregular short swords and “magic” blades looked like fantasy props, used for taboo sorcerous rituals. They were replicas, of course, but the quality made them look real. It was like going into a weapon shop in a fantasy RPG—and considering Nayuta’s gaming habits and Itsuki’s attempts at writing a battle-centric novel, all the weapons on display made their eyes sparkle.

“Ohhh, wow... They’re selling Excalibur at the store... It’s only twenty thousand yen...”

Itsuki took a moment to seriously consider purchasing Excalibur at a Kamakura souvenir shop. But:

“Hey! Itsuki! They have Zoro’s sword here!”

Nayuta came across one of the three katana carried by *One Piece*’s Roronoa Zoro (or a replica of one of the same type anyway), and clearly it had made her day. A lot of the inventory consisted of replicas from the world of fiction, actually, including *Bleach*’s Zanpakuto, *Rurouni Kenshin*’s Sakabatou reverse-blade sword and Mugenjin—even a sword-and-dagger set from *Conan the Barbarian*. Replicas or not, seeing all these weapons from pop culture laid out like this would make anyone excited.

One blade in particular caught Itsuki’s interest.

“It—it’s the Elucidator...!”

The beloved sword used by the hero of *Sword Art Online*, a light novel series with worldwide popularity.

“Wow... That’s so cool...!”

For anyone writing in the genre of battle fantasy, it was always a dream to see the weapons you’ve invented modeled and crafted in their actual size. But that was a tough hill to climb. With Itsuki’s *All About My Little Sister* anime

turning into a modest success, they were moving along with merchandising like figures and cosplay goods, but nobody had approached them yet about re-creating weapons from the series.

Nayuta smiled warmly as Itsuki carefully examined every inch of the Elucidator.

“I’m sure the weapons from your books will line the shelves someday.”

The comment caused Itsuki’s face to cloud over. “...I hope so,” he forced himself to say, more as a self-rebuke than anything.



After leaving the Sankaido souvenir store and seeing the Great Buddha statue, Itsuki and Nayuta went back the way they came.

The Great Buddha was...well, a pretty great Buddha.

“When I saw it in elementary school, it seemed so gigantic to me, but I guess it’s not *that* big, huh?”

“Yeah, well, that’s how your memory works as a kid.”

Taking a late lunch at the Kamakura Pasta restaurant on the way back, they caught a train from Hase back to Kamakura Station, walked to their hotel, and checked in. It was a beachside hotel with a panoramic view of the ocean from the window. They hung out there for a while, kicked back in the hotel’s large public bath, and ate at the restaurant by the lobby at half past six. The place was focused on prix fixe seafood courses, from fresh sashimi and carpaccio dishes to slightly offbeat picks like conger-eel lasagna and mackerel pike *al ajillo*.

It was all great, and they followed it up with a gaming session, another dip in the bath, and then a toast with the local Kamakura beer and some seasoned scallops they’d bought at the shops earlier. Neither Itsuki nor Nayuta had brought any work tools with them today; they didn’t even check their e-mail on their phones. And after they were both a comfortable sort of inebriated, one or the other closed in for a kiss...and from there, a full-on make out session.

The next morning, after eating breakfast at the hotel, they checked out at eleven and took the Enoden to Enoshima Station. They enjoyed the Enoshima

Aquarium here, taking in a raw-sardine rice bowl at a restaurant beforehand. This aquarium devoted a lot of its operation and displays to the jellyfish they kept, fine-tuning the lighting and tanks to make them look as beautiful as possible.

“...It’d sure be nice if I could just live like this, without thinking about anything...” Itsuki muttered to himself as he watched the whimsical jellyfish shimmer in the large, bulb-shaped tank before him.

Nayuta clutched at his hand in response...

“...Kanikou?”

“It’s all right.” She smiled softly at Itsuki. “You’re totally going to be all right, Itsuki.”

“...You think?” Itsuki broke into a smile, although he looked about ready to cry.

“I sure do.” Nayuta nodded. “And I’ll wait as long as it takes. So let’s take our time, all right?”

Itsuki turned away from her, facing back toward the jellyfish tank. He grasped Nayuta’s hand tightly.

“I’ll do my best,” he said, staring hard at the fluttering jellies. “So wait for me, okay?”

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

So I understand that when you submit a manuscript to a new writers contest, you have to include a synopsis as well. Are you supposed to write these as straight summaries, or should you try to build up hype for the series?



The right way to do it is to just summarize the content from start to finish—not too little, not too much. There's no need to make it a marketing blurb for the novel. I personally don't care what people write in their synopses, but some judges and entry readers will judge your ability to summarize your own work, so you should probably devote some effort to it.

QUESTION

Does Itsuki know Fuwa and Nayuta's real names?

Sure.



If you meet someone under their pen name first, you often stick with that even after you learn their real one. I think most creatives are like that, not just us.

Well said, Haruhiko Matsuo.



Whoa, don't just whip it out like that!

Too Many Sisters.

Two days after the Kamakura trip, Haruto and Miyako paid a visit to Itsuki's place while he and Chihiro were having dinner. Apparently, they had left the publisher's office at the same time.

"Here. Something from Kamakura for you."

Itsuki handed over a packet of pork jerky purchased at the Kamakura Ham outlet.

"Ooh, thanks."

"I was wavering between this and Excalibur for you," he joked, "but you're not quite worth the price, so..."

"Excalibur? You mean the one on sale at Sankaido?"

"You know it?"

"Yeah, I've been there before. Like, I own it, so..."

"You *own* Excalibur? You bought it from there?!"

"Yep."

"Really...?"

Seeing all those weapons and gear on display had made Itsuki wonder who actually bought any of that stuff. Now there was a customer right in front of him.

"Stop looking at me like I'm a grade schooler who bought a wooden sword on a field trip. It's reference material for my books."

Haruto's *Chevalier of the Absolute World* featured weapons called Calibres that transformed into giant robots. Excalibur was the Calibre the hero wielded.

"But isn't the Excalibur design from *Chevalier* totally different?" Itsuki pointed out.

"Well, yeah, but—you know, having a real weapon on hand can help a lot. Like, actually holding a sword when you're working on a battle scene."

"So you swing a sword around at home, Fuwa?" a curious Chihiro asked.

Haruto's face reddened a bit. "For *work*, yes!"

"Yeah," added Itsuki, "it's common for people to act out the scenes they're writing."

"Right. And *you* went fully nude when— Ah, never mind."

Miyako recalled the time she caught Itsuki naked in the bath, acting out a love-confession scene involving his main heroine. It made her blush as well.

"Did you get anything for Miyako?" Haruto asked.

"Oh, Naya already gave it to me... Thanks again for it. Kaiko liked hers a lot, too."

"Sure thing," said Itsuki.

He had purchased a set of oil-absorbing facial sheets for Miyako. For Kaiko, he purchased a *fundoshi*, a traditional sort of Japanese loincloth, except this one was meant for women. Miyako wondered how wise it was for a man to buy underwear for a woman he wasn't even dating, but Kaiko didn't care at all—it was another piece for her collection, and she was excited to have it.

Chihiro, by the way, received some Enoshima Aquarium stationery, as well as a full-sized Kamakura ham for the family. Aoba Kasamatsu, who had been swapping kitchen duties with Chihiro as of late, received both of those as well—and the boundlessly cute Nadeshiko Kiso received an equally cute plush otter. Finally, for the GF editorial office, Itsuki purchased a box of Kamakura *hangetsu*, half-moon-shaped crispy wafers with a sweet filling inside.

"I had no idea you were so conscientious about souvenir-giving," said Haruto, half-impressed and half-surprised.

"...Well," Itsuki replied half-heartedly, "I've caused a lot of trouble for a lot of people, so..."



As she whipped up some sardine pasta for Haruto and Miyako, Chihiro decided to heat up some thick-sliced Kamakura ham and sausage as well, lightly seasoning them with salt and pepper. They all toasted it over more Kamakura beer.

“Man, Chihiro, you are just *such* a good cook!” Haruto’s praise was delivered with his mouth partly full.

“Th-thank you very much,” Chihiro replied with a bit of bashful fidgeting.

Once they were done with the pasta, Chihiro collected their dishes. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll wrap up the washing real quick.”

“*Such* a great little sister,” Haruto whispered as he watched Chihiro walk away from the table. It made her blush again.

“...You’re right,” Itsuki said, too softly for anyone to hear. “And that’s why...”

“Oh, I got a present for you, too, Itsuki.” Haruto took a small cardboard box from his bag.

“A present?” Itsuki accepted the package. Inside was a box labeled “Too Many Sisters,” complete with an illustration featuring several girls.

“What’s this? A game?”

“Yeah. Kind of a reskin of Too Many Cinderellas, I think. I already have the original game, so you can have this version.”

Too Many Cinderellas had been played in this apartment many times. In it, players become important townsfolk in a kingdom, trying to convince the somewhat dimwitted prince that the girl from their family is the real Cinderella. Featuring simple rules and fast play times, it’s an approachable card game with surprisingly deep tactics.

“Wow, they actually put out something like this?”

“It was a bonus included with this book I bought yesterday.”

“Oh. Pretty rare to include a whole game for the limited edition,” Miyako commented.

A lot of them featured drama CDs or exclusive booklets, but games were almost unheard of. How many did they produce, and how much did each set cost them to make...? For Miyako, already deeply involved in editorial work at GF Bunko, it was a curious question.

“Wanna give it a play?” she offered. Itsuki and Haruto agreed, so Itsuki promptly unboxed the contents. Inside was an instruction manual, eighteen cards, and nine cardboard chips.

“Um, here’s the story,” Itsuki read out. ““A popular novelist who hit it big with a little-sister-themed book has unfortunately been involved in a traffic accident. He survived, luckily, but has lost part of his memory—and after reading his own novel, he’s become convinced he has a beloved little sister of

his own. Sadly, he has only the vaguest idea of what this sister looks like.”

“Well, yeah,” noted Miyako. “She doesn’t exist in the first place!”

“...‘Several publishers are interested in signing this author to their label, so they each prepare their own ‘little sister’ for him, in hopes of scoring his next novel. The players of this game are publishing agents, employing informants and providing information on their ‘little sister’ to the novelist. The object is to convince him that the sister you’re touting is the real one and get him to join your label.’”

“...”

Silence dominated for a few moments after he read out the backstory.

“There’s certainly...a lot to chew on, huh?” Haruto said with a chuckle.

“Trying to headhunt a writer with amnesia... That’s just cruel!” Itsuki’s face turned grim. “...But if this novelist was Kanikou, for example, I bet they really *would* do anything to score her...”

“You have a point... I could totally imagine Mr. Godo doing something like that...”

The image of the yakuza-like Satoshi Godo in his mind was enough to convince Haruto.

“The EIC’s really a nicer man than he looks,” Miyako felt obliged to add with a chuckle.

Itsuki skimmed through the rest of the manual. “So, yeah, apart from the backstory, and the characters and terms, it really is just a reskinned Cinderella.”

Too Many Sisters. worked as follows:

- The game is played with two to four players.
- Each player is dealt four out of the eighteen cards, each depicting a different person. These people are both little-sister candidates and informants spreading rumors about who really is the novelist’s sister.
- Every card includes data like age (Loli/teen/young/adult), favorite animal (dog/cat/rabbit), chest size (A-cup/B-cup/D-cup), and their answer to the most important question in anyone’s lives (shrimp or crab). The cards also include “rumors,” little snippets at the bottom with revealing information like “the little sister doesn’t have an A-cup,” “the little sister isn’t adult age,” or “the little sister is not a guy.”

- The cards are ranked from 1 to 18. The smaller this number is, the easier it is to convince the novelist that the person on the card is his little sister.
- When a player's turn arrives, they place one card in their hand on the table. This becomes a "rumor card," based on the snippet at the bottom of the card. In response, all players (including the one who dealt the card) simultaneously play either a "Yes" or "No" chip, indicating whether they accept or disagree with the revealed rumor. Players can play a "No" chip only once per game; after it's played, it's placed on top of the card whose rumor they denied, and that rumor is knocked out of the game.
- Players go around the table twice, with each one playing two different rumors. After everybody's gone twice, the top card is drawn from the deck and played as a "secret informant," adding one final rumor players can vote "Yes" or "No" on.
- If either of each player's two remaining cards is a match for all the uncontested rumors on the table, they can play it as a little-sister candidate. The player who plays the highest-ranked candidate wins.

In essence, the idea is to use your informants to shoot down the little-sister candidates your opponents might try to play, while using your chips to cancel out any rumors going against your own candidates. Your ultimate mission is to create a stronger sister candidate than any other player. (The instructions include a visual gallery of all the cards, which players can consult at any time.)

When the game is played by seasoned publishing agents, it becomes important for them to deduce which sister their opponents are setting up for victory, based on what rumors they spread and which they play a "No" chip for. Depending on your choice of tactics, you may even try to deceive your opponents by spreading a rumor that hurts your side or placing a "No" chip on a card you just played yourself.

"All right, shall we get going?"

With a practiced hand, Haruto shuffled the cards, dealt out four each to himself, Itsuki, and Miyako, then stacked the remaining six cards facedown

on the table.

“Hmmm...”

“Huh...”

“Whuhhh...?”

Scoping out their hands, all three players began to ponder their positions.

Itsuki Hashima’s hand

★⑤ Slender, beautiful swordswoman—A-cup—young—shrimp—cats

Rumor: The little sister doesn’t like crab.

★⑪ Boy who put beach balls or something in his shirt—D-cup—teen—shrimp—Gender: male

Rumor: The little sister’s not adult age.

★⑫ Dark-haired beauty—B-cup—adult—shrimp—dogs

Rumor: The little sister’s not Loli age.

★⑯ Well-nourished servant lady—D-cup—adult—shrimp—cats

Rumor: The little sister’s not an A-cup.

Hmmm... Not the strongest hand...

Itsuki groaned to himself. The highest-ranking card he had was #5, the girl with the sword, and everything else was in the double digits. How was he ever going to convince anyone that a middle-aged housekeeper is the correct little sister? And, Itsuki noted, this lady looked a lot like Ms. Mitahora, the woman who’d helped around the house back when he was a kid. He remembered her—and her daughter, Ayane Mitahora. The bittersweet middle school memory made him frown.

Haruto Fuwa’s hand

★② Fashionable college student—B-cup—young—crab—cats

Rumor: Place a “No” chip on any rumor card played.

★③ Silver-haired priestess girl—D-cup—Loli—shrimp—dogs

Rumor: Remove a “No” chip placed on any rumor card played.

★⑥ Little girl in kimono—B-cup—Loli—crab—rabbits

Rumor: The little sister doesn’t like dogs.

★⑱ Creep with panties on her head—D-cup—young
Rumor: Reverse the card ranking.

This is gonna work great, isn't it?





Haruto internally gloated, making sure nobody else noticed. Possessing cards #2 and #3 meant he had two powerful sister candidates, giving him a good advantage to start with—but card #1 might be in someone else’s hand, so it was too early to celebrate,

Miyako Shirakawa’s hand

- ★④ Silver-haired beauty—D-cup—teen—crab—rabbits
Rumor: The little sister doesn’t like shrimp.
- ★⑧ High school student—B-cup—teen—shrimp—cats
Rumor: The little sister isn’t Card #1, #2, #3, or #4.
- ★⑨ Young princess—A-cup—young—crab—dogs
Rumor: The little sister doesn’t like rabbits.
- ★⑮ Little boy—A-cup—Loli—shrimp—gender: male
Rumor: The little sister’s not a D-cup.

Hmm... What am I gonna do with this...?

Miyako almost brought a hand to her brow.

Her strongest card was #4, but the rest were no great shakes. A normal strategy would call for setting #4 up as her little sister—problem was, all three of her other cards knocked #4 off the candidate list. She’d have to back #4 while hoping someone applied “No” chips to her other plays, or hope the other players’ top candidates knocked each other out and opened the way for #8 or #9 in her deck. Either approach, however, required a decent amount of luck to work.

After a rock-paper-scissors round, Haruto was picked to go first, followed by Miyako and Itsuki.

“Okay, let’s start with this.”

Haruto played his weakest candidate, card #18—the panties-on-head weirdo. The visuals on the card looked familiar, but no need to think too deeply about that.

The rumor on that card called for reversing the ranks—in other words, the higher the card number, the stronger a candidate it was. Haruto picked it in an attempt to reveal who was holding card #1. What was once the most powerful

card in the deck had now become the weakest, and if you held #1, you definitely wanted to banish that rumor.

Meanwhile, he knew that card #1 was an A-cup teen who likes shrimp and dogs—and his #6 card took dog lovers out of the game. Players could only use a “No” chip once per game, so if the #1 holder used theirs to knock out #18, there’s nothing they could do if Haruto played #6 on turn two. At the same time, if no player held #1 and card #18’s rumor stayed in effect, he could just play #2 next, place a “No” chip on #18, and he’d be all set.

“Okay, let’s see if this rumor passes or not.”

The three of them each held a chip in their closed hands, then opened them up all at once. Haruto, Itsuki, and Miyako all carried “Yes” chips—and so, for this game, the higher the number on the card, the stronger it was.

...Wait. Do I have a chance now?

Internally, Miyako rejoiced. If the ranks were now reversed, then card #15, the innocent little boy in her hand, suddenly became a powerful little-sister candidate. (Whether his gender precluded him from being a “sister” was a debate for another time.)

“Okay, I’ll play this. The little sister doesn’t like rabbits.”

Miyako took out card #9. All three players showed “Yes” chips in response, so the anti-bunny stance took effect.

Hee-hee... Luck’s on my side, it looks like.

Like Miyako, the rank reversals were a godsend for Itsuki. Number 18 was already played on the table, so if Haruto or Miyako weren’t carrying #17, then #16 in his hand was the strongest candidate in play. Number 17, by the way, was a grown man who reminded him of Kenjiro Toki a bit (the question of why he was a “sister” candidate was a debate for another time). He had an A-cup (??), was adult in age, liked crab, and was male.

“Here.”

So Itsuki played #5 as a rumor card.

“The girl...isn’t into crabs!”

If this rumor was accepted, that knocked off the crab-loving #17 from the list. It passed without dissent.

W-wait! Whoa, I’m in trouble!

It was Haruto's turn again, and he was deeply concerned. He was so focused on keeping the player holding #1 from winning he totally missed the possibility that nobody held it at all—and, instead, that they held low-rank cards like #15, #16, or #17. It'd meant the tables were turned. If he held so many high-rank cards, it was only natural that the worse ones went to other players...but he didn't think about that.

I was watching out for #1 too much...!

He'd been wary of #1 and had the cards to fully shut it down—and that gave him tunnel vision. It was a punishing error of judgment, a rare one to see from Haruto. The college student on card #2 looked kind of like Miyako in his eyes, so maybe he was too focused on having her win.

Oh, man... Oh, man...!

With some trepidation, Haruto played his sole remaining thread of hope—the #2 card. This allowed him to place a “No” chip on anything previously played on the table without giving up the “No” in his own possession—but that, of course, was contingent on the other players approving of the card.

“I’m going to say ‘No’ to number eighteen here... This panties-wearing weirdo had the wrong idea the whole time, I think...”

“What?!”

“Didn’t *you* play number eighteen, Fuwa?!”

Itsuki and Miyako couldn’t hide their shock and surprise. Both had already committed to playing a low-ranked card as their little sister, and taking #18 off the board would ruin those plans. And as expected, Itsuki and Miyako both played “No” chips at the same time, knocking card #2 out.

Ooh... I sure messed that one up...

It was Miyako's second turn now, and she bitterly regretted playing that “No” chip. If she had known Itsuki was going to play his, she could've saved hers for now—but there was no turning back. She'd hers to switch gears and deal with it.

If Itsuki played a “No” back there, that means he’s trying to win with a low-ranked card too, doesn’t it...? Number 17 likes crab, so he can’t use her anymore...so #16, then...?

If Itsuki was building up card #16 as his candidate, Miyako had nothing to stop him with. Her #4 card stated that the little sister didn't like shrimp;

playing that would knock out #16, but it'd also take her own #15 and #8 (both shrimp fans) from working as candidates. Playing #15 ("The little sister's not a D-cup") would also eliminate #16, but it'd leave Miyako with nothing but #8 as a candidate. If Itsuki or Haruto had card #9 or better, she was out.

Hmmmmmmmm...

After a great deal of anguish, Miyako bet on Itsuki not holding #16 and played the high schooler on #8 as a rumor card. The rumor stated that cards #1 through #4 weren't the sister—only Haruto had a "No" chip left to play, and he declined to.

Ha-ha-ha! This one's mine...!

Now Itsuki felt sure of victory. If Miyako played a "No" chip on Haruto's last rumor, she must've been angling to win with a low-rank card as well. Right now, though, the most likely winner—the homely housekeeper on card #16—was in his possession. Between that and Haruto apparently suiciding himself out of the game, his victory was now all but certain...!

A breezy expression on his face, Itsuki played #12, the black-haired beauty. It dictated that the sister wasn't a Loli. Haruto's remaining two cards were likely both Lolis, so he was all but forced to play his "No" chip, but that didn't hurt Itsuki's standing one bit.

Now they had gone around the table twice. All that remained was to draw a card from the deck to serve as the secret informant.

"Okay, time for the final informant!"

With a smile, Itsuki flipped the card and placed it on the table. It was a young girl with boyish looks—card #1, normally the most powerful one of all. Boasting A-cup, teenage, shrimp, and dog stats, the rumor on it stated that...

"The little sister's not #16, #17, or #18— *Whaaat?!'*"

Itsuki's voice ratcheted up to a scream as he read the card. His grandiose plan to make the housekeeper on #16 his little sister was in tatters.

"Huh? Oh, no way! Nice!"

Meanwhile, Miyako was overjoyed. With #16 through #18 out of the picture, that made her own #15 the best candidate left on the board.

“Hnngh... I could’ve blocked that if I didn’t just use my ‘No’ card...”

Itsuki wailed in anguish as Haruto laughed.

“Ha-ha-ha... Okay, let’s all play our little-sister candidates, then. Putting all the rumors together, our sister is the card with the highest number that hates rabbits, hates crab, and isn’t number one, number two, number three, number four, number sixteen, number seventeen, or number eighteen.”

They all revealed their choices. For Miyako, it was #15, the young boy. For Itsuki, it was #11, the cross-dressing (?) boy. Haruto had nothing to match those conditions, so he couldn’t play any candidate.

“This boy,” Miyako crowed, “is your real little sister!” And with that, she successfully signed the forgetful novelist to her own publishing firm.

“Hee... I did, like, *nothing* to deserve this, but I win!”

“Ugh... Completely ridiculous...”

Miyako basked in her victory, as Itsuki hung his head in shock. That was the scene Chihiro saw when she came back from washing the dishes.

“Ha-ha... Too bad, Itsuki,” she said.

“Yeah... Well, this happens, so...”

Chihiro had kept an ear open to the game from the kitchen and tried to comfort her brother. All Itsuki could do was smile back. It was true. This happens. Sometimes, an unexpected fact comes out of nowhere and turns everything upside down. It can really happen.



After a few more games of Too Many Sisters. (with Chihiro joining the fray), the group called it a night, the other three leaving Itsuki alone in his apartment.

“Okay, I’m going this way, so good night, guys.”

“Good night.”

“Have a good one.”

Miyako split off to return to the apartment she shared with Nayuta, leaving Haruto and Chihiro to walk the late-night streets by themselves.

“Hey, um, Fuwa?” Chihiro said, voice unsteady.

“Mm? What?”

“You know, my brother...not being able to write novels right now... I’m probably the cause of that, aren’t I...?”

“...”

Haruto kept silent. Chihiro opted to go on.

“Toki told me that writers get burned out sometimes after their work gets adapted into anime...but I’m not sure it’s that...”

Itsuki acted the same as always around Chihiro. But when he was facing his computer screen, he seemed frantic in a way. “Struggling” was the impression he gave. He didn’t strike her as someone totally burned out, with zero desire to work at all.

“...”

Haruto kept slowly walking along without a word. After some hesitation, he found his resolve and stopped.

“...Honestly, I think your guess about Itsuki’s slump is absolutely right.”

The words visibly startled Chihiro. She’d expected it, but having it so explicitly spelled out for her, she couldn’t stop the ache of guilt and anxiety in her chest.

“...I mean, it was super confusing for me, too, so I’m sure the shock had to be even greater for Itsuki.”

“W-well, is there anything I can do about it?! So he can start writing novels again?!”

There was an urgent tone to Chihiro’s question. Haruto returned it with a sigh and a troubled look.

“I don’t know. I don’t really understand what’s going on in his mind, either. But you know, Chihiro...”

“Yes?”

“Even if you *are* the cause, I think this is a problem Itsuki has to overcome through his own efforts. If Itsuki wants to keep living as a writer—or really, if he wants to be the hero—then a problem so *inconsequential*, so *totally trivial* as his stepbrother turning out to be his sister all along, is something he has to take in and deal with himself.”

The bluntness of Haruto’s words shocked Chihiro. She was dissatisfied, eager to fire back. Somewhere in her mind, she unconsciously expected Haruto to give her just the right advice she needed.

“...That’s unusually cold of you,” she said, pouting at him.

Haruto replied with a chuckle, then a mischievous grin. “Well, whether I

look it or not, I believe in Itsuki Hashima as a novelist. I probably don't believe in anyone more, in fact, except for Nayu."

Something in Haruto's eyes made Chihiro realize the kindness hidden within his words. That, and the fact Haruto was talking not just about Itsuki, but her as well. He'd used terms like "inconsequential" and "totally trivial" as a way of looking out for Chihiro.

And when she realized that:

Ba-dum.

Her heart skipped a beat, making her cheeks burn red.

Ah, uh, what was that?!

"Besides, Chihiro..."

"Y-yes?!"

Chihiro's voice cracked at the sound of her name. Her chest was still beating hard.

Haruto gave her an odd look. "Instead of just worrying about Itsuki, don't you think you should put yourself first for now?"

"Huh? M-Me?" she replied in a panic.

"It's already November," he softly told her. "No matter how good your grades are, I really think you need to focus on your upcoming college exams. You know, I think if his sister failed to get in anywhere, Itsuki would feel responsible for it. If there's anything you can do for your brother right now, I think it's getting into a university and putting his mind at ease."

"..."

Haruto sounded like a grown-up talking to a child...or maybe a brother talking to his little sister. It made Chihiro feel a little gloomy—but getting irritated, she decided, would just make her look like a child.

"...You're right. I want to focus on my exams for now," she said.

She didn't consider too deeply about why she didn't want to look like a child.

"Good. Hang in there."

Haruto gave Chihiro a pat on the head—casually, cheerfully; something he might do to his own sister all the time.

"Okay... ♥"

Ba-dum.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

The “girl” Chihiro had been holding back this whole time exploded.



Q&A Corner

QUESTION

I like it when underwear is visible beneath summer clothes, but does Mikuniyama like seeing panties peeking out from shorts and stuff?!



I love it!

QUESTION

Chihiro has changed her hairstyle recently, but what about the other female characters? Why do they do their hair that way?



I change it based on my mood, too.

Oh, I change my hairstyle all the time.



I don't have any real reason for growing it out. I'm not married to it, so maybe I'll cut it in a while.



I try to keep a certain length that goes well with the panties.

Fall from Grace

One evening, the absolutely adorable Nadeshiko Kiso paid a visit to Itsuki's apartment.

"Good evening, big bro Itsuki!"

She made a polite little bow at the front door, and Itsuki beamed like a grandfather as he greeted her.

"Dee-hee! Great to see you, Nadeshiko. Here, come on in."

"Okay!"

Whenever Yoshihiro Kiso, Nadeshiko's real grandfather, came to the editorial office for a meeting, he would regularly drop off Nadeshiko at Itsuki's apartment.

"I have some *ohagi*. Did you want one?"

The question came from Aoba Kasamatsu, a younger writer who had come to discuss her work with Itsuki.

"*Ohagi*?! I love *ohagi*!"

Nadeshiko's eyes shone as Aoba smiled at her, took one from the fridge, and put it on a dish. Aoba had made these sweet rice balls back at home.

"*Oh-hagiiii, oh-hagiiii...♪*" Sitting in between Itsuki's legs, the little girl beamed at the world as she scarfed down the snack. "It's really good! Did you make it, big sis?"

"I sure did."

"Wow, you're super great!"

"Aw, it's not that special..."

"No, I think it's really great," Itsuki said, praising the humble Aoba. She would occasionally bring along other desserts, such as macarons and flan, and they were all pretty tasty. Apparently, she had developed the skill after cooking snacks for her siblings.

"I need to keep up my sugar levels for intellectual work, you know, so... Yeah. This really helps."

“Hee-hee-hee! It’s an honor, big bro.” Aoba looked down bashfully, cheeks a bit red.

After finishing the sweet treat, the three of them took up some board games. The lineup for today included Viva Topo!, Incan Gold, and Deep Sea Adventure—all party-oriented games with a fairly strong luck element. Itsuki picked these not because they could give a child a chance to win with a little luck, but because Nadeshiko was so good at the skill-centric games he and Aoba just couldn’t beat her. They were probably the right picks to make, because all their games were competitive and all three had a blast.

“Phew! That was fun... Hmm?”

Coming down from their last match, Nadeshiko noticed a stack of paper next to the *kotatsu*.

“What’s that?”

“Oh,” Aoba replied, “that’s the manuscript for my novel.”

The Unfortunate Siblings’ Student Council War was the name of the new series Aoba Kasamatsu had devised with Itsuki’s advice. The first volume came out back in September, to pretty good reviews.

This was quite different from the strongly arty, “literary” tone she had taken with her debut novel, an approach she clearly took from Nayuta Kani. It was much more comical in nature, featuring strong, unique characters getting up to all kinds of antics. The story was led by a set of brother-and-sister twins who were striving to become the next student council president after the previous one suddenly disappeared from the academy. The text covered them and their supporters preparing for the upcoming election (or war, really), along with how they overcame their troubles and gradually built up support for themselves.

The setting may have been vastly different from her debut work, but the realistic psychology behind the characterization and the clever story structure—both hallmarks of her last book—were still there, making it a remarkably solid package for only her second work. Thanks to Aoba’s acknowledgment in the afterword (“Itsuki Hashima gave me a great deal of support for the writing of this book. Thanks, big bro! ♥”), some people online assumed *All About* had been delayed because Itsuki fell for a real-life teen and lent a hand with her novel instead, but that was only a very small contingent of fans...for now, anyway.

Itsuki was continuing to offer her advice for Volume 2, and the stack of

paper by the table was her rough draft.

“That’s your novel, big sis Aoba?” Nadeshiko’s eyes shone. “Is it more of *The Unfortunate Siblings’ Student Council War*?!”

Aoba gasped a bit. “Uh... Did you read it, Nadeshiko?”

“Yeah! It was really neat!”

Aoba smiled shyly at Nadeshiko’s cheerful reply. “Hee-hee-hee... Thanks, Nadeshiko,” she said as she tousled her hair. Nadeshiko giggled at the ticklish feeling. “Oh, do you want some more *ohagi*?! Or maybe some Calpico to drink?!”

“Calpico! I want some of that!”

“All right. I’ll mix it up really thick for you, okay? ♥”

“...You’re starting to act like a grandma,” Itsuki pointed out with a grin.

Aoba blushed. “Oh, come on, big bro! You act like such a grandpa around Nadeshiko all the time.”

“Well, what do you want?” he fired back. “It’s Nadeshiko’s fault for being such a perfect angel.”

“You’re exactly right,” Aoba replied, nodding briskly.

Nadeshiko looked longingly at the manuscript as she enjoyed her drink. “When I’m in the sixth grade, I wanna be head of the children’s council!”

“The children’s council? That’s what they call the student council in elementary school, right?” The term gave Itsuki a shot of nostalgia. “Well, that’s really good of you, Nadeshiko, wanting to lead something like that.”

As a grade schooler, Itsuki was too introverted to even think about taking a leadership role.

“You’re in the fourth grade now, right?” Aoba asked.

“Uh-huh!” came the proud reply. “I’m on the library committee!”

“Wow. What kind of things do you do?”

“Oh, I help the librarian, I organize the shelves and stuff... I write about new books in our newsletter, too.”

“Ooooh. Sounds like you’re working really hard, Nadeshiko.”

“Hee-hee-hee! You know, I wrote about one of your books earlier, big bro Itsuki!”

“Guh?”

Itsuki’s face tensed up. All of *his* published work was about guys falling deeply, passionately in love with their flesh-and-blood younger sisters, and while the amount of erotic content varied from series to series (usually

revolving around fully naked girls), it tended to be a running theme. Itsuki believed a child's choices in reading material should be respected, and unless you were their parents or teachers, it's not really something you should comment upon...but even so, he didn't want this cute little girl he knew to be reading some of his pornier work. It was a complex issue for any creative type to tussle with...especially right now, when Itsuki was struggling to respect his own work.

"N-Nadeshiko... Are you reading my books?"

"Uh-huh! I think your books are really neat, big bro!"

"Oh...you do...?"

Even now, when he had lost his love for his series, Itsuki still got a rush from someone praising his stuff.

"And I really want to read what you write next!"

"...!"

Now Itsuki's face was wholly frozen. Aoba, who knew about Itsuki's slump as well, seemed just as conflicted. But Nadeshiko kept blithely talking, eyes agleam.

"I'm so excited to find out what happens next! Is the Service Club going to be all right?! Is Hachiman ever going to find his 'something real'?!"

"Huh?"

Itsuki's eyebrows arched down. This wasn't terminology from his novels. Aoba had a question mark above her head, too.

"Um, Nadeshiko? Which were you talking about? Something real?"

"...? I'm talking about your books, big bro."

"...Which books of mine?"

"Huh? Aw, quit picking on me, big bro! I'm talking about *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*, of course!"

"Aaahhhhh!!"

"?"

Itsuki yelped as he finally pieced the puzzle together, while Aoba was still lost.

It was about half a year ago when Nadeshiko first came to Itsuki's place. She'd asked him what kind of books he wrote, and he was reluctant to show her a bunch of books with hard-R illustrations in them. Out of desperation, he pulled a copy of *Ayakashi Gatari* off the shelf and said, "I wrote this." He

even lied and said his pen name was “Wataru Watari,” the actual author.

They hadn’t talked at all about novels since then, so he’d completely forgotten about it...but since it had never come up, he never had a chance to correct her, either. Now she was absolutely convinced Itsuki Hashima was Wataru Watari.

Am... Am I ever gonna get this fixed...?!

If Itsuki’s life was actually just a novel, it was written by a complete bastard, no doubt. He began to visibly shake, sweat running down his face, as Nadeshiko stared blankly at him with her pure, innocent eyes. He couldn’t stand the thought of deceiving such a tender young girl any longer.

“Ah...ahh... Nadeshiko... Listen, I need to tell you something really important, okay...?”

“Yeah?”

Itsuki fell silent, still wincing, before he gingerly began his reply.

“To... To tell the truth... I’m not Wataru Watari...”

“Hmm?”

Nadeshiko raised an eyebrow.

“What do you mean by that, big bro?” Aoba asked, similarly puzzled.

“...My pen name is actually Itsuki Hashima—it’s the same as my real one. I write titles like *All About My Little Sister* and *Sisterly Combat* for a publisher called GF Bunko.”

“...???”

The blank stare remained on her face. She still didn’t seem to understand.

“Ah!” Her eyes widened. “You’re joking with me, aren’t you?!”

“I’m not. I’m telling you the truth...”

“...? Huhhh...? What? But you said your pen name was Wataru Watari, big bro.”

“I’m sorry. I lied.”

“No way...”

“...Yes way. I didn’t write *Qualidea*, I didn’t write *Girlish Number*... I didn’t write anything cool like that. I’m not Wataru Watari.”

“Huhhh...?”

Nadeshiko seemed lost, in a state of total disbelief. She turned away from

Itsuki to Aoba.

“Oh, um, he’s right,” she told her, still not much attuned to what was going on. “Our big bro definitely writes under the name Itsuki Hashima.”

Nadeshiko, finally realizing Aoba was telling her the truth, slowly turned her face back toward Itsuki, like an old door creaking open.



“...You—you lied? You weren’t Wataru Watari?”

“...No.”

With this final confirmation, Nadeshiko slumped down on her seat.
“Ahhhh...”

“H-Hey... Nadeshiko? Nadeshikooo?”

Itsuki called for her, concerned, but she kept her head down, muttering.

“...I can’t believe anything anymore... All you grown-ups keep lying to me... Youth is all a lie. It’s evil...”

“N-Nadeshiko!” Aoba half-shrieked, attempting to cheer her up. “I—I don’t have any idea why you thought our big bro was Wataru Watari, but let me tell you, Itsuki’s works are just as wonderful as Wataru’s! He’s ‘something real,’ too!”

The girl turned her clouded eyes to Aoba.

“...I told my friends and the rest of the library committee that these books were written by a man I know.”

“Oof...” Aoba’s eyes darted away. She felt too awkward to keep them straight.

“And now I lied to them...”

“It—it’s all right! It’s not your fault! You were just tricked, is all! It’s all *my* fault! And I’ll do anything to set the record straight with your friends! Oh, I know... Why don’t I arrange a meeting between you and Wataru Watari?! Then you won’t be lying when you say you know him! I’ve never met him either, but I think I can tap some connections!”

“...”

Itsuki desperately tried to cheer her up, but ultimately, he failed to win Nadeshiko’s smile back. Her grandfather, Yoshihiro Kiso, finally managed to restore her good spirits when he returned from his editorial meeting—but now that she had a taste of the darkness, something about Nadeshiko would never be the same again...

THE UNFORTUNATE SIBLINGS' STUDENT COUNCIL WAR

BY: AOBA KASAMATSU ART BY: ARABURU KOALA
VOLUME I ON SALE NOW.

■SYNOPSIS

Ransho Academy is one of the most well-known "mammoth" schools in the nation, heralded for its academic and military arts—all thanks to the student council presidents who have ruled over the years. One day, the current president disappears without a trace—and all kinds of trouble ensues! In order to quell the chaos and take up the illustrious banner of their president, council vice president Shuichi Izumi and his twin sister Yuma declare their candidacies, each with their respective cadre of supporters. Who will persuade the most students and win it all in the next presidential election?

■CHARACTERS

Shuichi Izumi

A second-year student and vice president of the student council. Believes himself to be an intelligent, cunning strategist, but is actually just an overly serious, impulsive young man. As Yuma's brother, he cherishes nobody in life more than her.

Yuma Izumi

A second-year student and treasurer of the student council. Believes herself to be an intelligent, cunning strategist, but is actually just an overly serious, impulsive young girl. As Shuichi's sister, she cherishes nobody in life more than him.

Reo Tendo

A third-year student, gifted in fine and military arts. Charismatic and hardworking, he was lauded as the council's greatest president—before he disappeared without a trace.

Ryoma Kuriyamoto

A first-year student and head of the student council's general-affairs department. A tall, muscular young man, he supports Shuichi's election campaign. While just as big-hearted and heroic as he looks, he's also the calculating shadow mastermind of the council.

Chidori Shiikawa

A second-year student and secretary of the student council. Still nursing a grudge against Shuichi for beating her in the vice presidential election, she joins Yuma's campaign....but on the sly, she's seeking a chance to double-cross Yuma and win the president's seat for herself.

Considering the Obi

As Itsuki, Aoba, and Nadeshiko were enjoying an impromptu board game party, Yoshihiro Kiso was having a meeting with his editor Kenjiro Toki in a Gift Publishing meeting room.

They were joined by Miyako, sitting next to Toki. The GF Bunko editorial team often let her shadow meetings and conferences like this in order to help her prep for her new job. Editor in chief Satoshi Godo didn't want the folks at Branch Hill to think "Didn't GF Bunko teach her anything? What a disappointment," so he'd ordered his team to train Miyako so she could hit the ground running at her new workplace. But enough about her for now.

Kiso's first light novel series, *Tsurugi: Sword of Sengoku*, had wrapped its run with Volume 3's release in August. They had tied up the plot nicely, but they definitely had enough content to keep it going, and many of its readers wanted it to continue. The series enjoyed both great reader feedback and a great retention rate of old readers who'd reached out to buy a new release. It certainly had the potential to become a popular series, but *Tsurugi* was wrapping at Volume 3 for the simple reason that it didn't sell enough. Volume 1 stumbled out of the gate, and while the positive reviews gave it a little more footing, it still wasn't enough to merit a second printing, so the sales department decided they couldn't let it go past Volume 3.

...Listen, KenKen. If Volume 1 of a series stumbles on the initial release—especially if it's from an unknown author—it's 100 percent the editor's fault.

That's what Godo had told Toki once, back when he was still working part-time here, and Toki still believed that was true. For a brand-new series debut, the initial success of a Volume 1 release depended almost entirely on the packaging and advertising—and that was all the editor's responsibility. Of course, an editor could find excuses—sometimes the manuscript took so long to complete that they didn't have enough time to consider the packaging; sometimes the illustrator and designer didn't see eye to eye on

things; sometimes the ad budget was too low.

In the case of *Tsurugi*, Volume 1, they had revised the winning manuscript from the writer's contest so much it was essentially a different novel, so they didn't have much time to spend really molding the package. It was a hardcore samurai story, one with a fleshed-out backdrop...but it was also a classical light novel with a beautiful girl taking center stage, which made finding the right illustrator a challenge. They needed someone who could draw cute girls—that was a given—but add in katanas, kimonos, period backgrounds, and a tight schedule, and that limited the talent pool. Winning “honorable mention” in a new-author contest wasn't exactly a glamorous award, either, so the book didn't get too much hype in the bookstore flyers and posters.

Still, these were editorial issues. They were nothing the author needed to be concerned about. To an author, a novel is like a child they risked their lives to give birth to. Saying to them “This precious child you entrusted to us bombed after blowing its debut, but hey, the editors had it rough, too” would never sound very convincing.

Thus, messing up a production always produced bad karma, a heavy cross for the editor to bear. But Toki believed that anyone unaware of this burden had no right to preside over a series. He couldn't revive someone's baby after it was already killed, but he'd never forget about it, and he'd keep pondering over what he could do to not make the same mistake again. There would be more children, and he wanted to guide them to as happy a future as possible.

That was the sort of reinforced resolve Kenjiro Toki brought to this meeting.

“All right. So that's a go on the plot for Volume 2. As for the deadline... would the end of the year be asking too much?”

“No,” Kiso replied in his low, rumbling voice, “that won't be a problem.”

Yoshihiro Kiso's latest series, titled *Conquest of the Silver Demon*, was slated to go on sale next January. But Volume 1's text was in final author revision, the cover illustration was done (along with three front-of-book color pinups), and the roughs were also done for ten black-and-white illustrations—and if that wasn't prompt enough, they had just wrapped a plot meeting for Volume 2.

Across Toki's entire career, he had almost never experienced such smooth sailing with a project. But this wasn't a rush job—Toki was confident about

the content, too. The genre was still samurai action, ensuring they didn't lose any of their previous audience, and the characters were young overall, with an emphasis on pretty girls (and pretty young girls), adding more flashiness to the cast. Kiso's natural expressiveness had been further polished, and the you-are-there fighting scenes and appetite-whetting meal descriptions began to take on the feel of a seasoned writer. Best of all, the illustrations would be handled by Kantoku—who was not only heralded as the greatest artist of the generation when it came to drawing cute girls, but was also known for portraying fancy clothing and accessories, beautiful backdrops, quiet and dynamic scenes, and being consistently good in both color and monochrome.

Toki was absolutely positive this book would sell. But he couldn't let his guard down. He had to do everything required, and they had to publish this release in the best shape possible. Volume 1's cover and summary blurb were complete, both up to his standards—and when it came to packaging, there was just one aspect left to tackle.

“So, Mr. Kiso, what should we do about the obi?”

The obi—the strip of paper around the dust jacket of many Japanese books, serving as additional advertising—is an extremely important part of the pitch light novels make to readers. Its design and ad copy can often spell the difference between a customer making a purchase or putting it back on the shelf. But for *The Conquering Silver Demon*, Toki wasn't quite sure what the best approach was for the obi. So he decided to get Kiso's take.

“The obi...?” Kiso asked, eyebrows down.

“R-right...”

Kiso already looked like a living samurai, but his frown with furrowed brows instantly raised the tension in the conference room.

“I must apologize, but I am still a rank amateur when it comes to the packaging of light novels. I have only begun exploring this world as a reader a scant few months ago, so I'm not sure my opinions would offer much of a reference for you. That was why I had surmised I could leave this matter to you, Mr. Toki.”

With all that modesty and politeness, the author was placing his full trust in an editor less than half his age, despite his past failures. Toki took it as a high honor, his respect for Kiso growing even larger. Again, he reminded himself of just how much he wanted this book to succeed.

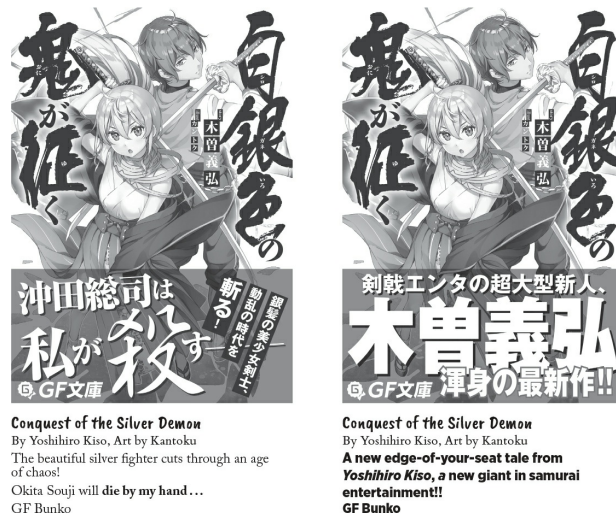
“Ah, well, Mr. Kiso, there's no need to think so deeply about it. I'm just

looking for some perspective you might have on this, you see, so you shouldn't be afraid to speak your mind."

"Mmm..." The stern Kiso watched Toki as he continued.

"In my personal opinion, with the quality we've got in the story and its cover, I don't think we need to resort to anything gimmicky. The obi can just give it to the reader straight, touting the story or using a catchy slogan or something." As he spoke, Toki banged out a couple images on his tablet. He had several preloaded templates designed by their pros in the graphic team, so he could just fill in a few fields and create a decent-looking obi in a flash.

...Yes. Indeed. Neither were any problem at all. But:



"But if you ask me, I'd like to try challenging ourselves a little further. If someone picks up the book for its cover and the blurb seems interesting enough to them, I want an obi that, you know, gives them that one final push toward a purchase... Oh, and if you have any ideas, Shirakawa, don't be afraid to chime in."

"Well," Miyako said, "maybe it's kind of a cliché, but could we get a comment from somebody famous, maybe?"

"Yeah, I actually thought about that first as well. But with a book like this, I'm having trouble deciding exactly what sort of celebrity endorsement would work the best."

"If it's a samurai period piece, maybe we could bring in a famous novelist in that genre?"

The quick suggestion inspired Toki to create a new image.

"...Certainly," Kiso said as he looked at Toki's tablet. "If Ikenami wrote

an endorsement, I would have no complaint about that. *I'd* certainly buy it, anyway.”



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Recommended by —taro Ikenami!!

His voice was as flat and detached as always, but his lips seemed a little more tensely stretched than usual.

“...Ah, yeah, I probably shouldn’t have put a dead author’s name in there...but you see what I mean, regardless. Let’s add this idea to the list of candidates.”

“All right,” replied Miyako. “Beyond that, um... How about a big name in samurai movies? Like, someone that everybody would know?”

“A samurai film star that everybody would know...” Toki turned toward Kiso. “Who would that be, for example?”

“Well, as a fan of the genre, I can think of several names...but on the other hand, I’m not sure which of them would be household names at the moment.”

“Well, like Ken Matsudaira, for example? You don’t even need to watch samurai films to know him.”

“Ahh, I see!”

Toki nodded and created a new image.

“...Hmm. This is certainly eye-catching as well,” Kiso said in his flat voice. “Apart from it being all but impossible to happen in real life, I think it is excellent.”



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
This book made Ken Matsu— sing!!

“It’s really not possible?” Miyako asked.

“...Well, I think we can pitch it to his agency, at least. Worth a shot.” Toki tried to sound upbeat. But he didn’t like their chances much, either. “I guess getting an endorsement from a light novel writer is more realistic, then...”

Toki whipped up a few samples. The results didn’t seem to satisfy him.

“Hmm... Certainly, going with people in this industry would be a lot easier to make happen, but it’s already kind of been done to death. It wouldn’t seem too fresh to readers. Especially Hirasaka—he’s written blurbs for like two dozen or so books by now. His name doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

“Yeah, I think I’ve seen his name on the obis of a few different books. Do you think he actually reads the books he recommends? *(Author’s note: Yes, I only write endorsements for books I read and like. Promise.)*



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Wataru Watari Loves It!!
"Super-exciting stuff!"



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Nayuta Kani Loves It!!
"Super-exciting stuff!"



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Yomi Hirasaka Loves It!!
"Super-exciting stuff!"



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Reki Kawa— Loves It!!
"Super-exciting stuff!"

“Who knows?” Toki sighed. “But anyway, let’s step away from the endorsement idea for now. Put yourself in my shoes for a moment. If you were at a bookstore, what kind of obis draw your attention enough to pick up the book?”

“Mmm, I don’t really pay attention to obis when I buy books... Oh, but if they advertise an anime version, I do wind up checking on that.”

It was a very “future editor” thing for Miyako to say. This approach was pretty threadbare as well, but notices like “Anime Coming Soon!!” or “Check Out the Manga Version Too!!” were a direct way to tell buyers “Hey, here’s how popular this franchise is.” It remained a strong advertising approach—but you really can’t use it on Volume 1 of a new series.

“We *could* also go with this...”



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Soon to be made into anime!! Hopefully!!

“Ahh, I see... It’s not a lie, no. I think some people would get angry about it, but...” Miyako’s reaction to the image Toki made was half astonishment, half disgust.

“I’ve been purchasing historical samurai novels for a long time,” Kiso said, “but I often tend to pick up books featuring whatever character is prominent in the ‘Taiga drama’ NHK is broadcasting that particular year. The industry is aware of this as well, so every year, they produce mounds of novels featuring the hero from the NHK drama. They pop up like weeds.”

“Yeah, I’m sure the year’s Taiga drama has a huge impact on the period-novel business.”

“Indeed. In fact, I even see some books print ‘Now a Taiga Drama!’ on the obi even if they had nothing to do with NHK’s production. It is a fairly common thing to see in that genre, but yes, it’s just as misleading as this obi here.”

“I see...”

Miyako nodded at this, curious about how the industry worked in other genres. Then an idea struck her.

“Oh! I know! Why don’t we put ‘**See the Taiga drama!!**’ on the obi?!”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean by that...?”

Toki and Kiso gave her quizzical looks.

“Well, Mr. Kiso, this work is focused on the Shinsengumi from the nineteenth century, right? And NHK released a Taiga drama about them in the past, I know. So it wouldn’t be a lie to say ‘the Shinsengumi, as seen in Taiga drama!’ or something! Not that this *particular* novel’s been adapted or anything, but...!”

“I... I see...!”

Toki, understanding Miyako’s idea, opened his eyes wide. Immediately, he produced a sample.

This was the simple truth—the Shinsengumi [were] a Taiga Drama Sensation [in the past]. Nowhere did it say that NHK chose this exact book for a drama adaptation.

“...It’s not just the Shinsengumi,” Kiso softly pointed out. “The main cast includes Ryoma Sakamoto and many other *ishin shishi* activists from the late Edo period.”



Conquest of the Silver Demon

By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku

The Shinsengumi,
A Taiga Drama Sensation!!

“...! Mr. Kiso, do you mean...?”

“...we can write whatever we want on here?!”

Toki immediately began jabbing at his tablet.

Again, there was nothing false about this. Everything written on these obis was 100 percent the truth. It was just that Taiga dramas, Masaharu Fukuyama, and Yusuke Iseya didn't happen to have much to do with *this* particular book.

“...Hmm.” Kiso closely eyed the images. “If we can get away with *this* much tangential material...

“...then why stop with Taiga drama? What do you think about writing ‘Hollywood picture showing now!’?”



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Now a Drama Starring
Masaharu Fukuyama!! [Ryoma Sakamoto]



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
Yusuke Iseya
Plays Shōin Yoshida in the Taiga Drama!!

““...!!””

Toki and Miyako were thunderstruck.

“Y-you’re right... There *are* Hollywood films in theaters right now...!”

“Definitely,” Miyako agreed. “It’s not like it’s based on this book, but there’s definitely *some* kind of Hollywood movie playing in theaters right now!”

“Great job, Mr. Kiso! That’s a genius idea!”

“Heh...”

Even Kiso had to smirk a little at Toki.

This wasn’t a lie. The number-one movie in the US (whatever it was) might not have had anything to do with this book, but it was definitely filling seats in movie theaters across Japan at the moment.

“Hey, I think we’re on to something here...!” Toki looked incredibly satisfied with this. “How about *this*?!”

This wasn’t a lie!

Not that it had anything to do with this book, but the hit series *Sword Art Online* was being adapted into a live-action drama by Hollywood, and the megahit *One Piece* definitely had its latest volume out sometime recently! All totally true!



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
HOLLYWOOD MOVIE Showing now!!!!!!!



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
America's #1 Megahit!!
Now Showing Nationwide!!



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
20 million copies sold!
The hit light novel,
adapted for a Hollywood series!!



Conquest of the Silver Demon
By Yoshihiro Kiso, Art by Kantoku
The latest from the megahit series with
400 million copies sold
now on sale!!!

“Whoaaaaa!” Miyako cried. “This *totally* works! Like, *totally*! We’re creating obis with impact like nothing that came before!”

“You can do this, Toki!!”

“Heh... I look forward to the final result.”

The three of them continued to brainstorm, creating the most outlandish obis they could come up with.

“All right, the Bible’s sold like four hundred billion copies, right? It’s the biggest bestseller in history. Let’s try doing something with this...”

“...Whoa, KenKen.”

They were making so much noise, in fact, that editor in chief Satoshi Godo peeked into the room to see what was going on. He patted the excited Toki on the shoulder.

“Oh, hey, boss! Look at all these amazing obis we’ve come up with! We’re bound to have a hit with these!” Toki smugly showed off his images.

“That’s called ‘misrepresentation,’ you dolt.”

With that dispassionate statement, Godo ended the fantasy immediately.

A misrepresentation is a statement of fact designed to mislead people into believing a product is better than it really is. It’s prohibited by the Household Goods Quality Labeling Act of Japan. You could get away with jokes like “Anime Coming Soon! I hope!” and in the samurai novel genre, taking advantage of whatever historical drama was showing on NHK was a long-running tradition at this point—but get too naughty with it, and you’re out.

So they were back to the drawing board for obi ideas.

“Sorry we kinda got out of control, Mr. Kiso...”

Kiso gave the truly apologetic Toki a light smile. “No, no, I realized midway through that this was probably illegal anyway.”

“You did?! Why didn’t you say something?!”

“Because sometimes, if you’re stuck on a problem, going on a wild tangent opens up a pathway toward a solution.”

From a man his age, Kiso’s statement held significance, and Kenjiro Toki realized just how immature he still was.

Miyako eyed the despondent Toki and earnestly said, “You really *are* Itsuki’s editor, aren’t you?”

CONQUEST OF THE SILVER DEMON

BY: YOSHIHIRO KISO ART BY: KANTOKU
VOLUME 1 COMING SOON

■SYNOPSIS

In the year 1864, Shimomura Katsu, a young girl with red eyes and silvery hair, traveled to the capital of Kyoto to track down the father who abandoned her five years ago and tell him that her mother is dead. But before she could reach him, her father—Serizawa Kamo, original lead commander of the Shinsengumi—is assassinated. Learning that the killing occurred at the hands of Okita Souji and his men in the Shinsengumi, Katsu disguises herself as a man named Kari and awaits a chance for revenge. With assistance from Kusaka Genzui from Choshu, Kari engages the Shinsengumi multiple times—and as she does, she finds herself attracted to the group's dreams and ideals. Meanwhile, she also forms bonds with Kusaka and the other reformists that go beyond their shared political motives. Oppressed by both sides, Kari struggles to forge her own path amid tumultuous events...

■CHARACTERS

Shimomura Kari

The sixteen-year-old daughter of Serizawa Kamo, first commander of the Shinsengumi, and a master of the sword even beyond her father's skill. A genetic defect gave her silver hair and red eyes at birth; she was raised isolated from her home village. Her skin is sensitive to sunlight, so she is most active at night.

Okita Souji

The twenty-two-year-old fabled samurai and leader of the Shinsengumi. He is the man behind Serizawa Kamo's murder, but he held a deep love and respect for him as well. Mild-mannered and gentle, but in battle he transforms into a demon.

Tani Amane

A sixteen-year-old girl who hides her gender to join the Shinsengumi with her two older brothers. She meets and befriends Kari without either of them knowing the other's secret.

Kusaka Genzui

A twenty-three-year-old samurai from the Choshu fiefdom. Attracted by Kari's sword skill, he agrees to shelter her inside his manor, as long as she helps with his assassination and bodyguarding duties.

O-Ryo

A beautiful twenty-three-year-old woman who works at the Ogi-iwa inn in Kyoto while secretly supporting the Shinsengumi cause. Kari admires the dignified way she lives her life.

The Antithesis

At a certain downtown hotel in mid-November, Gift Publishing held the award ceremony and party for the 16th GF Bunko New Writers Contest/11th *Comic Gifted* New Artist Contest. It was the sixteenth year—yes, a year had already passed since Ui Aioi, Aoba Kasamatsu, Yoshihiro Kiso, and the rest accepted their prizes for the 15th New Writers Contest.

A year was really all it took, though, to see how the professional writing careers for last year's crop had worked out. Aioi, Kiso, and Makoto Yanagase had launched series that sadly didn't take off; they were now either writing or pitching new titles. Kasamatsu's debut book sold well, but after being slammed as "an inferior rip-off of Nayuta Kani," she'd considered packing it up for a while, only to recover after receiving encouragement from a writer friend. Now she had a new series out, one that was already winning accolades. Soma Misaka had his first book bomb and then warred with his editor to disastrous results; he and GF Bunko had now officially parted ways.

For now, the only clear success story from the 15th New Writers Contest was Tadashi Kamo, whose debut effort *Karuma the Lawyer* became a huge hit. An anime adaptation was in the works, and right now he was parading around the event hall like he owned the place, wearing a fancy suit and an expensive-looking wristwatch. He spent last year's ceremony hunched over and constantly looking at his shoes, but now he had his head held high and his chest puffed out. He looked healthier, to be sure, but judging by the scornful looks from the people around him, he clearly had let success go to his head.

It wasn't just the Year 15 crew who'd seen change in the last year. Several people who had attended the festivities last fall weren't around this time, for assorted reasons. And in one corner of the hall, Itsuki Hashima was leaning against the wall by himself, taking occasional sips of his sparkling wine. He was, to be frank, in no shape to honestly enjoy this party—but he knew this

was his one chance a year to mingle with a lot of the writers and illustrators. There was no guarantee they'd come back next time, so he decided to at least make a cameo appearance.

As he blearily watched the judges and new writers talk to the crowd, seriously wondering whether he'd even be back here next year:

"...Hey... Hashima..."

The gloomy voice talking to him belonged to Makina Kaizu. He was dressed in a wrinkly jacket, a ribbon tacked on to it indicating he was a judge, and the plate he carried contained a small mountain of roast beef, sushi, *acqua pazza*, and pâté.

"Mr. Kaizu... Good to see you. Packing it in like every year, huh?"

"Heh-heh-heh... Yes, I'm busy protecting my good name as the Wolf of the Buffet... And by the way, what's one of GF Bunko's leading authors doing in the corner like this?"

Itsuki chuckled. "Leading author...? I'm nothing that fancy."

"Oh, come on. Your anime was a huge success."

Kaizu turned toward one of the big screens situated toward the front of the event space. The opening from *All About My Little Sister* was playing on it. This screen was reserved every year for a montage of imagery from Gift Publishing's anime and merchandising efforts.

"The books and the manga both got a sales boost from it, didn't they? I can't tell you how jealous I am..."

"Yeah, they did, but..."

The *All About* opening ended, segueing right into a promotional video for the live-action *Silvery Landscape* movie. It depicted a cast of actors anybody would know, shot with the kind of expert camerawork even an amateur could tell was first-class.

"...I'm still nothing compared to *that*."

"You don't think?" Kaizu eyed the dead serious Itsuki. "Because I'd say you're standing on the same stage, at the very least..."

Itsuki weakly shook his head. "No, I'm really... I'm just no good at all."

Kaizu frowned. "You're acting way more timid than usual. Did something happen?"

"..." Itsuki wavered over whether to tell the truth for a moment. "...I can't write any novels right now. Not at all."

"...Oh yeah, the new volume of *All About* got delayed, didn't it?"

“Yeah. I haven’t been able to write a single line of it the past few months.”

“Wow... That’s a pretty serious slump.”

“...I’ve been trying to write other things to help get over this...but I’m still not back to my usual self.”

“Do you have any idea what caused it?”

“I... I know the cause, yeah. But it’s not the kind of problem I can really detach myself from, so...”

“Mmm...”

Kaizu groaned to himself, solemn-faced, as Itsuki almost started sniffing. To keep it from getting even more awkward, Itsuki turned the conversation toward Kaizu.

“...Have you ever run into writer’s block, Mr. Kaizu?”

“Oh, I’ve been sidelined with a cold for a few days lots of times, but I’ve never had a slump like that, no...”

Itsuki’s eyes widened. “Not even once? Wow... This is the first time it’s been this bad for me, but I’ve had blocks like these all the time before.”

Now it was Kaizu chuckling. “Well, unlike you guys, I’m not staking my life and soul on these novels, so...”

“Huh?”

He smiled ironically. “I’m sure you see the creative effort as this noble, sublime thing. Something with this special value you can’t assign a money value to. But if you ask me, writing novels isn’t much different from any other job you might have. It’s just a way to make a living. Creators are normal people who happen to have a fairly rare skill they make money from. If you think they’re something special, any different from the guys walking around in business suits, then you’re seriously mistaken.”

“Wha...?!”

Itsuki was completely silenced by the embittered appraisal. He had aimed to become a novelist because he wanted to be the hero, because he wanted to be something special, and now Kaizu was denying the root of all of it.

There was a trace of sadness on Kaizu’s face. “So if you’re gonna bet your life on this, if you’re gonna chip away at your soul just so you can make a living, you’re putting the cart before the horse, is all. If you really just can’t write novels any longer...well, you can’t do much about that, can you? So just give up. There’s no need to suffer over this. I’m sure you can live off

your anime money for a while, so spend that time to study up, get certified in something, and find a new job.”

If Itsuki wasn't in this slump, he would have fired back in a rage, throwing caution to the wind as he bad-mouthed Kaizu, veteran author or not. But now, he didn't have the words. The choice of “giving up” seemed so attractive, so realistic.

“...Give up...”

Even Kaizu seemed to regret so clearly depressing Itsuki. “...I'm sorry. That went too far. I just can't help but look at you and see *her*, you know?”

“Hmm?”

“Never mind,” he said, shaking his head.

Then:

“Mr. Kaizuuuu!” Tadashi Kamo approached them, cheerful if a tad unsteady. His red face indicated he had been enjoying the free drinks a fair amount. “How ya doin', huh? You got somethin' to drink?”

“Oh... Hey, Kamo. You're looking pretty...healthy.”

Kamo was revved up, the complete opposite of last year. Kaizu wasn't quite sure how to manage him.

“Oh yeah, I couldn't feel better right now! And it's all thanks to you for givin' my story a chance, Mr. Kaizu! Thank you so, *sooooo* much!”

“Y-yeah... Hey, if I judge something and it becomes a hit, that makes me happy, too, for sure.”

“Aw, thanks, man!”

Kamo turned to Itsuki, standing next to Kaizu, and focused his eyes on his name tag.

“Ohhhh! You're Itsuki Hashima, huh?!”

“Um, yeah,” Itsuki replied, awkwardly nodding.

“I heard the anime's making your books fly off the shelves, man! Boy, I'm so jealous of you! Hey, and between you and me, *Karuma the Lawyer*'s gotten the nod for an anime, too! Gah-ha-ha!”

Considering it was “between you and me,” Kamo made sure as many people heard him as possible. Itsuki and Kaizu greeted him with a dry smile.

“When you score that anime, it really pads your bottom line, doesn't it?”

“...Well, to some extent, yeah.”

“Ooooh, wow, really?! Well, you *know*, I actually bought a car the other day! They said I didn't qualify for a loan, so I just paid in cash instead! It

kinda hit my bank account hard, but—hey, the anime oughtta fill it right back up, huh? Gah-ha-ha! Maybe I'll even buy a house next year, *bah-ha-ha-ha-ha!*”

Kaizu gave the exuberant Kamo a wry smile.



“Well, it’s great that you’re doing well...but are you okay with your taxes?”

“Huh? My taxes?” Kamo raised a puzzled eyebrow.

“Because the more income you make,” Kaizu flatly continued, “the more money they’ll haul away from you for taxes. Sometimes authors get a lot of money from an anime, they get carried away, they blow it all, they can’t cover their tax bill, and they wind up falling into debt. It’s not a very funny story, but it happens.”

Kamo’s face began to sweat a little. “...Um, when you say ‘haul away,’ like, how much are we talking about? Around ten thousand yen, or...?”

“...Well, based on how much *Karuma* has sold, I’m assuming you made twelve million yen or so this year, right? In that case, your income tax is gonna be around a million... Keeping estimated payments and stuff in mind, I figure you’ll probably owe around 1.7 million next year. Once you throw in municipal taxes, insurance, government pension... I think it’ll be at least two million in all.”

“T-two...?!” Kamo’s jaw dropped. The redness quickly drained from his face. “Ah, ah, ah...”

“...Sounds like you weren’t thinking too much about taxes, huh? You’re saving your receipts at least, right?”

“My...my receipts? What do you mean...?”

“Not even *those*?” exclaimed Itsuki.

“Whoa, you’re writing a courtroom drama and you don’t even know that?” Kaizu scornfully eyed Kamo.

“I—I was so focused on studying criminal codes, I don’t know about anything else!” Kamo, in his fancy suit, grabbed Kaizu’s wrinkled blazer. “M-Mr. Kaizu, what am I gonna do...? I—I was out of work until last yearrr... I don’t know anything about taxesss...”

Now he was starting to cry, and Kaizu was starting to panic.

“Hey, hey, hey! You’re too old to cry like that. Listen, I know a really good tax accountant I can introduce you to. You can talk to her about your situation, all right? I’m pretty sure she can work it out for you.”

“Th... Thank you so muuuuch! Thaaaaaaank youuuuuuuuu!!” He tearfully thanked Kaizu again and again before taking his leave.

“Hoo boy...,” Kaizu sighed, his face haggard. “...So you see? Writers are just like anybody else. They have to pay taxes, too.”

“Ha-ha...” All Itsuki could do was laugh. Then someone else approached them.

“Mr. Hashima? Do you have a moment?”

This was Kawabe from GF Bunko editorial—Haruto’s editor, and a man Itsuki had said hello to in passing a few times. Behind him was a young man about Itsuki’s age, a nondescript figure sporting glasses and a little pudgy. The ribbon on his lapel indicated he was one of this year’s prizewinning authors.

“One of our winners said he really wanted to meet you...”

“Me?”

An editor taking one of the winners around the party to chat with other writers was hardly uncommon. But only once before had some newbie gone out of their way to seek out Itsuki at this event. It was three years ago, and that person was Nayuta Kani.

“It—it’s good to meet you, Mr. Hashima! My name’s Sushita Nakashima, and I’m one of the winners this year! I’m really glad to have this opportunity!”

Nakashima stood before Itsuki, presenting his business card. Itsuki exchanged it with his own.

“Oh, um, yeah, I’m Hashima. Good to meet you, too.”

“Ooooh!”

Nakashima stared intently at Itsuki’s card, as if discovering some long-lost treasure. It made Itsuki grin as he took a look at Nakashima’s.

“Um... Is Sushita your real name?”

“It’s a pen name!”

“Hmm... Is it because you really like sushi or something?”

“No, I went with ‘Sushita’ because it’s kind of an anagram of ‘sister’!”

“Sister...? Oh, I see...”

“I started writing after I read your novels, Mr. Hashima! I won a prize with a little-sister novel of my own!”

“Oh, you did?”

Nakashima’s words, his eyes, indicated nothing but pure affinity and respect. For Itsuki right now, it was a painful experience.

“Uh-huh! I’ve read all your books! It’s my mission to become a little-sister novelist like you.”

“There’s no value in making *me* your goal...”

“Sorry?”

Nakashima raised an eyebrow at what Itsuki inadvertently whispered.

Itsuki tried to laugh it off. “Ah, never mind. But...yeah. Good luck at it.”

The wish seemed to energize Nakashima. “Th-Thank you! And I hope you’ll keep crafting great new little-sister novels, too, Mr. Hashima! I’m super looking forward to the next *All About!*”

“Ahh... Yeah, I’ll do my best for you.”

“Oh, right! Would you mind if we shook hands, Mr. Hashima?!”

“Um, sure.” Itsuki softly grasped Nakashima’s outstretched hand.

“Wow...! The hand that created all those godly sisters, touching mine...! The sheer aura is incredible... It’s just so *deep*...”

Itsuki’s face tensed up as Nakashima was almost driven to tears over the experience. Their hands remained together for around ten seconds. Nakashima only reluctantly let go and left after his editor nudged him to.

“Guy’s got a lot of passion, doesn’t he?” Kaizu said with a smile.

“Looks like it,” Itsuki said, smiling back.

“It’s like back when you first met Kasuka,” Kaizu reminisced.

“Huh?! I acted like that?!”

“You sure did. It was cute how much your eyes were sparkling. Of course, you said hi to *me* first because you thought I was Kasuka, but...”

“Ohhhh, now I remember! Wow...!”

Kaizu heartily laughed at his red-faced colleague.

“I really looked up to Ms. Sekigahara,” Itsuki said after his cheeks cooled down, chewing over his words. “And now there’s someone who became a writer because they looked up to *me*, huh...?”

It was one more reason why he had to keep it up—to keep writing, and not let the new guy down. Now wasn’t the time to be stuck in a rut. But Kaizu was ready to drop a bucket of water on the thought.

“You know, you don’t owe people like that anything. It’s on *them* for having those dreams in the first place.”

“...Really? You don’t think?”

“Nope.”

He found it hard to accept Kaizu’s sharp conclusion...but the feelings simmering in his chest were starting to dwindle. It did make him feel a bit better. Only then did he realize that all these feelings—from Nakashima, from Nayuta, from all the readers and acquaintances he knew—seemed so

heavy to him.

Ui and Miyako

While Itsuki and Kaizu were talking, Miyako was also wandering around the party space. She had been busy earlier helping the front desk and attending to the winners, but unlike the editors, she didn't have a writer to introduce around to other people, so she was free for the moment. As one of the hosts, she couldn't just eat and drink her fill—a thought she pondered as she ruefully eyed the treats and desserts lining the central tables.

“Long time no see, Ms. Shirakawa.”

“Oh, hello...”

Miyako turned sideways to greet the voice—then was puzzled. There she saw a woman in a loose-fitting long-sleeved dress, thick glasses, and just a bit of makeup covering an average-looking face.

Who's this...?

She didn't have that many writer friends, so Miyako didn't think she'd forget one of their faces, but...

As she pondered this, she took a glance at the girl's name tag.

“Huh?! M-Ms. Aioi?”

The tag read “Ui Aioi,” but she didn't look at all like how Miyako remembered her. The ample breasts spilling over her loose dress were a telltale sign, however.

“Hee-hee! What are you so surprised for?”

Miyako panicked a bit at Ui's teasing. “Um... I just thought, you know, you look a bit different from how I remember you, so...”

“Ahh, I tried too hard with my looks before now, that's all. I'm kind of embarrassed about it at this point.”

Ui blushed a bit. Before now, Ui had sought out a sexy look that emphasized her chest and devoted a hefty amount of time to her makeup. It was clearly an attempt to catch the eye of her crush, Haruto Fuwa. Miyako wondered if something had come up between the two of them.

“Oh, I see...”

“Yes.”

“...”

“...You’re not going to ask what happened?”

Miyako didn’t know where to take this conversation. It must have peeved Ui a little.

“...Do you want to talk about it?”

“Well, not to you in particular, Ms. Shirakawa...but at the same time, I want to let you in on it. Just you. It’s kind of complex.”

“...You might as well tell me now. Otherwise it’s going to bother me all night.”

“All right,” Ui said. “Haruto shot me down.”

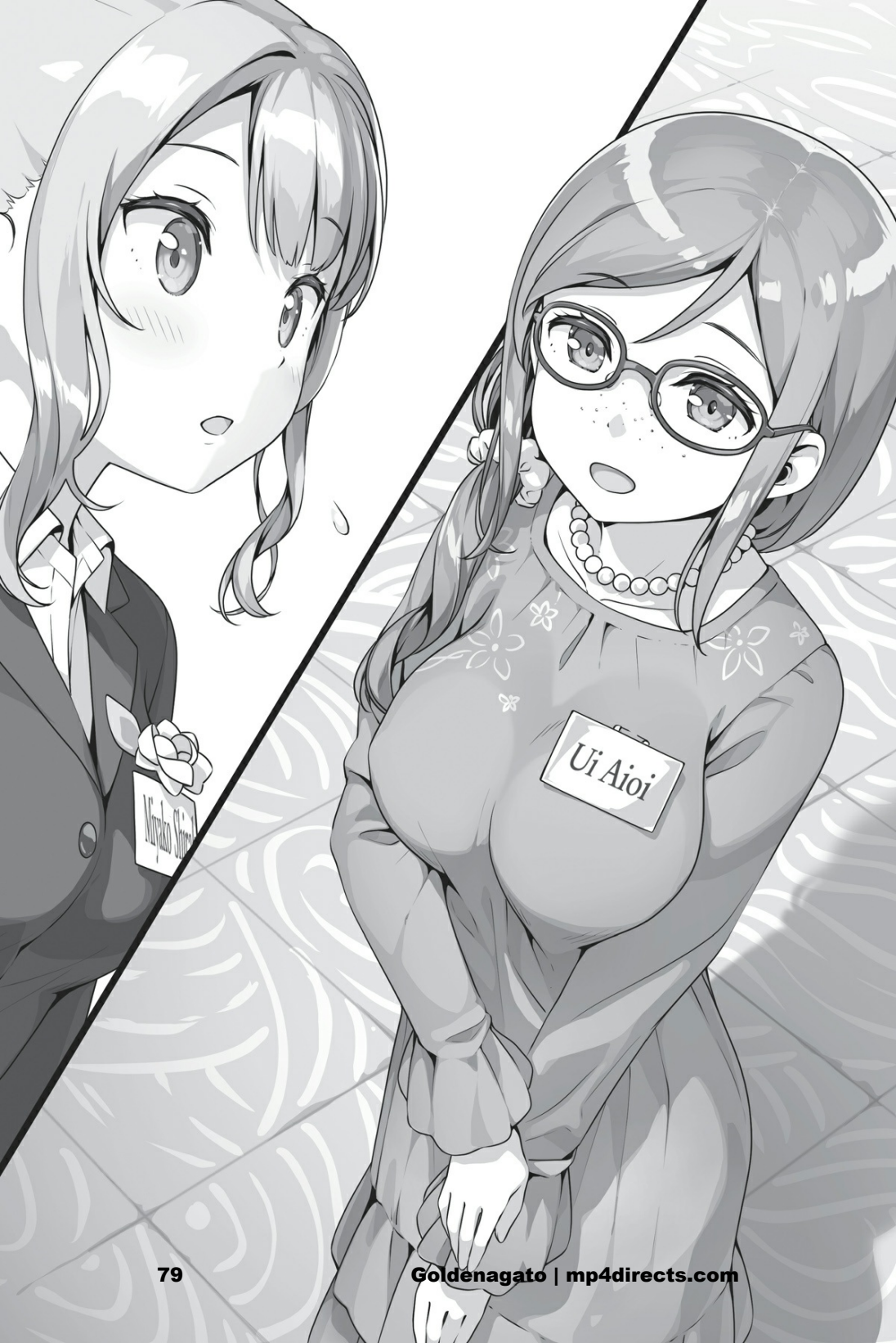
This was about the answer Miyako expected. She gave a vague sort of nod.

“Oh, but I don’t need any sympathy or condolences at all,” Ui said with a smile. “In fact, being dumped is what drove me to work harder on my writing.”

Miyako could tell the claim was more than bravado.

“You’re working on a new series right now, aren’t you, Ms. Aioi? Mr. Kataji said you’ve been throwing a lot of new ideas his way.”

She had heard a little bit about Ui from Kataji, her current editor. Apparently, she had written Volume 4 of her debut series and was actively crafting proposals for a new one.



“I am! We haven’t hit upon the perfect idea quite yet, but we’re working on it.” Ui smiled. “But you’re a senior in college this year, right, Ms. Shirakawa? What are you gonna do after graduation?”

“Well, I received an offer from a publisher.”

“Ooh! So you’ll be editing for GF Bunko?”

“Ah, no, not Gift Publishing. I’m actually joining a company called Branch Hill.”

This surprised Ui. “Oh, you are? Why not Gift?”

“Oh, I just...” Miyako paused a bit, self-consciously grinning. “I wanted to blaze a trail with my own abilities, I suppose. But despite going to another company, everyone at GF’s being really nice to me. They’re letting me practice editorial work before I make the jump over—joining in meetings, thinking about formatting, that kind of thing.”

“...Sounds like fun.” Ui looked at Miyako and smiled.

“It is. It’s a lot of fun.”

“Haruto’s gonna have a hard battle ahead,” Ui muttered.

“Pardon?” She smiled at the mystified Miyako. “If GF Bunko ever dumps me, have Branch Hill pick me up, okay?”

Miyako didn’t find that joke very funny.

PRIZEWINNER COMMENTS

***SEARCHING FOR THE HEART*****Hikari Kairou**

Hero, heroine, friend, lover—it's all me. An unusual teenage mystery.

After a car accident, high school student Jun Endo has been declared brain dead. His donated organs are transplanted into seven other patients—but after the surgeries, Jun's consciousness reappears inside the patient who received his eyes. Despite his guilt at inadvertently taking over a young boy's body, Jun decides to live out his second life as best as he can. Meanwhile, Jun's consciousness also awakens inside those who received his lungs, liver, pancreas, kidneys, and small intestine. Cosmically linked together, these patients encounter each other over the course of the novel, leading to some of the most bizarre lives a set of teens could experience. Their mission: to find the missing piece of the puzzle—the patient who received Jun's heart.

***MY SISTERS COME FROM
PARALLEL UNIVERSES*****Sushita Nakashima**

A surprisingly hardcore sci-fi romcom with a set of sisters who just can't have enough!

Average teen Shijima Sukawa suddenly meets a girl who claims to be Kanna, his little sister who had died three years ago. She has memories of Shijima that are totally unfamiliar to him, and she doesn't act much like the Kanna he knew, but he agrees to let her move in anyway. But then four more Kannas appear, each with different personalities and memories of their brother. It turns out they're all Shijima's little sister...from different parallel universes. In their worlds, it was actually Shijima who had passed away three years ago—and in order to prevent this from happening again, they've all come to the only universe where their older brother is still alive...

16TH GF BUNKO NEW WRITERS CONTEST RESULTS***THE EMPEROR'S CLASSROOM*****Yoshi Sekimitsu**

An arrogant hero becomes a high school teacher, resolving classroom dramas with words and sorcery!

After defeating the demon lord Vrywllorrahggh and saving the world, the hero Nhritylo Awyhetty Nggetyloe (aka Nero) should've been rewarded with the princess's hand and a spot as the next emperor. But on their honeymoon night, the princess teleports him over to another world—naked! Stuck in modern-day Japan, he happens to save Kurau Usuyuri, principal of a nearby private school, from terrorists. In return, Nero is hired to teach at the school, using the experience from his hellish adventures as a hero to fend off bullies, human traffickers, and more.

***MY BRAVE, DUSTY GIRLFRIEND*****Shinichi Baro**

Can you love her? A comedy where your love, and your cleanliness, are sorely tested!

College student Yusuke Ozawa is a total slob—but one day, he comes home to find an incredibly beautiful girl waiting for him. Apparently, she was spontaneously born from the dust that had accumulated in the dark corners of his apartment. Confused at first, Yusuke is nonetheless lazy enough to accept this girl named Ai—she's cute, after all. They enjoy living together, but one day his neatnik childhood friend Shizuku Kiyokawa learns about Ai. She tries to clean up his place to make Ai disappear for good—not out of jealousy, but because she fears for Yusuke, who had terrible asthma as a child...

Chelia

It was in the evening, three days after the award ceremony, when Itsuki Hashima was suddenly called to his tax accountant Ashley Ono's office. "We need to talk," she'd said over the phone.

"So you're finally here, Itsuki..."

Opening the door, Itsuki found Ashley seated on an orange chair, wearing a flashy red dress. Her voice, and her expression, indicated some pressing issue at hand.

Itsuki reared back a little. "Um, hello, Ashley. Is something wrong with you today?"

"...Does it look like it to you?"

"Well...yes, honestly."

"...You're right. I'm in a bit of a bad mood right now."

Itsuki broke into a sweat. "Wh-what happened?"

"...Today," she dully replied, "Makina came to visit for the first time in a while."

"Uh-huh..."

"...He brought along some younger writer. He said the guy was in tax trouble, so he wanted me to talk to him."

"Oh... Was it Tadashi Kamo?"

"Mm-hmm."

Itsuki expected as much. The "really good tax accountant" Kaizu mentioned was indeed Ashley. He must've really cared for Kamo's plight, taking him personally to her office and everything.

"...So here he is, seeing me for the first time in ages, and he wants me to deal with this *other* guy instead? It was awful."

"Well, you make it *sound* cruel, but I don't see the problem. All he did was introduce a new client to you."

"Tsshh!"

“Ah...!”

He was telling the truth, but Ashley shot an irritated glare at him. “And what’s *more*,” she continued, “the moment his errand was done, he just left. Shouldn’t he have at least invited me to dinner? It’s just good manners!”

“...So basically, you were glad to see Kaizu again, but he was just here for business, and that pissed you off?”

“Huhhh?!” Ashley’s voice cracked a bit, her face red. “You’re making it sound like I was dying to see Makina or something, aren’t you?!”

“Weren’t you?”

“Of course not! I’m just talking about good manners here!”

This girl is such a handful, Itsuki thought.

Ashley, maybe picking up on his exasperation, composed herself. “...But, ah, who cares about Makina? Here’s what I *really* want to talk about.”

“Oh?”

“He happened to mention... You’re in a big work slump right now, huh?”

“...! ...Yeah.”

Itsuki scowled as he nodded. Apparently Chihiro had never told Ashley about his writer’s block.

“So just to be sure, the book that was due out October is now delayed indefinitely, and it probably won’t come out this year? Do I have that right?”

“...Yeah.”

He gravely nodded as Ashley sighed.

“Ughh... So we’ll have to round your estimated income for the year downward a fair amount, won’t we?”

“I guess so.”

“...That’s a shame. I heard the anime went better than expected, so I actually prepared some articles of incorporation for you, assuming you’d keep up your income. I found a good insurance offer along those lines, so... But I guess that’s all in the trash now.”

“You did all that? I’m sorry...”

Yet someone else I’ve disappointed, huh? Itsuki hung his head down as Ashley stared at him.

“...Ahh, it’s not your fault. Hopefully you’ll be able to write again soon.”

The unexpectedly kind encouragement threw Itsuki for a loop.

“...Why’re you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Oh, um... I thought you’d berate me more.”

Ashley snorted. "...Well, I called you here so I could, yes, but if you're gonna break down on me, it's no fun to bully you." She stood up and opened the door to her private apartment. "I don't even feel like doing any more work today. Here, why don't you join me while I drown my sorrows?"

"All right," Itsuki said, smiling.



Chihiro was coming in every week to clean Ashley's apartment, so it was in decent order, but between the discarded dress and lingerie in one corner and the convenience store bag and plastic bottle lying on the floor, there was still no hiding the carelessness of the owner.

Itsuki felt an odd sort of affinity with her along those lines. He was certainly in no position to criticize. This was, in fact, the first time he had ever entered the home of a woman living alone, but there was nothing tense or exciting about it. Chihiro had given him a general idea of Ashley's place, so the gap between here and her office didn't surprise him.

"I'll go make something, so sit here and wait, all right?"

"Um, okay."

Itsuki sat down on one of the pillows placed by the room's low table. Ashley was off in another room, so he looked around a bit. There was a laptop computer on the floor, some work-related files and papers next to it. On top of it was a single paperback book; there was a paper cover on it, so he couldn't see what it was.

Ashley's personal reading?

Curious about what kind of stuff she read for fun, he surreptitiously picked up the book and opened it. It was called *Kasumi and Chelia*, published by GF Bunko, and the author was Kasuka Sekigahara.

This was a familiar title to Itsuki. In fact, he owned a copy. He'd bought it in middle school and read it several times since. It was a favorite of his, a quick sort of four-volume series, and this was Volume 1. A few of the pages were dog-eared, so maybe this copy had been read and reread as well.

Recalling the story, Itsuki flipped through the pages. The passages and illustrations he came across made him vividly remember the tale.

Kasumi and Chelia, or “Kasulia” to its fans, was a *yuri* story, depicting the love shared between two young women going to an all-girl boarding school. It featured Sekigahara’s trademark charming characters and unpredictable plot twists, topped off with her daring, sensual, but still elegant eroticism. It became pretty popular; even readers not into the genre rated it highly. As a middle school student, Itsuki wasn’t much interested in lesbian romance, but once he began reading, he was hooked.

As the title suggested, the protagonists were named Kasumi Mikagezaki and Chelia Featherstone. Kasumi was a second-year in high school, a prim Japan-style beauty and model student who also had her eccentric, prank-pulling side. Chelia was in her first year, a petite, blond, blue-eyed girl with a haughty attitude; she never shied away from confrontations with students older than her, which earned her a bit of a reputation. The two met, grew attracted to each other, fell in love, lost themselves in passion, and overcame a number of obstacles to find happiness.

There was a large cast of other charming characters, but Itsuki was a huge fan of Chelia. She was moody and unsociable at first, but after getting closer to Kasumi, she started calling her “big sis” and loving her like a cute little puppy. As she grew infatuated with Kasumi and their relationship took a romantic angle was truly exciting—she went from a puppy to a werewolf between the sheets, and Itsuki had called upon her “assets” for many a solo bedroom session of his own.

Chancing upon a favorite scene of his, Itsuki began to read it thoroughly.

Ahh, Chelia is so cute...

Ever since he learned Chihiro was his sister, he could find no love for his own work and subconsciously avoided other little-sister novels...but what he loved in the past, he still loved now. It gladdened him to see that. Chelia had a “little sister” personality, but at the root of it, she was “the younger girl at school”—and maybe that was why he still had the hots for her. But either way, it still worked.

“Sorry to keep you.”

Ashley came back in, holding a tray with some dishes. Itsuki was amazed by what she wore. The dress from before was gone; she was in glasses and sweats, and her hair was tied back in a ponytail that had been segmented with hair ties along its length. He knew from Chihiro that she dressed pretty sloppily when she wasn’t working, but actually seeing it for the first time was

a shock.

Placing the tray on the table, Ashley turned her eyes toward the stunned Itsuki's hands.

"Oh...?"

"Ah, um, s-sorry... I just kinda started reading this." He quickly closed the book and put it down.

"Oh, that's all right," replied Ashley, not showing much concern.

"Does this belong to you, Ashley?"

"Mm-hmm."

"It looks pretty well loved. Do you like Kasulia?"

Ashley gave Itsuki a lonesome smile. "Well... It's a special series to me."

"Oh, it is? I like it a lot, too!"

Itsuki's voice rose at finding an unexpected kindred spirit.

Ashley replied with a pleased smile, "Are you a fan of Kasuka Sekigahara?"

"I—I am! I've read all her work, not just Kasulia. *A Sister's All You Need!* is like a bible to me."

"Ahh... Come to think of it, Kasuka saw a lot of talent in you, didn't she?"

"I... I don't know if I'd put it like that, but she did praise my debut novel a lot. She even wrote the obi quote for it."

A smile came to Itsuki's face. He still remembered what a rush it had been.

"Hee-hee-hee... But let's have a drink, all right?" Ashley handed Itsuki a pair of chopsticks, a small plate, and a wineglass, filling it and her own with sake. The label on the bottle read "Ninki-ichi: Gold Ninki Junmai Daiginjo," from the Ninki ("Popular") Brewery.

"Ah... Thanks very much."

Itsuki took the glass, while Ashley took up her own.

"Hee-hee-hee... Well, cheers."

"Cheers."

They clinked their glasses together, and Itsuki took a sip. The drink was refreshing, and it had a nice amount of acidity and sweetness mixed in, making it worth a glass. It reminded him of a white wine; he could see why Ashley served it in a wineglass instead of a traditional *ochoko* sake vessel.

"Ahhh..."

Ashley took a sip, then let out a beguiling sigh, enraptured by the taste. Then she put down the glass and reached for a bowl on the tray with her chopsticks.

“Is this...*ryukyu*?” Itsuki asked, looking in.

“That’s right,” Ashley replied. *Ryukyu*, a traditional dish from Oita Prefecture, consisted of fish cut into sashimi, then steeped in a mix of soy sauce and mirin cooking sake.

“Did you make this, Ashley?”

“Mm-hmm. I loved the *ryukyu* I ate during our cherry blossom picnic, so now I always have some on reserve.”

“Huh...”

Impressed, Itsuki placed some pieces on his plate and tried them. The fish was springy in his mouth, bursting with a sweet, salty flavor, and it couldn’t have been a better match for the sake. The shallots and sesame seeds in the mix also added a nice accent.

“It’s really good.”

“Hee-hee! Thank you.”

“What kind of sashimi did you use?”

“Hmm, what was it? Two white fish, anyway.”

“...”

That was one of the charms of *ryukyu*—even if you weren’t using the best ingredients (or didn’t know what they were), you could still make a nice meal out of them.

“I don’t drink sake usually, but if it’s paired with this, I think I could go at it all day.”

“Right? And all I did was buy some random sashimi and dump some stuff on it. ...And after I went at it all day back *then*, too...”

“?”

Itsuki looked quizzically at the suddenly gloomy Ashley. She finished off her glass in one gulp, then quickly poured herself a second one.

“By the way, Ashley, what character from Kasulia do you like the most?”

“...Kasumi,” she replied, a faraway look in her eyes. “Who do you like, Itsuki?”

“I’m all about Chelia. She’s *so* cute.”

“Hmm...”

Ashley gave a mischievous smile.

“Chelia was me.”

“...?”

Itsuki stared at her, failing to comprehend.

“...???”

After a few more moments of thought, he still wasn’t getting anywhere, so:

“Hmm... I think one of these was *hamachi*. The other one might be sea bream, I think? Or maybe *kampachi*?”

“Can we not double back to what kind of fish is in the *ryukyu*, Itsuki?” Ashley looked a bit upset. She puffed out her chest. “I’m saying that I was the model for Chelia Featherstone from *Kasumi and Chelia*.”

“...Um, I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“Kasuka and I were a couple. She wrote *Kasumi and Chelia* using what I was like back then as inspiration.”

“.....”

Itsuki spent a healthy amount of time scrutinizing Ashley’s words.

“...Ah-ha-ha!” After interpreting them as a joke, he choked out a laugh.

“What are you laughing about?”

“Oh, I thought you were kidding.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“I’m gonna get angry at you.”

“...Wait, really?”

“Yes.”

Itsuki tensed up his face as Ashley nodded. “You know,” he said, his tone dropping, “I really love Kasulia. If you don’t knock that off, *I’m* gonna get angry.”

“I can’t help you there. It’s the truth, so...”

“.....Whaaa.....?”

His face scrunched up, as he peered intently at Ashley. Her face was as dead serious as ever. The alcohol hadn’t made her incoherent.

“.....Um.....So..... Really?”

“Really.”

“.....No way... Chelia... The best little-sister-slash-young-girl-at-school character...” Itsuki slumped over from the sheer shock of it.

An offended Ashley pouted. “You don’t have to act *that* depressed about it.”

“But, I mean, when I was in middle school, I used Chelia to get off a bunch of times!” he shouted with tears in his eyes.

It filled Ashley with a wicked joy.

“Hee-hee-hee... Well, why worry about it? You’re free to keep imagining me while you touch yourself in the future.”

“Never! ...I mean, you’re a lesbian, Ashley?”

“No. Kasuka was the only woman I went that far with.” She gave him a sad smile. “Well, let me correct myself. She didn’t use me as a model for a character in *Kasumi and Chelia*. It’s more like she became a couple with me so she could write *Kasumi and Chelia*, if you get me.”

“Whoa, do you mean...? That’s just crazy...”

“She never hesitated to do crazy things for her novels. That’s the kind of ‘big sister’ she was.”

From the pure nostalgia in Ashley’s smile, Itsuki had to conclude this was the complete, unaltered truth.

“This Ninki-Ichi sake was Kasuka’s favorite, you know,” she said, refilling her empty glass. The brand name meant “most popular.”

“Oh, was it?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s a good brand, and good for the price, but the real clincher was the name—Ninki-Ichi. I remember she said, ‘I’m the most popular, most talented girl there is! This sake’s perfect for me!’”

“Yeah, I’m sure it brought her good luck.” Itsuki helped himself to a second serving. “So what was Sekigahara like?”

He had only met Kasuka Sekigahara twice—once at the party for GF Bunko’s 10th New Writers Contest that he had placed in, and once at the same event the following year. She was too ill to attend the 12th New Writers Contest party, and then she died on Christmas Eve that year. Itsuki had been too nervous to say much of anything to her, so he didn’t know a lot about her personality. With his experience, he knew full well how the afterwords of novels and interview responses on websites never necessarily reflected the author’s actual nature.

Midway through his question, Ashley reached for the bottle, only to realize it was empty. She stood up and took bottle number two of Ninki-Ichi from the fridge. Once her glass was full, she finally spoke again.

“Kasuka was... Hmm. If I had to use just one word, it’d be ‘sadistic.’”

“S-sadistic...?!”

It wasn’t at all the word he expected. In his mind, she had been a sensible, caring, mature woman—a genius, but not like Nayuta or Setsuna; the kind who treated her novels with care, worked as a novel contest judge, and contributed to cultivating the new generation of authors, right up to her death. Even looking back at the few moments he’d spent with her, “sadistic” wasn’t at all the impression he had.

“You look surprised.” Ashley laughed at his reaction. “What kind of impression did *you* have of her?”

“My impression was more of this...serious, caring, mature woman, I guess?”

“Pfft!” Ashley’s eyebrows shot up as she sputtered. Her shoulders shook, like she couldn’t contain her laughter. “Oh boy, you’re killing me. You think Kasuka was a...*mature* woman...? What kind of avant-garde joke is that? You could never find a more childish girl than her.”

She struggled to hold back the laughs as she drank her sake and gazed at the perplexed Itsuki.

“You know, Itsuki... If I was Chelia, then Kasuka was Kasumi. She loved picking on people. All the time. She’d be mean to me, she’d cause me trouble, and she’d act so genuinely gleeful about it. She’d get a lot nicer once I got genuinely mad at her, but she’d forget all about it overnight. And whenever I wanted to sleep with her, she’d deliberately leave me alone.”

“...”

The relationship Ashley described was exactly as depicted in *Kasumi and Chelia*. Itsuki’s mind was clouding with fog.

“Um...so how much of Kasulia is a true story? You guys weren’t in high school or anything.”

“Yeah, the school scenes were Kasuka’s invention...but whenever the two of them were flirting, most of that wasn’t fiction.”

“...So, like, the scene where Chelia is licking Kasumi’s leg...”

“Well, that much intimacy is a given between ‘sisters,’ right? Or couples,” she casually replied.

Itsuki, floored by this, recalled an even spicier scene.

“Ahh... Then how about when Kasumi was busy with schoolwork, and Chelia took off her panties to get her attention, so then Kasumi locked her outside on the balcony with no underwear on?”

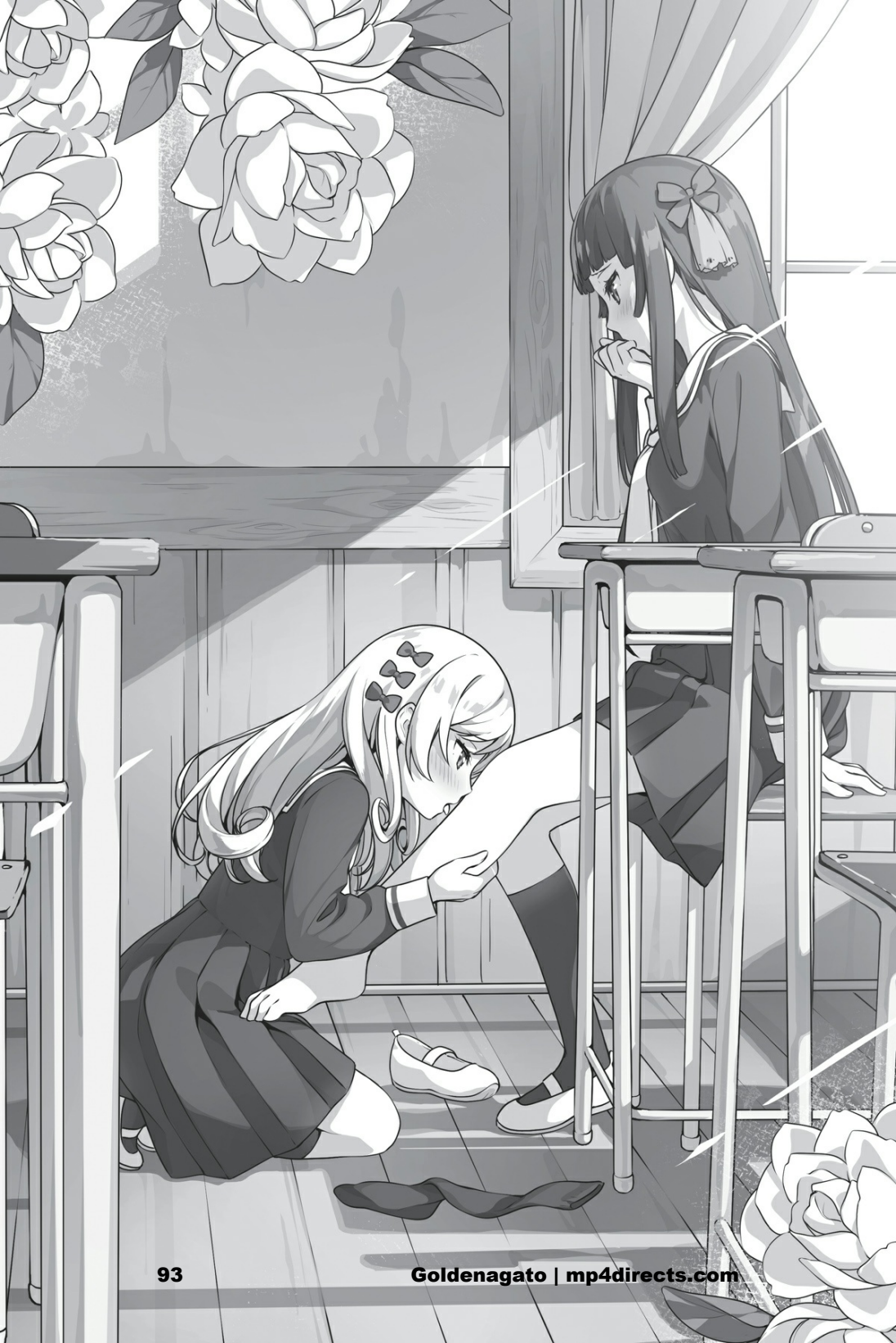
“...Oh yeah, that did happen, didn’t it? Except it was novel writing, not schoolwork...” Ashley’s cheeks reddened.

“What about when Chelia lost a bet and had to act like a dog for a whole day?”

“...I’m amazed you remember parts that were only, like, a few lines in the books. Well, *woof* to that, I say.” She accentuated the revelation with a few more staccato barks.

“...Um... How about when they were both playing in the bathtub until the heat got too intense for Chelia and she had a nosebleed?”

“Ahh, I was so young back then. I was too out of it to remember much... The novel depicted it as this really touching, beautiful thing, didn’t it? And really, it was just a huge nosebleed, but when I read about Kasumi licking Chelia’s ‘crimson-stained bosom’ and all that, I have to admit, it made my heart race. That was the first time I thought ‘Wow, novel writers sure are something.’” She was talking in a torrent as her face reddened further, and she tried drinking to disguise it.



“...But she *had* to have made up that scene where they snuck into school and went skinny-dipping in the swimming pool, right?”

“Of—of course. It was actually a hotel pool, and we didn’t sneak in.”

“You’re not denying the skinny-dipping part...?”

“Well, I mean, nobody else was there, and Kasuka was all like ‘Oh, I always wanted to try this,’ so...”

“What’s it like, anyway? Swimming naked in a pool?”

“Oh, this happened in the winter, so it was *cold*. A swimsuit wouldn’t have made a difference.”

This scene was described in the most romantic of terms in the novel, including an illustration of the two lovers sharing a fantasy moment naked under the stars.

“This wrecks so much in my mind...”

“Hee-hee-hee! Sorry about that.” Ashley emptied her glass once more, taking bottle number three out of the fridge—not Ninki-Ichi this time.

“...You know, there’s another scene she wrote about that got cut from the final draft. I really liked it, too.”

“Oh, what was it?”

Itsuki, ever the curious fan of Kasuka’s work, couldn’t help but ask.

“It was a scene where Chelia goes on a date with Kasumi with a remote-controlled vibrator in her. Kasumi held the remote, of course. She’d press the button whenever Chelia was talking with a store clerk, or during a quiet scene in a movie or whatever, so I had my hands full keeping my voice down... Ah-ha! ♥”

“I’m glad that was cut!!”

These memories were starting to make Ashley all hot and bothered, if her breathing was any indication. Itsuki had to raise his voice to stop it. A high school girl—*any* girl—going on a date with a vibrator “installed” was inconceivable to him.

But here she was, recalling that episode with glee.

“...Ashley... Are you actually a complete masochist?”

The question had bothered Itsuki for a while now. He decided to come out with it.

“Hee-hee-hee...” The sake had clearly taken effect; she was looking drowsy. “Oh, I’m only an obedient little puppy for Kasuka, you know...” She sounded glad for it, although the sadness was still palpable.

“Really...? Because I’m starting to have second thoughts about Chihiro working for you...”

“Oh, it’s fiiiiine... Whenever *she*’s cold to me, it doesn’t get me excited at all! ♥”

“You sure...?”

Ashley kept up her drinking pace for some time to come, rambling on pointlessly in classic late-night fashion. Then, about four-fifths into bottle number four, her head finally fell on the table with a “*fyaaahhh*...”

Itsuki, pacing himself much more sensibly, ate some more *ryukyu* as he watched her, a bit concerned. He had learned some things about Kasuka Sekigahara that’d be a revelation for any fan, as much as they wouldn’t want to hear them, and it came from a very unexpected source. He never thought his favorite character in one of his favorite book series was modeled after someone close to him. Masturbating to Chelia was *never* going to happen again in his life. It sucked.

“...”

He was sure there were more stories between Kasuka and Ashley, things not covered in *Kasumi and Chelia*. Itsuki probably wouldn’t learn about all of them, and he didn’t feel he had the right to. Ashley had her own story—one vital to her; one where she was the heroine. And not just her. Somewhere, somebody unknown to Itsuki—and thousands more like them—were engaged with their own shining tales. Just like Itsuki had his own to experience.

...*What happened to “I want to be the hero”?*

And once his slightly alcohol-dulled brain reached that thought—once he began to have serious, lethal doubts about the dreams that had supported him up to now—he left Ashley’s office.

KASUMI AND CHELIA

BY: KASUKA SEKIGAHARA ART BY: KOUME TAKAYAMA
FOUR VOLUMES.

■SYNOPSIS

Kasumi Mikagezaki attends Seirei Girls' Academy, an all-female boarding school. One day, she's assigned a new roommate—Chelia Featherstone, an exchange student whose bossy attitude gets her in constant trouble with other students. As Kasumi steps in to help Chelia, she finds herself attracted to her—and Chelia, noticing how Kasumi always sides with her despite the heat from the other girls, begins to open up as well. Soon, their feelings expand into love—a love they express in sometimes daring ways, away from the eyes of others. But what awaits them as their emotions deepen?

■CHARACTERS

Kasumi Mikagezaki

A second-year high school student; a classic Japanese beauty with long black hair. She is graceful and intelligent, but frustrated at how boxed in she feels. Becoming involved with Chelia opens her eyes to a more abnormal side of her.

Chelia Featherstone

A first-year high school student; a beautiful girl with blond hair and blue eyes. Originally from England, she reluctantly moves to Japan because of her parents' work. Her doll-like beauty is a major hang-up for her; and she often lashes out at classmates who treat her like a child. After falling in love with Kasumi, she grows more comfortable with her appearance, letting Kasumi shower attention upon her like a little sister.

Chihiro Hashima's First Love

On the Sunday after Ashley called Itsuki to her office, Chihiro paid a visit to Itsuki's apartment.

"Hey."

"Hi..." Chihiro looked troubled.

"...You all right? You don't look too happy."

"Yeah... Kind of..." Itsuki's concern was greeted with a not-so-nimble dodge.

As the two were sharing dinner together:

"...Listen, Itsuki," she said, her voice heavy. "Starting tomorrow, there's gonna be another little while when I can't come here. I asked Kasamatsu to come over in my place, so don't worry about staying fed or anything."

"Is something up?" Itsuki asked.

"Yeah... It's the same thing as before. My practice exams didn't turn out too well, so I wanted to focus on my studies."

She had taken a break from visiting Itsuki's place for the same reason several months ago. Back then, though, her studies were a secondary concern compared to discovering that the pervert trying to pull her pants down all the time was Setsuna Ena, the illustrator. She didn't want to run into him at Itsuki's and have her secret revealed—that had been the real reason behind the break.

But this time was different. Her results were worse than last time—the worst ever, in fact. It was such a rapid decline that even her teacher raised concerns about it. Now she was feeling the heat.

"Ah... Yeah, I was about to say something, too. Now's really the time you need to focus on that... It's kinda bad if your results slip right now, isn't it?"

"Yeah... It really is..." Chihiro nodded, her face dark.

"You have any idea why?"

She weakly shook her head. "I don't know. I just don't know why, but I haven't been able to concentrate on studying at all. Not just during tests, but during class and at home, it's like I just space out...and the next thing I know, I'm thinking about other things."

"Other things?"

"Yeah..."

"Like what, exactly?"

Chihiro hesitated. "...About Fuwa."

"..."

Itsuki fell silent, while Chihiro anxiously continued.

"...I don't really know why, but it's like I snap out of it, and there's Fuwa all over my mind. I suddenly start thinking about when we went to Akihabara, or when we played games over here, and it's like, what am I even doing? Or, like, I suddenly want to see him for absolutely no reason... And every time it happens, my heart starts racing and my head just blanks out... I have no idea why. I just...what *is* this...?"

She let out a sad sigh.

"..." Itsuki blankly stared at his sister, examining her. "...Ah, um..."

He tilted his head around, pondering something.

"...Ahh... So, like..."

Finding the right words was proving a challenge.

"...When you ask 'what *is* this'... Are you really serious?"

He visibly winced as he asked the question, clearly suspicious of Chihiro.

"Huh?" Chihiro just stared back, confused. "What do you mean?"

She doesn't seem to be faking it...

Granted, Itsuki hadn't picked up on Chihiro's secret after five years of knowing her. He could admit that. So maybe he wasn't the best at gleaning her true feelings from one glance at her face...but Chihiro had no reason to play dumb about this, and if she was joking, it wasn't funny.

Chihiro really didn't understand herself. She really, really didn't.

"Itsuki?"

"No, I mean, that's *love*."

He pointed it out as flatly as possible. Chihiro's eyes widened.

“Love?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah.”

“What is?”

“What is? No, like, you’re in love with Haruto, aren’t you?”

“Huhhh?!”

Chihiro was incredulous. Itsuki couldn’t believe what he was seeing, either.

“...Me...and Fuwa...?”

“If it was anything else, I’d be scared for you.”

He had the impression from before now that Chihiro might’ve had a thing for Haruto. But he had no idea it had gone this deep, or that she was so oblivious to it.

“Love...? Me?” Her face burned bright red as she said it.

“...You really never noticed?” Itsuki asked, still doubtful.

“Well,” the blushing Chihiro replied, “I know about the concept of love, but...”

“You know the concept...?”

“...But I just didn’t know that this is what it is... This is the first time for me, so... But *this* is love, huh...?”

She’s so cute, Itsuki thought as he watched his sister blush.

She then proceeded to nod to herself a few times, punctuating it with statements like “Oh...” and “Okay...” until she finally smiled softly. “Thanks, Itsuki. Now I know why I couldn’t focus on studying.”

“Oh...? Well, great.”

“I’m gonna go tell Fuwa.”

“Oh.Oh.Wait, **what?!?**”

The words came so naturally from her that Itsuki almost missed them entirely.

“You’re gonna tell him you love him? When?!”

“Maybe tomorrow?”

“That’s kind of fast!”

Chihiro looked at her panicking brother. “Well, the sooner the better, isn’t it?”

“Why are you in such a hurry?!”

“Well, if I can’t focus on my exams because I’m in love, I need to fix that.”

“Wow, what a clear, logical answer... You applying for any science majors?”

It almost made sense to Itsuki now.

“But... But please, Chihiro, wait a bit. This is really hard for me to tell you...but...”

“What?”

“.....Well, to tell the truth, Haruto.....already has someone he loves, and uh...”

“Miyako, right?”

“Oh, you knew? Yeah, I’m sure you would, actually...”

Haruto had made his affections clear enough to Miyako, even when everyone was hanging out in this apartment. There’s no way Chihiro wouldn’t know.

“...So you know he loves someone else, but you’re still gonna tell him?”

“Yeah,” she replied without a moment’s hesitation.

...Knowing Haruto as he did, Itsuki doubted he’d date Chihiro despite his feelings for someone else. He had spurned the advances of Ui Aioi just the other day, in fact.

“Why would you do something so...reckless?”

“Well, I mean, unless I spell it out for Fuwa, I don’t think he’ll notice.”

“That... You may be right.”

Even Itsuki could tell that Haruto didn’t see Chihiro as a love interest at all.

“So I’ll say I love him now and get him to start seeing me as a girl. It probably won’t go anywhere at first, but if I don’t give up and keep challenging him, I know I can get him to look at me. Wasn’t that how Kani was with you, Itsuki? She had no luck at first, but she kept hounding you and eventually you became lovers.”

“I think things are pretty different from me and Kanikou...”

Itsuki, after all, had fostered feelings toward her from the first time they met—and he wasn’t committed to anyone else. Still, though, Chihiro didn’t intend to go down in a blaze of glory for no reason. She pictured herself winning him in the end—and if she did, then Itsuki could do nothing to stop

her.

But... Wow. No wonder she could hide her gender for so long. Her decision-making and commitment stats have to be maxed out...

Itsuki sighed a little.

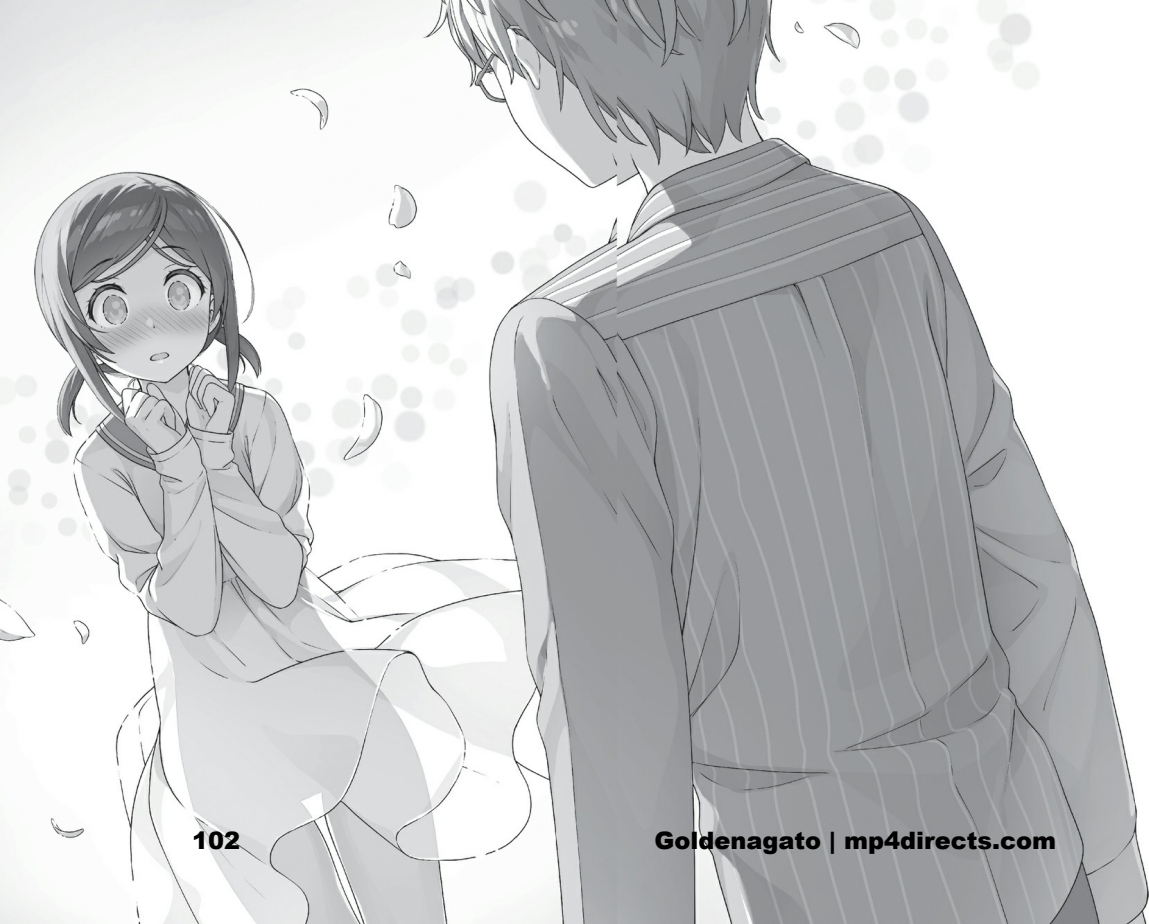
“.....Well...um...good luck, I guess.” He gave her a smile and cheered her on.

“Thanks!” she said with an undefeatable grin. “I’ll do my best!”

Her good spirits returned, Chihiro eagerly ate the rest of her dinner. Discovering these feelings of love for the first time made her spirits soar and firmed her resolve to tell him—that was clear to Itsuki. And despite his trepidation at whatever result might come of it, he really did hope things turned out okay for his sister.

“...Oh, I got a response, Itsuki!” she yelped. She had texted “Can we meet up tomorrow?” to Haruto and received “OK” back from him.

“All right! Let’s do this!”



“I’m sorry.”

The Little Sister

“Haaahh...”

Haruto Fuwa, back home after turning down Chihiro, washed his face in the bathroom and heaved out a deep sigh.

He'd had absolutely no idea Chihiro liked him like that. To him, Chihiro was his industry pal's sister—a younger friend, not at all a love interest. It never occurred to him that someone around the age of his own little sister—a good seven years younger than him—could even be perceived along those lines.

“Ahhh...”

Another sigh left his mouth.

Haruto knew how hard unrequited love was, and his heart ached at the idea of inflicting it on someone else. Turning Ui's feelings down a few months back had racked him with guilt for the entire night afterward. He'd been sure his choice would benefit Ui Aioi the author, and her optimistic response had convinced him she'd understood...but still.

Losing a love, and making someone lose a love, hurt a lot. He didn't want to experience it, or make anyone else experience it, but this world was full of loves that never went anywhere.

“...Why can't people choose who they love...?”

He muttered it to himself as he looked at his frail face in the mirror. Then:

“Eww...”

He heard a groan like someone had just stepped in excrement. Quickly turning around, he saw his little sister leering at him, face scrunched up as if she had discovered a weirdly colored caterpillar.

“Geh...!”

He had uttered the most embarrassing thing possible to himself, and the last person he wanted listening to him had heard it all. Haruto's cheeks burned with shame as his sister began haranguing him.

“Ugh! That was *so* gross just now, bro! You’re always gross, but that was ten billion times grosser!”

“Ooh...”

He’d normally be firing back right now, but even he thought that was pretty sickening. He couldn’t find the right words.

“So? What happened? What reason would you have for making eyes at yourself in a mirror and reciting a poem like you’re in some *shoujo* manga? Can you even *get* any grosser? Did you eat the Gross-Gross Fruit or something? This is just *soooo* gross! You could win the World Gross-Out Championship! All of America is shuddering at your grossness!”

“Sh-shut up! That was, um, really...you—you know! That! You know what I mean! *Pfft!* You dumb stupid idiot!”

The momentum he got going resulted in a stream of meaningless words. He opted to make a dash for the bathroom door, still blushing intensely.

“Ah! Whoa! Wait, you stupid brother! ...What a dumbass.”

When he was gone, she gave the mirror an icy sideways glance.

“...‘Why can’t people choose who they love?’” she pouted. “That’s the one thing I think of the *most*, dumbass.”

Becoming Family

It was the night after Chihiro bared her soul to Haruto, and Itsuki still hadn't heard back from her. He was 99 percent sure of the results, but he couldn't help but wonder. He texted "How'd it go?" to her.

The text got marked as read about an hour later, but no response came after that. Nor was one waiting for him the next morning. It was the first time Chihiro had ever ghosted a text from him.

She must be depressed after being turned down, huh?

Chihiro must've already factored in the near certainty that Haruto wouldn't reciprocate, but Itsuki supposed she was down about it anyway. He wanted to know some more details, but if he asked something like "Are you sad because he said no?" it'd just be rubbing salt on the wound. He'd have to wait for Chihiro to reply—but even after three days, even after a week, she never contacted him. This really did begin to worry him, so he texted "Doing okay?" to her, not touching on the denial.

After about fifteen minutes:

...My heart is darkness..... Nothing but an empty void.....
The blank darkness is eating into my soul...

"Ummmmmmmm...?"

The unexpectedly poetic reply made Itsuki scratch his head. After pondering the issue for a bit, he decided to ignore the prose and text back "How's the studying coming along?"

.....I no longer need any future..... All I must do is fall
toward my ultimate fate...

“Wowww...”

Itsuki blushed a bit. This was more embarrassing to read than write.

...I never really fell into this grimdark kind of prose, did I? Terms like “void” and “emptiness” are cool and all, and I’ve written stuff like it before. But whenever I had love problems in middle school, I just covered it up with little-sister fandom, so my actual behavior never went in that direction.

I wanna ask...like, does she actually think that stuff is cool?

But it felt like that would just hurt Chihiro further. Fending off the bubbling urge, he decided to send “Isn’t it annoying to type out all those periods?”

About five minutes after it was marked as read:

.....All the machinations of mankind.....seem like such a futile effort.....

Now there were even more.

No... You gotta hold back...! Chihiro is (probably) seriously hurt... Don’t laugh at her...

He knew the pain of losing love. That’s why he really was concerned... but seeing Chihiro descend to depths of cringe-inducing grimness like none before was honestly pretty funny to him.

After a few moments of debating over whether to get serious or tell a joke, he opted for the harmless “What are you doing now?” instead. The answer came quickly.

.....Building a Gundam model.....

“.....Building a Gundam model.....”? Dude, *study*.”

He couldn’t help but say it out loud. Admittedly, building models was a good way to shut off your mind and distract yourself from your troubles. But...

Maybe I should try building one. It’s been a while.

As he thought to himself—

“What’s wrong, big bro?”

Aoba, who was over at Itsuki’s place cooking for him, seemed puzzled.

“Hmm... I dunno... My sister Chihiro’s turned into a mopey poet.”

“Huh? Chihiro?”

Aoba went from puzzled to downright confused.

Itsuki lifted up his hands. “No, I mean, she’s going through some hard stuff, and I think her feelings are hurt right now. She can’t even focus on her studying.”

“Oh really? That sounds worrying...”

“Yeah...but there’s not much I can do about it, so...”

“What are you talking about, big bro?” Aoba said, a bit of annoyance in her voice.

“Huh?”

“You need to go over and cheer her up.”

Go over and cheer her up. It was an option that had never occurred to Itsuki.

“Go over...? But, um, I actually don’t get along with my parents too well, so I haven’t been back home in ages... Besides, I don’t see what trying to cheer her up in person would do...”

“Well, I don’t know what your family situation is,” Aoba sternly replied, “but if a big brother won’t do anything for his little sister when she’s hurt, then I hate that. I’d like to *think* all the heroes of your novels would drop everything and go over to help their sisters.”

“...!”

It was like being struck by lightning. All his protagonists were crazy for their sisters to a repulsive degree. They had real erotic feelings for their own sisters. It was just wrong. But still...if their sister was crying, they’d come to her side, no matter what. That, he thought, would never be the wrong thing for a brother to do.

“...Yeah.”

Itsuki stood up. If he didn’t go now, he thought, he’d forever lose the right to compose another word of *All About My Little Sister* or *Sisterly Combat*.

“I’ll put dinner in the fridge, okay? See you later, big bro.”

“Sure thing. Thanks, Aoba.”

With that, Itsuki quickly got himself out the door.



Picking up a taxi near his apartment, he rode in it for about half an hour before reaching a house with HASHIMA on a sign by the door.

The last time Itsuki had come here was when he went to the aquarium with Chihiro—a good eighteen months ago, and even then, he just went up to the house and left without going in. Realistically speaking, he hadn't come home in three and a half years, after he'd started living alone.

Leaving the taxi, he took a deep breath, stood in front of the gate, and took another deep breath. Then, ever so carefully, he pushed the button by the nameplate. He had a key to the place, but he couldn't just help himself inside after being gone three and a half years.

He could hear the doorbell ring inside, followed by a woman's voice saying "Hello?" on the intercom above the button. It belonged to Natsume Hashima, Chihiro's mother and the second woman Itsuki's father had married. "Who's calling?"

The sun had long set and there was no front light by the gate, so she probably couldn't see it was Itsuki through the monitor. There was no way she could've forgotten his face entirely.

"Um," he nervously began, "it's Itsuki."

"Huh? Itsuki?!" came the surprised reply.

"Yes."

"J-just one moment!"

"Okay."

With a click, she turned off the intercom. About a minute later, the front door slowly opened. From behind it emerged a stern-looking man, eyebrows turned downward—Keisuke Hashima.

Itsuki gulped nervously. He no longer had any negative feelings toward his father. Even if Chihiro hadn't forced his hand today, he felt it was about time he started talking to his dad again. But they hadn't exchanged words for so long, he couldn't help but tense up.

Keisuke approached the gate, opening it.

"...Itsuki?"

"...Yeah."

“...It’s been a while, huh?”

“...Yeah.”

“...What’s going on?”

“...I came to see Chihiro.”

They both looked dour, awkwardly using as few words as possible to communicate.

“Well, come in.”

“Okay.”

Itsuki removed his shoes and went inside—his first visit in three and a half years. He was so nervous the whole trip over, but now that he was in, it didn’t seem like any trouble at all. He wasn’t particularly moved by the experience—he was back home, and that was it. To him, it wasn’t a place to “visit” quite yet, he supposed. It was still “going home.”

Then:

“...Do you know what’s up with Chihiro?” Keisuke asked.

“...You didn’t hear?”

Keisuke shook his head. “We asked, but she won’t tell us.”

“...How’s she doing?”

“She came home a week ago sobbing. She’s going to school, but for the most part she just holes up in her room.”

“Is she eating?”

“Yeah. Better than usual.”

“Oh...”

He thought the sadness might’ve ruined her appetite, but apparently the opposite was true. Her coping mechanism, he figured, as he entered the living/dining room.

“It’s good to see you again, Itsuki.” Natsume greeted him with a soft smile and a relaxed voice.

“Y-yeah...” Itsuki nodded his head at her.

She had a notable bump by now. They had found out she was pregnant back in June and she was two months in by then, so this put her at month number eight. When she’d first come to this house, Natsume left Itsuki with the impression of a suave, beautiful woman, but as she got used to her new life, her aura grew softer and softer. Now, after three and a half years, she had rounded out a bit and seemed like just another nice, friendly woman around the neighborhood.

“Um... Congratulations on the pregnancy,” Itsuki said.

Natsume frowned a bit. “Why so formal? She’ll be your new little sister.”

“Little sister... She’s a girl?”

“That’s right.”

First, he had a stepsister. Now he’d have an actual half sister, connected by blood. Yet another reason to turn his attention away from his novels, full of guys romancing their little sisters.

“Did you eat dinner, Itsuki?”

“Oh, not yet.”

“Well, we’re about to eat now, so why don’t you join us? Dad cooked tonight.”

“Huh?!”

Surprised, Itsuki turned toward Keisuke. His father was a workaholic, and Itsuki had never once seen him cook.

“...I’ve learned a little from Chihiro. I cook on my days off nowadays.”

He was as stern as always, but there was a touch of self-aware embarrassment about him.

“He got a lot better than me in no time. I practically lost my place in the kitchen,” pouted Natsume.

“Don’t look at me,” Keisuke retorted.

“We’ll be ready in a bit, Itsuki, so go wash up.”

“Oh, okay...”

Itsuki went to the bathroom to wash his hands, as directed. Returning to the dining room, he found Keisuke nimbly putting food on each plate while Natsume ferried them to the table.

“You help too, Itsuki,” said Keisuke.

It’d be too awkward to just sit and let a pregnant woman do all the work, so Itsuki meekly followed the command.

On the table were brown rice, miso soup with freshwater clams, mackerel simmered in miso, spinach and chicken boiled in soy sauce, and a vegetable salad. Itsuki wasn’t sure if they had enough food for one more setting, but there were still a few slices of mackerel left after all four plates were on the table, and everything else had extras, too. Keisuke must’ve been cooking for tomorrow as well.

Once everything was laid out, Natsume left the dining room and called upstairs.

“Chihirooooo! Dinner’s ready!”

In another moment, Itsuki heard footsteps heading down.

...Oh, she can leave her room okay...?

He’d been anticipating camping out in front of Chihiro’s door and giving her a pep talk through it. This kind of threw him.

After a bit more, Chihiro sluggishly staggered into the living room. She was in brown sweats, her hair unkempt, and she had a spaced-out sort of expression. A decal from a Gundam model was stuck on her cheek. Itsuki had never seen her so disheveled.

She slowly approached the dinner table—then froze when she saw Itsuki.

“Huh?! Wha—? Ah, uh, ah, huh...?!”



“H-hey.”

Itsuki greeted her, feeling just as awkward for seeing her like this. Chihiro blushed deeply, shivering as tears came to her eyes.

“I-Itsuki... Why...?!”

“Well, you know, I was worried about you.”

“This—this is too sudden...!”

“Can you wash your face, please?” Natsume asked.



Keisuke, Natsume, and Itsuki all sat down, followed by Chihiro when she returned from the bathroom—hair fixed, but head still hung low. Keisuke and Natsume sat next to each other, their children facing them across the table.

“Now,” Natsume said first, “before we begin... Dad?”

“Hmm...?” The stern Keisuke looked at her.

“You told me before that you had something to say to Itsuki whenever he came back home, didn’t you?”

“Oh yeah,” the sheepish Keisuke muttered as he looked straight at the confused Itsuki.

“Wh-what...?”

Itsuki wasn’t sure where to look. Keisuke took a deep breath.

“...I’m sorry. About the whole gender thing with Chihiro.” He bowed his head to him.

Itsuki was dumbfounded. His father had never apologized to him about anything his whole life.

“We’re really sorry, Itsuki,” Natsume said, bowing her own head.

“Ah, p-put your heads back up! You too, Dad...”

Having your own parents bow to you was just beyond awkward. Itsuki hurriedly asked them to stop, and as he did, he said, “...I’m not angry at all.”

That was the truth.

After reading his debut novel *Sister of the Apocalypse*, they were so concerned about Itsuki that they’d accepted Chihiro’s offer to pass as a boy around him. In Itsuki’s mind, their concern was justified. If he had been in their position, he probably would’ve made the same choice. That’s how

disgusting that novel was.

Lifting their heads, Keisuke and Natsume carefully studied Itsuki's face. He gave them a soft chuckle back.

"It's fine! It's all in the past anyway... But thanks for letting me eat with you." He speedily took up his chopsticks and tried some of the mackerel. "... Mmm. Good stuff. You really made this, Dad...?"

He gave his honest opinion as he faced his father. Keisuke gave a self-satisfied little *harrumph* in response.

The rest of the family quickly joined in, Chihiro going last out of hesitation. They ate in silence for a little while, but suddenly Keisuke stopped and spoke up.

"...By the way, Chihiro, do you think you can finally tell us what happened?"

"...!" Chihiro's shoulders twitched. She put down her chopsticks and fell silent.

Keisuke sighed. "...Well, you don't have to if you don't want. But Itsuki's here and all, you know, so I just want you to feel better."

"..." Chihiro didn't react.

"It's all right," Natsume replied in a friendly tone. "I'm sure it's her first love, so..."

"Wha?!"

"Fweh?!"

Keisuke was stunned into silence, while Chihiro stared at Natsume, eyes wide open.

"M-m-mmmmmommm... H-how did you know...?!"

She shook as she asked, face bright red.

"Because," Natsume casually responded, "you got all made up, you went out, and then you came back home crying. It's pretty easy to assume you put yourself out there, and he said no."

"Itsuki! Is that true?" his father asked.

Itsuki reflexively nodded. "Um, well, yeah."

"Itsukiiiiii..."

"S-sorry."

The hot burn of Chihiro's reproachful eyes drove him to apologize.

"Wait, this other man isn't..."

"No!"

“No, Dad!”

They both shouted at once the moment they spotted the question in Keisuke’s eyes.

“Well,” reasoned Natsume, “if you know who it is, Itsuki, is it one of your friends? A fellow writer?”

“Y-yeah,” Itsuki nodded.

“Ugghhh! Mommmm!!” Chihiro was tearing up. “Just stop already...”

“Chihiro,” Itsuki said to his downtrodden sister. “Didn’t you know from the start he’d say no?”

“...Yeah...but it was so much harder than I thought it’d be... I’m amazed how calmly Kani and Miyako dealt with it.”

“...”

They weren’t calm about it at all, actually. But Nayuta was an unusual girl by any standard, and even Miyako had gained—and lost—love a few times in her life, Itsuki thought. Chihiro just had far too little experience as a “girl,” was all. She’d lived until the age of eighteen without knowing how romantic love felt—and part of the cause of that was Itsuki himself.

“...Sorry.”

“Hweh? About what?”

Itsuki smiled a bit at the flummoxed Chihiro. “Nah, I mean... If there’s anything I can do to help you out, just say the word, okay?”

“Um, okay... Thanks, Itsuki...”



Chihiro flashed a weak smile of her own, and Itsuki felt it was time to ask the question that continued to nag him.

“...By the way, what was with that crappy poetry you texted me?”

Her face started to burn all over again. “.....It... It was my way of saying ‘my heart’s fallen into darkness, so let me be’...”

Apparently this was a serious case of edgy-teen-itis.

“Well, it didn’t work. If I read something like that, of course I’m gonna be worried.”

“Ohhh...”

Itsuki smiled at his groaning sister. "...But thanks to that, I finally summoned the energy to come here, so it's all good."

"Yeah..." Chihiro lifted her head up, wiping a tear away. "This has always been a dream to me. The four of us together, eating like this...so...!" Suddenly her face twisted up, a large tear running down one cheek. "So... thank you... Itsuki..."

"...You're welcome."

Itsuki reached out and gently caressed Chihiro's head—and Keisuke and Natsume watched the siblings in action, contentment on their faces.



After finishing her dinner, Chihiro tried going right back to her room. Keisuke stopped her, suggesting they should talk more while everyone was here, but Chihiro just smiled.

"I gotta make up for lost time with my exam prep... And something tells me we'll have a lot more chances to eat together from now on, won't we?"

Itsuki nodded. She acknowledged it with a happy nod back.

"Honey," Natsume said after Chihiro left the table, "would you like something to drink for a change of pace? You, too, Itsuki. I can't drink right now, of course, and your father's given up alcohol during the pregnancy, too. But just this once won't hurt you, will it?"

Keisuke gave his son a glance. "Hmm...mm... Well? Want a drink, Itsuki?"

After a bit of thought...

"...Ah, um, sure. I'll take one."

"...All right. Well...let's, then."

"Sure."

"What would you like?" Natsume asked, smiling. "Beer? Sake? *Shochu*?"

"Do you have any Belgian beer?"

"Nothing that fancy," Keisuke retorted.

"Oh... Sake, then."

There was mackerel and chicken left on the table—a good pairing with Japanese sake.

“Right.” Keisuke stood up and took out an *isskobin* (a traditional 1.8-liter bottle) of sake with two cups. It was already opened, but only about a quarter of it was consumed.

“Well, I’ll leave you two be...”

Natsume picked up her dishes and brought them to the sink. Keisuke placed a cup in front of Itsuki, filled it up, then poured some sake into his own.

...Should we toast or something?

He pondered this as he took the cup, trying to steal a glance at his father. Their eyes met—Dad seemed to be considering the same question. After a moment, though, he silently brought the cup to his lips. Itsuki followed his lead. It was a crisp, dry *junmai-shu*, and while Itsuki preferred his sake with a little more personality—tarter, maybe, or fruitier—a nice, approachable one like this might be better as a regular after-dinner thing.

So Itsuki washed down the chicken and spinach with some sake.

“...How’ve you been lately?” the dour Keisuke asked.

“Oh... The same.”

Keisuke’s eyebrow twitched up. “...Your book got delayed, didn’t it?”

“Ah—why do you know that...?”

“I keep an eye on your release dates, at least.”

“Oh... You do?”

It embarrassed his dad a little. He covered for it by finishing his cup of sake in one gulp.

“...Well, it’s all right,” Itsuki said as he poured himself another. “It’ll all work out.”

“...Ah.” Keisuke looked closely at his son. “...Well, hang in there.”

“...!”

Something about what he said made Itsuke’s eyes well up a bit. Here was his dad—the man who’d yelled at him after his manuscript got picked in that contest; who all but disowned him after reading his first book—and now he was voicing support for him. It surprised Itsuki how happy that made him feel.

“By the way...,” Keisuke continued.

“Yeah?”

“It sounds like you’re seeing someone?”

“.....Yeah.” Itsuki nodded, blushing hard.

“You planning to marry her?”

“.....S-someday.”

It felt incredibly awkward, but he managed to squeak out the word.

“Someday when?”

“We—we don’t know yet...”

...They had barely spoken in years, and all of a sudden, his dad was getting *way* too in-depth with him. It felt weird.

“...What about you?”

“Hmm?”

“What made you decide to take the plunge with...with Chihiro’s mom?”

Itsuki wasn’t just trying to change the subject. He thought Keisuke might have a hint as to when to pop the question to Nayuta.

“.....Do you wanna know?” he replied, in a dead serious tone of voice.

“Ah... Well, you know, just for an idea...”

“...Hmm...” Keisuke drained his own cup and poured out another. “...All right. I’ll tell you.”

So, as he sipped at his sake, Keisuke began to tell his son about how he came to be with Natsume. The way she found him blacked out on the street in winter. The way he impulsively ran to her place when he heard she quit her job. The way he looked at this woman, someone he wasn’t even officially dating, and casually said “Will you marry me?” out of nowhere...

“What is this, some hipster drama?!”

Itsuki couldn’t help but poke fun at the story. He was just kind of curious about it, but it was a surprisingly dramatic, romantic tale—and it was his *father* telling him. His head was going to explode.

“I can’t just blurt out the question like that!”

“Heh.....I’m kind of embarrassed about it, too,” his dad admitted, cheeks a bit red from the sake.

“But... Oh man. Really? Who are you, Yuji Oda or Yosuke Eguchi or something?”

That’s what it felt like to Itsuki—a drama starring one or another of Japan’s greatest male leads. He took a drink, slumped back in his chair, and looked up at the ceiling.

...There was a hero in that story, too.

The strength seemed to drain from him. He could feel a weird kind of

smile come to his face. It was so ridiculous. Here he was, missing out on love, struggling to become the hero, and his own father was living out a prime-time drama the whole time.

“But enough about that, Itsuki.”

“Guhh?”

“This man who turned Chihiro down... What’s he like?”

Itsuki sat up and examined Keisuke’s face again. His eyes were fully glazed over now. It was scary.

“What’s he like...? Well, he’s a friend who got his first novel published the same time I did... He’s a nice guy. He’s tall, he’s handsome... He had his first novel series made into an anime, he’s twenty-four years old, he’s making a steady ten million yen or so a year... From an impartial point of view, he’s a super-good catch.”

“...Mmm... I can see why Chihiro fell in love with him, then.”

“...I agree with you.”

Haruto was a totally different story from him. He thought he had finally caught up to his best friend/rival, but then had taken a misstep.

“*But!*” Keisuke rapped on the table.

“Y-yeah?!”

“Even with a super guy like him, I’m sure Chihiro can *more* than cut it! What was so wrong about her in his eyes?!”

“Um... Not ‘wrong,’ really...but there’s this other girl he’s had a crush on for a while.”

“What? Do you know this girl, too?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s she like?”

“...Well, she’s really something, too. She’s a college student, but she’s super popular, everybody on the editorial team trusts her, and lots of writers and manga artists treat her as their big sister. She’s saved my ass a lot of times, too.”

“The super girl for the super guy, huh? So why don’t they get together?”

“...Well, I’m sure she’s got her reasons...” Itsuki hated to admit that he had turned her down.

“Mmmmm... Sounds like you got a lot of drama in your friend circle.”

“Maybe so...”

A smile came to his lips—maybe self-deriding, maybe proud.

“Right! Itsuki, call up that super guy for me right now. This isn’t gonna sit right with me until I give him a word or two!”

“What are you talking about, Dad...?” Itsuki chuckled. “...But I like it!”

He took out his phone, having drunk enough that his usual good judgment was failing him. He brought up Haruto’s entry in his phone book and tapped on the number. Another few seconds, and they were connected.

“Oh... Hey, Itsuki. What’s up?”

Haruto sounded a little reticent over the phone. Chihiro must have been weighing on his mind. Keisuke was motioning at Itsuki, so he put the phone on speaker mode and placed it on the table.

“Itsuki?” Haruto asked.

Keisuke leaned over a bit. “Hello there. This is Chihiro Hashima’s father.”

“Huhhh?!”

“Yeah, my dad wants to talk to you,” Itsuki said, holding back his laughter.

“Huhhh?! Itsuki, are... Are you serious?!”

“I hear that you’ve been very, *verrrrryyyyyy* kind to our Chihiro.”

“N-no, um, Chihiro’s, I mean, she’s been very kind to me, too, so...”

“So what don’t you like about her?”

“No, it’s not that! I think she’s a wonderful girl! It’s just that I’ve already decided on someone, so...!”

“Mmm. And are things proceeding along with this other someone?”

“Ahh, well, not exactly, no...”

Itsuki put his head down on the table, laughing at the flailing Haruto. But just then, he heard the *thump-thump-thump* of someone bolting down the stairs. Chihiro came bursting in, her face bright red.

“D-Daaaaaad! What’re you doing?!”

The speaker volume must’ve been turned up too high, because apparently Haruto’s voice made it to Chihiro’s room.

“I’m talking with the man who turned you down right now,” Keisuke said, totally serious and also totally drunk.

Chihiro looked down at the phone. *Haruto Fuwa*, it said. She panicked.

“F-Fuwa, I—I—I’m sorry! I think my dad’s had too much to drink!”

“Oh, um, okay...” Haruto sounded like he had no idea what to do.

“I...I’ll talk to you later!”

Chihiro reached out to off turn the phone before glaring at Keisuke and

Itsuki.

“I can’t *believe* you guys! Why did you do something like that?! You’re so stupid, Dad! And what’s gotten into you, Itsuki?!”

Keisuke and Itsuki both winced at the menace that was a truly angry Chihiro.

“Oh, um... We kinda got carried away,” said Itsuki.

“You got carried away?! You’re always so terrible with that kind of thing, Itsuki!”

“Sorry about that...”

“Now, now, Chihiro, don’t be so angry.” Keisuke’s advice only made her angrier.

“Of course I’m going to be angry at this! Dad, if you do something like this again, I’ll never speak to you for the rest of my life!”

“I don’t want that... I’m sorry.”

“Ugh! You’re so *stupid*!”

She stormed back into her room, leaving the two of them to sit there, regretful for a few moments. Then:

“...Wanna drink it off?”

“Sounds good,” Itsuki said, filling his cup.

They spent the rest of the evening talking. For the most part, it was about their respective jobs—a fascinating topic for Itsuki, because he didn’t know much about Keisuke’s line of work. They stayed up late into the night, as if making up for the blank of the past few years...but given how drunk they got, they had forgotten about most of it by the next morning.

The Phantom Sirius

The next day, at half past ten, Itsuki woke up in his own bed, in his own family's house, for the first time in three and a half years.

The room was astonishingly clean for having been empty that long. Apparently Chihiro had kept it tidy so Itsuki could use it whenever he came back. When she said it was her “dream” to have the four of them eating dinner together, she couldn't have been exaggerating.

...Let's make coming back home a regular habit, he thought as he had breakfast by himself in the downstairs dining room. The meal consisted of fried eggs, white rice, and some leftover mackerel and salad from last night. It being Monday, Keisuke and Chihiro were both gone for the day, leaving Natsume relaxing in the living room.

“Okay, I'm gonna get going.”

The outfit he wore yesterday was hanging out to dry after Natsume washed it, so he changed into some clothes from his bedroom drawer, put on his coat, and prepared to leave.

“Come back anytime, okay?” Natsume said, smiling softly.

“You bet,” Itsuki said, giving a slightly bashful smile of his own.



Leaving home, he walked to a bus stop a few minutes away. Chihiro always took the bus to Itsuki's place, he had heard, but Itsuki had only used this stop once—on the day he'd moved out.

The morning rush hour was over, so not too many people were around. He read a novel on his phone while he waited, getting on the bus that arrived about ten minutes later.

As he went down the aisle, figuring out where to sit:

“Hey, are you Itsuki Hashima?”

“Huh?”

A voice to his side surprised him. It belonged to a woman sitting window-side, maybe in her mid-twenties. She had an affable-looking face and a casual smile, and although she had matured, Itsuki instantly recognized her.

“...Ayane?”

“You got it!” she exclaimed.

This was Ayane Mitahora, daughter of the housekeeper Keisuke had hired before he remarried. She was two years older than Itsuki, and when his mother died, she came over to his place to cheer him up. They had started hanging regularly after that...and in his third year of middle school, he told her he loved her. She turned him down, though, and they hadn’t seen each other since.

Someone was audibly clearing their throat at them, so Itsuki quickly sat down next to Ayane.

“It’s sure been a while, Itsuki,” she said bashfully, although he could tell she wanted to say more.

“It sure has,” Itsuki replied, feeling just as awkward.

“Where are you going?”

“Just back home... Um, from my family’s home to my apartment.”

“Oh! Where do you live now?”

He gave the neighborhood name to her.

“Wow, that’s a pretty good place. I’m still living with my family.”

“Nah, there’s just some cheap student housing there, and I’ve been living in it ever since, so...”

If she lived at home and used this bus line, Itsuki realized she must’ve taken this route when she was visiting his childhood home, too. He knew Ayane’s house couldn’t be that far from the Hashima family’s, but he never heard the exact address.

“...Where are *you* going, Ayane?”

“To my office.”

The answer surprised Itsuki a little. He turned his eyes toward her. She was dressed well, but it wasn’t exactly business attire. Was she in fashion or something? He didn’t know anything about that industry, but her clothing and fairly late work commute seemed to indicate as much... Come to think of it,

Itsuki had thought Ayane had huge breasts back when he was in middle school, but after another look, it wasn't really the case. Around Miyako's size at best. Maybe high school girls seemed bigger than they really were to him back then.

As his mind went off on this tangent, Ayane took a card out of her bag and handed it to Itsuki.

"Hee-hee-hee! Here's what I do."

Ayane Mitahora
Entertainment Editorial Dept.
Branch Hill, Ltd.

"Branch Hill?!"

Ayane gave Itsuki's shocked reply a shy smile. "Oh, you've heard of it? It's still a brand-new company, pretty much...but I guess if you're in the biz, you'd know it."

Itsuki was surprised mainly because Miyako was about to join them, but he had known about Branch Hill since the beginning of his career. It was founded by a famed, charismatic editor from a well-known publisher, so it had already generated a lot of buzz around the publishing business. Certainly, no industry was more marked by casual dress codes and the total lack of a nine-to-five schedule than books—as a writer, that should've occurred to him first thing.

But something else stuck in his mind.

"If I'm 'in the biz'?"

"Well, you're a professional novelist, aren't you? I've actually been keeping tabs on you ever since your debut."

"Oh..."

Ayane's mother had still been working in the Hashima residence when Itsuki published his first book. It's natural that Ayane would've found out. But after he had severed ties with her, learning that she knew what he'd been up to for years since seemed *so* awkward.

"I knew you were into little-sister series, but I didn't think you'd specialize in that yourself!" The teasing tone of Ayane's voice didn't make it any less awkward. "Oh, and I saw the pics from the Taiwan convention, too."

“Wehhh?! You mean the...?!”

Ayane smiled at the panicking Itsuki. “That’s how I recognized you at the bus stop, Itsuki. You had on a mask and glasses in the photos, but your figure and hairstyle are the exact same.”

“Wow, really...?”

“But I gotta say,” she continued with a laugh, “that manga artist is incredible. Why did she decide to conceal her face with a pair of panties?”

“Oh, she wasn’t trying to hide it. She wraps panties over her head whenever she draws manga. I’m serious.”

“Ah-ha-ha!”

She must’ve thought he was joking. Itsuki took another look at her card.

“So...are you an editor, Ayane?”

“Yeah. I edited for this other publisher for about a year, but when my boss left and founded his own place, he invited me to join him.”

“Wow. That must’ve taken some resolve...”

Nobunaga Shirogamine, president of Branch Hill, had previously worked at a famous imprint for one of Japan’s largest publishers; apparently his starting salary there was way above what Kenjiro Toki earns even now (he bitched about this to Itsuki at some point long ago). Leaving that cushy job to found your own publishing company was certainly a bold challenge.

“Well, I really had to think about it. But it seemed like fun, so...” Ayane gave him a timid smile. “...And this hasn’t been announced yet, but we’re about to launch a new light novel imprint. I’m working on the launch right now, but it’s *super* fun.”

There was something impish about the smile. She might be a mature adult now, but that grin had changed a bit from when a preteen Itsuki fell in love with her.

“Did you always want to edit light novels, Ayane?”

When Itsuki knew her, at least, she never mentioned anything like that.

Ayane nodded—“Mm-hmm”—then averted her eyes a bit. “I think it was my next-to-last year in high school? My boyfriend loved light novels and tried writing them himself, too. Our idea was that he’d become a professional novelist, I’d become an editor, and then we could both work together. That was the promise we made.”

If that was her second year of high school, Itsuki would’ve been in his last year of middle school... In other words, the same year Ayane shot him down.

He recalled how Ayane was down after being denied by another guy she loved—a light novel fan who wore glasses, Itsuki recalled.

“Um... This boyfriend you’re talking about... Did you mention him to me back then?”

“Yep. That guy.”

“I thought he turned you down the first time you asked him out.”

“He did. But I kept trying, and he finally said yes the fourth time.”

Shot down once, refusing to give up, continually challenging herself, and finally winning the attention of her beloved—it was Nayuta Kani’s story all over again. Itsuki found it deeply moving, but Ayane just smiled.

“But I knew I needed to get into a good university if I wanted to enter publishing, so I studied like a maniac in high school—but *he* gave up after he didn’t win a prize in the first contest he submitted to. I kept going with it anyway, but I wound up focusing on studying more than him and he started cheating on me, and that was it.”



“Oh... I guess it didn’t go too well for you, then.”

If middle school Itsuki heard that story, he probably would’ve been moved to tears.

“Right?” Ayane said, sighing as she smiled over it. “...But still, I always had dreams of being an editor.”

She no doubt understood what Itsuki wanted to ask—why did she keep going if she only started so she could work with her boyfriend?

“And, I mean, I already expended all that time and effort grinding it out for my exams and improving my grades. So it felt so stupid to give up on my dreams just because we split up. Besides...I just like light novels, you know? Whether I have a crush that goes nowhere, or I find a good guy, or it all falls apart—*that* part of me never changed. So in a way, the fact I’m here today is thanks to you, isn’t it? For introducing me to light novels.”

Seeing Ayane sitting there, bashfully confessing to all this—Itsuki could no longer blink back his tears.

“Ah...?! I-Itsuki?!”

“It—it’s okay,” Itsuki said, trying to assuage the concerned Ayane.

In another little bit, the bus arrived at the nearest stop to Itsuki’s place.

“You know, we might just offer you some work later on, so when we do, give it some real thought, okay?”

“I’ll certainly consider it,” he said as he stood up, deliberately taking a vague stance. He was the only one leaving at this stop, so the bus quickly trundled off again. Watching it go, Itsuki felt the tears returning.

The days had he spent with Ayane Mitahora; the happiness and fun and romance; even the pain and sadness of a love lost—none of it went to waste. His rage and despair at how small he was, how endlessly large the world was—none of it was meaningless. No matter how minuscule Itsuki Hashima’s story was as a middle schooler, it still connected to the tale of Ayane Mitahora.

He used to think of her as “like the heroine of a story”—but after he got dumped by her, and she got dumped by someone he didn’t even know, Itsuki felt so disillusioned. But he was wrong.

“I was in love with you...and you were a hero after all.”

A wintry wind sent the softly spoken words off to oblivion.

So maybe...a story like this is good enough for me.

Itsuki found his heart filled with salvation—a salvation that seemed rather close to emptiness.

No Matter Who Forgives It, the Main Heroine Never Will

Back at his apartment, Itsuki took off his coat, sat down on his chair, and took his laptop off sleep mode. He didn't even bother saving the non-sister practice novel he was working on to get his groove back. Instead he opened up another file. It was named "All About My Little Sister_vol7_draft1," and there wasn't a single word in it yet.

Now he could write. He was sure of it.

His index finger rested upon a key on the keyboard. The rest of his fingertips began to weave text, just as he thought they would. The writer's block from before seemed like a mirage. Now, the text of *All About My Little Sister*—content that literally nauseated him whenever he tried to write it—was proceeding along faster than it ever did before.

Silently, he maintained a constant pace, never reaching an impasse as he kept on writing. He was almost like a machine, his fingers automatically moving where they needed to go. The talent in his soul, and the passion behind his personality, were shut away from the process. Instead, he used nothing but the techniques he had cultivated over the past six or so years of novel writing, following the plotline and piecing the sentences together.

Itsuki Hashima the person, and Itsuki Hashima the novelist, were totally separate. Whether he had a little sister or not had no bearing on this story. What the protagonist of this novel thought about his sister had no bearing on Itsuki the novelist. Thus he followed the set formula, putting the characters into action, giving them thoughts, and getting them in love. There was no empathy, no projecting himself into it. He was a professional writer; therefore, he wrote novels.

This was just a work program. There was no need to insert extra story elements from the author's own life.

A story like this is good enough for me.

Once he came to that conclusion, the rest was simple.

Chihiro Hashima, Nayuta Kani, Miyako Shirakawa, Haruto Fuwa, Ashley Ono, Kasuka Sekigahara, Keisuke Hashima, and Ayane Mitahora—this world was full of protagonists, heroes that moved as if selected by fate. He, however, didn't seem to be one of those. That's why a story like this was good enough for Itsuki Hashima. He had attained the somewhat rare occupation of novelist; his work was made into anime; he even had younger writers looking up to him. For a non-chosen one, just another average guy, this was a pretty darn good performance. So forget it. He didn't need any more dramatic developments. He'd write novels, make money, hang out with friends, drink good beer, have dinner with his family, maybe get into pottery or Gundam models as a hobby, marry the woman he loved—that kind of modest happiness. For the remaining chapters of his life, this average sort of tale was good enough.

So Itsuki kept typing away, his face contented, like a retiree enjoying his golden years. It was all so emotionless, so unmoving, so businesslike, so machinelike, so factorylike. His old fighting spirit, the drive to create the ultimate story, had disappeared. His straining desire to become a special hero was gone—and with it, something important that comprised part of Itsuki Hashima, novelist, also vanished.

There was no love, no passion, no pride—and also no trials, no tribulations, no conflict. The writing went along like a breeze, as simple and as monotonous as it could be. And then, in early December—a mere week after Itsuki began writing again—the first draft for *All About My Little Sister*, Vol. 7 was done.



“It’s just fine.”

That was the review offered by Kenjiro Toki when he read the draft.

You didn't get the sense of surging talent and passion, like you did from Itsuki's work up to now. The story had a well-devised plot and never

deviated from it. Every passage made sense and contributed to the narrative. It was a “just fine” piece of work. And considering how many past readers nervously stepped away, too floored by the overflow of sister-love to keep up, this was the perfect approach to take if they wanted to hook the audience that learned about Itsuki Hashima from the anime. Truly, a fine, artisanal piece. A well-honed, industrial product.

“...But could you really call this an Itsuki Hashima work...?”

Even though something huge, something at the foundation of all his past work, was well and truly gone, if anything, it was a more balanced, more marketable book. Noticing this as he read the manuscript left Toki conflicted, so he decided to ask Itsuki himself. Was he sure he wanted to have this published?

“Of course,” he responded. “I’d like to get it out there as soon as possible.”

The calmness of the reply, as if some demon had let go of him after a long residency in his brain, only disturbed Toki further. But still he put the delayed Volume 7 of *All About* into the schedule, carving out an emergency slot for it. The author wanted it out there, the market wanted to see it, the product had the needed quality, and the editor had no right to unilaterally deny it to the world.

It would come out in January of next year. The cover and internal color art were already done before the delay was announced, so the rest of the illustrations should (barely) make it in time.



“Hey, I’m done with Volume 7, so how ’bout we have dinner together for a change?”

A few days after wrapping up *All About*, Volume 7, Itsuki called Nayuta over to his place. His real motive for the invite was to propose to her. He had a ring all set to go—Nayuta had wasted no opportunity to tell him her size, so he knew it. He thought about giving it to her on one knee in a fancy restaurant or at some scenic, romantic overlook, but most of their memories together were made in this apartment, so this seemed like the most

appropriate place.

“Ooooh! Is that the Volume 7 manuscript?! Lemme read it right now, please!”

Right after she walked in, Nayuta discovered the stack of paper on his desk. Her eyes sparkled at the sight.

“Sure,” Itsuki said, watching as Nayuta joyously sidled up by the *kotatsu* and began reading.

...He thought he’d ask the question over some predinner drinks, but maybe it could wait until right after she finished reading. His slump was one reason he’d missed his chance to propose before now, so he was picturing a scenario where she’d read it, understand that Itsuki Hashima the writer was back in business, and then he’d say “I want to be together with you forever” and have at it. That struck him as the best timing.

So, as Nayuta read through Volume 7, he did some more work—this time on Volume 9 of *Sisterly Combat*, another series that ground to a halt after he hit a wall. He had been silently beaver away on that one, too, in similar machinelike fashion.

A bit under two hours later:

“...I’m all done.”

“...! Y-you are?”

Itsuki casually stood up and surreptitiously took the box with the engagement ring from his coat hanging on the wall, hiding it behind his back as he quietly sat across from her. His heart was beating like a drum roll.

“S-so, so Kani—”

He was about to say “Kanikou” but thought better of it. This was special. He wouldn’t use Kanikou, he wouldn’t use Nayuta Kani—he wanted to use her real name for this.

“Um, I mean, Kaz—”

“...What is *this*?”

There was a shivering chill to her voice.

“Huh...?”

Nayuta didn’t look at her confused boyfriend. Her eyes were fixated on the sheaf of papers in her hands, and the emotion in them was dark. Her face

was pale, and her fingers were shaking a little.

“K-Kanikou...?”

“...What is this? This *garbage*?”

Nayuta looked up, her baleful stare freezing him to the bone.

“G... Garbage? Wh-what are you—?” Itsuki tried his hardest to fight back.

“*How dare you!!*” With a scream, she threw the stack on the floor, scattering papers everywhere.

“Wh-what...?”

“This... This isn’t any kind of novel by you! It’s not an Itsuki Hashima novel!” She had tears in her eyes as she shouted.

Itsuki was shocked. “Was it that lame to you...? I mean, I’ve only just recovered from my slump, so maybe I wasn’t on my A game...but I don’t think it’s bad at all, and the editor okayed it, so... I wouldn’t describe it as *garbage*...”

The defense sounded weak. Nayuta was the last person he wanted to slam his novel. Even if people said his work had *too* much sister-love in it, this was the first time anyone had completely trashed it. He truly believed that even if the whole world told him he was a failure, Nayuta alone would tell him she liked his writing. And now she was drilling down on him.

“...No matter how boring it was, no matter how poorly it was written, I thought I could always love your work. But... But not if it’s like this! This is just *wrong*! If you’re gonna make me read this soulless crap, like some AI wrote it, then *you’re better off not being able to write at all!!*”

“...!”

Itsuki’s mind went blank. The statement couldn’t have pierced into his soul any deeper, or with any more precision.

“Wha... Wha-what do you mean by that...?” The voice he finally summoned was shaking. “You think I’m better off not being able to write...? Are you saying you’d prefer if I was in...in that hell for the rest of my life...? Do you have any idea how painful it was...? What I went through before I was able to write that...?”

“I know you were in pain. But... But still, I—I can’t accept this.”

“...Didn’t you say you’d accept me no matter what...? Were you lying when you said that...?”

“I wasn’t lying. I wasn’t trying to. But I can’t... I just can’t. I mean, I love you, Itsuki...but I *really* love Itsuki Hashima, the *writer*!”

“...!”

“Seeing Itsuki Hashima, the writer who saved me, turn into something like this... I’ll never forgive it! No matter who forgives it, *I* never will!”

In order to get out of his slump, Itsuki Hashima the man had to separate himself from Itsuki Hashima the professional writer. But to Nayuta, who found salvation when she read *Sister of the Apocalypse*, who fell in love with the man named Itsuki Hashima, this was beyond anything she could allow.

“S... Stop giving me all that crap!!” He understood Nayuta’s anger. But he couldn’t take any more of this. “Who the hell do you think I worked so hard to overcome this slump for? Who do you think I came back as a writer for...?”

He wanted to take the woman he loved the most and make her happy, as soon as he possibly could. He’d struggled so hard for that—and this was the result? He could feel his strength abandoning him.

“...What’s the big deal...? What’s wrong with writing a banal, soulless novel...? Everybody’s the hero of their own story... I’m not special or anything. There’s no need for me to...to risk my life and soul trying to write something special. If I can write average novels, make a decent amount of money, and find a decent amount of happiness, isn’t that fine...? That... That’s the answer I’ve come to with this slump...”

“All you’re doing is deceiving yourself,” avowed Nayuta, delivering her final judgment. “You haven’t come back at all. You’re still lying prone on the ground... I can love you if you’re desperate, if you’ve been discouraged—but the one thing I can’t forgive is you making compromises and diving into this lukewarm, slapdash answer of yours like some idiot... You are a writer, Itsuki Hashima. Please keep fighting until you can become the hero you hope to be.”

Itsuki weakly shook his head. “...I can’t be the hero of your story.”

“*Do it! You’re* the one who saved me, who showed me dreams, who taught me about love. You’ve got an obligation to live up to that, Itsuki Hashima!”

Nayuta cried as she screamed—and Kaizu’s advice flashed back into

Itsuki's mind.

You've got no obligation to people like that. It's on them for having those dreams in the first place.



Yes. He's right...!

"I'm *telling* you that I *can't*! Stop pushing your ideals on me! I'm not a genius like you! How can someone who cranks out these masterpieces as naturally as she breathes ever understand the pain some *average* person goes through?!"

"You're a great writer, Itsuki! You've got a special talent like nobody else in the whole world!"

"No, I don't! And even if I did, I lost it!"

"If you lost it, then why don't you just find another one?!"

"I told you to stop acting like it's so easy! You're a genius!"

"*You* should stop bandying around the world 'genius' like that! Stop trying to use 'genius' to describe everything! I put in a lot of work when people aren't looking, too! You dumbass!"

"I know! But to me, your genius is blinding! I get so jealous it drives me insane!"

"Well, what do you want *me* to do about that?! It's not like I got talent because I wanted it! If I only had just enough to place in the writers contest so I could meet *you*, Itsuki, that would've been *fine*!"

"Wha...?! Where do you get off, acting so arrogant?! Then give me some of that talent! If you got more than you know what to do with, hand it over to me!"

"I told you already, you *do* have talent, Itsuki! Ugh! You shithead!"

"No I *don't*, you stupid piece of crap!!"

After that final scream, Itsuki let out a defeated sigh. They were going in circles, shouting past each other. Nayuta seemed pretty exhausted, too.

"...Why don't you understand me...?"

"...If I had talent, I wouldn't produce 'garbage' in the first place..."

Itsuki morosely eyed the papers all over the floor.

"...Like, I can't deal with this anymore. Let's split up."

It was the polar opposite of a marriage proposal, but it left his lips so naturally.

"...Ah-ha... Yes... Wanna do that?"

Nayuta nodded, a weakened smile on her face. And so, after the very first

argument since they had become lovers—since they'd even met, for that matter—Itsuki and Nayuta were on the brink.

(End)

Afterword

The focus for this volume was Itsuki, who had fallen into a terrible slump, interacting with the rest of the cast and finally climbing out of it...or will he? Maybe not...?! That was how Volume 11 went. Also, since the last volume was arranged in kind of a tricky way, I wrote this one with as much light novel playfulness as I could. I think this may very well be the most light novel-like book I've produced so far in my career. With more people switching to e-books and paging varying quite a bit depending on the device and user settings, I've avoided any tricks based on flipping the page over to something in this series—but since a special edition of this volume came out in Japan, I revisited the idea for the first time in a while.

That's right—the special edition actually comes with a physical copy of Too Many Sisters., just as it's described in the novel!

I can't be sure of this, but I have to think this is the first time a novel included a game in its special edition. Games have been a running theme throughout this series, so this is something I always wanted to do, and finally making it happen makes me insanely happy. Too Many Sisters., as you may surmise, was created in collaboration with the creators behind Too Many Cinderellas, a masterpiece of a card game that I love and have played tons of times. My sincere thanks go to Taikikennai Games and Arclight for agreeing to this. Thanks also to Kantoku, Eadu, the designers, and the anime production committee for their help as well...! I hope you'll all play Too Many Sisters. and experience the same kind of fun Itsuki, Haruto, and the rest enjoyed. I should note, by the way, that card #9 is Sylvia from *Chronica Chronicle* as she was drawn in the manga version. She sported some pretty big boobs in the comic, but we actually cut them down a bit for game-balance reasons. Sorry!

Chihiro finally began to get serious in Volume 10, so she's rocketed to the top of the votes in our feedback. But what will we see with *this* volume...?

Thanks again, and see you in Volume 12.

Yomi Hirasaka
Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist
Early November 2018

Preview

Things have, well, happened between Itsuki and Nayuta. In order to find a new frame of mind, Itsuki shaves his head and abandons all earthly desires, as Nayuta strips naked and becomes a potty-mouth as she murders her video game opponents on a daily basis. The only one who can save them? Why, Miyako the archangel, of course...! But now that Chihiro's pretty much wrapped up all her main story events, what'll happen to her next?! And what about Ashley's increasingly worrisome love life? And what on earth are we going to do about Nadeshiko?! Volume 12, packed with amazing delights! (Note: This preview is preliminary and may not reflect the actual content.)

Afterword

This is Kantoku, the series illustrator.

Chihiro is as cute as ever in this volume! The little sisters just never stop coming! But on the other hand, the rebound from Itsuki's anguish blew my mind. It's kind of depressing. I feel like Itsuki is becoming more human than ever, and it's really easy for me to empathize with him.

By the way, I didn't think the members of the Hashima family would wind up such nice characters. What a fine family... Just reading about them makes me feel a little more grown-up.

It seems like the past two volumes are touching upon the main theme of this series, which is a bit frightening. Why frightening? Because I feel like I can see the end on the horizon! But no, no, we're fine; there are lots of characters whose paths haven't been decided. We're good, right? Right?!

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