

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

5

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku



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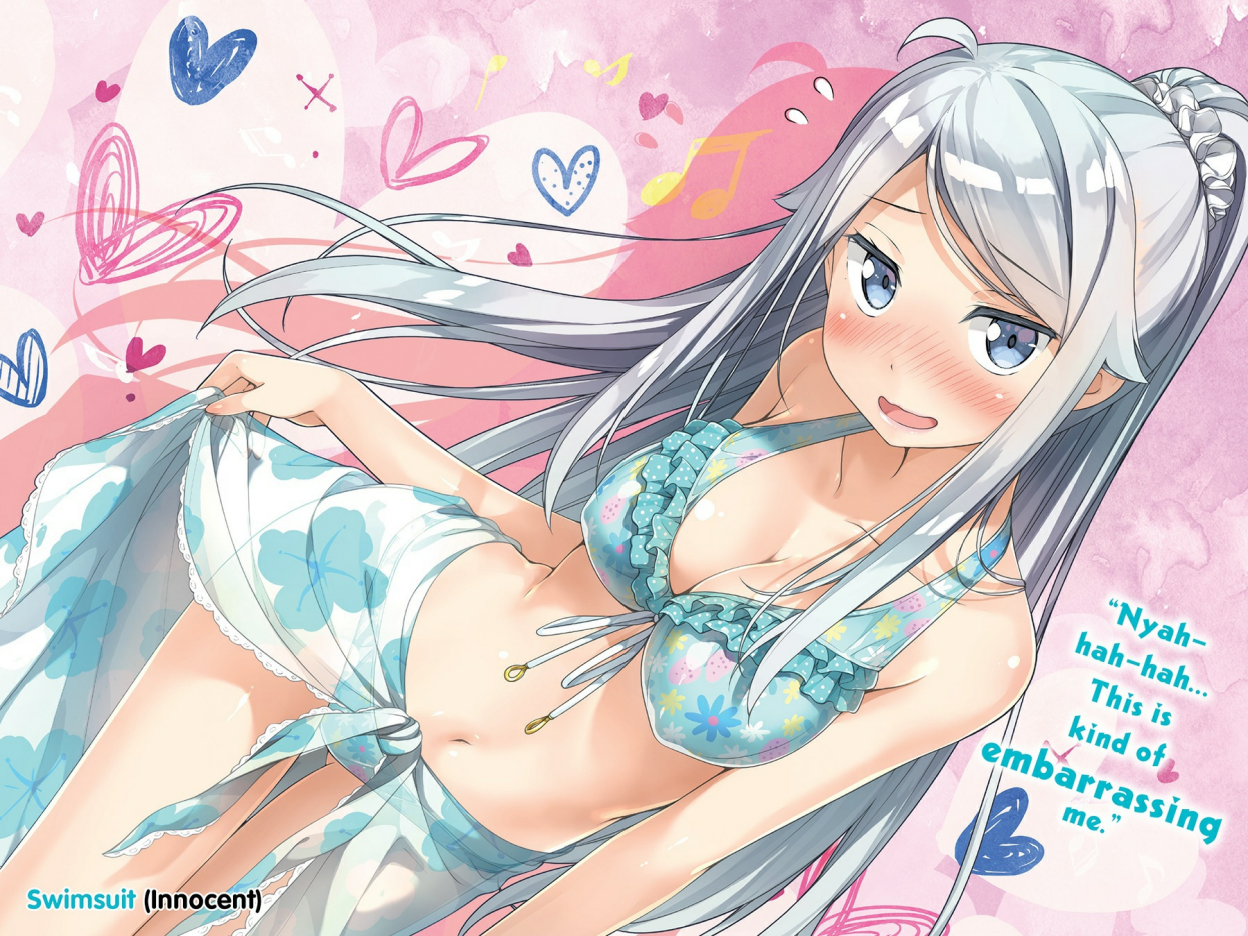
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“Nyah-
hah-hah...
This is
kind of
embarrassing
me.”

Swimsuit (Innocent)



☀ The Novelist Is a
Little-Sister-Obsessed F███k IV



☀ The Interview

☀ Chihiro Hashima's Lunch Break

☀ The New Publishing Gig

☀ The Swimsuit Episode
(Part 1)

☀ The Swimsuit Episode
(Part 2)

☀ The Swimsuit Episode
(Part 3)

☀ The Anime Version

☀ The Grave Visit



☀ I've Seen This Happen in Real Life All the Time, So All You Editors Really
Need to Be More Careful. Like, Seriously.

☀ Chihiro Hashima's Hobby

☀ Rookie Prize Judges' Table

☀ Star of the Common Man

☀ Miyako Shirakawa



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Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 5

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 5

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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Original Japanese edition published by SHOGAKUKAN.

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Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: October 2019

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hirasaka, Yomi, author. | Kantoku, illustrator. | Gifford, Kevin, translator.

Title: A sister's all you need. / Yomi Hirasaka ; illustration by Kantoku ; translation by Kevin Gifford.

Other titles: Imōto Sae Ireba II. English | Sister is all you need

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2018—

Identifiers: LCCN 2018004223 | ISBN 9781975326425 (v. 1 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975353599 (v. 2 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975353605 (v. 3 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975353612 (v. 4 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975353629 (v. 5 : paperback)|

Subjects: LCSH: Women novelists—Fiction. | Fictitious characters—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Humorous.

Classification: LCC PL871.I74 I4613 2018 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018004223>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-5362-9 (paperback)
978-1-9753-5975-1 (ebook)

E3-20190910-JV-NF-ORI

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

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

CHIIRO HASHIMA

Itsuki's younger brother. The perfect human being.

NAYUTA KANI

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

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant.

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.

The Novelist Is a Little-Sister-Obsessed F—k

IV

The woman walked along the quiet, seemingly abandoned street. She was a pretty young thing—in her early twenties—but the exhaustion on her face cast a pall over her attractive features.

It had been two years since she had landed a job at a trading firm lauded as one of the nation's largest. Day in and day out, she arrived at work early and went home late at night, her boss unfairly rebuked her for things beyond her control, and her coworkers all slaved away, determined to get ahead in the rat race. The general mood around the office was impossibly gloomy. She had wanted to get away from the daily grind for too long—but she lacked the resolve to quit altogether. A languid sigh escaped her mouth.

Then she noticed something odd. It was too quiet. There was no one around; not a single vehicle passing by. As late as it was, she was on her way to a station in the center of the city. But a quiet, seemingly abandoned street...? She couldn't recall a single part of her daily commute that fit the bill.

“Wh...? Where am I...?” she nervously asked herself.

“Heh-heh-heh...”

She instinctively whirled around to face the source of the sinister laughter. There she found a beautiful young girl—fourteen, or thirteen, or maybe even younger. Her face was well formed and beautifully symmetrical, like an intricately carved doll; her long golden hair flowed gently like a mountain stream, and her eyes shone a bright red amid the darkness around her. Not a stitch of clothing was on her body; her skin gleamed a brilliant white beneath the pale moonlight.

The woman stared at the fair, otherworldly sight before her, almost forgetting to breathe. The girl simply gave her another eerie laugh.

“Hee-hee-hee... I want you to become my...*little sister*.”

Before the woman could even gasp in bewilderment, the girl lunged forward with the speed of a wild wolf. Her sharpened fangs sank themselves into the woman’s jugular vein.

“Ahh...”

Warm blood seeped from the wound as a pang of untold pleasure arrested the woman’s every thought.

“Ahhhh... Ah, ah, ahhh...”

Her body shook in an odd rhythm; her face contorted in ecstasy as she let slip one lascivious moan after another.

The girl ravenously lapped at the blood streaming from her victim’s neck, savoring every drop. Her expression was far too lewd and bewitching for such an innocent-looking face. Tasting the woman’s blood, her arms slowly began to move. A simple, light caress from her small hands was all it took to rip the top and bottom off her business attire and send it all fluttering to the asphalt. By the time she removed her lips from the woman’s neck, they were both naked as the day they were born.

She gave the woman another greedy, expectant look. Somewhere in her fit of passion, the woman’s eyes had taken on the same shade of crimson as the girl’s.

“Congratulations,” the girl quietly stated, wiping the blood off her lips with the back of her hand. “You are now my...*little sister*.”

Thus was born the latest in a series of unholy unions—a new inductee into the Immortal’s Sinister Sisterhood...



“HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM...”

Wrapping up the forty-page-or-so manuscript, Kenjiro Toki let out a troubled-sounding groan. Itsuki Hashima, the novelist he served as editor for, was politely sitting across the table from him and searching his face to gauge

his reaction.

This sample was for *The Sinister Sisterhood*, Itsuki's latest novel-series pitch to Toki. It contained an extensive rundown of the story's world setting, its atmosphere, and the personalities of its main cast; and while it was short, it was already a complete package, an entire story arc from beginning to end.

Although this was still a stepping-stone on the way to officially launching a new series, this was no rough work in progress. If anything, it was a real professional job. In fact, among all the treatments Itsuki had pitched to Toki lately, this was unarguably the *sanest* one yet. Unlike *Life with a Little Sister*, Itsuki's last pitch and a novel too divorced from reality to make any sense whatsoever, Toki fully understood what the novel's themes and goals were.

But...

"I dunno, it's..." Toki scrunched up his face. "Kinda run-of-the-mill."

"Run-of-the-mill?" Itsuki replied, eyebrows rising.

"Yeah. I mean, not to get in your face with it, but all you did was take the word *vampire* and replace it with *little sister*. Otherwise, it's just another dime-a-dozen vampire story. We get a few of these vampire-battle novels pretty much every year in our new-writer competition."

"Oh."

"And I'm kinda interested to see where you go with this 'sisterhood' thing, but there's no essential...*reason* to make the woman her little sister instead of a vampire. Nothing unique. There's an idea here, but right now, it's just a simple bit of wordplay. The protagonist is pretty attractive, too, but I feel like he's too perfect to be very engaging. Maybe it was on purpose, but he resembles Sieg from *Sisterly Combat*, so he's not gonna feel too fresh to Hashima fans. His foe's a textbook zillion-year-old goth-loli girl, too, which isn't too original."

Toki had Itsuki's rapt attention for the first part of his calm-toned criticism. But toward the end, he could see his author's hands shaking, before:

"Ahhhhhh, graaahhhhhhh!!"

Toki didn't bat an eye at the howling. "So yeah, like I said at the start... run-of-the-mill."

"Nrrrrgghhhh..." Itsuki visibly winced as he gritted his teeth. "Every time, you bitch at me about how my ideas are insane or my characters are f—

s of nature. Why do you think I held back this time...?!”

“No, that definitely came across.” Toki nodded. “But I think you held back a little too much. You want just the right, comfortable amount of uniqueness. Not too crazy, not too reserved, novel without driving readers away; something that a larger pool of readers can enjoy.”

Itsuki resentfully rolled his eyes, irked at this appraisal.

“Not that I think this treatment is badly done or anything. It’s definitely at the level of quality you’d expect from someone making a living off this...but compared to *Sisterly Combat* or, like, *All About*, which was good enough to score an anime, it’s not really enough for the audience. That’s all I mean.”

These conciliatory words brought a slight smile to Itsuki’s face. “Heh-heh-heh... I see. So it’s a masterpiece that could readily be released if written by any of the random novelists you find on the street, but it’s *just a bit* lacking for someone like me, the savior of the publishing industry and the one keeping the light novel business singlehandedly alive? Well! I guess I see your point, then! That’s a lot for one man to shoulder, I’ll tell you, but I’ll just have to accept it as my fate. What do they call this? Noblesse oblige? The duty of the chosen ones of this modern era? Ah, it’s tough to be nobility sometimes...heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha...!”

Toki heaved a resigned sigh. Despite all the whining, Itsuki seemed to be accepting enough of his appraisal. He was even laughing.

“So anyway, try to rework that treatment a bit. And don’t forget about your *All About* and *Sisterly Combat* obligations, either.”

As Toki stood up and turned to leave the room, the woman accompanying him also rose to her feet.

“...Keep up the good work, Itsuki.”

Miyako Shirakawa, refined college student, nodded at Itsuki as she followed Toki out the door.



“Wow... Being an editor can be tough sometimes, huh?” Miyako asked as they walked back to the editorial department. “You can’t just trash someone’s work. You have to follow it up with a few compliments afterward.”

“Yeah, I guess,” replied Toki with a dry smile. “I have to keep the authors energized and motivated to work. That’s a big part of the job.”

“I see...”

“And really, Itsuki Hashima’s on the easier side of things to work with. You throw him a bone or two, and he revs himself up.”

“Oh, I don’t know if Itsuki’s *that* easy to read...”

She couldn’t help but say it. She knew, after all, that Itsuki was dealing with a multitude of complexities in his mind. Toki belittling him like that put her off a little bit.

“Yeah, maybe not. I mean, he *knows* I’m just buttering him up, so I imagine he’s doing a lot of that on purpose to drum up his inspiration. But either way, if you give me a novelist who’s capable of dialing up his motivation through sheer willpower, I couldn’t ask for much more.”

“He can see that?” Miyako asked, a bit surprised. “So are some authors harder to deal with than that?”

“Oh yeah,” came the immediate reply, a wry smile thrown in to drive the point home. “Lots.”

“Lots...?”

“I imagine you might run into them sooner or later in this business, Miyako...but when you do, be careful.”

“Be careful how...?” Miyako asked with a look of concern. She still had her misgivings about this job, and Toki wasn’t helping.

BOOK PROPOSAL

THE SINISTER SISTERHOOD (tent.)

CONCEPT

An approachable little-sister dark fantasy anybody can get into.

SYNOPSIS

Our world is inhabited by Immortals, people who hide in the darkness out of sight of the world at large. Immortals survive by preying on the blood of young virgins, making them "little sisters" in their "sisterhoods." Van is a young boy whose beloved little sister, Mina, was forced to join one of these sisterhoods at a tender age. To rescue her, and to rid the realm of the Immortal scourge, he becomes a hunter called a Jäger. He fights endlessly for the cause—a cause that brings him to Japan after he learns of a cadre of Immortals there. In Japan, he discovers Misaki Hikawa, a girl who looks exactly like Mina, and before long, their destinies begin to intertwine...

CHARACTERS

[Van Mystique]

A seventeen-year-old young man hunting down Immortals, unbeknownst to the general public.

[Mina Mystique]

Van's sixteen-year-old sister. Forced into a sisterhood and spirited away by an unknown Immortal who took the appearance of a gray-haired young girl. A blond, blue-eyed beauty.

[Misaki Hikawa]

A Japanese high-school teen. Except for her black hair and eyes, she is the spitting image of Mina. She has lost her memories of her younger years; the prestigious Hikawa family took her in ten years ago. Believed to be sixteen.

[Kamira Utsurogi]

An Immortal who wields bewitching magic. Lives the high life with the small army of beautiful girls in her sisterhood. Appears to be a fetching silver-haired young girl, but this is just a magical illusion; in reality, she is an ugly old woman.

[Vlad]

The Immortal who took Van's sister, Mina. Immensely powerful, even by Immortal standards. Looks a bit like Ms. Ono, the accountant, except with gray hair.

The Interview

Miyako Shirakawa was invited to join the team part-time at Gift Publishing's GF Bunko label on a Sunday in early July, right when the first completed pages for the manga version of Itsuki's *All About My Little Sister* were sent over. It all began with an offhand remark from Nayuta—"too bad *you* couldn't be my editor"—and Miyako briskly replying "Yeah, yeah, if I ever get the chance." That was all the impetus Toki needed to make the offer.

Hanging out with authors and editors like Itsuki and Nayuta and Haruto and Toki, as well as helping manga artist Kaiko Mikuniyama with modeling work for the *All About My Little Sister* comic, helped foster within Miyako an interest in the publishing business. It made it too easy to accept the invite; it wasn't until she went home that she realized her only qualification was that she happened to know a few people in the industry. She knew next to nothing about the industry itself.

That made her nervous about the chances of it working at all, but she still saw it as an avenue to self-improvement. Itsuki and Nayuta were living off their writing as a profession and even becoming known for it, while she had just been going through the motions, day after day. In Miyako, that always gave her a sort of inferiority complex—or perhaps a less well-defined sense of gloom about her own life.

This was just part-time, of course, but she figured that if she could work in the same world as Itsuki and his friends and gain a glimpse of the things they got to deal with, maybe that would alter the path of her life a little, too. And it wasn't all wrapped up in her feelings for Itsuki, either. She had had an interest in publishing for a while, and being involved with the manga project was eye-opening in how much joy it brought her. She was looking forward to a lot of it.

Thus, Miyako fell asleep that night, her heart racing with anticipation and

anxiety.



Several days later, Miyako paid a visit to Gift Publishing for her interview. This was the publisher who ran the GF Bunko label her friends were involved with; they also published general literature, comics, and magazines on assorted topics. The building was less than a five-minute walk from Itsuki's apartment. She had passed it countless times, but this was the first time she stopped in.

The entrance had one of those signs outlining what department was on which floor. GF Bunko was on the fifth floor of the ten-floor building.

"Um..."

Nervously, she told the secretary at the front desk that she was here for a GF Bunko job interview. She was instructed to report to the fourth floor, so she walked over to wait for the elevator. There were five men waiting with her, all wearing lanyards with company IDs on them, but none of them wearing what she'd call business attire. They must have been editors, too. She had only met Toki so far, and he was always either in a suit or a dress shirt and tie, so she assumed editors tended to go for the "company man" look a lot. Maybe Toki was the weird one, after all.

Toki himself was waiting for her on the fourth floor.

"Thanks for coming in, Ms. Shirakawa."

"Oh, no, thank you for inviting me!" She bowed nervously.

"Right this way," he replied as he used his ID to unlock the door to the hallway beyond. "Our editor in chief will be interviewing you. He might look kind of mean, but he's totally normal, so don't worry!"

"O-okay..."

He seemed to be joking a little, but that stilted reply was still the best Miyako could manage.

"Yeah," Toki said, still trying to assuage her fears, "I called this an interview, but it's really just a formality. You're gonna be just fine... probably."

As he put it, Toki's recommendation had all but landed the job for

Miyako already—connections can be powerful things, after all. They had already agreed on the job's conditions and such via e-mail, so all that remained was this formality of an interview. Miyako knew that. But speaking directly to the editor in chief behind probably hundreds of published books still made her tense up.

"Here we are," Toki said as he stopped and knocked on a door reading CONFERENCE ROOM 4. "Come in."

"...Thanks."

The room was about 150 square feet in all, with two long desks in the middle. The walls were decorated with posters advertising Gift Publishing releases, situated at evenly spaced intervals, including the house's monthly release list and a promo picture for the *Chevalier of the New World* anime.

Sitting in the middle of one desk was a lone man, well-built and dressed in a borderline tacky suit made of what looked like gold lamé. He had a notably thick beard, wrinkles between his eyebrows, and the sharpened gaze of a predator on the savanna. The first phrase that popped into Miyako's mind was *Mafia boss*. Toki warned her he looked "kind of mean," but that was a bit of an understatement. He was terrifying.

She stood there, withering in her awkwardness, when the man addressed her in a deep, husky voice.

"...Sit down."

"S-sure!" she squeaked as she followed his orders, while Toki took a seat next to the man.

"My name's Satoshi Godo, editor in chief of GF Bunko."

"Um, g-good to meet you!"

"Mm," he replied, looking Miyako in the eye. "So can we get down to business?"



“C-certainly!” She nodded. This was starting to feel more like an inquisition than an interview.

“I heard that you were in the same year as Itsuki Hashima back when he attended college.”

“Oh, that’s right. Um, Itsu—er, Mr. Hashima left in his first year, but... yeah.”

“And you are acquainted with Kani and Fuwa as well?”

“I am. We hang out a lot together.”

“Hang out?”

“Um...like, board games, and RPGs, and stuff.”

“Mm. A lot of editors here like tabletop games, too. Maybe you’ll have something to talk about, huh?”

Godo’s voice was just as deep and growly as before, but he was speaking so casually that Miyako could feel the anxiety dissipate.

“By the way, Ms. Shirakawa, I heard that you helped out a great deal with the comic version of *All About My Little Sister*?”

The anxiety was back. Miyako’s face tensed up.

“Oh, um, it wasn’t anything that big, ha-ha-ha...”

“No need to be modest,” Godo said, drowning out her nervous laugh. “Her editor at *Gifted* magazine said that Mikuniyama sends her warmest thanks to you.”

“Oh, ohhh, okay, ha-ha...”

“How did you help her, exactly?”

Well, she had been stripped down, then poked and prodded across every inch of her body so her boobs could be rendered with a master artist’s careful precision in the comic pages Kaiko produced.

...Probably couldn’t say that. “Well, um...”

“I mean, I don’t know anything at all about manga. I just gave her some advice here and there.”

“Ah. Well, that’s fine, then. By the way, what titles from our label do you like?”

“Um... Well, I have a thing for Itsu—for Mr. Hashima’s *All About* and *Sisterly Combat*.”

“Mm-hmm. What else?”

“Well... I read *Ono’s Sister* and *Oregaimo* [short for *Is It Wrong That My Little Sister Is This Cute, As Expected?*], too.”

Two more Itsuki Hashima books.

“You like any authors apart from Hashima?”

“Ah...”

Miyako thought for a moment. She had read all of Itsuki’s published books for starters, but there was no other GF Bunko title in particular she could point out as a favorite.

“...I’m sorry, I haven’t read a lot of GF Bunko titles.”

This made one of Godo’s eyebrows twitch. It seemed, in her mind at least, that he was scowling at her a little now. *Maybe that wasn’t the best thing to say...*

“...How about Kani’s and Fuwa’s work?”

“...I’m sorry, I haven’t read it.”

“Aha. So which novels outside of the GF Bunko label do you like?”

“Well, I like *Index* [*A Certain Magical Index*] and *Irregular* [*The Irregular at Magic High School*] and *Toradora!* and—”

The interview continued with questions about her favorite novels and manga and anime, but since Miyako had only taken an interest in those after meeting Itsuki, her knowledge was limited to fairly recent titles, megahits anyone would know, and shows from her childhood. It wasn’t like she had become a very deep fan of any title she mentioned, so whenever she was asked what made her like a particular series, she had trouble piecing together a coherent reply.

Man... Someone like me, wanting to join an edit team? I’m totally blowing this...

“...All right. Can you start next month?”

The sudden question stunned Miyako into silence.

“Huh? You mean...I’m hired?”

“Of course,” Godo replied with a broad nod.

“I told you,” added Toki with a light smile, “this is a formality. The boss here just wanted a chance to talk to someone younger than him.”

“Oh... But I mean, seriously, I hardly know anything about the industry...”

“That’s not a problem. We don’t need our part-timers to know a lot of

nerd stuff. We want *sincerity*. And talking with you, I know you're a sincere woman."

"Thank you very much...!" Miyako cried, visibly gladdened.

"You bet. See you next month."

She smiled and nodded. "Absolutely! I'll look forward to it!"



"You did good, KenKen," Godo rumbled, still seated. "Hell of a woman you found."

"Yeah, I think so," replied Toki. "She's really serious about this."

"...What do you think's the most important thing a part-timer needs, KenKen?"

"Sincerity, isn't it?"

"You dumbass," he breathed, wincing at Toki.

"...Didn't you just say that, boss?"

"No, dumbass," came the calm reply. "That was just for show."

"So what's most...important, then?"

"Looks."

"Looks?!"

Godo gave Toki a reassuring nod. "You aren't gonna give a part-timer any super-specialized stuff—or skilled work or whatever. You hire someone who keeps themselves looking good, and that helps boost morale among the authors and editors. I got no complaint at all about her on that front. Probably one of the best part-time hires I've made yet."

Toki squinted at him. "...That'd count as harassment if you said that to any of our female staff, boss."

"I know," his boss replied.

But neither Godo nor Toki realized yet just how vastly, and how generously, Miyako Shirakawa, the woman hired on for her connections and her looks, would contribute to their company.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Have you guys ever had a part-time job?



I've never worked below someone else.
Not in my life.

My first job is working for Ashley, I guess.
I helped my mom with some of her side jobs
at home when I was kid, but...



Never.

Never for me, either.



I worked at a video rental store, a game store,
and a diner during college.

A little bit here and there since high school.
At a convenience store, at a café, at a gas
station... I did a little home tutoring work, too.



One-off day jobs? All the time, sure.

Paper delivery, night traffic guidance...
A few other things, too.



Oh, I have experience, but not the kind I can
talk about in public.

Chihiro Hashima's Lunch Break

It was a balmy afternoon in mid-July, near the end of the first semester for Chihiro Hashima's second year of high school. She had gone out for lunch with six or so friends, and afterward, they had invited her to go out and hit the beach sometime during summer break.

"The beach? Isn't the clam-hunting season over?"

Stunned silence fell upon the group, before everyone burst into laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha! What're you talking about, Chi-hee?"

"Wow, Chi-hee! You're probably the only girl in this school who hears the word *beach* and thinks about collecting clams!"

Chihiro raised an eyebrow. "Well...um, fishing, then? I've never gone fishing before..."

"He" was still posing as a younger brother to Itsuki and their mutual companions, but at school, *she* was just another part of the female student body. That being said, though, this school didn't have a dress code, and Chihiro had yet to wear a blouse or skirt to her classes. She opted for a casual, loose-fitting short-sleeved shirt and shorts for today.

"You're, like, the most non-girly girl I know, Chi-hee..."

Chihiro scowled at this appraisal. "Non-girly...? I don't think so. I'm a really good cook... I make my own lunches and everything."

"Sure, yeah, that's pretty impressive. I could never do that. Plus, all the simmered vegetables you do are supergood."

Her friend took that cue to reach over and pluck a piece of simmered lotus root from Chihiro's bento box. Her lunches were generally last night's leftovers with a few extras. Today it was grilled mackerel, chicken with simmered vegetables, a rolled omelette, pickled cucumber and eggplant, and brown rice—a rather colorless meal, but a filling one. At Itsuki's place, she often prepared chicken, fried rice, paella, and other favorites among girls and

the young. But she made dinner at home, too, and her stepfather had a preference for traditional Japanese cuisine, so that was the shape her lunches often took the next day.

“All right, I know you’re a good cook,” her friend said, chewing on the lotus root. “But *this* stuff doesn’t really scream ‘girliness,’ y’know, Chi-hee? It’s more, like, **housewifeyness**.”

“Housewifeyness...?!”

This shocked Chihiro. She never deliberately set out to be the typical popular teenage girl, but she didn’t think it was anything like...*that*. Being called a housewife at high-school age would offend anyone.

“Well,” she timidly countered, “what does girliness even mean anyway?”

“I mean, like, basically, **whether you can get guys or not**.”

“Wow, that’s pretty blunt...”

The rest of the group nodded.

“But it’s true.” “Yeah, it’s true.” “Pretty much.”

“And you should go to the beach, too, Chi-hee! Not for clam hunting, but I guess you *would* kind of be fishing for something...”

“Yeah! Fishing for boys!”

“Let’s go out and have ’em hit on us! That’s how a girl *needs* to spend summer break!”

Chihiro looked around at her friends. “Oh, I dunno...”

“Although, I’m not really into those kinda guys anyway...whether they’re hot or not.”

“Yeah. If you’re gonna hang with someone, it’s gotta be someone *real*.”

“We’re not going so we can play around with guys who hit on us. We’re going so we can say, like, ‘Ooh, he totally hit on me! ♥’ It’s about testing your attractiveness as a girl and getting experience.”

“Exactly. Seeing whether you’re popular or not. It can really boost your self-esteem, you know?”

Chihiro giggled at the oddly scientific approach her friends took to human relationships. “Hmm... I dunno if I’m that interested, really...”

“Aw, just go to the beach. You can ignore all that stuff if you want.”

“Yeah, yeah. You never get to play around much, Chi-hee. Let’s go have

some fun out for a change!”

She gave them a smile. “Yeah. All right, I guess I’ll go.”

“Great! Plus, my folks run an inn, so we can all stay for free.”

“Oh, man, we can stay up all night!”

“Whoa,” a surprised Chihiro interrupted. “You mean we’d sleep over?”

“Of course!” Her friends nodded.

“Wow... I’m not sure...”

“What, is that bad? Are your parents gonna say no?”

“No...but I got chores to do, and I gotta make food for my brother...”

“Oh yeah, doesn’t your bro work for a publisher, Chi-hee?”

“Yeah, um... Yeah.”

She hadn’t expressly stated to her friends that her brother wrote books. Itsuki Hashima wasn’t a pen name, so they’d be able to track down his works with one net search. Not that her brother’s work embarrassed her; it was just that people would think Itsuki was weird, writing little-sister trope fiction even though he had a real-life little sister. “Working for a publisher” wasn’t exactly a lie, either.

“I heard that if you work for a publisher, you have to sleep overnight at the office, like, all the time.”

“...Yeah, I think that’s true.”

As far as the editor Kenjiro Toki told her, that really *did* come with the territory.

“Wow, that sucks,” her friend said, wincing.

Chihiro earnestly nodded. “Yeah, I think it does. He keeps such an irregular schedule, and when he’s really busy, he hardly has time to sleep at all.”

“Oh, man, that sounds like the workplace from hell.”

“Yeah...”

Piecing together everything Toki and Itsuki told her, Chihiro couldn’t come up with any other conclusion.

“Hey, does your brother have a girlfriend or anything?”

“Um, well, there’s this girl who stops by his apartment all the time, at least...”

“Oh, so why don’t you have her cook for him instead?”

“Hmm... I don’t think she has any more life skills than he does. I cook a lot for her, too.”

Recalling Nayuta made Chihiro smile in embarrassment as her friends looked on with sympathy.

“You sure got it hard, Chi-hee...”

“You’re like a hero or something...”

“Of a tragedy...”

“It—it’s not *that* bad, guys! I like doing that kind of stuff anyway! But I think staying away overnight ought to be fine.”

Everyone smiled at the semi-frantic Chihiro.

“Really? Sweet!”

“And get a really cute swimsuit for it, too, okay? Not, like, the ones the school gives us.”

“Oh yeah, for sure,” Chihiro replied, a degree more frantic now. She had figured the school swimsuit was good enough.

“But, you know, if your brother works for a publisher, d’you think he gets to hang out with Nayuta Kani and stuff?”

“Huh?!”

The unexpected name-drop made Chihiro flail in her seat. There was no way she could finger Nayuta as the girl who “stops by” her brother’s place.

“Um, hmm, I don’t know. I’ll have to ask.”

“Kani?” one of her friends asked. “Who’s that?”

“You don’t know her? She’s, like, super-popular.”

“Yeah, I read the whole *Landscape* series! It’s this line of really awesome novels.”

“Yeah, *really* awesome.”

“Hmm... I didn’t think *you* guys read fiction.”

“Well, it’s, like, ‘light’ novels or something, so they’re really easy to read, but super-deep, too. It really gets you!”

“I read a couple of VOCALOID novels. Is it kinda like that?”

“Um, yeah, the art, at least. Totally different inside, though. It’s more, like, realistic?”

“Huh. Okay. Lemme borrow one later.”

“Sure.”

“And Nayuta Kani’s still in high school, too, right?”

“She was during her first novel, but I don’t think so now, no. Plus, like, you know they make up that stuff anyway. No way someone in high school can write like *that*. I bet it’s, like, some middle-aged woman who wrote fancy

novels and thought she'd try a different voice as a 'teen writer.'"

"Yeah, but how can someone in their forties or whatever write like that? She writes like she really understands how teens feel. That's what makes her such a genius. Whether she's lying about her backstory or not, she can't be *that* much older than us."

"Mmm, maybe. You know how she sometimes name-drops super-old games and stuff? Like *Spelunker*. You'd have to be alive when the NES was, like, current to get some of those references."

...Her friends almost never talked about novels like this. Watching them carry on about Nayuta Kani made Chihiro realize all over again how amazing Kani really was. A bead of cold sweat ran down the side of her head.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

What extracurricular activities did you do at school?



My favorite extracurricular was going home!



I didn't do anything, either.



Me too...



I played badminton in middle school, joined the computer club in high school, and got into the tabletop RPG group in college.



Karate, tennis, and basketball. We covered that in Volume 2.



I was in the handicrafts club in middle and high school. Right now, nothing.



I was on my middle-school basketball team, but I spent most of that time on the bench.



Baseball in middle school, soccer in high school. In college, I was in this club involved with manga, games, and all that other nerd stuff... We cribbed the club's name from a certain pretty well-known manga title.



In grade school, I did tea ceremony and flower arrangement. In college... I'm not telling.

The New Publishing Gig

Generally speaking, the official office hours for part-timers at the GF Bunko department of Gift Publishing were from nine to five, Monday through Friday, with an hour break for lunch. Most other publishers had the same rule. A high-school diploma was the only qualification you needed, and the work pool consisted of people with multiple part-time jobs, students going to night or online school, housewives, and so on. This pool was paid by the day, and when Miyako converted that into hours, she found that it paid better than the convenience store and café she worked at, but less than the tutoring gig she held for just a brief time.

The responsibilities associated with the job could be summarized with the word *miscellaneous*. This included a wide variety of shipping work (author proofs, sample copies, contracts, merchandise, and much, much more), photocopying of manuscripts and materials, marking out borderlines on proofs, getting approvals from this or that department, organizing and collating reader feedback forms, and so forth. Many editors arrived at work late in the day, so the part-timers also ran phone duty in the morning for them. They could also be asked by the editors for quick shopping trips and other favors, as well as to help out with events (award ceremonies, autograph tours, fan shows) and the like.

In the case of Gift Publishing, each department had one part-timer to work with, with another brought on for new-writer awards and other busy events. GF Bunko had hired an extra to aid in handling the rookie prizes and their corporate booth at Comiket in a week and change, so Miyako's contract was effective only for August and September, when the university was on break.

“Right...”

Mentally reciting the job description Toki gave her, Miyako gave herself a reassuring nod and headed up to the fifth floor. It was 9:05 AM on August 1—

the first day of her new job—and since the interview had been held one floor down, this would be the first time she'd set foot in the editorial department.

Using the part-time key on her lanyard, she unlocked the steel door that led to the edit room and slowly opened it.

“Hello,” she said softly as she stepped inside—and felt her foot lightly kicking against something. Flustered, she looked down to find Kenjiro Toki on the floor, lying faceup.

“Mr. Toki?!” she half shouted in fear.

“Mrrnng...”

His eyes were closed, and his face looked stern as he half groaned, half snored down there.

“Oh... Um, are you asleep...?”

She gave him an incredulous look. Why was he on the floor? She bent down, trying to wake him up.

“Um, Mr. Toki...?”

“You can just leave that there,” a cold female voice snapped.

Miyako turned to the side and saw a single woman, seated right at the center of a neat row of desks. Nobody else was in the room.

“Once more people show up, I’m sure someone will kick him awake by accident. It happens all the time with KenKen.”

“Oh, it does...?” Miyako looked down at Toki again, unsure how to take this woman’s advice, before looking back up. This coworker appeared to be in her late twenties and was dressed in a pair of wrinkled pants, a blouse, and black-rimmed glasses. She was pretty, with kind of childish features, but the effect was ruined by the deep rings under her eyes and the exhaustion on her face.

“...You the new part-timer?”

“Yes!” Miyako bowed to her. “My name’s Miyako Shirakawa. I’m starting work here today.”



“Yeah... KenKen told me about you. You’re friends with Kani and Hashima?”

“Um, yes.” She nodded as she circled around Toki’s body and toward the woman.

“Hmm...” The woman sized her up, as if examining the fruit in the produce department. “My name’s Yamagata. I edit for Kani.”

“Oh, I see!”

Miyako shot a glance at the ID card hanging around her neck.

Kirara Yamagata
GF Bunko Editorial

“Um...”

It was a cute name, but Miyako wasn’t sure if Kirara would take that as a compliment, so she fell silent instead as Yamagata let out a lifeless yawn.

“...Have, uh, have you been here since yesterday?”

“Uh-huh,” Yamagata replied, eyes half shut. “A manuscript that was due yesterday never showed up, so I’ve been waiting for it all night... KenKen was, too, but *his* submission got wrapped up around three AM.”

She shot a spiteful glare at the passed-out Toki on the floor.

“W-wow... Sounds tough.”

“Ah, editors deal with it all the time,” Yamagata replied. Her face said she was resigned to her fate, but the flames of resentment were burning in her eyes. “Not that I’m willing to forgive it, but...”

“Um, by the way,” Miyako asked, carefully choosing her words, “what’s this manuscript you’ve been waiting for...?”

“Kani’s.”

Miyako’s face tensed up. She suspected as much.

“She isn’t responding to e-mails, of course, and I can’t get her on the phone. She wasn’t at the hotel room we use for deadline slackers, and she wasn’t at Hashima’s place, either...”

She watched Yamagata mumble on as her eyes glazed over. *Huh*, Miyako thought. *Would she be mad if she knew we were screwing around together yesterday?*

Nayuta had actually invited her over the previous afternoon. They caught

a movie, went shopping for a bit, ate dinner, and sang karaoke until late at night. The girl was full of energy in the karaoke booth, singing the opening songs from multiple *PreCure* seasons in a row in her passionate, if off-key, voice. When Miyako inquired about her work status during dinner, she had smiled and said, “Oh, noooooo problem, nya-ha-ha,” but she thought she saw Nayuta’s face tense up a bit at the question.

So she must’ve been using me as a distraction while she totally blew her deadline...

“...What?”

“Oh, um, nothing,” Miyako stammered at the suspicious-looking Yamagata.

“Mm,” she replied, not looking very engaged with the world. Letting out a half-yawned sigh, she picked up the phone. Nobody answered after thirty seconds, so she angrily put down the receiver and let out a deeper, more pained sigh.

“...Um,” Miyako dared to ask, “is Naya’s manuscript in that much trouble?”

“...Do you know what the on-sale date is for Kani’s next book?”

“Uh...no.”

“It’s this month.”

“This month...?”

The release dates for GF Bunko titles always hovered around the eighteenth of each month. Were they in that much of a hurry?

“So you still have two weeks or so, right...?”

“Oh, you don’t know a thing, do you...?” Yamagata gave her a look of fairly obvious disgust. “We can’t put a book on sale right after the writer sends us the file. There’s editing, there’s proofs, there’s checking for any problematic content. You check it over and over again for typos and missing words. Then you hand it back to the author, she makes her own corrections and checks the edits themselves, and *then* it finally heads to the printer.”

“Um...but even if you do all that checking, it still seems like a lot of stuff makes it through to the final books...”

Even with Miyako’s relatively shallow experience with reading for pleasure, it felt to her like every book had at least a few typos or other weird spots. The ages of characters varying from page to page; a cast member’s name appearing without warning when they weren’t supposed to be in the

scene; misspelled terminology; a climactic scene ruined by some goofy mistake.

“Well, editors are only human, so there’s no way you can catch everything.” Yamagata’s voice sped up a bit as she pleaded her case. “You’ll miss stuff no matter how careful you are, so if you keep chipping away at editorial’s time in the schedule, you know what’s gonna happen. It varies from writer to writer, but most manuscripts we receive are in pretty crappy shape. Kani practically never goes back to read her own writing, so it’s really brutal with her. If Kani’s fans ever read one of her first drafts, they’d probably pass out from the shock. That’s the kind of thing we have to polish up and make into a salable product in what limited time we have. And of *course* when a reader finds a single typo, it’s all like ‘Do your job, editors’ and ‘We’re paying real money for this crap’ and...*ughhh*.”

Miyako forced out a smile as Yamagata audibly gritted her teeth.

“Yeah, that... That sounds rough.”

Yamagata heaved another sigh. “It *is* rough. But that’s my job! It’s not the readers’ fault that we have to go through this. You can’t blame them for slamming us...” Her voice fell to a whisper as she spoke, like she was reciting a mantra to herself. “...But anyway, I’m in a very dangerous situation. And we’re doing the Obon dance right now, too...”

This was an unfamiliar phrase to Miyako. “The Obon dance?”

“You have the Obon holiday at the start of August. The printers close up for a week straight. So we gotta move up the schedules for all that prep work to account for that. There’s the New Year’s dance and the Golden Week dance, too.”

“Ohh...”

“If you’re an editor, extended national holidays like that are nothing but a menace. I wish the government would do away with multiday holidays for good...,” she moaned with heartfelt loathing.

“So...what happens if Naya’s submission doesn’t come in on time?”

“Well, of course, it’d mean...we’d have to...*ngh*...delay it...”

To Yamagata, the mere concept seemed like unspeakable anguish.

“...Um, not to play devil’s advocate, but is delaying a book that bad?”

It was a simple question that popped into Miyako’s mind. Yamagata answered it with a pained sort of shock, as if to say *What the hell is this girl talking about?*

“Er, I mean, if the schedule’s that tight, that means more mistakes make it into the book, right? So why not delay it so you have the time to work out all the bugs and make it a better book?”

“...Yeah. You might have a point.” She paused. “But...there’s a lot more people involved with publishing a book than you think. If the book’s delayed, that creates a lot of hardship on all kinds of people. We’ll disappoint the readers looking forward to it, of course, but then there’s the distributors, the bookstores, the printer, the proofreaders, the sales and marketing people... It’s not just the writer’s problem; it affects people’s trust in this entire company. And if it’s a bestselling author, that makes the impact even worse.”

Yamagata’s eyes grew heavy again.

“...And so, I’d have to go around and apologize to every single person involved. Me, the editor. And once I run *that* gauntlet, I have to deal with the EIC and company management yelling at me. *Me!* Not the dumbass kid who can’t produce a damn novel for me, but *me*, for some reason! Can you think of anything more unfair?! Why is this always happening to *me*?!” she shouted, slamming her fist against her desk. Then, in silence, she chewed at her nails a bit...then slumped back in her seat. “...But no, no, I understand... This is my job... Just let some teenage girl ruin your life. What could be easier...?”

She sighed and picked up the receiver again. No answer. Miyako could hardly bear to watch anymore.

“Ahh... She just isn’t replying to me...”

“...Um, would you like me to try contacting Nayu?”

Yamagata turned toward Miyako. “...All right. Try it,” she said in a drained voice.

“Okay!”

Miyako took her phone out of her bag and sent Nayuta a quick *You awake?* message. The word **Read** appeared next to it several seconds later.

“Oh, she read my message.”

The bloodshot eyes of her editor opened wide.

“*What the...?!*”

Then Nayuta sent a message—a sticker of some kind of weird costume character smiling and giving a thumbs-up. Yamagata stared at it for several seconds, her eyes almost popping out of her sockets.

“Can... Can you ask where she is for me...?”

“Sure...”

Where are you? she typed.

At the hotel, came the immediate reply.

“God *damn* her...!!”

Yamagata began to visibly shake, her face twisted into an expression that looked nearly demonic. She took a breath to gather herself.

“You were...Shirakawa, right? Can I ask you to visit Kani and see how her manuscript is going?”

“Sure... By myself, though?”

The editor nodded with a weak smile. “...She wouldn’t be too happy if I went with you. I suppose she has this hate-hate relationship with me now...”

“Oh...”

As good or bad as their relationship was going, was this really something to ask a part-timer on her first day? Miyako wasn’t too sure, but faced with the spiritually drained Yamagata, she couldn’t drum up the courage to ask.



Twenty minutes later, Miyako was at Nayuta’s hotel room, smiling in the buff like she always did.

“Why are you here so early in the morning, Myaa?”

“Oh, I just had something to...ask, you know...”

“Well, go ahead and take off your clothes, please.”

“Um, okay.”

With a practiced hand, Nayuta removed Miyako’s clothing. The whole process was over in a flash. Then Nayuta went to lie down faceup on the bed, smiling in her self-satisfied way.

“Nya-ha-ha! Now I got Myaa here!”

Miyako sat down naked next to her. Then she blinked, shooting back up to her feet.

“...Wait, I’m not here to talk to you all day!”

She always ended up naked whenever she visited this room, so in Miyako’s mind, chatting at the hotel was now firmly associated with stripping bare.

Nayuta looked up at her, a tad put off. “Huh? Are you on an errand or something?”

“I told you yesterday that my first day part-timing at GF Bunko was today. Right?”

“Right. Good luck with that, Myaa!” she said, playfully rolling around on the bed.

“Thanks,” Miyako replied, looking as serious as possible. “So, um, this is my first job.”

“Uh-huuuh?”

“So I guess your deadline was yesterday, Nayuta?”

Nayuta awkwardly turned her head aside. “Nyaa...”

“Ms. Yamagata’s been staying up since yesterday waiting for you. When do you think you’ll be done?”

“Mmm...” Nayuta pursed her lips before slowly, languidly opening them. “There’s a lot left, so it’s going to be a little bit. I just... I don’t know; I’m not feeling it.”

“Not feeling it...?”

“Yeah. That’s why I invited you over, so I could maybe rev myself back up. And it really worked. I totally recharged my batteries yesterday, so I figured I’d go back to the hotel and just zip through the rest.”

“So...did you?”

“No, I was tired out, so I went right to sleep. My spirit was in maximum overdrive...but my body was like ‘nuh-uh!’ (·ω<)”

She stuck her tongue out in her best effort at a “tee-hee” pose.

“Yeah, um...” Miyako let out a dejected sigh. “Can you just ‘zip through’ it right now, please? Your energy’s back up after sleeping, isn’t it?”

“Well, about that... I *had* recharged my spirit gauge, but all that sleep just knocked it straight back down to zero.”

“Okay, look...”

“So let’s go out and have some fun so I can charge it back up again!”

“No.” Miyako almost snarled at the smiling Nayuta.

“Aww...”

“Don’t ‘aww’ me. You can play all you want to once you’re done writing.”

“Nyaaa... Well, I guess you’re right...”

Ever so reluctantly, Nayuta rolled over to the nightstand and picked up her

phone.

“Okay, Myaa, lemme put my head on your lap.”

“Huh?”

“I wanna recharge myself while I write. You’re my power source.”

“How’s *that* work...? I mean, if it’ll make you do it, then fine, but...”

Miyako sat back down on the bed, slapping a knee. “Come on.”

“Nya-ha-ha!”

Placing the back of her head on Miyako’s thighs, she began tapping away at her phone screen. It made Miyako wonder.

“Are you writing on that phone?”

“Uh-huh,” Nayuta said offhandedly with a nod.

“Really...? You aren’t playing a game or something?”

“No, really.” She gave Miyako a disgruntled look and showed her the screen. It displayed a text editor filled with her work in progress.

“Oh, you are...”

“Hee-hee! I can write with just about anything. A computer, a palmtop, a phone, pencil and paper... And it’s just about the same speed across all of them.”

“Huh.” Miyako squinted at the proud Nayuta. “Impressive...but if you have to be naked to write, I don’t see how useful that is.”

“Hee-hee! Your thighs are so comfy, Myaa.”

“Yeah, great, thanks.”



It was with slow, measured strokes that Nayuta began tapping away at her phone, and in time, the emotion drained away from her face, her blue eyes focused solely on the screen. Miyako couldn't see it from her angle, but she definitely spotted the supersonic speeds her finger was now moving at. She was in full writing mode now.

Taking care not to disrupt her, Miyako reached for her own phone and sent a message to Yamagata.

Looks like she'll have it finished soon. She's writing on her phone, so don't contact her.

After a few moments: All right. Thanks.



Nayuta wrapped up around two hours later. She briskly attached it to an e-mail and sent it off to Yamagata—no body text, nothing in the subject line.

“Good work, Nayu.”

“Hyaaaah...”

Nayuta erupted in a self-satisfied yawn as she tossed her phone away, head still on Miyako's lap. Then she lifted up her arms and began kneading Miyako's breasts.

“Whoa?! What're you doing?!”

“Hee-heeeee. Chargin' you back up, Myaa.”

“Ugh...”

She sighed but allowed Nayuta to do whatever she wanted, patting her head as she did her work and focusing her eyes. It wasn't a bad sensation.

“Well, thanks to you, I'm all done. Too bad *you* couldn't be my editor.”

“I'm just a temp, pretty much.” Miyako grinned a bit, then lowered her voice. “But...what don't you like about Yamagata, Nayu?”

“Huh?” came the quiet reply. “I don't hate her or anything.”

“No? Then why didn't you just contact her?”

“Mmm, 'cause she's annoying. She'll just needle me for my submission. It's not like chatting with my editor's gonna make me finish any faster.”

“But you don’t know that, do you? Maybe talking with her could give you some good ideas.”

“Mmm... I dunno...”

There was a trace of self-doubt on Nayuta’s face.

“Is it, like...you have trouble trusting her?”

“Not really.” Nayuta closed her eyes, and the emotion left her voice. “It’s not a matter of trust, really. I don’t have anything against my editor, and it’s not that I don’t trust her. I’m just...not expecting much from her.”

Not expecting much. In a way, Miyako thought, that was even crueler than hating or mistrusting her. It was the same as dismissing her out of hand, really. Their relationship wasn’t even worthy of “like” or “hate.”

“Personally speaking, as long as my editor corrects my typos and stuff, that’s enough for me. Seeing Itsuki and Mr. Toki carry on all day like they do... To be honest, I don’t really understand that. If Ms. Yamagata harangued me about this and that the way Mr. Toki seems to do, I’d probably just want her to get out of my way.”

Miyako had nothing to say. There was no advice an average person like her could offer Nayuta Kani, a genius in a gift-wrapped package.



That night, at a traditional *izakaya* bar near the editorial office, the staff held a combination welcome party for Miyako and general post-work boozathon.

Eight members of the GF Bunko staff were on hand, along with Miyako. The edit team had another part-timer on staff, a twenty-three-year-old woman who’d been working for GF for the past year or so as she looked for a more permanent career, but she was never one to go to these things, apparently. “Sorry I can’t be there for your welcome,” she said in apology, before adding a whispered “...Be careful!” at the end.

Once everyone had their drinks, editor in chief Godo, seated adjacent to Miyako, stood up.

“Okay... Well, let me introduce Miyako Shirakawa to you all once more. Starting today, we’ll be seeing her on a regular basis. And as you all probably know by now, on her very first day, she managed the incredible feat of

extracting a completed manuscript from Nayuta Kani herself...!”

“Whoaaa!”

“Seriously?”

“Daaang!”

The cheers and applause from the audience seemed honestly heartfelt to Miyako.

“So here’s to a new hire that I think we can definitely count on. Ready? Cheers!”

The editors clinked their glasses with their nearby neighbors and got straight down to the business of drinking. Miyako played along, taking a gulp from her draft beer. The chill from the beer, along with the carbonation, filled her mouth and ran down her throat. Itsuki and Haruto always popped open a lot of unique, tasty beers from overseas whenever they hung out, but Miyako still had an affinity for the good old lager beer drunk most often in Japan, especially in hot summers. It went great with the small cup of cubed tuna stew served to everyone at the table as an appetizer.

“Mmm! Not a bad drinker.” Watching Miyako chug down half her glass with one swig, the adjacent Godo flashed her a threatening, mafia boss–style grin over his sake. “You drink a lot of beer?”

“Well, kind of... Fuwa brings a lot of imported beer over, so...”

“Aha. What about sake?”

“Um... I like it a lot, actually.”

“Mm-hmm...hee-hee...”

That reply seemed to please Godo even further, but it made Miyako break into a cold sweat. The wider and deeper his smile, the scarier he looked.

“...You want a sake cup?” he asked, offering her one.

“...Oh, sure, thank you.”

A selection of sashimi had just arrived at the table, so she leaped at the opportunity. Godo filled the cup as she grabbed one of the tuna cubes in her bowl and took in a mouthful of chilled sake. A faint sweetness and acidity spread across her tongue. She could feel the aroma of high-quality rice rising up from her mouth to her nose.

“Ooh... This is good,” she commented honestly. She had noticed, as of late, that she both enjoyed alcoholic beverages and had a decently high tolerance for them. Whenever she was drinking with Itsuki and Haruto, or with her university buddies for that matter, she was still fully conscious even

after other people passed out or got wasted, and she never got hungover.

Suddenly, Godo bowed his head at her. “You really saved our asses today. Thank you. I really mean it.”

“Oh, no,” the bashful Miyako replied. “All I did was go to Nayu’s room and have her finish that book up.”

“Heh... You have no idea what kind of monumental feat you just pulled off. We were all but expecting to delay it... I wasn’t anticipating such a last-minute miracle.” His grin was almost maniacal at this point.

“Um,” Miyako began, “does Nayu’s writing schedule always fall out of whack like this?”

“On the deadline-blowing scale, Kani is basically Satan. We pretty much always miss the real Deadline every time.”

The Deadline, unlike the normal deadlines put in place to allow for a little breathing room, was a border that, if crossed, guaranteed a painful sales delay.

“What’s the...deadline-blowing scale?”

“We rate authors on a scale of one to five based on how well they stick to deadlines. If you’re a wonderful person who submits your manuscripts a month or more ahead of when you need to, that’s the Angel level. Fuwa is an Angel.”

“Huh.”

“If you aren’t as fast as an Angel but always submit before the regular deadline, you’re at Knight level. That’s where most of society lies, but for some reason, you don’t see this much with writers. The majority are in the next level, Peasant—that’s when you blow the first deadline, but make it in by the second or third, generally between a few days and two weeks of the original one. Then, if you stick it out until the *Deadline* every time, that makes you a Demon. Hashima hangs around that level.”

“Okay...”

Miyako recalled how Toki had dragged him into that basement room at the end of one recent project.

“But the worst of the worst are the people who always, *always*, blow right through the big Deadline, no matter how much time you put into their schedule. That’s a Satan. The word *deadline* isn’t even in their dictionary. They are the release-lineup apocalypse. They’re such a delay-triggering risk, it’s hard to even assign release dates to them, so figuring out when to bring

on the illustrator and designer is another enormous hassle. And normally, we'd cut these delinquent authors the first chance we have, but it's *always* the biggest bestsellers, the people your label can't do without, that turn into Satans on you. Maybe it's having enough money that not putting out a book doesn't affect you so much anymore. I don't know."

"Sounds like quite a headache."

"It can be. Also, sometimes you have what're called Fallen Angels. These are the ones who keep submitting volumes before you even set deadlines for them, faster than any normal editor can cope with. A real famous example is K—ma K—chi over at D—ki Bunko."

"Whoa..."

Whether this was really useful or not, Miyako appreciated hearing this insider talk.

"So what that means is, on your first mission ever, *you killed Satan*, you know what I mean? I've got to know what you did to achieve that."

"Well, honestly, I didn't do much of anything. All I did was promise her we could go out and have some fun once she finished."

Godo observed her intently but said no more. Which was good. Because Miyako really didn't want to go into the whole resting-on-my-naked-lap thing, if she could help it.



Even with the final train out of the neighborhood due to arrive, the drinking party showed no signs of wrapping up. In fact, everyone was so well hammered that time was no longer even a minor concern. Kenjiro Toki, after pulling an all-nighter twenty-four hours ago, got smashed almost immediately.

Godo, meanwhile, was talking a mile a minute as he continued at the same measured sake-drinking pace. Miyako tried to lend an ear to him, nodding and giving an "uh-huh" now and then, but eventually he started repeating himself, prattling on even when Miyako excused herself to visit the bathroom. *Oh*, she finally realized, *he isn't really talking to me. He's just totally hammered.* So after a while, she just let Godo be her audio

background as she took in the rest of the party.

“...You see all these remarks on the net about ‘Oh, light novels are nothing but *this* these days or nothing but *that* these days,’ but if you look at the data over the past thirty years, it’s always been diverse. There’s never been a period where you could definitively say it was any one thing. People say ‘Ooh, the titles are all four nonsensical syllables thrown together,’ ‘Ooh, it’s all really bitchy heroines who fall for the hero,’ ‘Ooh, it’s all school harem fantasies,’ ‘Ooh, it’s all stupidly long titles,’ ‘Ooh, it’s all titles that make up fancy new readings for old Chinese characters,’ ‘Ooh, it’s all God-mode heroes,’ ‘Ooh, it’s all regular people ending up in fantasy worlds,’ but even in the most notorious eras for all those things, there were always tons of titles that *weren’t* that. So why do all these casual accusations keep gaining headway? Is it because a lot of people are idiots who don’t know much about the industry, don’t bother checking the stats, and just give their own vague assumptions? Is it the general public’s regrettable tendency to abandon critical thought and toss around the baseless conclusions they’ve made instead? Yes, those are factors, of course. But you know who created that so-called conventional wisdom in the first place? You know who it was? It was *me*. It was *us*. If you’re somebody who doesn’t interact with this business too much, all you see are the major movements, the trends. So if you see a few standout titles that get released all at once, even if they’re a *tiny percentage* of overall output, these clueless idiots go ‘Oh, light novels are all about *this*.’ If there’s a groundbreaking new title that does this or that with the genre, we make an effort to produce more titles like that. That’s how we create hits. If there’s just one wannabe novel modeled after a previous successful one, that’s a rip-off; if there’s two or three or four, that’s a genre. And a new genre means a new market for us. We’re the ones creating these genres, these movements, these images, this atmosphere, these trends. This whole era! We’re at the front lines of light novels, a great force creating the era we live in... That is the GF Bunko editorial department! We, ourselves, are the epitome of ‘light novels these days’!!”

But even as Godo was drinking and mumbling his speech to himself, Miyako was planting the seeds for her next move.

“Hey, uh, I better get home soon. I’d feel kinda bad for being the first one to leave my own welcome party, but...”

Kirara Yamagata, who had been soberly working on her notebook PC at

the edge of the table, approached to offer a helping hand. “Yeah, head on back. You don’t want to miss the last train.”

“...Are you sure?”

“What’s it matter?” Yamagata cast a judgmental eye toward the drunkards in the room. “They’re just using you as an excuse to drink anyway. Nobody’s gonna care. In fact, the sooner you escape, the better, or else you’re gonna see some things you wish you hadn’t.”

Miyako raised her eyebrows.

“Things...?”

“Boss! Oh, boss, that’s so amazing! Lemme show you *my* ‘great force’!”

One of the younger editors was now screaming across the room, his cheeks fully reddened as he began to clumsily take off his pants.

“Uh...?!”

By the time Miyako audibly gasped, his pants were low enough that his ass was fully visible.

“Ahh! What, what is he doing?!”

She covered her eyes with one hand as she blushed, trying her best to avoid the detestable sight.

“...You see?” Yamagata asked, blushing a bit herself as she trundled Miyako out of the building. “Let’s go.”

But even on the way out, they could hear more of the editors disrobing, a harried manager shouting “Gentlemen, please, stop!” and their editor in chief replying “We will stop nothing! Take it all off, boys!”

“...This is how our staff parties usually turn out,” Yamagata deadpanned once they were safely on the sidewalk. “They’ll get kicked out soon, so they’ll just move their debauchery over to some karaoke place. Every time.”

“Wow. Pretty trashy.”

“Totally,” she replied, eagerly nodding her agreement.

Now Miyako knew. This must’ve been what that advice to “be careful” meant.

“But anyway, Shirakawa,” she continued, “thanks for helping me today. I think we can actually get this book out on time.”

“Oh no, I... I hope you can wrap it up, Ms. Yamagata.”

Miyako couldn’t help but honestly pity her. Waiting for the manuscript all night, finally getting it in the early afternoon, then having to work until the wee hours checking it—this was a clear-cut case of employee abuse.

“Is it always this hard, being an editor?”

“Not *always*, no. Pretty often, yes, but...”

“Wow... That’s so rough.”

She had used that term several times today, but it was frankly the only word that seemed to fit.

“Well,” Yamagata said as she began walking toward the office, “see you tomorrow.”

“Wait, are you going back to the office again?”

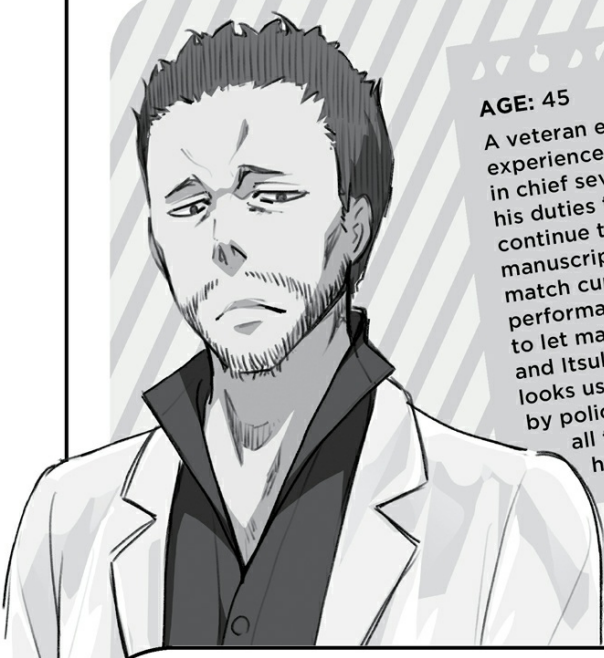
“Uh-huh,” she said, pausing just long enough to nod back at the shocked Miyako.

“Um, good luck...”

There was no reply. Miyako just watched her exhausted frame totter away. It was the end of her first day on the job, and the one thought she brought home with her that night was:

...Editorial work might be a lot harder than I thought.

SATOSHI GODO



AGE: 45

BORN: September 23

A veteran editor with twenty years of experience. Even after becoming editor in chief seven years ago, he's left most of his duties to the assistant EIC so he could continue to work directly with authors and manuscripts. A master at releasing series to match current trends and boosting his label's performance, he's also open-minded enough to let mad-genius talents like Nayuta Kani and Itsuki Hashima do their own thing. His looks used to get him randomly questioned by police officers on the street, but now that all the cops in the neighborhood know him, that's thankfully died down.

KIRARA YAMAGATA



AGE: 28

BORN: June 19

Editor for Nayuta Kani. As the first person to read the manuscript Nayuta sent to the publisher's rookie tournament, she immediately submitted it for nomination. A member of the literature club in her college, she submitted her own work to many contests in hopes of turning pro, but her efforts never bore fruit. She had been secretly working on a novel when editing work didn't keep her busy, but since being assigned to Nayuta, her writing has ground to a halt.

The Swimsuit Episode (Part 1)

It was evening by the time Miyako left Gift Publishing, wondering whether she should go home, pay a visit to Nayuta, or go hang out at Itsuki's apartment for a while.

"Wait a second, Myaa!"

She was flagged down by a prim-looking girl—Kaiko Mikuniyama, age twenty and wearing a large and childlike ribbon (or something closely resembling it) on top of her silky black hair. She would be making her professional debut as a manga artist shortly, handling the comic adaptation of Itsuki Hashima's *All About My Little Sister*.

"Oh, Kaiko! Good evening."

"Good evening to you, too, Myaa!"

The two had come to know each other in late June, just over a month ago. Kaiko, who turned out to be a specialist (some would say fetishist) in the realm of ladies' undergarments, received a stern lecture from Nayuta after trying to turn all the nude scenes from *All About* into lingerie catalogs. Miyako was just accompanying Nayuta that day, but one thing led to another, and she wound up becoming Kaiko's first (nude) model. The fact that *All About* hero Ichika Akatsuki's boobs, as depicted in the manga, were just straight-up Miyako's boobs was a secret Itsuki still wasn't aware of. Even with all this chaos, the two girls, being close in age, hit it off enough to exchange contact details and go out to eat now and then.

"How is your job at the publisher going, Myaa?" she asked once they had both settled into a nearby diner for a quick bite.

"Mmm, it's not that bad, really. Nothing super-challenging about it, and there's actually a lot of downtime."

"Ohh. That kind of thing, huh?"

"Yeah. Are you out doing work, Kaiko?"

“We’re discussing my rough draft of *All About*, chapter four.”

“Whoa, the fourth one already? Going along well, huh?”

“Luckily, yes,” Kaiko bashfully replied.

The manga version of *All About* was set to debut in the September issue of *Comic Gifted*, due out August 20. Having three chapters done before chapter 1 even debuted was extremely smooth sailing.

“Is chapter four going well?”

Kaiko’s face darkened slightly. “Well, to be honest, I have some issues to deal with.”

“Oh... Did they turn down your draft chapter?”

“No,” she said as she took her sketched-out draft copy of chapter 4 from her bag and handed it to Miyako. “This is the draft so far.”

“Ooh...”

Miyako took a look. As always, it was remarkably detailed for a sketched-out proposal, right down to the characters’ clothing and facial expressions. She found herself staring intently at it. This chapter, set around the midpoint of Volume 1 of the novel series, featured the main cast taking a trip to a swimming pool.

“They gave me the okay on this draft, so I’m going to keep working on it once I make it home...”

“Uh-huh,” Miyako said, thumbing through the pages.

“...Do you own any swimsuits, Myaa?”

That broke her concentration. She looked up at Kaiko.

“Wh-why do you ask? Um... I have my old swimsuit from high school, but I haven’t been to the beach or the pool or anything since I entered college, so I dunno if it’s still usable...”

“Ah, I see...”

“But why are you asking about that?”

“Well...” Kaiko grimaced. “I’ve never drawn swimsuits before...”

“Oh, you haven’t?”

“No. So I’m a little anxious... You know, about whether I can draw them right for chapter four or not.”

“I see... Oh?”

A question mark appeared over Miyako’s head. She flipped through the pages in search of an answer.

“But you drew them just fine in here.”

The draft was filled with Ichika Akatsuki, Yukiko Onizaki, and a small horde of other beauties running around and splashing one another at the pool. The art was practically shimmering with energy. But Kaiko just shook her head.

“No, I’m not doing it right at all.”

“Well, whether you think so or not, I’m telling you—”

“Those are actually underwear.”

“Um?” was the best response Miyako could manage.

“Remember the original novel? Ichika didn’t wear a bikini. She had a one-piece swimsuit on.”

“Ohh, right, maybe so.”

She couldn’t remember, but it sounded right. And the Ichika in this draft was certainly in a bikini, along with everyone else poolside, including the lifeguard sitting at her post. That *was* a tad unnatural.

“So you’re picturing this as everyone in lingerie, not bikinis?”

“Right.” Kaiko nodded. “I didn’t know how to draw swimsuits, so after agonizing over it, I went with this as kind of a desperation measure. And I got away with it in the pencil sketch, but once I start inking this, I’m gonna have to change them into swimsuits...”

“Ahhh...” Miyako took a closer look at the girls in the draft. Now that Kaiko had told her this was lingerie, if you paid close attention to each character—then yeah, all right, it looked like underwear. But in a poolside scene like this, people would surely assume these were swimsuits if they didn’t know better, right?

“...Well, what’s the big deal?” she casually asked. “Just draw it like your lingerie.”

Kaiko’s eyes burst open. “Oh, that’s a ridiculous idea, Myaa! Going to the pool in your underwear... That’s just sick!”

Miyako was stricken by the impulse to remark on the tied-up pair of panties serving as the ribbon on Kaiko’s hair. She just barely managed to resist.

“I don’t know, though... I mean, in the finished art, I don’t think you could tell the difference between panties and bikini bottoms...”

“Oh, you could, you definitely could! The texture of the fabric is totally different. The transparency when it gets wet, the way water droplets wick off it... It’s completely obvious at a glance!”

“Is it...?”

“It is!”

“Hmm...”

Certainly, maybe you couldn’t spot the difference with an average artist, but bring in Kaiko’s natural gift at perfectly depicting the look and feel of fabric, and eagle-eyed readers might notice something was amiss.

“...So I guess you’ll have to look at real swimsuits to draw them, huh?”

“You really think so, Myaa?” Kaiko earnestly asked.

“I... Yeah?”

Miyako nodded. She was already having a bad feeling about this, as Kaiko leaned up and off her seat.

“In that case, Myaa, would you mind serving as a swimsuit model for me...?”



Even with that bad feeling, Miyako breezily agreed. It had to be better than last time, where she got stripped and scrutinized from every angle possible.

The next day, Miyako reported to Nayuta’s hotel room, swimsuit in hand. This, they decided, was the most suitable place for going around in swimsuits without it getting awkward. She had brought along a swimsuit purchased in high school, trying it on the previous night to make sure it still fit fine. It was a one-piece, matching with the original *All About* setting.

“Oh, you’re right on time, Myaa,” Nayuta said when she opened the door, acting oddly excited. She was nude. Kaiko, who was already there, gave Miyako a polite bow. She was also nude.

“Thank you again for this, Myaa.”

“Um, sure.”

“Right, let’s get your clothes off.” As always, Nayuta stripped Miyako as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“You...want me in a swimsuit, right?” the naked Miyako asked as she

reached for the one she brought.

“Yes... Hmm. Which one should we start with?”

Kaiko plunged a hand into a large department-store bag.

“...*Start* with?”

Miyako suddenly felt very uneasy about this. There were actually *four* bags in the room, both seemingly full of merchandise.

“I think we’ll begin with this, Myaa,” Kaiko said as she took out a bikini with a worryingly small surface area.

“Um... Don’t tell me those are all swimsuits?!”

“Yes,” replied Nayuta to the half-panicking Miyako. “Miku and I went shopping this morning.”

“Good thing the store had a pretty wide summer selection,” Kaiko cheerfully added as she tore open the plastic packaging. “It’s hard to believe how many swimsuits there *are* out there. I had zero interest at all in them before now, but you can really lose yourself in this world.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t have to buy *that* many!” Miyako shouted. “I thought you wanted to look at the texture of the fabric! Can’t you just do that with the one I brought along?!”

“This is an important part of the story. I want to show off Ichika in the best swimsuit I can find for her, so I’ve got to make comparisons with a real-life model.”

“But she’s wearing a one-piece in the novel! That’s a bikini...or I don’t even know if you can *call* it a bikini at this point! Won’t people yell at you if you change her suit to that?!”

“No need to worry. I asked Hashima if I could change the swimwear around, and he kindly agreed to it.”

“After he carried on for that long about lingerie in his nude scenes?!”

“Itsuki doesn’t care that much about swimwear,” Nayuta countered. “Or lingerie.”

“It didn’t seem like he remembered what he had Ichika wear in the novels anyway,” added Kaiko.

Miyako shook her head. “He just wants them naked, huh...?”

“So!” Kaiko handed Miyako the micro-bikini in her hands. “If you could, Myaa!”

“N-no! There’s no way I’d wear something like that! It’s embarrassing!”

But despite the nude Miyako’s staunch denial, two or so minutes of

sincere pleading on the nude Kaiko's and Nayuta's parts was all it took for her to reluctantly mutter "Ugh, whatever..." and agree to it.

So they began with the micro-bikini. Then one with a ridiculously high-cut bottom. Then an equally ridiculous low-rise one, which Miyako worried would reveal some things it shouldn't. Then an athletic swimsuit. Then a full-body suit. Then a V-shaped sling swimsuit. Then a regulation blue one-piece usually seen in school competitions. Then one with large holes in the rear. It went on and on. There were a few sensible selections—a cute one-piece like the one Miyako brought along, plus a bikini with a pleated top—but the great majority weren't.

Miyako had to ask where they got all this stuff, as the idea of a high-end department store selling sling bikinis and blinding-white school swimwear seemed unlikely to her. Just as she thought, they had *also* stopped by some cosplay and adult-goods shops. The department-store bags were just a bluff to put Miyako off her guard.

Thus, Kaiko and Nayuta continued to use Miyako as their personal dress-up doll, asking her for a wealth of poses. They even put her in the bath to see how the fabric changed when wet.

For Miyako, it was exhausting—but it paid off. Chapter 4 of *All About My Little Sister* wound up packed with incredible, ultrahigh-quality swimsuit shots. And when Miyako read the final submission several days later and discovered that the swimwear saga lasted a whopping three pages before one of the series' villains launched a magic tornado that instantly tore all the suits off their bodies...well, the tale of her unbridled rage can wait for another time.



Q&A Corner

QUESTION

In Volume 1, it's written that Nayuta Kani sends all her earnings to her parents. Where does she get the money to blow on trips to Okinawa and other extravagances?



They gave me a credit card connected to my account back home. I don't know how much money is in the bank, but I'm pretty sure I'm nowhere near my card's limit. I don't really think much about money, as you can see.

QUESTION

Does Kaiko like men's undergarments, too?



I sure do!

QUESTION

Is Kaiko into *yuri*? Slash?



No, not really...

The Swimsuit Episode (Part 2)

The day after Kaiko and Nayuta made Miyako perform all sorts of shameless acts for their pleasure, Nayuta paid a visit to Itsuki's apartment, shopping bag in hand.

"Whew!" she said as she entered, grabbing the fabric around her chest and flapping it up and down to fan herself down there. "It's a hot one, huh, Itsuki?"

Itsuki casually turned his head away from the flashes of bra and cleavage that resulted. "Yeah. Nothing's better in the summer than staying in an air-conditioned room all day."

"You said it," Nayuta said with a smile. "That's why I brought something along to help you cool down."

"Oh? Cool down...?"

As Itsuki puzzled over this, Nayuta thrust her hand into the bag she brought along and took something out.

"Ta-daa! A bathing suit!"

Spread out wide between her hands was a black swimsuit shaped like an upside-down triangle, albeit angled for maximum provocation. It was suited less for the beach and more for a bodybuilding competition.

"...And?" Itsuki coldly replied to Nayuta and her sparkling eyes.

"It's a present for you!"

"I don't need it! What were you thinking when you bought that for me?"

"I was thinking you'd wear it, of course. This was a little embarrassing for *me* to buy, even."

"It embarrassed *you*, and you want *me* to wear it?!"

"I brought one for myself, too," Nayuta countered, standing tall against this refusal. "A pretty bold one. Wanna wear them together?"

Itsuki took a breath, noticing Nayuta's cheeks redden. "I... What am I

gonna do in a swimsuit anyway? Are we going to a pool or something?”

“Oh, I would die in the pool. It’s going to be so packed in the summer! It’s the middle of the season in Okinawa, too, so count me out of that.”

“I can’t disagree with you on that...but why’d you buy a pair of swimsuits?”

“Because I just wanted to wear them to make out with you. Indoors.”

“Indoors...? Wow, I can feel myself getting dumber.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s summertime.”

“The answer’s no, all right? I’m not gonna put up with your silly fantasies. Go do it yourself, if you’re that desperate,” Itsuki snapped back.

“...All right. I’ll go put this on real quick.”

“Huh?!”

Ignoring the astounded Itsuki, Nayuta took the shopping bag with her to the bathroom.

Is... Is she really gonna do it?

She had helped herself to Itsuki’s bathroom numerous times in the past. There were times when he’d wake up and she’d be next to him in bed, clad in nothing but her undergarments. He had even seen her naked, although it was just a quick glance. Swimwear, though, would be brand-new—and frankly, he had no interest. He had a creative interest in underwear, perhaps—Kaiko Mikuniyama’s influence had helped a great deal with how he depicted them in his novels—but the swimsuit descriptions in his novels were just as vague and slapdash as ever. He saw no need to give them special attention. If he slapped them on a character, they were bound to be taken off in short order anyway.

But even in Okinawa, Nayuta chose to goof around on the beach naked. No swimsuit. This might, he thought, be a really valuable experience. And it was a “pretty bold one.” How sexy could it be?

He could feel his heart racing, but instead he focused back on the novel he was writing on his computer, reminding nobody in particular in his mind that he *definitely didn’t care about swimsuits*.

And when Kazuma took Ichika by the hand, it was swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits sexy swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits swimsuits

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“All done!”

He whirled around in his chair at the unexpected sound of her voice. In another moment, his eyes—his heart—were all hers.

There was Nayuta, squirming a bit, her cheeks red. Nayuta had called it something “bold,” but that didn’t seem to be the right word. There were pleats everywhere on the two-piece suit, adorned with a fancy aqua-blue pattern. It was also pretty modest in what it covered up—more cute than sexy. For someone like Nayuta, well-developed but small and youthful, it matched well. Itsuki silently stared at her, mouth agape.

“Ummm, what do you think, Itsuki?” Nayuta nervously asked.

The question made him regain his senses. He instantly began to blush. “I... I think it’s nice,” he managed to gasp out before turning away. The show made Nayuta’s cheeks redden even more.

“Th-thanks for saying that...hee-hee...”

She bashfully held her head down as she toddled right past Itsuki and sat down on his bed.

“Nyah-hah-hah... This is kind of embarrassing me. Being here, in a swimsuit...”

“And whose fault is that?” replied Itsuki, taking a side glance at her.

“Eh-heh-heh...” Nayuta took on a chiding tone, hiding her embarrassment. “Is this turning you on, Itsuki?”

“.....Yeah,” came the reply—that he kept locked within his closed mouth. But no matter how much he tried to lower his voice, Nayuta caught the sound. It set her cheeks on fire.

“Oh... Okay...”

She lay facedown on the bed, hiding her redness.

“Um, wearing a swimsuit indoors *is* pretty dumb, isn’t it? I’m gonna change!”

Then she stood up, carefully avoiding a peek at Itsuki's face, and started changing in the bathroom. This swimsuit strategy paid off better than she expected—but it wound up exciting *her* so much that she couldn't take it anymore.

This was a swimsuit she bought for herself while shopping for Miyako, but she had considered one of the more outlandish selections from that day as well. Now that she knew her feelings for Itsuki were reciprocal, however, going for all-out sex appeal in her advances just seemed embarrassing. She had intended to give Itsuki a treasure trove of self-made porn for her birthday but chickened out at the last minute, and she wouldn't be able to go out in front of him in something *too* provocative.

Thus, for now, she opted for a typical, mature-looking swimsuit to stake her claim with. But even a "typical" swimsuit paid off big-time for her. It totally enthralled Itsuki's mind.

"Nyaaa..."

Her suit was off now. Nayuta looked at her naked frame in the mirror, scowling and groaning to herself. She didn't know what kind of distance she should take with Itsuki. Before she knew where his mind lay, she had no problem storming right up to him like an advancing army. Now, she was scared of going too far. Going too far and triggering some decisive change in their relationship. But at the same time, she didn't want him to totally ignore her as a woman.

Nayuta Kani, author of countless tales of burning youth, seated at the pinnacle of the light novel industry, was at a very normal sort of impasse—one that any young woman might have. Love really *is* hard.

The Swimsuit Episode (Part 3)

As Nayuta Kani was standing anguished in the bathroom, Chihiro Hashima was enjoying a day out at the beach with her school friends. There was swimming; there was splashing; there was a game that involved throwing a beach ball.

Being the height of summer, the beach was mobbed with people, enough so that a visitor who disliked crowds might have felt queasy. But the sheer youthful power that surrounded Chihiro and her female high-school friends seemed to keep all that at bay.

Ah, the blue sky, the white clouds, the shining sunlight.

The sea, the waves, the sand.

Water and sweat spraying, glistening into the air.

Amid a group of radiant young women in swimsuits.

...Yeah, nothing really noteworthy happened here, so please enjoy this wonderful swimsuit illustration provided by Kantoku instead. →



The Anime Version

One day in early August, Itsuki was summoned to the Gift Publishing building, a five-minute walk from his place. This was something that almost never happened, what with Kenjiro Toki stopping by Itsuki's apartment for most of their work discussions. But this wasn't about novel business. Today, he would be meeting with the core staff for the anime.

The animated version of *All About My Little Sister* had first been brought up to him in late May of this year. It was typical to see a lengthy time gap between the planning of an anime project and the start of its actual production, so a writer like Itsuki meeting with his core team less than three months after signing on the dotted line was normally impossible to imagine. However, by the time Itsuki was approached with the offer, nearly all the broad production details—the sponsors, the broadcast networks, the production companies involved, the main staff members, even the TV broadcast schedule—had already been decided.

This unusual speed wasn't for very auspicious reasons. The whole project wasn't originally meant for *All About* but for another GF Bunko novel series (*SILLIES*, written by Yohei Kitagata and illustrated by Puriketsu). Due to extenuating circumstances, this suddenly got canceled, and among the many possible last-minute replacements available, *All About* got picked. In other words, *All About* was *not* the choice made by the production companies, the staff, or anyone else actually producing the anime. Worse, the series was also meant to launch on TV next July. A year between starting production and launching episode 1 was not much time at all. There was next to no leeway in the schedule.

This entire project was the result of good intentions falling through and people scrambling for something, anything for plan B—but Itsuki knew all that and still said yes. If he wanted to take the next leap forward as an author,

he firmly believed that overseeing an anime adaptation was unavoidable along the way. He knew this was a risky bet—but he didn't want anyone taking his work and turning it into a piece-of-shit anime. He wanted the series to work out well, to become a hit that'd prop up novel sales along the way.

Thus, it was a mixture of anxiety, expectation, and nervousness that had him standing bolt upright as he took the elevator to the fourth-floor conference room and called Toki on the phone. He arrived before long, alongside editor in chief Satoshi Godo and part-time helper Miyako Shirakawa.

"Haven't seen you in a while. Doing well?" Godo boomed in his high-pressure voice.

Itsuki shivered for a moment before smiling vaguely and squeaking out a "Just fine, thanks." He debuted on the GF Bunko label almost four years ago, but he talked with the editor in chief so infrequently that every meeting still made him nervous.

Godo gave him as kind of a grin as his villainous visage allowed. "Congrats on the anime. You're part of the writers' elite now. I hope you keep flying higher and higher after this...!"

You just slotted me in place of something else, Itsuki struggled not to reply. His EIC wasn't aware, after all, that Toki had told him the whole story about his series getting subbed in. *You two-faced bastard*, he thought as he stretched his lips into a smile and said, "Thank you very much."

"Let's go to the meeting room. Everyone else should be here soon."

The four headed off, Toki and his boss in front and Miyako and Itsuki in the back.

"...You're attending this, too?" Itsuki whispered to Miyako.

"Yeah. He wanted me to get some tea and stuff ready."

"...Oh."

"...Why do you seem so tense? Are you nervous?" Miyako gave him a concerned look.

Itsuki blushed a little. "Of course not! I'm cool as a cucumber! And I'm here to calmly and precisely give the animation staff just the guidance they need, ah-ha-ha-ha!"

"Sure, sure," Miyako replied with a gentle laugh. "Good luck."



Several minutes after they entered the meeting room, the anime staff filed on in. For this meeting, it consisted of the director, the screenwriter, the production manager, and the producer.

After a few quick hellos and exchanges of business cards, they all sat down—novelist and editors on one side, animators on the other. Itsuki sat at the head of his table, followed by Toki and Godo; on the other side, the director sat closest to the door, then the screenwriter, producer, and assistant. Miyako, after passing out tea, stood meekly in front of the door.

The director was named Munenori Tarui, age forty-two. He was of medium build and looked friendly enough, although he didn't have much of a presence in person, dressed in his wrinkled jacket and slacks. Based on Itsuki's net research, he started his career as an animator; this would be the third series he'd directed. The other two were romantic comedies based on manga series, both released to good-but-not-great reviews. His art style was fairly nondescript; Itsuki had the impression that he preferred a workmanlike approach, taking the original material and doing a perfectly acceptable job of animating it.

The screenwriter was Masahiko Hirugano, age thirty-eight. A pen name, apparently. He was a pudgy man in a short-sleeved tee and shorts, looking every bit like an anime industry old-timer. He'd made his screenwriting debut ten years ago, working for a large number of series across multiple genres. On three of those, his credit was story editor, the main person overseeing the other screenwriters; one series was an original, while two were light novel adaptations. Itsuki didn't know much about the writing on those two, but the box sets (DVDs and Blu-rays) on both weren't too shabby. The original anime, however, didn't have a very good rep among fans.

The producer was Tsutomu Oshima, age forty-five. He gave a bit of a mobster-like impression himself—stocky, well-built, and dressed in a full business suit. His release list included a wealth of anime known for their sexier scenes, including several series that Itsuki knew and enjoyed.

Finally, the production assistant was Kakeru Yamada, age thirty-two. He was tall, dressed in a polo shirt and slacks, and looked like a well-tanned sportsman, although one with a notably hangdog look on his face.

Many more people than this would be involved with the production, but it would largely be these four people dealing with the original series publisher.

“Thanks to all of you for coming out here today,” Godo began in his low voice. “This will be the first meeting between the publisher and the main animation staff, and I’m hoping we can use this chance to talk about our goals and compare notes on how we picture the series going.”

Everyone murmured their agreement.

“So,” the producer said, “we have less than a year before launch, so we’ll need to proceed quickly. Along those lines, I’ve had Hirugano here prepare a treatment of the series’ overall structure for us to discuss.”

This was a surprise to the Gift Publishing side.

“Oh...? Let’s see it.”

At Godo’s bidding, Hirugano passed out two sheets of paper to all the attendees. Itsuki nervously picked them up.

The outline called for twelve episodes. The first few seemed to follow the plot of the books pretty well, not going into great detail on the events they contained. *About what I figured*, Itsuki thought as he kept reading. But starting around episode 4, the descriptions tapered off into loose, bare-bones sentences. It unnerved him, but he didn’t know why—not until he reached the end of episode 9, which featured the debut of an anime-original enemy that wasn’t in the novels. The battle against this villain occupied the brunt of airtime beginning in episode 10, and episode 12 capped things off with the final battle and the hero and heroine being linked together—a totally anime-exclusive ending.

“...An original enemy?” Itsuki asked in a quiet but foreboding voice. Hirugano, apparently expecting this, began to explain.

“In the original books, there isn’t really a neatly defined climax to round out the final episode of a series, so we need something in the final quarter to build up anticipation for the ending. We want to be sure the viewers are satisfied with the series as a whole.”

“Hmm...”

Hirugano had a valid point. The original novels weren’t known for strong endings, each one capping things off with a “To Be Continued,” and the screenwriter’s evaluation made Itsuki realize that there really wasn’t a single perfect plot point to hang a final TV episode on. Maybe some original storytelling was in order, and with that would come an original character or

two. Dogged devotion to the original material didn't necessarily make for good anime viewing, and given that this was a whole different type of media, there were bound to be differences here and there, no matter how hard you tried. Even the *All About* comic, which Itsuki was arguably the world's biggest fan of, featured edited dialogue, abbreviated scenes, and original content.

It made Itsuki recall what he told Haruto once. *We're not here writing anime pitches.* He didn't say that just to assuage Haruto's damaged ego. As a writer and as a performer, Itsuki was firm in his belief that his novels could never be 100 percent reproduced in some other media. Thus, he thought, if it improved the final anime, changing the original was a necessary evil—something worth actively pursuing, even.

If it was meant to improve the final anime, that is. And this was not.

Yes, this series would tell a complete story in twelve episodes, but that was it. It wasn't a story but a summary of events. Cutting out scenes and foreshadowing from the novels and cramming all the rest into a neat package like this? This wasn't adaptation. It did nothing to optimize the series for anime.

“...I'm seeing that the Onizaki siblings barely appear in this,” Itsuki commented, holding his emotions back.

All About My Little Sister mostly focused on the adventures of Kazuma Akatsuki and his sister, Ichika, but there was another pair of siblings: Shingo Onizaki and his sister, Yukiko. They were undercover monster hunters but also classmates with the Akatsukis, totally unaware of the demon blood running in that family. Sometimes they'd fight; sometimes they'd work together in battle; and along the way, the story developed. The Onizakis weren't just handy friends or rivals to have around—they existed as foils to the Akatsukis, an important asset to the series' diverse depictions of love between brother and sister. They were kind of the shadow hero and heroine, and Itsuki devoted as much strength and devotion into writing for them as he did for the Akatsukis. And there was almost nothing written about them in the story structure.

Hirugano had a smooth answer ready. “If we bring in the sub-characters too much, the viewers will have trouble identifying who the hero is, so I'm thinking that we should put the spotlight on Kazuma and Ichika for the anime. There's only so much airtime to work with, besides. Of course, the

Onizakis will have appearances in areas I didn't specify in this summary treatment, and I'm thinking we could include a few more Yukiko fan-service scenes that weren't in the original."

"Sub...character...?"

Itsuki could feel the blood rushing into his skull. Shingo and Yukiko were shadow protagonists. Some of the most vital characters in the books. Dismissing them in crude terms like *sub-characters* or *sidekicks* was out of the question. In fact, all the characters that appeared in the novels were like children to him, complete with their own emotions, their own lives, and their own stories. Deep inside, Itsuki didn't want any of them to be treated as carelessly as this.

There's no such thing as a dispensable character in my stories. Don't use excuses like "simplicity's sake" or "lack of time" to snuff out someone's entire life!

"Do you—?"

"I see, I see."

But before Itsuki could erupt into a furious diatribe, Godo opened his mouth.

"Certainly, there are a few things that *slightly* veer off from the novels, but we're dealing with different media, after all. We're all amateurs here when it comes to anime production, so I'll want to respect the professionals on questions like these, no doubt."

He was turned toward Hirugano, but it felt like the words were meant for Itsuki.

"So I'd be glad to leave the anime in the able hands of all of you here, while Mr. Hashima continues on with his own tale. I know it'll be a hectic schedule ahead for us, but I'm looking forward to doing everything we can to make *All About My Little Sister* as exciting as possible."

...leave in the able hands of...

...while Mr. Hashima continues on with his own tale...

...doing everything we can...

In other words, Godo had just told Itsuki to keep his nose out of the anime.

"...!"

Itsuki bit his lip, pushing the words back inside. He knew from Toki that his story was plan B for this project, that he shouldn't expect much of

anything to go the way he thought it would. He knew that, and he had still agreed to it. So no, he shouldn't meddle. Godo was right. He had to accept the anime for what it was and devote his full attention to the original story ahead. He *was* an anime amateur. The only real option was to trust in the pros and let them do their work...

He tried his best to bottle up the frustration, to convince himself that this was all right. But then, someone else gave his inner conflict the voice it deserved.

"Um... Isn't that kind of weird?"

The loud, sharp voice came from Miyako, standing in front of the door.

"Ms. Shirakawa!" Toki rebuked, wincing.

"I mean..."

"...We're not asking a part-timer for feedback."

The sheer authority behind Godo's powerful voice made Miyako freeze in place. But she was still upset, and she matched his glare, remaining firm. "I mean, this anime's supposed to be based on Itsuki's work, isn't it? I just think it's weird that you're telling the original creator to butt out of his own anime."

"...We aren't telling him to butt out. We'll be glad to have him help out as the original author, but I just want to be sure Hashima keeps the novels as his primary focus."

The almost threatening tone Godo took made the anime staff cower in their seats. Miyako didn't let it bother her.

"So why don't you let Itsuki have his say right now, then?! Isn't the episode structure one of the most important elements of any anime project? I really don't think we can delegate all that to somebody else!"

"He's an author, but he's still an amateur when it comes to anime. That's why we should trust in the professionals—"

"Well, as an editor, you should know that not even professionals are perfect all the time!"

"Bffph," Toki said, stifling a laugh. "She has you there." Godo just stared him down.

"That's why, um... I think you should talk things out and really think

about this. To make sure that you can trust each other!”

“And that’s why I said this isn’t something a part-timer needs to worry about...!” Godo’s voice was turning rough with frustration as Miyako gave Itsuki a forlorn, almost crying look.

Itsuki, a casual observer to this exchange so far, snapped out of his torpor.

“Itsuki! What about you? You want to leave all of this to them? Maybe they’ll put out a really great anime if you do, or maybe it’ll wind up like Fuwa’s series, no matter how hard they try...but this is your precious story, isn’t it?!”

“...Heh-heh.” An impudent smile crossed Itsuki’s face. “I’ve come back to my senses, Miyako.”

“...Oh.” She turned away, blushing.

“...What on earth was I thinking just now? Why do I have to act like I’m so inferior to you all just because I’m subbing in for *SILLIES*...?!”

“You told him, KenKen?”

Godo glared even harder at Toki. The editor just looked away and played dumb.

“...*All About* is my story,” he said, voice sharpened to an edge. “What’s so wrong with me throwing everything I’ve got into the anime version?! What’s so wrong with me calling a shitty episode structure a shitty episode structure?!”

He held up the summary printout in his hands and ripped the two sheets in half.

“...I’m not so sure about that, Mr. Hashima,” Hirugano, the screenwriter, slowly began. He kept himself calm on the surface, but the anger inside bubbled up nonetheless. “...I can understand that the original author might find some off-putting elements in this, but I’ve taken my understanding of your work and done my best to put it in a format suited to animation. So I hope you can understand that. These are the differences in media that everyone has to deal with.”

“What are you, stupid?!”

“S— Stupid?!” The word stopped Hirugano in his tracks.

“‘I hope you can understand’? ‘Differences in media’? That’s nothing but a lame excuse from a bunch of people who have no idea what they’re *talking* about with media. People who’re gonna totally fail to bring out the charms of what’s probably the greatest slice-of-life masterpiece ever written! Don’t give

me that crap like it's some kind of wise old adage! Oh, you did your best to format it for anime?! You're a liar! Liiiiiaaar! I can't believe you'd come in here and give me that bullshit with this total mess of an episode summary! It just screams 'Well, here's a summary; hope you like it'! It's so obvious you barely even thought about it! And if you *did* and *this* is the result, you're a talentless hack! Just quit and find a new career!"

Hirugano gritted his teeth against Itsuki's crashing tidal wave. "Where does some mid-level writer who lucked into an anime get off telling me to —?"

"Ah, Hi-Hirugano...!"

"Please, Mr. Hashima, calm down..."

"Itsuki, that's kind of going too far, isn't it...?"

Oshima, the producer, Yamada, the production assistant; and Miyako, the part-timer, all expressed their panic in different ways, as Toki and Godo winced in shame. Only Tarui, the director, retained his serenity, almost seeming to enjoy the argument between author and screenwriter.

"...I'll give you that. Yes. I'm a mid-level writer. That's why I decided to take this chance at an anime and do everything I possibly can to *grab* something with it! And I can't do that if I have to work with a bunch of crap from a screenwriter whose heart isn't even in it!"

"Anime isn't some kind of RPG monster the writer can milk for experience! It's a team effort! You have a huge staff of professionals working together to create this work of art! Just because you're the original creator doesn't mean we have to listen to a total amateur when it comes to anime!"

"Ha! If you keep calling yourself a pro, I'd like to see some actual pro-level work from you! You probably have a bunch of projects ongoing and figure it's safe to phone it in on at least one of 'em, huh?!"

"Don't give me that shit! You think the industry's *that* easy to work in?! If you submit a bad script, that's a permanent mark on your résumé! It'll affect the work offers you receive for years on end! You can find a screenwriter's entire past career in two seconds on the Internet—we get fans and haters just like everyone else in the business! I can't phone it in on anything and expect good results!"

"So why did you phone in this total garbage of an episode plan?!"

"I didn't phone it in!"

"Yes, you did!"

“No, I didn’t!”

“Oh, *really*? Well, if you *didn’t* phone it in, am I supposed to assume this is your one hundred percent best effort?!”

“No! I’m not totally satisfied with this episode setup, either!”

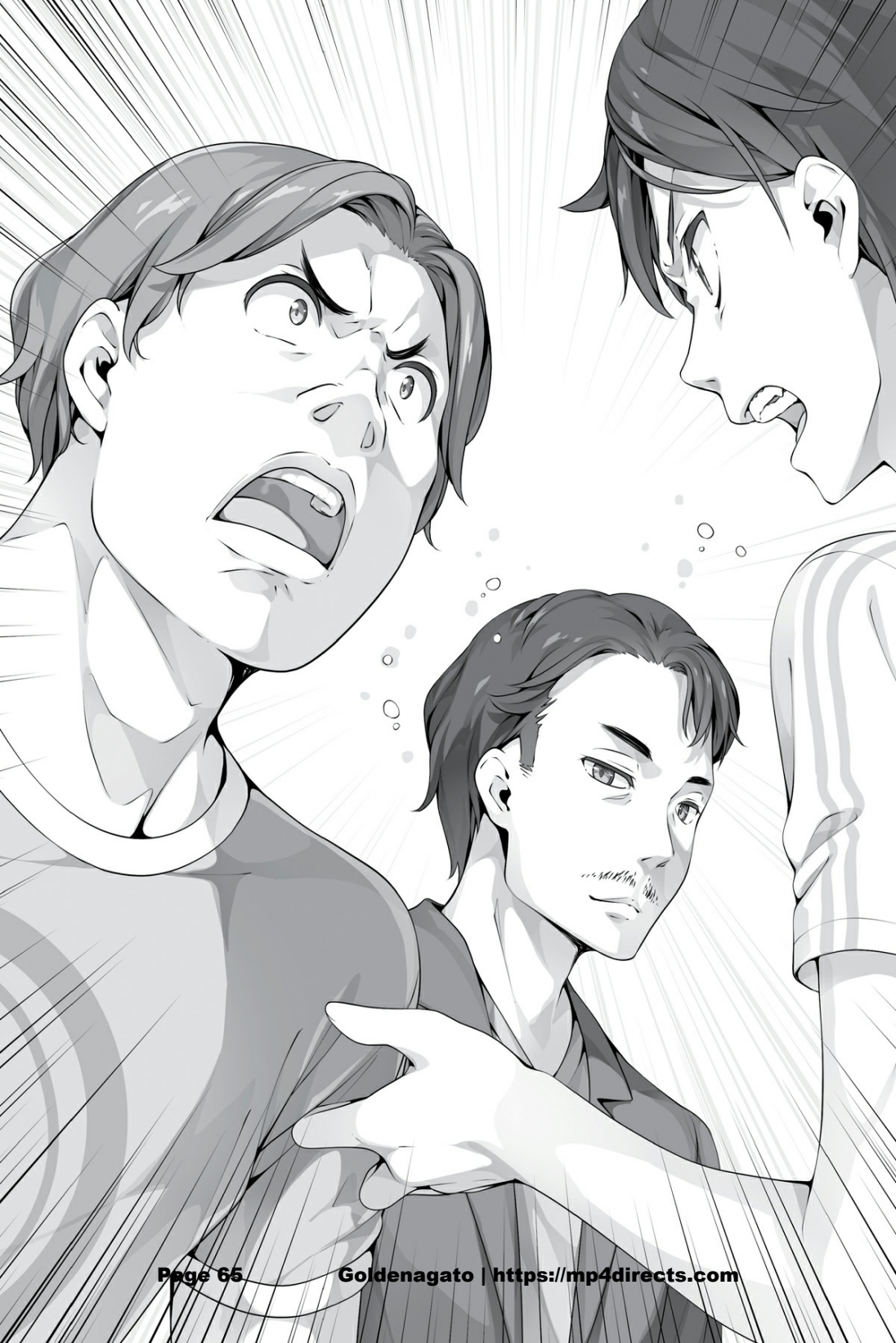
“So why did it end up like this?!”

“Because the original is fucking boring!”

“Hrnng (>д<)?! ”

Not even Itsuki could reply to such a frank evaluation.

Hirugano let out a regretful clearing of the throat. “...Or, to be more exact, I’m not sure I understand what makes this story interesting. I’m a huge fan of Mr. Kitagata’s *SILLIES*, so when I heard about the *SILLIES* anime project, I went directly to the director and asked him to let me handle the screenplays! And then that all went down the toilet, so we had to do some other property... It just doesn’t make any sense!”



It seemed Itsuki wasn't the only one struggling to deal with this bait and switch. The feeling might've been mutual among the anime team.

"We had all the episodes fully mapped out. All we had left to do was wait for production to officially begin! And just because the main heroine has a dick, the fans lost their minds! These nerds drive me up the goddamn *wall* sometimes! ...But this is my job, so I read through all the published volumes of *All About My Little Sister* to get a grasp of it. More than once. But I couldn't! I just don't get what's so attractive about the little-sister trope! I've got four younger sisters of my own in real life, and...just picturing them as, like, girls? It makes me sick. So I tried to mold this into something I could understand, and these are the results..."

He looked down at the proposal in front of him and gave a dejected shrug.

"Ngh...!" Itsuki pointed a clenched fist at him. "You..... You.....
You lucky bastard!!!"

Anger, sadness, frustration, honest-to-God jealousy—all of it was mixed into that insult (?) lodged at Hirugano. He blinked, unsure how to parse it, then sighed deeply.

"...I've said way more than I should have, so I really have no right to be involved with this project. I apologize for losing my temper." Hirugano bowed his head deeply at Itsuki.

"...You want to step down from screenwriting?"

"Yes."

"I'm not gonna let you."

"Er...?"

"You call that responsible, saying all that and just waving good-bye? I thought you were a professional."

"...But I told you. I don't understand this series at all."

"If you don't, then keep reading it until you do... Actually, you know what? It doesn't even matter if you get what makes *All About* good or not. Just understand what makes a little sister so wonderful. I'll be glad to give you all the guidance you need until you do. You've got four of them. *Four*. And I'm gonna make you understand just how blessed you are, right down to the bottom of your heart...!"

Itsuki's speech seemed to be at least partially motivated by a personal

vendetta against him, but Hirugano gave an abashed smile. “I’ll...do what I can.”

And it was at this point, finally, when Tarui the director spoke for the first time.

“All right. So we’ll keep Hirugano on as the writer, but it sounds like we’ll need a top-to-bottom overhaul of our story structure.”

“Mr. Tarui...!” Oshima, the producer, was the first to react. “That’s going to ruin the schedule...”

Tarui ignored him, looking Itsuki straight in the eye. “Mr. Hashima,” he calmly began, “you and Hirugano just exchanged your first honest thoughts about this with each other. So I’m going to be honest with you, too. With this project, there’s essentially one thing expected of me, and that’s to *cut our losses*.”

“Wha...?!”

This was almost too much honesty for the conference room. Everyone was visibly taken aback.

“We have to deliver this thing on time, of course. We have to cut down on scenes with lots of action or characters running around; anything that consumes too much animation time. We have to keep the number of characters that appear in any given episode as low as possible. We have to do everything we can to keep production costs low, push the sexy scenes on the forefront, and recoup as much as we can on the box sets. *Keep the losses to a bare minimum*. That’s the prime directive, and that’s at the root of Hirugano’s episode structure.”

Oshima gave his boss a pleading look. “Mr. Tarui...”

Itsuki took that moment to reply. “Wait a minute, Director... When you say ‘cut our losses,’ is that, like, basically expecting this anime to fail from the start?!”

“Well, look, everybody would love this to be a big success. But the top people in the production committee have come to the conclusion that there’s very little chance of this anime succeeding. That’s mainly due to the substitution we had to do, which creates all kinds of scheduling and personnel issues. But beyond that, this story is a love comedy set in a Japanese high school, and it has incest as one of its themes. I suspect that will put up a lot of barriers to worldwide distribution.”

The anime-industry model was rapidly shifting from one that made its

money off DVD and merchandise sales to one that lived or died off distribution deals. Itsuki, being part of an affiliated industry, knew that as well. In an era where people were no longer buying physical discs, any successful anime—i.e., a profitable one—needed to resonate with audiences overseas. That’s how important they were.

“...But...” Itsuki weakly responded.

It was a lot to ask of a writer to care about whether their work would be accepted in a foreign nation. Whether they wanted their novel to get the anime treatment or not, it wasn’t like they were picturing the anime version from the first word they wrote. Now Itsuki knew that something he could never have accounted for was threatening to drag down his anime. It depressed him.

“Still,” Tarui continued, “I certainly don’t want to lead a project I’m sure is doomed to fail from the beginning.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe this is presumptuous of me, borrowing your work, but I like to think of the series I work on as my own children. And no parent raises their child with the intention of making them a failure in life, do they?”

“Director...”

Tarui was putting it as softly as he could, but Itsuki felt sure that he could see the passionate flame of a creator in his eyes.

“Plus, you know, sometimes you find an anime series that nobody expects anything from, but once you pop the lid open, it turns into a huge hit. So instead of going into this full of pessimism, I want to believe that we can win in this... It’s certainly cooler, wouldn’t you say? Like the hero of some anime.” He flashed a mischievous smile.

“Well, thank you very much,” Itsuki said, meaning it from the heart. “I... I look forward to working with you guys.”

“Right. I’m going to do whatever I can to make this series work...and to do that, I’m going to need your help.”

“Of—”

Of course, Itsuki was about to say before Godo interrupted. “Of course, from our perspective, we’ll be glad to help check on the character designs and oversee the story settings.” The pressure in his voice was nearly suffocating.

“That’s not going to be enough,” Tarui flatly replied. “We need the

original creator to take a full, active role, if we want to turn the tables on this. First, I need you, Mr. Hashima, to work with Hirugano to remake the series structure as quickly as you can. I want you to be present at all our script meetings. If we need original characters or settings, you'll be crafting them for us. Depending on how things go, we may need you to write a script or two. That and a special bonus novel to package with the disc releases. And I'm sure we'll have more things for you that I can't think of right now."

"Yes, but we need Hashima to keep up the pace on his novel work. I don't think he has the time to—"

"I'll do it."

Godo winced at being so forcefully interrupted. "...Hashima, being 'fully' involved with the anime is much more work than you're picturing. It's going to affect your writing pace, I guarantee you. If you get too busy with it, and it slows your novels down, all that hard work's going to be for nothing," he lectured.

"...I still want to be involved with the anime. And I'll, um..." Itsuki steeled his resolve. "I'll be very purposeful about keeping my pace up!"

"...Boss," Toki said, "we don't have the right in editorial to ban him from anime work."

"....."

Godo wordlessly stared Toki down before turning to Itsuki. Itsuki didn't flinch.

"...Ugh. Don't blame me if it blows up."

And with that parting shot, Godo looked away.

"Well, Mr. Hashima, once again, thanks for joining the project," Tarui said with a light bow.

"And thank you for working with me." Itsuki bowed in reply.

He was part of the team.



After the meeting, Itsuki, Toki, Tarui, and Hirugano went out to discuss the project, get to know one another, and (most importantly) do some drinking. Oshima, the producer, and Yamada, the production assistant, left soon after,

leaving the stern-faced Godo alone with Miyako as she cleaned up the glasses.

“You know, most writers should really see the whole media-mix thing as large-scale advertising more than anything. Whether it succeeds or not, they shouldn’t care. All they have to do is focus on their project—their own project. Of course, if any of ’em actually *thought* that way, they probably wouldn’t have become writers in the first place...,” Godo muttered, eyes fixed on some faraway point.

“...Why do you want to keep writers so far away from their anime, sir?” Miyako asked.

“Because the more engrossed they are with the anime, the deeper it hurts when it fails. I’ve seen more than a few authors get so bent out of shape about the anime that they stopped writing altogether. And even if it succeeds, it can still burn them out.”

“...Well, that won’t necessarily be the case with Itsuki, will it?”

“Maybe. But maybe it *will* be. And based on my experience, there’s a greater chance of ‘will’ than ‘won’t.’”

Godo’s estimation was based on his twenty-plus years of experience dealing with untold numbers of writers. It had real weight behind it. Miyako had little to counter with. But:

“...If you put it that way, then why bother making an anime adaptation in the first place?”

It was an honest question, the kind only someone the opposite of Godo—someone totally ignorant of the industry—could ask. Godo smiled a little and remained silent.

Because anime is always on the move, pulling in the hopes and dreams of vast crowds of people.

Q&A Corner

QUESTION

Who are your favorite musical artists?



I don't have a number-one favorite band, but I listen to a lot of J-rock.



I've Sound.



Kenji Ito and Yasunori Mitsuda.



I don't know a lot about music... Sorry.



Hmm... It's all I can do to keep up with whoever's currently popular.



T.M.Revolution!



Brief & Trunks... And not just because of the name, of course.



I listen to a lot of pop idols so I have something to talk about with the girls I run into, uh, Saturday nights.



The Beatles... Why're you looking at me like that?

The Grave Visit

It was mid-August, the height of the Obon holiday in Japan. Obon is a Buddhist custom in Japan where families come together, visit their ancestral homes, and tidy up the graves of their long-gone brethren.

The Hashima clan took this opportunity to visit the grave of Keisuke Hashima's ex-wife—in other words, Itsuki's mother by blood—but Itsuki never went with them. He preferred to visit the site alone over having to deal with his father, stepmother, and half brother at the same time.

He was there by himself again this year, in front of his mother's grave as the sun set over the horizon. The rest of his family had visited yesterday, so everything was already neat and clean around the site. So he went straight into the usual customs—using the nearby ladle to splash water on the gravestone, placing incense on it, putting his hands together.

Inside his mind, he reported the latest developments in his life to his mother. His novel getting the anime treatment. How much more he'd been hanging around with Chihiro since the start of the year. How he and his father were still fairly estranged... How his feelings for the girl he loved were growing stronger and stronger.

...He had a lot of scorn for his father at the time, marrying a new woman so quickly after his mother died. He hadn't forgotten about that. But now he realized how far beyond one's control love usually was, and he found himself not feeling so terribly angry about how his father behaved any longer. And sensing that change in himself just depressed him more.

Neither Itsuki nor anyone else in his family offered many kind words for Keisuke Hashima's second wedding. Before then, the family tradition for Obon and the New Year holiday was to visit Itsuki's grandfather's house up in Gifu Prefecture; after, they hadn't gone once. His grandfather and the rest of the family may not have held any ill will toward Itsuki, but they were far

less lenient with Keisuke—and Itsuki resented that. So he started keeping his distance. He hated his dad, but more than that, he hated the judgmental eyes from his own family.

This is all such a pain in the ass, he chided himself. A sister's all you need! The love I hold for my (pretend) little sister in my heart is what drives me to go on!

...But while it would've been great if things were that easy, real life had a way of tying you down until you couldn't move.

“...There's just no controlling it,” he whispered with a sigh as he unclasped his hands and stood up. “See you next year.”

And hopefully, Itsuki thought as he headed back home, I'll have something even better to report then.

I've Seen This Happen in Real Life All the Time, So All You Editors Really Need to Be More Careful. Like, Seriously.

It was near the end of August—past the gauntlet of the Obon dance, past the equally daunting chaos of Comiket. All the August releases, including the latest in Nayuta Kani's *Landscape* series, somehow managed to safely reach store bookshelves, and everything was much more chill around the editorial office than at the start of the month.

"Sounds like *The Blue Landscape*'s doing as well as we thought it would," Nayuta's editor Kirara Yamagata remarked to Miyako as she made copies of the stories submitted for the new-writers contest.

"Really? That's great."

Yamagata smiled a bit. "I mean, it's selling way better than the rest of the month's titles combined. If this wound up being delayed... Oh, I shudder to think about it. Thanks again, Shirakawa. We couldn't have done it without you."

"Oh, I really didn't do anything..."

"If you didn't do anything to make her finish the book," she ironically countered, "then I guess I'm completely useless, huh? But it's selling great, and the feedback's as positive as it always is. And all *I* did was clean up the typos."

Miyako could imagine. All the praise heaped upon a book they had a hand in...but it's not like they worked on the content at all, really.

"Do you want to get more involved with the actual writing, Ms. Yamagata?"

"No."

The negative response surprised Miyako.

“There’s really no place for me to butt in on her story,” Yamagata flatly said. “Even if we had ample time to discuss the plot instead of the razor’s-edge schedule this time, I probably would’ve still cleaned up the typos and released it as is. It’s so annoying.”

“...Have you ever thought about turning her over to someone else?”

With Yamagata and Nayuta, it seemed like there was none of the trust, none of the friendship, that Itsuki and Toki shared. If anything, Yamagata acted honestly resentful of her. *Wouldn’t it be better for everyone if she just switched editors?* Miyako thought.

But with a sigh:

“I’ve never thought that once in my life.”

“Oh, you haven’t?”

“I mean, if I quit, then I won’t be the first person in the world to read a Nayuta Kani novel.”

She made it sound so matter-of-fact.

“...You really love Nayuta’s work, huh?”

“As reluctant as I am to say it, yes.”

She hated the writer, but she loved the writing enough to keep working with her. *Maybe*, Miyako reflected, *that could actually work*.



After she wrapped up the copying, Miyako was stopped along the hallway by a voice.

“Oh, Ms. Shirakawa? I wanted to find you.”

This was Kohei Tokuyama, an editor from the *Comic Gifted* desk that Kaiko Mikuniyama reported to. *Gifted* ran a lot of manga based on GF Bunko properties; their editors were all on the fifth floor as well, and they socialized together a lot. Miyako knew most of them casually by now, even carrying out a few errands for them.

“Oh, did you need something?”

“Yeah, we just got the sample copies of *Gifted* in. Could you bring them to the GF office for me?”

“Sure thing.”

Going into the *Gifted* department, Miyako discovered a stack of boxes near the entrance, each filled with the latest issue of the magazine.

“It’s finally here, huh?”

“Yep. They’ll be on store shelves the day after tomorrow.”

Miyako felt something warm bubble up inside her. The *Gifted* cover had the Akatsukis from *All About My Little Sister* posed front and center, touting the launch of Kaiko’s manga adaptation. She picked up a copy and thumbed through it; chapter 1 was right at the front, complete with a color spread to kick it off.

It didn’t take long for her to spot Ichika Akatsuki’s first nude scene a few pages in. This was huge. It meant that bookstores across the entire nation of Japan would soon be stocking a magazine featuring artwork modeled directly after her own boobs. Now, it felt real—and that sense of realness filled her with intense shame.

Tokuyama gave her a look. “Why’s your face all red, Ms. Shirakawa?”

“Oh, um, nothing!” She hurriedly waved her hand. “How many should I bring over?”

“Just this box. That has enough for the GF editors and their writers. Would you mind mailing copies off to the authors today, too?”

“S-sure.”

The nuts-and-bolts work of shipping sample copies and merchandise to people took up a hefty portion of the part-timers’ workday.

“Should I get a copy over to Kaiko, too?”

“Oh, right.” Tokuyama placed another magazine on top of the box. “Ms. Mikuniyama could probably use one.”

So Miyako brought the dozen or so copies of *Comic Gifted* over to the GF Bunko side, whipped out her shipping envelopes and invoices, and prepared to get to work. But before she could, she snapped a photo of Kaiko’s copy and messaged it to her.

The sample copies are here! I’ll send one to you now, so you should get it tomorrow (*^_^*)

Kaiko immediately responded with a sticker of some cutesy character crying a river of joyful tears.

Actually, where does Kaiko live? Miyako had a list of writers and their addresses—Itsuki Hashima’s, *Chevalier of the New World* author Haruto Fuwa’s, and so forth—but the list didn’t include manga artists. So she decided to ask her directly.

Can I get your address?

A few seconds later, Kaiko sent the address and a thank-you sticker. Miyako promptly wrote the address on the invoice.

Kaiko Mikuniyama
-, ***** City,
Gunma Prefecture, 37*-*****

It wasn’t until two days later that Miyako realized she had made an enormous mistake.



That day took a turn for the worse when Miyako was interrupted from her survey tabulation work by a dour-looking Kenjiro Toki.

“...Ms. Shirakawa? Were you the one who sent a copy of this month’s *Gifted* to Ms. Mikuniyama’s home?”

“Oh, um, yeah?”

“Ooooh...” Toki’s eyebrows shot downward.

“...Um, was that bad?”

“You wrote Kaiko Mikuniyama on the envelope, right? Her pen name?”

“...Ah.”

He was right. That was exactly what she wrote down. The authors on her mailing list did have their real, legal names next to their assumed ones (if they used them), which she faithfully copied over for shipping purposes, but Kaiko had only provided her mailing address, so she didn’t think to ask her real name. She called her Kaiko all the time anyway, so it never even occurred to her that Kaiko Mikuniyama may not be her given name.

“Um, did the post office refuse to deliver it or something?” Miyako tentatively asked.

Toki shook his head. “No, I guess Mikuniyama is her mother’s maiden name, so her family received it all right.”

“Oh, good.” A relieved Miyako sighed.

“...No, well... The fact that they *did* receive it is kind of the problem.”

“Oh? How so?”

“It sounds like Ms. Mikuniyama didn’t tell her family that she was about to debut as a professional manga artist.”

“Huh...?”

“But since the package had the name Mikuniyama on it, her mother opened it, and that was how she found out. About her pen name, too, and the manga she was drawing.”

“Oh no...”

Miyako was shocked. All she did was write down an assumed name by accident, and now she had put Kaiko in a terrible situation. She *had* heard from Kaiko, at least in passing, that her parents weren’t very keen about her entering manga full-time. She must have kept it a secret because she still hadn’t fully convinced Mom and Dad back home about it.

Toki sighed as Miyako cowered in front of him. “...This is partly editorial’s fault. We should have made it clear to be careful with addresses, since writers come from all kinds of personal situations like that. It’s not the first time something like this has happened. For example, there’s this writer named Yomi Hirasaka who kept his pen name a secret, but then his publisher Kad*kawa sent him this pointless legal notice about management reshuffling or something under that name, and that was how his parents found out.”

Miyako didn’t really care about the rather obscure author Toki referenced. She had other things on her mind.

“Um, so is Kaiko okay?”

“...Well, Ms. Mikuniyama is at *Gifted* editorial right now with her father. Her editor, Tokuyama, is handling them, but it sounds, uh, pretty threatening.”

“.....!”

Miyako immediately jogged over to the *Gifted* department. Inside was a small partitioned space for visitors, where she saw Kaiko, Tokuyama, and a stern-looking middle-aged man who was probably Kaiko’s father. Kaiko’s family had run a silkworm-cultivation business for multiple generations; presumably her father was the president. Miyako could see him angrily

ranting at Tokuyama, the hapless editor trying his best to mollify him. Kaiko was seated next to her father, her eyes cast vaguely downward. The latest issue of *Comic Gifted* was haphazardly tossed on the table between them.

She knocked on the partition door.

“Pardon me...”

“Myaa?!” a surprised Kaiko shouted.

“...Who’re you?” her clearly peeved father said as he glared at Miyako.

“My name’s Shirakawa; I work part-time in the GF Bunko department. I just wanted to apologize for all the trouble I caused, putting your pen name on that package.”

“Huh. All right. So I’ve got you to thank for discovering this stupid crap my daughter’s involved in.”

“Stupid...!”

The father paid no attention to the resentful Miyako. Instead, he turned right back toward Tokuyama.

“So that’s it, all right? She’s not drawing any more manga. And whether she’s finished drawing it or not, I’m not gonna let you print it in next month’s issue.”

“Sir, you understand that puts us in a very bad situation...” Tokuyama looked almost puny in the face of this assault.

“Right, right. I know this...isn’t great for you. If you want me to pay reparations or whatever, just tell me what kind of figure you’re thinking of.”

“It’s...it’s really not that sort of problem, sir...”

“Okay, so we’re done talking, then! Let’s go, Kinue.” The father grabbed his daughter by the arm, motioning for the door.

“No! Father, let me go!”

“Please let go of Kaiko!”

Kaiko’s tearful resistance finally made Miyako’s anger erupt. Her father glared resentfully at her.

“This girl’s name is Kinue! Do *not* call her by that name!”

“Kaiko’s the only person who can draw the *All About* manga,” Miyako shot back, holding her ground. “When the original writer of this read her manga, he loved it so much he literally started crying! Kaiko has a real talent for this! So please, let her continue working on it!”

“Myaa...!”

A light smile now crossed Kaiko’s lips. But the plea had no effect on her

father. He removed his arm from Kaiko, picking up the *Gifted* on the table and thrusting a nearly full-page shot of the nude Ichika Akatsuki at Miyako.

“A ‘talent’?! Nobody should ever have a *talent* for drawing manga as disgusting as this!”

“It’s not disgusting! This manga has the power to make people happy, more than you can count! That’s not something just anyone can do. I think that’s really incredible!”

“Don’t give me that nonsense, girl! Do... Do you think I put in all that time and effort raising my daughter just so she could be a manga artist...?!”

There was a streak of grief in the father’s shouting. There was no doubting his feelings for Kaiko. But the sheer contempt he showed for all of Kaiko’s efforts, the manga-artist career, and all the editors and other people bringing this magazine to life was more than Miyako could forgive.

“Sir, you can’t say that unless you realize how much blood, sweat, and tears Kaiko put into drawing this! Sure, it’s a little...all right, *fairly* raunchy, and I’ll admit that I don’t even like the story all that much, so I can totally understand if it’s not to your liking...but...”

“...” Kaiko’s father remained silent, listening on.

“...But she’s a young woman staking her future on what she knows she wants to do! I think finding something that you really, truly want to do in life is one of the most beautiful experiences you’ll ever have. And actually following through with it, pursuing it, takes an incredible amount of courage. And whether you’re her father or not, you just don’t have the right to say no to that!”

He waited a moment, making sure Miyako was done.

“...So is that all, then? Let’s go, Kinue.”

“...!”

Miyako’s shoulders drooped down. Her words didn’t come even remotely close to touching his heart.

“...I’m not saying you’re wrong. But you’re a total stranger to us. And I don’t want to hear your opinions about how *I* run *my* household.”

“Wait a minute! Kaiko is...”

“It’s fine, Myaa,” Kaiko said, her voice serene. “Thank you for going out of your way to defend me.”

The sight of Kaiko’s soft smile made Miyako want to cry. “But this is all my fault...!”

“No, Myaa, there’s no reason for you to feel that way. With all the things publishers send out to people, they would’ve found out soon enough anyway. Really, I want to thank you, Myaa.”

“Huh?”

“...Thanks to you, I’ve made up my mind.” She looked up to her father, eyes resolute. “This was bound to happen the moment I decided to pursue a career in manga. Just as Father said, it’s my responsibility to solve my own problems.”

“...Aren’t you listening to me, Kinue?”

“I am.” Kaiko nodded back. “No matter how opposed you are, Father, I’m going to live my life as a professional manga artist. And if that means cutting ties with my parents, so be it.”

Her father was clearly shaken. “...Pfft. How could a girl as sheltered as you ever go on by herself?”

“I’m not sheltered! I can learn how to cook and do laundry for myself!”

“Learning how to do a few chores is not the point! How’re you going to afford to live? You know full well how hard it is for a brand-new manga artist to keep herself fed. You can’t live just off of what they pay you here. This is a monthly manga magazine, so it’s gonna be a while before they put out the first collected volume—and if Volume 1 doesn’t sell, and sell a lot, they’re gonna cut you.”

“You sure know a lot, sir,” Miyako unconsciously whispered.

It made the father’s cheeks redden.

“It’s... It’s just common sense!”

He must have researched the profession a little himself, Miyako figured. It wasn’t pure prejudice that made him speak up against this.

“Well, I’ll work part-time until I can live off of manga alone! I can make it work!” Kaiko responded.

“You’ve never worked a day in your life before now. I really don’t think you’ll manage to work hard enough to keep yourself afloat, Kinue. Especially while you’re drawing manga.”

“I—I can do it! I can work as an assistant for other manga artists...”

“You? A girl as shy as you? You really think you can?”

“Sure I can! I can do anything for the sake of manga!” she shouted back.

Father and daughter stared at each other for a few moments. Then:

“...Phew.”

It was her father who turned his eyes away first. He had been beaten.

“...Why do you want to be a manga artist that badly?” His voice was softer now, more forlorn. “You could have become a great lingerie designer. When you were a kid, you said you dreamed of using our silk fabric to craft the greatest undergarments the world has ever known. Were you just making that up?”

“No,” Kaiko defiantly replied. “I just found something I want to do even more.”

“...And that’s drawing manga? Can’t you just draw that as a hobby?”

“No.”

“What?” the puzzled father replied.

“My dream is to use Japanese manga, a format known and loved all over the world, to show everyone just how wonderful undergarments can be. And if I want to do that, I’ve got to be on the front lines of the business. As a professional!”

“Kaiko...”

The words moved Miyako’s heart, even as they made her want to edge away from Kaiko a little. Here was a woman, pretty much her age, boldly talking about her dreams and taking concrete steps toward them. It made her feel tremendously sorry for herself.

It’s such a beautiful thing. And look at me...

“Kinue,” her father called her, voice full of emotion. Kaiko responded by removing her hair band, taking the bow (or what passed for a bow) off, unraveling it, and presenting the pair of panties to him.



“K-Kaiko, what’re you doing?!” a frantic Miyako asked.

“Th-this is...?”

He took the panties in hand, a look of utter shock on his face. Kaiko gave him a smile, recalling her past memories with him.

“Do you remember, Father? These panties...?”

“Of... Of course I do...”

He stared at them lovingly, running them across his hands to feel the fabric.

“These are the high-end panties I bought you for your tenth birthday... I thought the pattern looked familiar, but I didn’t think it was the same pair...”

“Every page of manga I’ve ever worked on was drawn with these panties over my face. No matter how hard and painful it’s been, I’ve made it over every obstacle I’ve faced because of the panties you gave me. And I want to keep pursuing my dreams, Father, together with the panties you poured so much of your love into.”

“Kinue...”

Her father’s eyes began to water. He brought the panties up to his face, taking in the aroma. “...Mmm...ffuuu...hah... It smells wonderful. It’s filled with the aroma of years’ worth of hard work. You’ve worked hard... Kinue...”

The panties were lovingly placed back on the table.

“I think I understand how you feel now. All right. I’ll be happy to support your dreams.”

“Father...!” Kaiko beamed at him.

“...But first, we’ll need to go home and explain things to your mother. She’s going to be a lot more stubborn than I was.”

“I know.”

“But with the kind of passion you have, I’m sure we can have her see things our way. Keep up the good work, Kinue...or I suppose I should say, Kaiko Mikuniyama.”

“Of course!”

“Ah, you’ve grown into such a fine woman...Kinue...”

“Well, I’m my father’s daughter.”

They smiled at each other, both shedding tears.

“...Um, is this really something to get teary about...?”

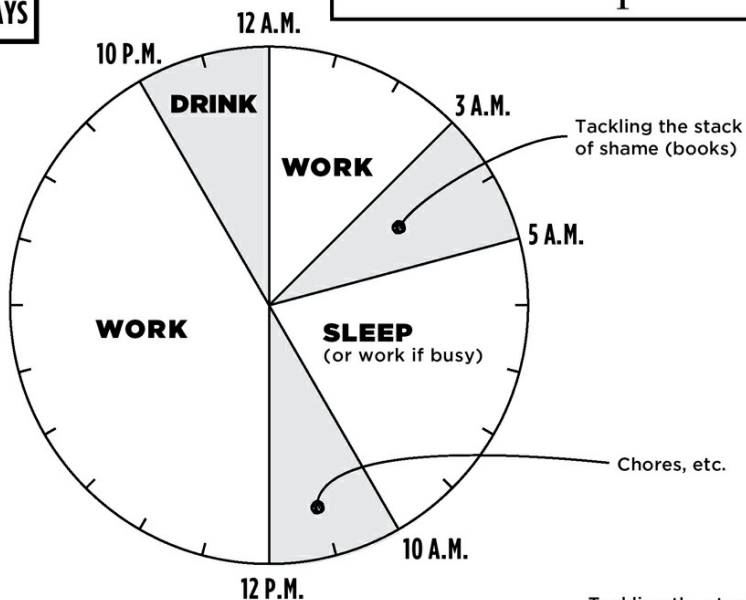
Miyako was less than convinced, but she forced herself to accept it.

Problem solved, I guess?

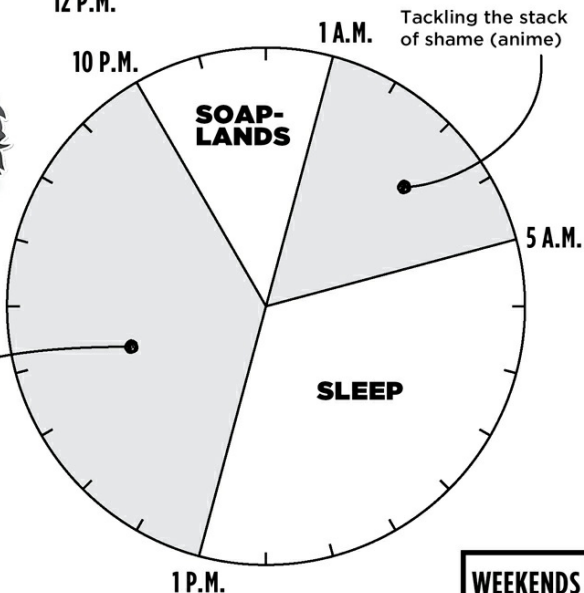
A CERTAIN EDITOR'S

Life Report

WEEKDAYS



Work, lazing
around, work, etc.



WEEKENDS

Chihiro Hashima's Hobby

One evening in early September, Itsuki and Chihiro were having dinner at Itsuki's apartment. On the low *kotatsu* table was a large bowl of soba noodles accompanied by tempura made from shrimp, Sillago fish, squid, eggplant, *shishito* peppers, ginger, *shiso* leaves, and more. The cold noodles—perfect for summer—were an excellent match for the crisp fried tempura, and they were making rapid progress through the bowl.

Itsuki paused only just long enough from his single-minded quest to destroy the noodles to speak up.

“Oh, hey, Chihiro...”

“Yeah?”

“What do you want for your birthday?”

Chihiro arched his eyebrows up high. His seventeenth birthday was on September 6, just a few days away. “Oh, are you sure?”

“Uh-huh. You gave me a present.”

The owl T-shirt Chihiro had given Itsuki was now a regular part of his closet rotation. He took a moment to think.

“Hmm, I dunno...”

“Don't worry about it being expensive. I'm an accomplished, anime-adapted writer, ha-ha-ha!”

“...Really? ...Well, um.....maybe a carving knife or something.”

“Huh?”

It wasn't what Itsuki pictured. He gave him a look.

“A carving knife. The one you have here is like you bought the cheapest one we could find just so you'd have one, right? It doesn't really cut very well. I try to sharpen it, but there's only so much quality I can get out of it.”

“...Oh.” Itsuki had no idea. He never cooked at all. “Wait. If you put it that way, pretty much every cooking utensil in the kitchen was taken from

some cheap cookware set, wasn't it?"

"Yeah... A lot of it might be worn down by now. I've been using them for over two years..." Chihiro looked almost guilty about it.

"Okay, perfect! How about we replace all the cookware with good stuff? I wouldn't know what to buy, so you can choose for me!"

"Really?!" Chihiro's eyes lit up. "Oh, wow... Are you sure it's okay to give me something like that?"

"No. What're you talking about?"

"Huh?"

"That's just me replacing my kitchen stuff. *Your* present needs to be something else."

"Oh, really? Because that's perfectly fine as a present."

"Nope. Pick something for yourself."

"Hmm... How about some fancy shrimp, then, or some meat?"

"For you to cook?"

"Yeah. I'll eat it, too, so it'll kind of be for me."

He was technically correct, Itsuki thought, but it didn't sit well with him.

"...No, how about something that's one hundred percent going to be yours? Like a game system or a music player or something?"

"Hmm... I can just use whatever you've got here, though."

"Okay, how about a CD or a game or a Blu-ray anime box set, or... Oh! How about some porn games?!"

Itsuki made it sound like a brilliant idea. Chihiro just stared reproachfully at him.

"What kind of person gives his younger brother a bunch of porn games?"

"...A lot of people, wouldn't they? I remember back in middle or high school, people sometimes brought in porno mags or DVDs they found in their older brother's stash..."

"Well, all right, maybe!" Chihiro blushed. "But I, um—it's not like seeing naked women makes me happy or anything..."

Itsuki had the impression that Chihiro openly was speaking his mind, not just demurring out of politeness. He had a lot of female friends, it felt like. Maybe he was so used to seeing naked girls in person, porn didn't interest him any longer.

"Um... Are you thinking about something?"

He waved his hands at the quizzical Chihiro. "Oh, um, no! Okay, uh, do

you have any hobbies, then? What do you do when you have free time at home?”

“Oh, I read, I play games...and, um...build GunPla...”

“Whoa, maybe you can tackle the stack of unbuilt ones I got!”

GunPla was the brand name for model kits sold in Japan depicting robots and vehicles from the *Mobile Suit Gundam* anime franchise. Chihiro seemed a little embarrassed about admitting to be a fan. Itsuki’s room back at the family house had a large stack of GunPla he purchased and never got around to building. This was common among hobbyists—purchasing a set because the box art looked cool but being too butterfingers to actually put it together well. Itsuki thought he’d told Chihiro to take them, but...

“Yeah, I already did. I think I’ve done around thirty?”

“Wow, that’s...just about all of them, isn’t it? Are they bare [i.e. simply put together following the instructions, without applying paint or other extras]?”

“No. At first, I just added lining [using a pen or other tool to paint in the gaps in the model parts, adding to the realism] and applied a matte finish, but lately I’ve started doing the whole painting and weathering thing. I haven’t done much modding apart from stuff to improve durability, but...”

“...For real?”

Compared to Itsuki—who usually just glued them together, filled in the lines, and called it a day—Chihiro’s skill level was astronomically higher.

“...You know, I think there are some more unbuilt GunPla in my closet here. You want ’em?”

“Really?” Chihiro asked, eyes aglow again.

“Yep. I can handle up to HG [High Grade standard 144:1 models], pretty much. The RGs [Real Grade, a line released several years ago on the same scale as HG but with a huge difference in realism and moving parts; the pinnacle of Bandai’s GunPla technology] have so many parts to them, I just opened the box and said nope.”

“Ohhhh? Aw, you’re so kind, big bro! 🎵”

Chihiro immediately took an excited look inside the closet. Itsuki couldn’t help but smile as he did. If he was that enraptured with GunPla, **he was definitely a guy.**

(By the way, Chihiro’s birthday present wound up being a [really huge] Neo Zeong.)

Rookie Prize Judges' Table

It was a sunny day in early September when Haruto Fuwa visited Gift Publishing to help judge for the fifteenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest.

Contests like these were, as the title suggested, a system for light novel publishers to discover new talent; lots of labels held their own. They accepted unpublished manuscripts, gave out prizes to the best ones, and (generally) put the winners into print. Even if a novel wasn't quite prizeworthy, the writer would still occasionally be assigned an editor and make their debut later. Having new talent show up and be active in the business wasn't just good for labels, but for the industry as a whole—it was no exaggeration that the future of light novels rode on the backs of these contests.

Despite having honest doubts about how qualified a judge he was, Haruto took the elevator up to the meeting room where the evaluations took place. The GF Bunko New Writers Contest was launched alongside the label itself; this was its fifteenth anniversary. Evaluation took place over three rounds, through a process of test readings and editor checks, before a smaller pool was nominated for the final judgment. This was what the judges went through to pick a grand prize and multiple first, second, and honorable mention prizes, along with a Special Judges' Selection.

The judges were picked from writers, manga artists, well-known screenwriters and anime directors, and other creative types, paired with GF Bunko editors. It was common to see some pretty famous figures in the judge pool for the first few years of these awards, but these days, they were more likely to be people already working in the Gift Publishing family. This was Haruto's first stint as a judge; he was picked because his work was being made into anime (this was before the show's airing) and he had some "momentum" going. (A lot of this also had to do with the fact that Nayuta Kani, the most famous winner of the GF award, declined to participate. She

told Haruto as much herself.)

Not that I could imagine Nayu taking this seriously at all...

Haruto smiled a little as he called his editor Kawabe to announce his presence. After a few moments, he was instead greeted by Miyako Shirakawa.

“Oh, hello, Fuwa!”

“Oh, uh, hi, Miyako.”

His heart skipped a beat. This came wholly out of the blue. He knew she was working part-time for editorial, of course, but he hadn’t had much business at the publisher itself after the anime’s run ended. It was the first time he had seen her here.

“Mr. Kawabe is a little busy at the moment, so I’ll let you in.”

“Okay.”

She used her ID lanyard to unlock and open the door. The way she seemed so used to operations around here flustered him a bit as he followed behind.

“Here’s the judging room.”

The meeting room she took him to was unoccupied. None of the other judges was there yet. Haruto had been here countless times before for other meetings; it wasn’t decorated for the occasion in any way. Publishers would occasionally rent out space at a fancy hotel or hold the judging at a lavishly decorated chamber inside their building, but that wasn’t the case for GF Bunko. Instead, there was a long table with some chocolate and other snacks on a paper plate in the middle, while neat stacks of paper had been placed in front of each seat.

Haruto sat in a random chair, picked one of the contest entries in front of him, and flipped through it.

“Have you read all the entries?”

“Oh, sure.” Haruto nodded. “Of course. Well, the final six nominees, at least.”

The contest this year had received over a thousand entrants. Haruto and his fellow judges would be assigning prizes to the six that made it through the process.

“Pretty crazy to think,” remarked Miyako. “A six-in-one-thousand chance.”

“Yeah, I think there were around nine hundred in the contest Itsuki and I

participated in. I'm still kind of amazed that I passed."

He smiled a bit. That was the honest truth.

"Oh, so you and Itsuki both turned pro after being selected in this?"

"Uh-huh. We both earned prizes in the tenth annual contest. They publish the names of the writers who make it past the first round on the net and stuff—I still remember how happy I was to see my name up there. I was on pins and needles the whole time until they released the round-two survivors."

It was all nostalgic memories for him now, at this point.

"Though, really," he added, "it must be a lot harder to select from a thousand entries."

"I bet it was. The editors were all reading entries over lunch and everything."

Miyako mentally recalled the scene around the office a month ago. For the first round, GF Bunko usually hired on part-time readers—not from the general public, but among writers, critics, friends of the editors, and other people with an eye for quality. Works that made it past there and into round two were read through by at least two editors, and in round three, the entire department read through the surviving entries. All stories that beat the first round had an evaluation sheet attached to them outlining their merits and issues, along with suggestions for improvements; these were sent back to the writer after the judging was over. Around a hundred novels were picked in round one; twenty or so made it past round two.

This meant, of course, that the editors had to read and write evaluations for a hundred entries. This, combined with their regular duties, made the judging period a trial by fire workwise. In the office, at home, commuting in between—it was a given that every second would be spent reading. Every waking moment devoted to work—and only questionably legal.

"So we'll have to pick the prizewinners from the six they handpicked for us?" A bead of cold sweat appeared on Haruto's cheek. "That's a lot of responsibility."

"Good luck, Fuwa. The future of our label is riding on this."

Haruto giggled a bit at her ironic comment. "You really *have* become a full-fledged editor, Miyako."

"Huh?! Oh, no, I really haven't..." Miyako laughed awkwardly.

"No, Kawabe told me about how Shirakawa, the part-timer, defused a huge crisis at GF Bunko on her first day, and so on."

“All I did was go fetch Nayu’s manuscript.”

“Not only that, but you’re always working hard, you find stuff to do before anyone asks about it... He said they really appreciate having you around.”

“Well, uh... I’m glad to hear that. But I wrote someone’s pen name on a package I sent the other day, and it caused this huge uproar...”

“Ah, everybody makes mistakes. Do you mean the person making the manga for Itsuki’s series?”

“Yeah...”

Why does he know? It puzzled Miyako.

“Mmm. I heard about that. Like, the manga artist’s dad stormed into the office, demanding you stop making her draw porn, and you lectured him into submission like Kamijo [protagonist of *A Certain Magical Index*].”

“I—I didn’t lecture him! And definitely not into submission! And who told you that anyway?” Miyako’s face turned red.

“One of the editors there was so impressed, I guess he told a whole bunch of people. Itsuki knew about it, so I bet a lot of other writers do.”

“Ooooooh... No wonder I’ve been feeling all this attention on me lately. I better yell at Mr. Tokuyama about that...”

“Ha-ha! Ah, it’s no big deal. You’re the most red-blooded, passionate editor we’ve got, Miyako!”

“Oh, stop!” Miyako gave Haruto a light slap on the shoulder for that jab.

“Hyeahh...”

...And, of course, that slight bit of unannounced body touching made Haruto’s (virgin) heart skip a beat.

“...Do I hear the sounds of youthful flirting...? Is someone in here playing out a light novel–style romantic comedy? Writing about it isn’t enough...?”

Then, with a voice that seemed to rise up from the core of the earth, the door opened to reveal two men. One was Satoshi Godo, GF Bunko’s editor in chief and flashy mafioso. The other was a slight, skinny man in his late thirties wearing a worn-out jacket, about Haruto’s height but appearing shorter because of poor posture. His face was pale, drained of energy, and

there were rings under his eyes, giving him the appearance of a ghost.

“...That’s strange... I thought this was the refined, holy sanctuary of the judges’ table, and yet, I seemed to detect the voice of a dashing young man, enjoying casual conversation with a woman...”

The man sluggishly took his seat, his glassy, fishlike eyes squarely upon Haruto and Miyako. Miyako returned the gaze, utterly confused.

“Um...?”

Haruto, meanwhile, let out a little laugh. “Hey, Kaizu. Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Mm. Yeah. You too.”

This was Makina Kaizu, a veteran novelist who made his debut way back at the very first GF Bunko New Writers Contest. Basic arithmetic meant that he had now been in the business for a good fourteen years, time he had spent launching a large number of titles. Some were canceled midway through the plot; some were smash hits and candidates for an anime adaptation (but never accepted); but through it all, he had maintained his presence in the business this entire time.

Kaizu had been a judge for the New Writers Contest since its twelfth year; this was his fourth go-round.

“How’re you feeling, Fuwa?”

“Oh, fine, I guess...”

“Fine” seemed to sum it up. The *Chevalier of the New World* anime turned out awful, but the books were selling well, at least.

“You getting your regular checkups?”



“...Oh, you mean how am I physically feeling? I haven’t gotten a checkup since college.”

“Ooh, you better get one every year... Your health is everything, you know...”

Haruto giggled a bit. Considering his advice, Kaizu looked less than healthy himself. “What about you, Mr. Kaizu?”

“I had a physical last month. Everything passed with flying colors.”

“Really?” Haruto had trouble believing that, given the evidence in front of him.

“Heh-heh-heh...” Kaizu gave him a creepy laugh, then turned to Miyako. “So who’s this pretty girl?”

“That’s the new part-timer I mentioned,” Godo replied.

“Oh... The real-life Ms. Bear Cub, huh?”

“What does *that* mean?!” a confused Miyako exclaimed.

“That’s the nickname of the main character in *Juhan Shuttai! [Sleeper Hit!]*, a manga about an editorial team. She’s a former candidate for the Japanese national judo team. Real passion, you know?”

The shame made Miyako’s cheeks redden again. “Ugh, how far are those rumors traveling anyway...? People call me Kamijo, people call me Bear Cub...! I never even tried judo before! I did karate, but...”

“Oh, you did?” This was news to Haruto.

“W-well, as a kid,” the ever-reddening Miyako replied as she poured tea from a bottle into some cups as a distraction.

“Right, now that we’re all here, can we get started?” Godo asked gruffly.

The final decisions were to be made by these three judges—Makina Kaizu, Haruto Fuwa, and editor in chief Satoshi Godo.

“Right,” Kaizu said blandly as he picked up a crunchy, puffed-corn snack from the bowl and tore it open. “Let’s get this over with quick, shall we...?”

“Well,” Haruto countered, “I don’t want to half ass this. This is really important, so we need to talk it out.”

“Heh-heh...” The laugh from Kaizu couldn’t have sounded more sarcastic. “Don’t get so worked up, Fuwa. The important thing is the New Writers Contest system itself. The final selections don’t really mean anything.”

Haruto arched an eyebrow. “...How do you mean?”

“Anyone whose work made it to the final round is gonna be assigned an

editor and have their work published. That's already been decided. Whether it's the grand prize or honorable mention, it's not their ranking in the contest that drives sales—it's how the package marketing plays out. Sometimes the grand-prize winner flops in the market, and the honorable mention from that same year makes it into anime territory."

"Well, yeah, but—wait, wasn't that *my* year?"

Chevalier of the New World won honorable mention at the tenth New Writers Contest, but the grand-prize winner that year sold like garbage. That wasn't unheard of. You saw lower-ranked titles outselling the first-prize entries at least once in the history of pretty much every contest. There were even real-life examples of entries that didn't make it into the final round getting fished out of the pile by an editor and becoming a big hit.

"We judges are just icing on the cake. We're here to keep up appearances for this event, that's all. All we're doing is deciding how much lunch money we're doling out to the new guys."

Kaizu flashed an ironic grin.

"So let's keep it chill, huh?"

He was rather point-blank about it, Haruto thought, but he might be right. Even if he was, he was loath to admit it.

"So if all this is pointless, Mr. Kaizu, then why have you done it so many times?"

"To get paid."

"...Judges really don't make a lot of money."

They did receive some payment for this, yes, but considering the work involved with carefully reading and judging six complete novels—pretty rough ones, too, since no editing or proofreading had been done on them—it was barely worth it. Writing novels was a much more lucrative use of their time.

"Oh, well, maybe it's just a pittance to a hotshot rising star like you, but for a starving writer like me, it's enough to make my eyes pop out of my sockets."

Haruto could tell he was half joking.

"That...and we're kind of doing the writers a favor. Some of 'em may go on to do big things, and now we'll get to say 'Hey, you turned pro thanks to us.' And if they make hits, they'll take us out to fancy sushi places and stuff..."

“Even though all six of these are gonna be published anyway?”

“Oh, you know, these new writers are so naive... No one has to tell them that...”

Haruto chuckled. “Wow. That’s pretty awful.”

“Hee-hee-hee... Eating expensive sushi on some younger guy’s tab... That’s my dream in life...”

“...Well! Enough chitchat. I’d like to move on to the judging, if you don’t mind?”

“Oh, sure!”

“Yeah, yeah, um...”

Both nodded as Miyako took her post in front of the door.

“I don’t have any idea how this works,” Haruto said, “but what’s the process?”

“First,” replied Godo, “the writing judges will go over their assorted feelings for each of the titles and name the one they think deserves the grand prize. I’ll give my opinion as EIC, too, but I want the writers’ feedback to take precedent. If you two agree, then great; otherwise, we’ll talk about it.”

“All right...”

“I think the grand prize should be something sexy written by a woman. Can you tell me which one that is?” Kaizu joked.

For the purposes of this contest, readers and judges were not given writer profiles, so they wouldn’t have any preconceived notions going in. The content of the novel was the only thing they had to judge on.

“Um... Well,” said Haruto, ignoring Kaizu’s nonsense, “should I begin?”

Kaizu waved his snack toward him in agreement, so he took out his tablet and loaded up a document with his feedback for each entry.

“Oooh, you brought your own notes and everything. Really into this, huh?” Kaizu remarked dully.

The six entries left for the finals were as follows:

NEW WRITERS CONTEST ENTRY SUMMARIES

MAKEN WARS

A new wave in battle legends! Let the life-and-death sword combat set your mind aflame!

The Maken Wars: a tournament of death where sword fighters of history and myth battle until just one remains standing. The prize: whatever they wish for. Seven warriors are summoned for this contest, each bearing their own swords of legend, holiness, and evil. Siegfried, Hervor, Okada Izo, El Cid, Roland, Beowulf, and Seki—each of them strives to be king of the mountain for their broken dreams, for their beloved people or homelands, for their own honor. Shun is a boy thrust among these legendary fighters during a training trip for his fencing club. His life is saved by Seki, a woman dressed as a man who wields the Kansho-Bakuya blade and is a tad self-conscious about her large forehead. Before long, they're plunging into the heat of the battle!

I WOKE UP AS THE DEMON LORD OF ANOTHER WORLD, SO I JUST STARTED A HAREM

The high road of fantasy! The ultimate feel-good, kick-ass experience!

I woke up on a luxurious bed I had no recollection of with three beautiful, nonhuman girls sleeping naked next to me—Rosetta the succubus, Alice the vampire, and Tsubaki the ogre. Apparently, this was another world, and this trio had just summoned me to serve as their new Demon Lord, king of the monster realm of Asmodia. Quickly faced with mortal danger to my land, I used my knowledge gleaned from strategy games and blood-and-guts fantasy novels to conquer the neighboring kingdoms, one by one. And as attractive as people find me here, it isn't long before princesses and female fighters from a vast array of species join my harem...

NEW WRITERS CONTEST ENTRY SUMMARIES

MEMORIES OF THE SKY

A beautiful fantasy of youth, featuring delicate souls taking paths that'll sing to your heart!

Akira, a boy tormented at school, abandoned at home, and alone at all times, cracks one day and runs off. He finds himself face-to-face with Sora, a mysterious white-haired young girl. No longer alone, the two of them form their own little “kingdom,” and soon four other children—each carrying pain in their own ways—join them. In the world around Sora, Akira and the others have adventures, fight off those who wish harm upon them, and deepen their bonds. But when one of them reveals his love for Sora to the group, the kingdom begins to fall apart...

ILLEGAL TRIAL

I can create my own truth! A unique courtroom drama featuring the most dastardly attorney in history!

Aso, a law student who's tried to pass the bar three times and failed, is falsely accused of groping a woman. He's saved by a beautiful seventeen-year-old girl—Karma Sakazaki, a demonic attorney feared and renowned for doing whatever it takes to win her cases. In exchange for getting him out of trouble, Aso is enslaved by Karma and forced to help out with all of her gray-area (mostly illegal) lawyering tactics. One day, a rich young woman comes to their office seeking a defense attorney for her father, caught red-handed for first-degree murder...

NEW WRITERS CONTEST ENTRY SUMMARIES

THE GODDESS MUST BE PUNISHED!

~ I'll Save the World for You, So Just Show Me Your Ass! ~

Awaken, my fetishes! A brand-spanking-new fantasy that can even make you climax!

Maran, a swordsman on a quest to defeat the Dark Lord, visits a lakeside temple said to house a legendary holy sword. There he finds a beautiful woman, sleeping as if dead, and slaps her on the rear to wake her up. It turns out she is the goddess Cittia, who gave the holy sword to a legendary hero of the past. With her powers sealed away by an unknown force, she can manifest her divine strength and summon the sword only when her butt is slapped in just the right way to drive her to the heights of ecstasy. Fortunately for her, Maran is a once-in-a-century genius in the delicate art of spanking. Thus begins an epic journey, as Maran slaps the loopy goddess across the land to send the Dark Lord's armies to their graves!

SENGOKU KENPUDEN

A solemn samurai tale about a man who cannot die and the fighters who leave carnage in their wake!

Tsukahara Bokuden, a samurai granted eternal life by the god Takemikazuchi, journeys across the land to master the way of the sword. Lauded as a holy master of the blade, Bokuden provides sword instruction to the shogun Ashikaga Yoshiteru, the one-eyed tactician Yamamoto Kansuke, the jack-of-all-trades Hosokawa Yusai, and the fleet-footed genius Imagawa Ujizane. He is witness to their lives, and their deaths, as they ultimately fall to the greatest shogun of them all: Tokugawa Ieyasu, the man who united Japan. Meeting him helps Bokuden begin to find the answer waiting at the end of his limitless journey—one that meets its conclusion in an encounter with the young samurai Miyamoto Musashi.

Checking his notes, Haruto began outlining his feelings.

“Um, so *Maken Wars* to start... This is pretty much *Fate*, although, I guess I’m not really one to talk when it comes to battle-royale fantasy. The names of all the sword moves are pretty nice. They stir the imagination of the little kid inside all of us; I like them. But there’s nothing novel to it at all. I really wanted at least some kind of fresh new element.”

Haruto’s own *Chevaliers of the New World* borrowed a great number of things from Arthurian legend and mythological weaponry, so honestly, *Fate* was a huge inspiration to him, but he thought that his work stood out from the pack a lot more than this one...or so he hoped, at least. The judges in *that* contest slammed him for it, though.

“*I Woke Up as the Demon Lord of Another World, So I Just Started a Harem* is, well, about as Narō-style [*Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, or “Let’s Become Novelists,” a Japanese amateur novel publishing website and the starting point for many successful light novels] as you can get, like you can tell from the title. It definitely does what it says on the tin, huh? Really fun read, and I think the ending got wrapped up in a nice way. Still, I think you’ll find a lot of titles on Narō in the same wheelhouse and doing it better, so I’m not sure how much business it has earning an award...”

“Harsh,” Godo whispered in his low voice.

“Next was *The Goddess Must Be Punished! I’ll Save the World for You, So Just Show Me Your Ass!*, but...how to put it...?”

Haruto gave a glance to Miyako before lowering his voice.

“...Um, the author’s passion for butts and spanking them came across loud and clear, for sure. It’s basically a quick-reading comedy with a little sexy stuff in it, but you can tell he devoted a *lot* of his energy to describing people’s rear ends. It’s not just deep, but super-deep. If you have the same tastes the author does, I think you’d really enjoy it.”

“What do *you* think of that stuff, Fuwa?”

Haruto gulped. He had deliberately avoided talking about that, and Kaizu latched right on to it. Haruto gave him a taut smile, pushing back the desire to scream *I don’t wanna talk about my sexual preferences in front of the girl I like!*

“I, um, well, I’m not huuuugely into it...”

“Oh? Funny. Didn’t you like maids a lot? I figured that scene where the goddess was dressed up in a maid outfit and spanked would be right up your

alley.”

“Why do *you* know so much about my...uh, my stuff?!”

Kaizu grimly smiled at the blushing Haruto. “Because you can’t hide the fetishes in your work. Like, you’re a fan of the closet-masochist type, right? Someone who’s all willful and determined normally but faithfully follows orders and secretly wishes her master would punish her more?”

“Gahhh?! Wha—? Why...?!”

Haruto’s eyes burst open. He was absolutely correct.

“Heh-heh-heh...” Kaizu smiled in victory. “Maybe you didn’t notice it, but you were definitely on a roll when you wrote that scene where Högni had Asao punish her in a maid outfit in Volume 7. That wasn’t the only time your own tastes came out, but, ah, we can compare notes another time.”

“Ngh... I, um, thanks for reading my novels so carefully...” Haruto made a quivering fist with one hand, then took a deep breath. “Um, let’s go to the next one, *Illegal Trial*. Basically, this is the TV series *Legal High* reworked as a light novel. We’ve seen a few light novels set in courtrooms, but this one has a lot of fun, charming characters, and despite all the comedy, it’s got a nice backbone of a theme to it. The plot gimmicks are pretty crude, though, to the point that I thought any prosecutor who’d be fooled by *that* stuff has to be an idiot. It affects the whole persona of this invincible defense attorney, and I think that’s going to need some serious plot-level fixing to address.”

To sum up Haruto’s take, although it had the potential to become a masterpiece on the level of *Legal High*, in its current state, it was far from a complete package.

“Considering it’s a samurai drama about a man with eternal youth, *Sengoku Kenpuden* shares a few core elements with *Blade of the Immortal*, but the writing style and storytelling are pretty much a straight-up samurai novel. Going into all this detail on the daimyo of the period and their armies... I mean, personally, it’d be great to see a hard-boiled samurai tale in the light novel genre, but just thinking about its entertainment value, I worry about how it’s so focused on historical realism that it brings out all these famous warlords and samurai, pits them against one another, and then all that gets cut off. It’s like the main hero has no real effect on history at all. You see figures from history, but that’s it; you just see them. Tokugawa Ieyasu puts on a little demo of his sword skills, he talks a bit, and that’s all. Who cares? I’m not saying to ignore history, but I wish the author thought more about

living up to reader expectations.”

“Hmm... I kind of liked it,” Godo meekly protested.

“The last one is *Memories of the Sky*. I thought the way the author depicted each character’s delicate state of mind was excellent. I was surprised by plot developments several times, and I think the story’s well put together. The climax was a little heartrending, but it left me feeling very refreshed. It really felt like a nice novel about youth to me. So those are my feelings.”

“Hmmm,” Kaizu lifelessly pondered. “...So which do you want for the grand prize?”

“It’s hard since they all have their pluses and minuses, but if I had to pick one, I guess I’d have to go with *Memories of the Sky*.”

“Huh?”

The protest came from a surprising source—Miyako, listening in from the door.

“What is it, Miyako?”

She turned her eyes toward Godo, hesitating to butt in as a part-timer. “If you have something to say,” he replied, “say it.”

“All right. Um, it’s really nothing too important, but Fuwa, you were lavishing praise on *Memories of the Sky* just now, but you sounded pretty unsure about picking it for the grand prize. I was just kind of surprised.”

“Ah, yeah...” Haruto laughed. *Memories* was a well-made package and one he personally enjoyed, but he had good reason not to push too hard for a grand prize. “Well, I think you’ll see why in a sec,” he simply said, before turning back toward Kaizu and Godo.

“How about we hear from Kaizu next?” Godo asked.

“Sure thing, boss! Although my feelings were mostly the same as Fuwa’s...”

Kaizu took a quick peek at the list of entry titles on the table before giving his takes in his usual slow, disinterested style.

“Um... *Maken Wars* is one of those ‘battle of the stars’ type things. The setting and move names are really cool, so I wish the title was a bit more original, too. Otherwise, the same as what Fuwa said. Next, *I Woke Up*—blah blah blah. I liked it. Fuwa questioned it being here since there’s a ton of stuff like it on Narō, but you won’t find many series on Narō that wrap things up as nice and neat as this book, although that advantage’ll go away if it becomes a series. *The Goddess Must Be Punished!*, like Fuwa said, is

probably the best sex comedy ever if you share the author's fetishes. I didn't too much, but it takes a kind of talent to push your libido to the world the way this guy did. *Illegal Trial*... I agree with Fuwa. It's not really up to par yet, but it's got a good chance to hit it big with some rewrites. *Sengoku Kenpuden* definitely isn't all that entertaining per se, but for someone older like me, this kind of dispassionate writing style is nice... Finally, *Memories of the Sky*... It's a very well-done Nayuta Kani wannabe, is all I can say."

As he warned in advance, his opinions mostly matched Haruto's, including his impression of *Memories*.

"So the grand prize goes to?" Godo asked.

"Either *Illegal Trial* for all the potential it has, or maybe *The Goddess Must Be Punished!* for how neatly it comes together and how unique it is."

Haruto winced at this.

"Hmm... We have a difference of opinion," noted Godo.

"Oh, great," Kaizu responded, sighing with a little laugh as he turned to Haruto. "What do you think, Fuwa?"

"Um..." He mulled over Kaizu's thoughts for a moment and compared them with his. "...Well, I can't see *Illegal Trial* getting the grand prize. It's just not complete enough."

"Not now, no, but I'm thinking about what a decent round of editing could do. It could turn into a masterpiece."

"But shouldn't we be judging based on what they sent in?"

"You think? The readers are going to be seeing the edited versions, so wouldn't we be safe thinking about its future prospects?"

"Well, if you put it that way, editing has the potential to improve *any* first draft. The difference is that with *Illegal Trial*, it's really easy to see how to improve it. I'm sure some entrants wrote multiple drafts of their work before submitting it, so I think it'd be kind of rude to them if we say, like, 'Well, maybe we can make it better later.'"

"Mm. True. Let's take *Illegal Trial* off the board, then." The ease with which Kaizu withdrew his proposal disappointed Haruto a bit.

"Oh, all right. So next..."

"Right. I'm also pushing for *The Goddess Must Be Punished!* It's a complete package, it's unique, and it's a match for your fetishes. Don't you think it's good?"

"My—my fetishes don't matter!" Haruto shouted. "But in terms of

completeness and uniqueness, I agree with you. Still, I think the grand-prize winner is kind of the ‘face’ of the whole award. Maybe it doesn’t matter to readers what kind of prize each entry won, but I think it does matter to future writers who might send stuff to us in later years. I mean, if I were a new writer, I’d kinda hesitate to join a contest where the winner was a spanking-fetish novel with the subtitle *I’ll Save the World for You, So Just Show Me Your Ass!*”

“Well, what’s the big deal? You like spanking, don’cha?”

“I told you, my own tastes don’t matter!”

“Certainly,” Godo interjected, “the style of a grand-prize winner can affect the trends we see in next year’s entries. Fuwa said it before I could, but honestly, I’m not sure I want *Just Show Me Your Ass!* to be the face of the contest.”

“Besides,” added Haruto, “I think that *Memories of the Sky* is even more complete than *Ass*—I mean, *The Goddess Must Be Punished!*, so that’s why I’m pushing for that.”

“But it’s a blatant, inferior rip-off of Nayuta Kani.”

It was an extremely harsh way of putting it, but Kaizu sounded a little sad saying it.

“That... Yeah,” admitted Haruto.

And that was why he, despite all his kind words, had trouble pushing very hard for *Memories*. It was very clearly inspired by Nayuta Kani’s *Landscape* series. They had no way of telling whether this was deliberate or happened unconsciously, but either way, it was an undeniable fact. And *Memories* didn’t hold a candle to the *Landscape* series in any way. The depiction of the characters’ thoughts was excellent...but not as good as *Landscape*. The story was intricately woven...but not as well as in *Landscape*. It stuck in your mind afterward...but not as much as *Landscape*. It was more complete than *Goddess*...but not as complete as the *Landscape* series. The author had clear talent...but not as much talent as Nayuta Kani. Thus, it was an inferior rip-off.

“If it had anything going for it that wasn’t already in *Landscape*,” Kaizu commented, “I’d be happy to nominate it for the grand prize.”

“I wouldn’t hesitate either, I don’t think. But if you ignore the *Landscape* series for a moment, I think *Memories* is still a better piece of work than *Goddess*, so I have to give it to that, I suppose...”

“Yeah, but we gave the grand prize two years ago to a series that’s now GF’s top seller. If we turn around two years later and give that same prize to a total rip-off, how is that gonna look?”

“That’s...true, yeah.”

Kaizu and Haruto could see that they both had valid points. All they could do was grumble at each other, unable to reach an answer.

But then...

“Um, do we absolutely have to pick a grand-prize winner?”

It was Miyako who presented the simple question. And she, too, had a point. *Memories of the Sky* and *The Goddess Must Be Punished!* both deserved prizes, no doubt about that...just as long as it wasn’t the grand prize, the top spot won by Nayuta Kani two years ago.

Kaizu turned to Godo. “...That’s certainly true, isn’t it? Ridiculous, but...”

But it was a rule in the GF New Writers Contest, beginning with the ninth year, that a grand prize had to be given out each time.

“Why is that?” Miyako asked.

“Because otherwise, the judges would never award one,” Godo bitterly explained. “In the first eight years, we awarded grand prizes based strictly on merit. We didn’t do any comparative assessments. So in that whole time, we only awarded a grand prize once.”

“Well, that’s not a bad thing, is it? It means winning a grand prize really means something.”

“It *is* bad,” Godo countered.

“...Why is that?”

“If we never give out grand prizes, people’ll think we’re cheap.”

“Cheap?”

“In our contest, the grand-prize winner gets three million yen; the two runners-up, one million; the honorable mention, half a million. Two million yen of difference between the grand prize and the other ones. Kaizu called it lunch money, but for a new writer before their debut, two million yen is a lot. A lot of people enter the contest for the money, period. But if we advertise a three-million-yen prize and don’t award it each year, what’ll the authors think

of that?”

“...They’ll enter a contest that gives out the entire reward pool, instead of gunning for three million that never gets rewarded.”

Godo nodded at Miyako. “Exactly. Of course, this isn’t something we should give out to a low-quality novel, but we can’t have the standards for a grand prize be too strict, either.”

“Sounds hard,” she meekly stated.

Kaizu gave this a sarcastic smile. “Not that the judges are really supposed to care about what the company wants to do, honestly.”

“Actually, does it say in the official rules that we’ll definitely choose a grand-prize winner?” asked Haruto.

“Yep, unfortunately,” replied Kaizu. “Like, ‘a grand prize will be awarded to the best entry among the final nominations’ or something.”

“Ahh. So we gotta choose one, then...”

Haruto sighed, despite himself. Just like Kaizu, he wasn’t into the idea of grading these entries on a curve.

“I know how you feel about it,” Godo tried to explain, “but since the year we made it clear that we always give a grand prize, the number of entries has kept going up. That’s the truth of it.”

“Yeah, yeah... I’ll follow the rules.” Kaizu shrugged.

So the debate went like this: Kaizu was firmly against *Memories of the Sky* winning the grand prize. Haruto steadfastly opposed *Illegal Trial* winning it. Godo clearly disdained the idea of *The Goddess Must Be Punished!* taking the prize. Kaizu enjoyed *Sengoku Kenpuden* for its refusal to serve as casual entertainment, but Haruto disliked it for the same reason. “I liked it,” Godo commented, “but just like *Goddess*, I don’t want it to be the face of our awards.” Everyone agreed that *Maken Wars* was a level below the pack in originality and execution.

Thus, in the end, after tireless debate and discussion that extended across over four hours, the group managed to work out a compromise among themselves.

The winner of the grand prize was...*I Woke Up as the Demon Lord of Another World, So I Just Started a Harem*.

Once the grand prize was picked, the rest fell into place much more quickly. *Memories of the Sky* and *The Goddess Must be Punished!* both got first prize; *Sengoku Kenpuden* and *Maken Wars*, second prize; and *Illegal*

Trial, the Special Judges' Selection. Thus, after much mental and emotional distress, the fifteenth GF Bunko New Writers Contest came to a close.

HOW TO ENTER THE 15TH GF BUNKO NEW WRITERS CONTEST—JOIN IN AND CRAFT THE NEW GENERATION OF TALENT!!!!!!

NEW WRITERS CONTEST OUTLINE

Following three selection rounds held by the GF Bunko editorial team, a panel of judges will examine the final nominees and award prizes. The best entry among this final pool will be awarded the Grand Prize.

PRIZES

Grand Prize: Commemorative Plaque and 3,000,000 Yen in Cash

First Prize: Commemorative Plaque and 1,000,000 Yen in Cash

Second Prize: Commemorative Plaque and 500,000 Yen in Cash

*A Special Judges' Selection (prize: 300,000 yen) may also be awarded.

JUDGES

Makina Kaizu (author), Haruto Fuwa (author), Satoshi Godo (GF Bunko editor-in-chief)

SUBMISSION RULES

Submit an unpublished work of fiction targeted for males in their late teens to twenties. Any genre is allowed, including fantasy, mystery, romance, and science fiction. (Works in self-published genre magazines and nonprofit online work are allowed; please provide the name of the publication or website with your entry.)

ENTRANT REQUIREMENTS

None

HOW TO ENTER

Provide your entry in vertically written Japanese, 80–150 pages in 34-row, 42-column format. Submit via mail or online. Handwritten manuscripts or submissions on floppy disks, CD-Rs, or other recordable media cannot be accepted.

Star of the Common Man

“Well, I’m honestly at a loss to explain why it turned out the way it did, but either way, the judging process for the New Writers Contest is firmly behind us. Kaizu, Fuwa, thanks for all your hard work today. All the other editors, thank you for wading through all those entries and writing up all those evaluation sheets. Good work, guys. Cheers!”

“Cheers!!”

After Godo finished his deep-voiced toast, everyone raised their glasses, proud of the hard work they had just completed.

It was a mere hour after the judging ended, and Haruto, Kaizu, Miyako, and the rest of GF Bunko editorial were seated in a fancy *yakiniku* barbecue chain to celebrate the end of judging. Beer, sake, and *shochu* were readily passed around as the editors congratulated one another and eagerly placed the meat brought over in large plates on the grill in the center of the table. Looking at the mounds of marbled red meat and thick beef tongue—clearly pricey—Miyako felt obliged to warily ask the nearby Toki a question.

“Um... Is this really okay? Ordering all this expensive meat?”

“Ha-ha-ha, it’s fine! It’s all on the company tab!”

Toki, medium-sized beer mug in hand, was already well on his way down Pass-Out Lane.

To be sure, publishers usually put dinner outings with writers or other associates on their expense accounts. These were limited, though—up to 5,000 yen per person, by Gift Publishing’s standards. And even if you stayed under that limit, if you expensed things too often, you’d get a call from Accounting and get raked over the coals about whether it was *really* for business or not.

“But one plate of this stuff goes for over four thousand yen...”

“Ahh, I’ll pay whatever we can’t expense,” said Godo, working hard on

his glass of straight whiskey. “So don’t hold back!” He already looked like a mafia boss as is; pairing him with whiskey fit him so well, it was scary. Add a cigar, and it would’ve been perfect, but he wasn’t a smoker.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about, boss,” a nearby editor said as he caught a waiter’s attention and ordered some sake and a Korean *yukhoe* platter.

“Well, in that case... Um, I’ll have cold Chinese noodles and a salad, please.” Miyako still couldn’t let herself get anything too expensive.

Soon, meat was cooking from one end of the table to the other, crafting a mouth-watering aroma that wafted across their private room.

“You want something, Miyako?” Haruto asked from his adjacent seat, wielding a pair of tongs.

“Oh, thanks. Pick whatever for me.”

“Okay!”

Picking up Miyako’s plate, Haruto tried to choose a few well-cooked cuts for her, when:

Twing!

A pair of tongs cut him off from the side.

“Huh...?!”

“Hold it, Fuwa,” said Makina Kaizu, face dead serious as he grabbed the meat Haruto was after. “That’s mine.”

“Oh, uh, sorry...”

“It’s fine. Now you know.”

With the befuddled Haruto watching, Kaizu placed piece after piece onto his plate, then ate them all at astounding speed.

“...You sure eat a lot, Kaizu.” Haruto chuckled as he divided the remaining meat between himself and Miyako.

“Offph...”

Kaizu turned his unhealthy-looking face to Haruto, swallowed the piping-hot meat in his mouth, and took a swig of oolong tea. “...There’s nothing I love more than eating with other people’s money. The more expensive, the better.”

“Oh... Really?”

His point-blank honesty impressed Haruto.

“...It’s pretty much nothing but bean sprouts for me at home,” Kaizu continued as he snapped up more meat for round two. “So when editorial springs for me, I eat as much as I can. To be honest, I don’t really like the

feeling of heavily marbled meat melting on my tongue. I think the cheap steaks they sell at the supermarket are tastier than that. But I still order the most expensive cut anyway. Because it's their treat."

He almost looked brave, dashing if you will, as he said it, following it up with an order of high-grade *galbi* (the most expensive cut).

"I see..."

You should just eat what you want, Haruto thought as he ordered some rice.

"Rice at this point? *Rice* at a *yakiniku* restaurant...? You hotshot bestselling authors really *are* a different breed."

"Huh?" Haruto asked, not understanding the sarcasm.

"Oh, I kind of get that," Miyako said. "If you're at an all-you-can-eat thing, you kinda don't want to order rice because you'll get full sooner that way."

"Ah, looks like *someone* here is a true woman of the people." Kaizu theatrically motioned to Haruto. "I hope someday *I* become filthy rich enough to be able to order rice at an all-you-can-eat place, while I'm lighting my smokes with ten-thousand-yen bills..."

"Wh-what's the big deal about ordering some rice?!" Haruto shouted. "Who cares? I like eating rice with *yakiniku*!"

"...Oh, sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to pick on you. You should eat whatever you want, Fuwa... Just enjoy your rice as you behold the comical sight of us lowborn common folk clawing at this meat since we know it'll be our only chance at it..."

"Nngh..."

Haruto gritted his teeth as Kaizu grabbed some more top-grade meat, applied sauce, and ate it.

"Heh-heh-heh... Ugh, it's just melting... I can feel the juices seeping all over my mouth... This would go *so* much better with rice..."

"Then order some goddamn rice!"

Haruto complained, not even realizing how friendly he'd become with the senior author.



The party began late today, so last call came all too early at this restaurant. The gang just barely satisfied their appetites before they had to go.

“It sounds like the younger editors are going to another place,” Godo reported to Haruto and Kaizu. “What d’you guys want to do?”

“...Is the second place all fancy, too?”

“Nah, probably the same all-night *izakaya* we always hit.”

“Dahhh, I better go home, then,” Kaizu groaned. “All the juices in that meat upset my stomach...”

“And you were going to deal with that if they were going to a fancier place?” Haruto asked, exasperated.

“Well, yeah.” The green-looking Kaizu nodded.

Godo sighed at him a little. “...I don’t want you throwing up on the train. Lemme call a taxi. You live pretty close...”

“If I have someone taking me home, can I make it Kirara or Miyako?”

“Shut up, stupid.”

“Um,” Miyako interjected, “I’m probably gonna have to say no to round two as well.”

Her statement visibly disappointed some of the male editors, enough so that Miyako felt obliged to say “I can’t, guys!” a little more strongly. These all-night sessions always ended with at least one of them stripping, so she did her best to avoid them whenever possible.

With Haruto also opting out of the festivities, the judging after-party came to a close. The editors began walking toward the local entertainment district as Godo hailed a taxi.

“Thanks for everything,” Haruto said to Kaizu as he climbed in. Kaizu replied with a pale, painful-looking smile.

“Heh-heh-heh... You do well for Miyako, all right?”

“Wh-wha—?!”

He had spoken softly enough that only Haruto could hear it. Haruto instantly began to blush.

“...Oh, I was right...? Ah, youth... Just die in a fire...”

Haruto just stared at him, mouth agape, as Kaizu and Godo left him with those completely serious parting words.

“Well,” he said, “guess we better go, too.”

“Sure.”

He and Miyako began walking to the station. Then he opened his mouth

again, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Oh, actually... You know, there’s a Belgian beer bar right by here.”

“Oh, really? I’ve never actually gone into a bar before.”

“You haven’t?”

“My college friends and I always go drinking at cheap *izakaya*, and when I’m with you guys, we’re always drinking at Itsuki’s place.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Well, um, drinking out isn’t so bad either, sometimes.”

He could already feel himself flailing for a lifeline as he scrambled to keep the conversation going.

“A bar’s different from an *izakaya*, right?”

“Um... I don’t know the exact definition, but there’s gotta be a bar inside, obviously, and they make cocktails for you.”

“Yeah. Some *izakaya* have bars, too, though. And serve cocktails.”

“True. But also... I guess it’s a bar if there’s a dedicated bartender.”

Miyako gave a little laugh at this. “Oh? That’s a pretty arbitrary definition.”

Wait... I think this is going pretty well! Haruto drummed up all the confidence he could find.

“So, um... Wanna check it out? That bar?”

“Oh, sure. Sounds great.”

Miyako nodded. It was an easy decision for her.



So Haruto had successfully invited Miyako to a private outing, but he had no real plans to push anything with her immediately. This was, after all, the first time they had done anything alone. She usually stopped by Nayuta’s place (Haruto not invited, of course) after a day at Itsuki’s with Nayuta and Chihiro, and even if they went home together, they split up at the station turnstile since they took different rail lines home.

He had wanted to be alone with her for a while, since he wanted to be more to her than just a mutual friend of Itsuki’s, but it was just too hard for him to take the plunge. Tonight was different. Nayuta wasn’t there; they had something to talk about in the New Writers Contest; and Kaizu had just given

him that final, decisive push.

If I don't invite her now, then when?!

His emotions were running strong along those lines, which the alcohol no doubt helped along, and it finally drove him to do it. Drinking alone with a woman you like—one small step for a normie, but one giant leap for Haruto.

The Belgian beer bar in question was located in the basement of a mixed-use building; Haruto had gone there once before with some of the other writers. He generally preferred to drink at home, so he had only gone to bars a few times with work colleagues, which meant he still wasn't very comfortable inside them. He tried his best to hide his nervousness as he opened the door.

Inside was a space designed to look like an old-style European tavern, complete with wooden walls, ceilings, tables, and chairs. The lighting was on the dim side, adding to the stylish atmosphere. Over half the seats were occupied by a motley crew of customers, including groups of businessmen, couples in their thirties, and elderly men and younger women drinking alone. It was a booming business, but there was still something relaxed and refined about the space. Next to the register station was a large cooler filled with craft beer, mostly Belgian; customers paid for these as they drank, taking them back to their seats to enjoy.

Miyako looked around, curious. "Huh. So this is a bar."

"Not much like people's typical idea of a bar, but yeah. It's all beer, and I don't think there's a real bartender."

"Right. But you know, when I imagine the taverns we stop in during our RPG sessions, I kinda think of something like this."

"Oh, that's true! We have kind of a medieval European thing going in the game, so you're probably right. Except they don't have coolers."

They secured seats for themselves as they talked.

"Hey, when'll we do our next session?"

"Hmm, next month, probably? That dumbass Itsuki went and kept an NPC alive who was *supposed* to be killed, so I have to revise a bunch of things. I think Nayu's up to something weird, too, so I need to be prepared for just about anything."

"Sounds harder than it looks," Miyako said. Her apologetic look made Haruto quickly change the subject.

"Ah, well, if it goes really bad, I'll just bust out the all-powerful

Apologize spell.”

“Apologize?”

“Yeah. The GM’s ultimate skill. If the players try something totally beyond my imagination, and I decide I can’t fully handle it, I apologize and pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Ha-ha! That *is* pretty powerful.”

“You don’t want to use it too much, though. I’m staking my pride as a professional writer on being able to put up with their nonsense.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

The words made Haruto’s heart flutter. It was just a passing sentence, but for him, it was a sudden bolt of energy. *Love really is a crazy thing*, he thought.

“Here, lemme bring a beer over. Do you have any requests?”

“Surprise me.”

“All right.”

He stood in front of the cooler, comparing the unique, whimsical labels on the bottles. Many were new to him and looked worth a try, but for starters, he went with one he knew—Framboise Boon. This was a fruit beer aged on raspberries, pouring a bright red into the glass with a bubbly, slightly pink head for a beautiful contrast. The refreshing sweet-and-sour aroma of the raspberries was a preview for the beer itself, featuring the perfect balance of sweetness and tartness. People called it the Queen of Fruit Beer.

Haruto had the checkout lady pour the beer for him, placing an order for some mussels steamed in white wine along the way, before returning to his seat.

“Thanks a lot. How much was it?”

“Oh, no, I’ll pay for it.”

Miyako shook her head. “No, let me cover this. I just got my paycheck.”

“Oh? Well...”

For now, he suggested Miyako pay about a third of the total tab. She immediately obliged.

“Well, here’s to a long day of work,” he said.

“Yours was longer than mine, Fuwa.”

They clinked their glasses, took a sip, and breathed a satisfied sigh. The *yakiniku* at the after-party was wonderful, but it wasn’t exactly a relaxed atmosphere over there. Now, they were really in their element.

“Ahhh... This is really good,” Miyako said, meaning it from the bottom of her heart. It made Haruto breathe an internal sigh of relief. They continued to enjoy it for a bit longer until a metal bucket filled to overflowing with mussels came to their table.

“A bucket?!” Miyako exclaimed, eyes alight.

“I guess this is how they normally serve mussels in Europe. It’s about a kilogram in all, but this is one serving—half of it’s shell, though, so it’s not that hard to finish.”

Haruto picked up and downed a mussel as he explained. The salt, onions, and herbs in the homemade soup paired with the white wine to add a light touch to the mussels, bringing out their full savory force. It went great with the beer, of course. Belgian beer comes in such a variety—tart, sour, bitter—that the potential food pairings are as limitless as the number of beer brands, but mussels in white wine work well with most beer styles, so if you intend to cross multiple genres in one evening, this was a good meal to go with. Whether it was for that reason or not, Haruto didn’t know, but he knew that Belgium consumed the most mussels in the whole world.

Miyako copied Haruto’s moves, taking a shell and eating the contents. It made her break into a smile. “Oh, I like this. I think I’ve had canned mussels in white wine before, but this is a lot better.”

“Yeah, those canned ones aren’t bad, either. Maybe we can find some and have Chihiro cook them the next time we hang out at Itsuki’s.”

“That’s a good idea! I bet he could find an even better way to prepare them.”

Reasonably priced and low on calories, mussels went well not only with beer, but with wine, sake, and *shochu*, and they could be so freely seasoned that they worked perfectly well as a main dish instead of an appetizer over beer. The ultimate all-purpose dish. They really ought to be more popular in Japan.

As the pair munched their way through the heaping pile of mussels, Miyako suddenly spoke up.

“By the way, Fuwa...”

“Mm?”

“What’s Kaizu like?”

“Mmm...?!”

Unable to gauge the motivation for this question—and what if there was

some kind of *romantic* nuance to that?!—Haruto hesitated.

“Because I don’t know,” she continued unawares. “He’s kind of a tough one to grasp. He seemed really eager to get the judging session over as soon as possible at the start, but you and he engaged in some really serious debating.”

“Ha-ha! Oh, you can assume that eighty percent of what he says is just him hiding his true feelings.”

Haruto laughed it off. No, nothing romantic about that after all. Then his face turned more serious.

“...Kaizu’s probably the one writer I respect the most.”

Miyako tilted her head. “Really?”

“But don’t tell him that, okay? If you do, he’ll make me take him out for sushi or something.” Haruto smiled.

“What kind of things has he written? I haven’t really heard of him.”

“Lots of stuff. His first series was this battle chronicle type of thing. That ended in three volumes, and then his next one was a romantic comedy that went for four books. He’s written fantasy, robot stuff, slice-of-life... I suppose his most famous titles are *The Lord of Time and the Mechanical Strega* and *Futagun!* Those both got manga adaptations. Right now he’s writing *Me and My Girl’s Medieval Village Revitalization*.”

Miyako had never heard any of those titles before. “Um... So he’s pretty good at writing, then?”

“Good? Yeah, I guess. He looks at the trends, and he puts out decent enough quality in that genre at a decent enough pace.”

“Just decent?”

“Yeah. Decent. They’re decently engaging; they sell a decent amount, but there’s nothing that’s world changing originality-wise or way better than what’s come before it. That kind of thing. You never see him in the top of the *This Light Novel Is Amazing!* rankings, and his style isn’t unique enough to build a core fandom. He’s, like, the eternal mid-level writer.”

“Well, Fuwa, so why do you...um...?” Miyako chose her words carefully.

“Why do I respect such a completely nondescript writer?”

“Yeah...” Miyako nodded, despite knowing it was rude.

Haruto took a mouthful of Boon. "...That's exactly why. For fourteen years, he's been fighting on the front lines of this business as a mid-level writer. If you think about it, that's just incredible."

"It is?"

"...Like, I couldn't even imagine writing for ten years straight. There's a lot about this industry that can break your heart. Just because your first book hits it big, there's no guarantee your second one will. You're surrounded by genius-level talents, and there's this constant stream of new writers more talented than you coming in."

Miyako stopped eating for a moment, sitting intently as Haruto bared his soul.

"...Kaizu won the grand prize at the first annual GF Bunko New Writers Contest, right? One of the other winners that year was a guy named Kasuka Sekigahara. Total genius-level writer. It's half thanks to him that GF went from a tiny label to the force that it is now. But that genius is long gone, and Kaizu is still with us. Seeing him work as hard as he does, it kind of drives me to keep striving, too... I don't want to lose to a total genius. I'm a regular guy, and I wanna show everyone what we can do, you know?"

By *genius*, he no doubt meant either Itsuki Hashima or Nayuta Kani. But in his life, Haruto had a mentor of sorts, a guy who trudged his way along, surrounded by geniuses and superhuman talents, never receiving heaps of praise or attention. Looking on from behind, he saw Kaizu as far cooler than any genius-level hero from any light novel.

"That's...really cool, I think."

Miyako smiled softly, and Haruto was bewitched.

"Oh, you see what I mean? Yeah, I mean, if you're a massively overpowered genius, I don't think that's as cool." He smiled as well, framing it as a joke.

"...Not just Kaizu. You too."

"Me too?" Haruto exclaimed.

"...You—and Kaizu," Miyako replied, her tone a little sad. "And Itsuki, and Kaiko, and the editor in chief, and Ms. Yamagata. And Mr. Toki. And the screenwriter for Itsuki's anime. And the director. It's, like, we have all

these people fighting for their beliefs and dreams, and it's really cool... Like, they're shining so bright, I almost feel like I shouldn't be there."

With a self-effacing smile, she finished her glass and let out a deep sigh.

"I don't have any beliefs or dreams; I can't find anything I want to do... I took this job because I thought I'd find something if I was working near all these amazing people. But every time I run into yet another really cool person, it just reminds me of how empty I really am... Ah, what am I even doing?"

"Miyako," Haruto quietly replied, "back in April, when we watched episode one of *Chevalier* at Itsuki's place...you cried for me, didn't you?"

"...? Why are you bringing that up now...?" She looked back at him, puzzled.

He passionately continued. "You really saved me. Back then, I think that helped me stay strong when I was on the brink."

He didn't want the person who saved him to berate herself in front of him. He didn't want her talking about how empty she was. He wanted to tell her: *You are wonderful.*

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

Maybe I'm just a little guy, but the novels I make—the manga, the anime, the art, the photos, the music, the poetry, the theater I make—will touch someone's heart. Not many creators can keep putting one foot in front of the other after losing hope about that. And hope was exactly what Miyako gave Haruto back there.

"Kind and gentle...?"

Softly, slowly, her tears began to flow.

"Huh?" They confused her. She smiled out of embarrassment. "Ha, ha-ha... Wow, that really resonated with me, Fuwa... I guess it was just what I needed to hear... I'm getting kinda emotional."

Haruto tried to sound as light as possible through his own emotions. "Oh, really? Did you fall for me? Ha-ha."

"Mmm, I got pretty close to, maybe," she jokingly replied.

"Ooh, that close, huh? Too bad."

Then, without further preparation, he dropped the laughs, summoned his

courage and his feelings, gave her the kind of smile that usually comes with tears of joy, and confessed.

“Because...you know, I fell for you a long time ago.”

“Oh?”

Haruto did his best to keep from shaking as he saw Miyako's confusion.

“...Ever since you cried for me there, I've really liked you. If you're interested, I'd kinda like to be a couple.”

She could tell he was serious.

“Um, I, ah, oooh... What should I do, ha, ha-ha-ha...?”

Her face was red, her eyes darting to and fro...and then, she took a deep breath to gather herself. Her eyes met Haruto's. She didn't want to engage in stall tactics. She wanted her full, serious sincerity to come across to him. And she said:

“...Let me think about it for a while.”



MAKINA KAIZU

AGE: 37

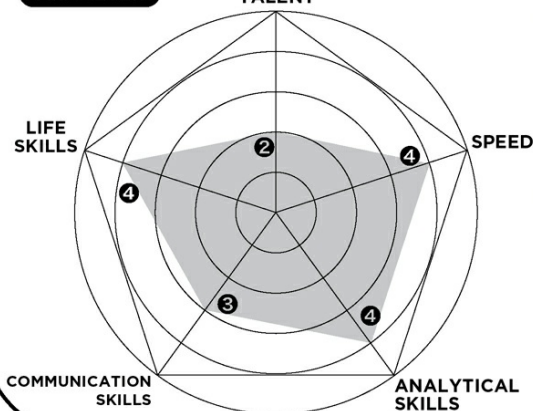
BORN: July 28

A fourteen-year veteran writer and craftsman type who studies current trends and writes novels to suit the times. Novels: *Atrya of the Faraway Dream* (5 volumes), *Life at the Supernatural Academy* (4 volumes), *The Lord of Time and the Mechanical Strega* (7 volumes), *Futagun!* (5 volumes), *The Valkyrie's Gone Loony* (4 volumes), *Me and My Girl's Medieval Village Revitalization* (4 volumes, ongoing), etc.



PARAMETERS

TALENT



**A WELL-SEASONED AVERAGE
AUTHOR SURVIVING IN A
CRUEL WORLD**

Miyako Shirakawa

It was mid-September, a few days after Haruto told Miyako how he felt, and the fourth-floor meeting room at Gift Publishing was being used to work out the episode structure of *All About My Little Sister*.

A month had passed since the publisher and animation sides first met, and today marked the fourth meeting (counting that first conference and subsequent trips to the *izakaya*). In attendance were Itsuki Hashima, Kenjiro Toki, anime director Munenori Tarui, and screenwriter Masahiko Hirugano. Arranging a date and time was a challenge, given that everyone had other work to attend to, but they arranged this meeting over e-mail so they could come together and, once and for all, decide how to best arrange the story over twelve half-hour episodes without draining the charm of the original novels from it.

There, after several shouting matches that could only be described as heated, they finally hammered out a final plan. The anime would be based on the first three novel volumes, but they made some bold moves in rearranging the episode order, introducing a few anime-exclusive rival characters, throwing in a few episodes digging deeper into the Onizaki siblings' relationship (something Itsuki hadn't covered in the novels yet), and adding more sexy scenes that went beyond mere fan service and functioned as foreshadowing for future events. Some fans might complain "This is completely different from the original!"—but now, the novelist, the screenwriter, and the director were all convinced that this was the best way to bring *All About My Little Sister* to the screen.

"All right, Hirugano," Tarui said as the two prepared to leave, "make a clean copy of the final proposal and share it with Oshima and Yamada."

"Got it!"

"After that, I'm gonna want you to work on the script for episode one

ASAP, but can you do that?”

“Of course! We could have the first script meeting next week.”

They were both very busy people—neither could’ve slept very much lately—but they looked and sounded energized.

“Thanks, guys. Keep up the good work,” Toki said with a bow of his head.

“Thanks,” Itsuki added.

“You too, Mr. Hashima,” replied Tarui. “I have to say, I’ve never worked so closely with the original writer before the script meetings like this.”

“Me neither,” his screenwriter added. “With all the passion and guidance you showed me, I think I’m beginning to understand the little-sister trope a little. My littlest sister is always whining about wanting to take a bath together, but maybe I should say yes next time...”

“.....Ah, how old is she?” Itsuki asked, squinting.

“I think sixteen? No, she turned seventeen last month.”

“Wha...?!”

“By the way, Mr. Hashima,” Tarui said in his soothing voice to the stupefied Itsuki, “this is actually a secret, but Hirugano here is married to the voice actress Kohime Shiratori.”

“(◉_◉)”

Itsuki made the “It doesn’t make any sense” face.

Kohime Shiratori. Her role as the protagonist (i.e. the little sister) of *A Sister’s All You Need!*, an anime from a few years ago, rocketed her into stardom. Itsuki owned all her CDs.

“.....I have to call the police... This man needs to be arrested for **having a monopoly over all the world’s little sisters...**”

Toki hurriedly leaned over toward the muttering Itsuki and stopped him before he could bring up his phone and call emergency services.

“What’re you doing, dumbass?!”

“Gaaaaahhhh! Let go of meeeeeee! Let me rub this playboy—this **little-sister robber baron**—out of existence!!”

“Ugh, calm down!”

Tarui smiled serenely as Toki attempted to physically pin Itsuki down. “What’s he angry about?” Hirugano audibly wondered as he left the room.



As he was about to take the elevator down from the meeting and go back home, Itsuki spotted Miyako.

“Oh, hi there, Itsuki,” she said softly as other people were waiting in the elevator hall.

“Hey. You going home, too?”

“Yeah.”

It was a little past five thirty. Between attending to meetings and being taken out to drinking parties, Miyako often found herself inside the editorial hours in the evenings, but her actual work hours generally ended at half past five.

“You look kind of spent. Hard meeting?” she said, raising an eyebrow at Itsuki’s exhausted face.

“...No, the meeting went great, and we have a wonderful episode structure, but then the screenwriter launched a terrorist little-sister bomb at me on his way out the door.”

“A terrorist what?” Miyako giggled.

“It’s not funny... I haven’t had to deal with anything so unfair in ages...,” the gaunt-looking Itsuki replied.

They both got off at the ground floor and headed for the exit.

“Chihiro’s gonna come to my place around six to make dinner. Wanna join us?”

Itsuki phrased it completely naturally. There was none of the psyching up Haruto needed to ask Miyako to the bar.

“Hmm... Well, if you don’t mind, then, all right?”

Miyako, on the other hand, looked nervous, face taut, none of the loose “Let’s do it” casualness she showed Haruto.



Five minutes later, they were both at Itsuki’s apartment. The moment they arrived, Itsuki flipped on the AC and invited her to sit at the low *kotatsu*

table. The season being summer, it wasn't plugged in and generating heat, but he kept the heavy futon blanket over it all year. It was never too hot as long as the AC worked, and it also protected you from the direct blast of cold air, making it useful for a little summer-afternoon snooze.

"Want something to drink?" he asked, opening the fridge.

"Mmm, do you have some tea?"

"Yep."

He took out a plastic bottle of barley tea and brought it to the *kotatsu* with two beer glasses. Taking a seat opposite Miyako, he poured the tea into them both.

"Well, here's to work."

They clinked their glasses and took a swig.

"Kind of weird to say cheers over tea," remarked Miyako.

"Well, I got beer, too. Want some?"

"Mmm, I'll wait 'til dinner."

"Yeah."

Itsuki drank about half the glass, then suddenly sat up and turned to Miyako.

"Um?"

He blushed a little. She looked back, puzzled.

"Well, um... I just thought this would be a good opportunity to say thanks to you."

"Thanks?"

"...We worked out a complete episode plan for the anime today, and in my opinion, I don't think we could've nailed it any better."

"Oh, congratulations."

"Thanks... We couldn't have hammered this out if Tarui, the director, Hirugano, the screenwriter, and I didn't seriously talk things over. Throwing our takes at one another, you know. And the only reason we're able to do that is you, Miyako. So thank you...very much."

He silently lowered his head to the blushing Miyako.

"Oh, don't say thaaat! I'm just a part-timer, and there I was, butting in on an important anime meeting without any permission..."

This wasn't Miyako being modest. She really did have qualms about it. It worked out well in the end, but she regretted running her mouth off on sheer impulse in a meeting where her input wasn't even invited.

Itsuki lifted his head back up. “Not just the anime, either. I heard what happened when Kaiko’s dad showed up at the office.”

Miyako grew redder. “Ah... That totally was all my mistake. I’m really sorry.”

“What’re you apologizing about? Thanks to you, there’s no more family drama in Kaiko’s life, so now she can fully focus on the *All About* manga. She, her editor, and I honestly couldn’t thank you enough.”

He lowered his head again.

“So...thanks. Thanks for working so, so hard *for the sake of my story*.”

...And something about that touched a nerve in Miyako.

“Nnnnnnnhhhh...”

She groaned painfully, as if expressing all the darkness in her heart.

“Nnnnnggggaaaaahhhhhhh!!”

It then evolved into an inscrutable, near-primal scream, evoking all her frustration, her sadness, and her self-inflicted pain.

“M-Miyako...?”

Miyako stared at the confused Itsuki, eyes watering. “Itsukiii! Please, listen to me!”

“Um, yeah, sure!”

“I’m going to be perfectly honest with you. I really don’t care at all about *All About My Little Sister*!”

“Wh-whaaaa—?!”

Itsuki’s eyes burst wide open. *That’s a little too honest!*

She leaned right over the *kotatsu* toward him and brought her face close to his. “During that anime meeting—and when Kaiko’s dad came, too! When I let my emotions get the best of me, when I tried so hard to do something, that wasn’t for your story. That was for *you*!”

“Huh? Um, uh, what do you...?”

Itsuki’s mind was in chaos now. Her face bright red and her eyes welling with great big tears, Miyako shouted:

“When will you finally notice, you dumbass?! I love you!”



* * *

...Ahh, I finally said it.

...What am I even doing?

Despite the sobbing mess she was on the surface, inside her mind, everything was strangely clear and serene. Seeing Itsuki there—blinking helplessly, his mind more confused than it had ever been—she was now sure of it. He never *did* understand his own feelings. He wasn't just pretending not to.

It also meant that, to Itsuki, Miyako was not on the list when it came to potential romantic partners. She knew it was true now—Nayuta Kani had been the only woman in his heart. But right now:

“...Oh, uh...y-yeah... Um, really...?”

Itsuki was regaining his thoughts.

“Yeah.” Miyako nodded. “Really.”

Now you've got me in your heart, too, Miyako thought, enjoying this odd sense of victory. *There used to just be Nayuta Kani, but now, Miyako Shirakawa has a presence, too.*

“I've really liked you for a while now.”

...What am I even doing? I haven't replied to Haruto, but here I am confessing my feelings to another man. I'm just awful—but what's said is said, I guess. I was never any good at thinking before taking action, and all the impulsive things I did in the office turned out great anyway.

It's gotta work here, too...

“I'm sorry.”

The words came flatly out of his mouth. He was apologetic, but he was straight, unbending, as he looked at her.

“I'm in love with someone else.”

All she could manage the other day was “Let me think about it...,” but

Itsuki Hashima had his answer ready immediately.

This is exactly it. This. These supercool people, with their drives and their dreams, running straight ahead toward what they want...

“...Ah, um, I’m talking about a real person, too, okay? Not a 2-D one.”

I know that. You didn’t have to rub it in.

“Oh.” A faint smile came to Miyako’s lips. “Well, so be it, then.”

She pretended to be indifferent, but her voice had gone all nasal, and the tears were still flowing down her cheeks, so she knew she wasn’t fooling anyone. But still, she smiled. A parting gift, the strongest smile she could manage; her way of holding out against a world that couldn’t go her way.

Itsuki said nothing, but he still faced Miyako as if withstanding some kind of pain.

“...I think I should go home for today.” Miyako slowly stood up.

“Okay. Well...”

He was hesitating—because he didn’t know whether to say “See you later.” Miyako could tell.

“See you soon, Itsuki.”

He breathed a small sigh of relief.

With that, Miyako received her first taste of unrequited love—and the pain it brought would push the story of her life into a new, and unfamiliar, stage.

(The End)

Afterword

Picking up from the end of Volume 4, I had decided to talk about Miyako's part-time job at the editorial department in this volume, but when I asked my editor about what kind of work that would involve in real life, I was struck by all the things that (it turned out) never occurred to me. Editors sure have it tough, huh? (Glad I don't have anything to do with it.) Thus, this volume doesn't have much partying in it—it's a long workday, start to finish. Guess I can't talk about my editor Iwaasa's dick getting ripped off any longer...

By the way, I've often received reader feedback along the lines of "This series inspired me to try becoming a writer" or "I tried playing board game X or role-playing game Y" or "I've started to drink imported beer." If my work has provided the spark for positive changes in its readers' lives, I suppose there's no greater honor a writer could bask in. But if anyone reads this book and wants to become an editor afterward.....then I'm sure it will be very rewarding—good luck with it; someone rip Iwaasa's dick off.

This volume also features a large number of new characters—editors besides Kenjiro Toki, an anime director, a screenwriter, a veteran writer—who are much older than Itsuki and his friends. All those years in the industry have certainly worn down their innocence, but just like Itsuki, Haruto, and the rest, they're all potential heroes driven by a deep-seated passion. Hopefully you've enjoyed reading about them. It's weird how, even if you turn into some middle-aged lump of a man, your youth never really goes away.

See you in Volume 6.

Yomi Hirasaka
Ravishing Silver-Haired Nude Female Novelist
Late June 2016

* Now I'll answer a few questions I've received.

[Q] How much detail have you gone into in conceiving *Chevaliers of the New World*, *All About My Little Sister*, and the other original books in the story?

[A] What you see in the text is pretty much everything. We may be talking a basic synopsis and setting, but I actually spend a lot of time working these things out. I had six to invent for the New Writers Contest in this volume, too... The idea is to have them seem like they'd fit right alongside actual series you'd find on the shelves, and hopefully they're convincing enough.

[Q] I understand that many of the characters' last names are taken from real-life place names in Gifu Prefecture. Do you have any criteria for your selections?

[A] Basically just how they sound. A name starting with "Ha" sounds kind of protagonist-y; that kind of thing. I think I'm gonna run out of material with place names alone before long, so I borrowed a few names of rail stations for this volume.

* Finally, some advertising. In addition to the manga version of this series running in *Sunday GX* right now, a new spin-off *A Sister's All You Need* manga is going to debut in *GanGan JOKER*. It's an original slice-of-life comedy with the primary focus on Nayuta Kani, and it's created by Kobashiko, author of *Hazuki Kanon wa Amakunai* and *Kabe ni Mary.com*. I can't wait to see how their extreme comedic sensibilities work out with my characters. Stay tuned for more info!

Afterword

Thanks for reading up to the end. This is Kantoku, the series illustrator.

This volume certainly brought the heat, didn't it? I can't guess how it's gonna turn out! I love all the characters so much; hopefully they can all wind up happy!

Miyako has descended into the editorial world like an archangel from heaven, but in this volume, I played with her hair a little. She had no set hairstyle in the initial concept, so I decided she's the type of girl who likes rearranging her look regularly, although personally, I think she's pretty cute in braids. It really works for a big-sister type, you could say. If she has the right hair type, I bet she could give pigtails a shot, too.

あまがき



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