
UNFLAPPABLE EIGHT BALL ANGLE?
8
FULL
Metal...
PANIC!
SHORT STORIES
AUTHOR: SHOUJI GATOU
ILLUSTRATOR: SHIKIDOUJI

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FULL METAL PANIC!

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Full Metal Panic! Short Stories Volume 8 [Complete]

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The Obligatory Virtual Reality (Part 1)

Beside the castle town of Pinckney, located in the backwaters of the Holy Kingdom of Laboon, there was a forest. A place controlled by evil demons, it had been called the Twilight Forest since times primeval. The only light that illuminated the untracked forest was dark amber sunlight, which cast everything there in a gloomy twilight color. Even the merchants importing valuable trade goods from the east avoided the region for fear of demon attacks, and those fools who did unwisely set foot there became easy fodder for the cruel weapons and terrible curses of the region's dark denizens.

A particular party was currently braving that forest.

"Okay, guys! Let's do our best! (^^)" said the party leader, Zama the Sorcerer, to his three companions. He adding a standard emoji at the end of his statement.

"k lol," responded the heavily armored knight who served as their tank. He was dressed in ornate black plate mail that glowed with a faint gold light—an extremely rare item that could only be completed by bringing large amounts of a material only available in extremely difficult quests to a skilled blacksmith and paying a whole lot of money. It granted him unparalleled defense in exchange for a slight reduction in attack power.

"kk. I'll try not to die, lmao," said the monk, a DPS (damage per second) specialist. He wore black gloves that radiated dark flames—powerful magical weapons that could only be obtained by beating Ticon and Deroga, two wild fire elementals hiding in an infamous dungeon on the east of the continent called the Cave of Carmay.

"Okaaaaay!☆ Leave the heals and buffs to me! (^^)b" said the cleric girl, who received her holy power from the Earth Goddess Millias. She spun around and thrust her crystal staff to the sky. The staff had the ability to boost the user's mana—their intelligence and willpower—and released a blinding light as it cast a support spell on the other adventurers in her party.

Attack, defense, movement, HP regen, special attack resistance, poison

resistance—Mystical symbols representing each appeared in a ring in the sky above, then affixed themselves to the party members' bodies. Without her buffs, the party's combat potential would take a major hit.

"Okay, all ready! ^^" the girl said.

The adventurers offered their thanks in return.

"Nice ^^"

"got buff ^^"

"buffzzzzz lol," said the knight in heavy armor, falling to one knee in a pose of gratitude toward the girl.

"You're welcome. I know it's not much ^^," she said. "I'm pretty low-level, so my spells aren't great. I just hope I'm good enough..."

"Don't talk like that! ><" the knight said.

"Without you, Cia, we'd have been dead way before we got here lol," said the monk.

"Yeah, they're right," Zama the Sorcerer did a quick check of his party's stats. "Yeah, they're right," he told her. To be frank, he could have easily cleared this dungeon himself, but it was best to avoid such boasts at times like this. "There's lots of coordinating mobs in this region, so even high-level parties can get wiped out without a devoted healer."

"R-Really? ;~;" The cleric girl shrank back a little, apparently feeling the pressure.

"Hey, you'll be okay. I'll cover for you if things get hairy. Just have fun, like you've been doing ^^" Zama said.

"Okay ^^" The girl smiled and tilted her head. Then she added, "But let me know if things are looking bad. I'm pretty slow about stuff like that ^^;"

Though they were all pre-programmed poses, the cleric girl, Cia, had very docile and cute mannerisms. She had a soft, girlish silhouette and kind, down-sloping eyes, with wavy blonde hair done back in a neat braid.

"Okay, lets go." Zama was so captivated by Cia that he accidentally made a

typo. “*let’s ;~;” he added.

“Ahaha lol,” the cleric girl laughed merrily.

The four thus ventured forth into the Twilight Forest.

Zama had no problem covering for the inexperienced Cia. He first cast a defense spell, then employed carefully timed AOE attack spells to shave down the enemy’s HP, making his allies’ jobs easier. Cia was being chased around by an enemy and didn’t seem to know what to do, so he sniped it with Arrow of Light, a basic single-target spell. The large monster then shifted its attention from Cia to Zama and charged him instead. Zama followed up with a wind spell that slowed its target down, followed by another Arrow of Light to finish it off. It let out a death cry as it burst into pieces.

“Thanks for the save! ><” Cia said.

“No problem.” Normally, it would be the tank’s job to draw aggro like that, but the knight was focused on other enemies and hadn’t noticed Cia’s predicament.

“You’re so reliable, Zama-san. ^^ You move so quickly and beat strong enemies so easily.”

It was an easy job for the relatively famous Zama the Sorcerer, but he still enjoyed the praise. “You’ll get a sense for it too, Cia-san, if you play long enough.”

“Really? I’ll try my best!” The young cleric giggled as she did a little dance. It was another unbelievably cute gesture.

Technically, Zama could have made his own character with Cia’s same appearance, and there were many others in the game that looked just like her. But for some reason, he couldn’t help but see her as the most beautiful girl in this world, created in some special way.

Stop that, Zama told himself. *This is a game. It’s not real life. If you can’t keep the game and IRL separate, you’ll end up looking like a total creep.* Nevertheless, he couldn’t stop himself feeling attracted to Cia.

Then they were attacked again. It wasn't just monsters this time, though. Now, the majority of their enemies were humanoids wielding powerful armor and weapons. Several of them were actual player characters—the most powerful, intelligent, and unpredictable enemies in the game.

This game, which had several thousand players logged in at any given time, gave players the option to attack and kill other players. They could then steal weapons, armor, and gold from their defeated players, and even take them into captivity. And indeed, this new attack came from this most hated class of players, the PKs—player killers!

"Crap," said Zama. There had been no time to warn the others before a paralysis spell hit the party from an unexpected direction, immediately rendering their two melee fighters helpless. Only Cia could cast paralysis recovery spells, but she was new to the game and not yet used to the controls.

"Calm down! Call up the menu and select healing spells, then 'Anti-Paralysis.' Got it? Select that and—" via a masterful use of keyboard shortcuts, Zama tried to protect his party while also offering advice. But the attacks were unrelenting.

"Pointless, pointless, pointless!" A sorceress in a bondage-style outfit said, cackling as she appeared in an explosion. One would be forced to admire her physique, were it not just a CG creation. "Before the might of Demon Queen Yoko, your scrub characters are like patrolmen before a chief of police! I'm taking that little girl to vent my stress about my paperwork!" Yoko, who styled herself the Demon Queen, used multiple casts of the high-level spell, Geas, to render Cia helpless.

"Ohh... Zama-san," Cia wailed, "I can't move. Please help me!"

"Cia?!" he exclaimed. "Dammit, not so fast!" With no time to waste, Zama picked his most powerful item and unleashed a single-cast spell on the enemy. The accompanying effect was impressive— light and fire rushed past, and the enemy's HP took a huge hit.

"Ha... ha ha ha! Not bad, Zama the Gale! You're just as the rumors say! However..." The monsters and PKs serving Yoko formed ranks and pressed in on the paralyzed Cia. "If you focus too much on me, your precious girlfriend will die! Death means losing all your equipment as well as a whole bunch of levels!

Do you think some newb player girl has the guts to come back from that?!”

“No, please! Please help me, Zama!” Cia cried for aid.

But Zama didn’t have time to both save her and defeat Yoko. Maintaining his defense spell while shaving down the numbers of the enemy monsters *and* trying to hold off Yoko was taking everything he had. “Cia, hang in there a bit longer! I—”

“Gotcha!”

“No... gwaaaaah!”

Yoko cast her ultimate spell, Daisy Cutter, on Zama.

“Zama-saaaan?!”

A huge explosion washed over them, and Zama’s HP hit zero. Thanks to the Replacement Doll he’d equipped just in case, he avoided true death, but he was still blown away to his respawn point in a distant city.

He quickly regrouped and hurried back to the location of the ambush, but only found his two dead warrior-type companions. Their equipment had been stolen, and Cia was nowhere to be seen. Due to the harsh penalties incurred by character death—For about two hours after death, you couldn’t chat with other players (except for clerics like Cia and a class called “medium”)—he couldn’t even ask them what had happened. But Zama knew nevertheless.

His beloved Cia had been taken by the Yoko, the PK sorceress.

●

Kazama Shinji had never been the particularly energetic type, but he seemed especially despondent today. Dark circles could be seen under his eyes from behind his glasses. Even when his friends in the classroom greeted him, he didn’t seem to notice. And from time to time... every three minutes or so, he let out a deep sigh.

Even the typically dense-as-a-brick Sagara Sousuke seemed pained by the sight, and approached him during lunch break to ask how he was doing. “Kazama. Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Yeah, kinda...” Shinji responded dejectedly. “Some bad guys took my

girlfriend.”

“A kidnapping?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“That’s very serious,” Sousuke observed. “Did the kidnappers make any demands? If you have something to go on, we can raid their hideout and mount a rescue—”

“Kazama-kun has a girlfriend?!” said Chidori Kaname, interrupting Sousuke as she burst into the conversation. She leaned forward, not even trying to hide her surprise. “Are you serious?! Um, I don’t mean it like that... But you’re always so timid. When did this happen? And who is she?! Er...”

Suddenly noticing Sousuke and Shinji scowling at her, she tried to tone it down a bit. “Um, but... you said she was kidnapped? Have you told the police? I’m honestly impressed you’re even coming to school after something like that...” Kaname continued, forcing herself back to the subject at hand.

Shinji slumped over a little. “Well... see... She was kidnapped in a video game, actually.”

“A video game?” Kaname and Sousuke said in unison.

“Ever heard of *Dragon Online*? It’s an online role-playing game for PC. It’s got a user base of tens of thousands.”

“Ahh. An RPG...” The only RPG Kaname had ever played was *Dragon Quest* in the SNES era, so she just nodded along cluelessly.

Sousuke, meanwhile, tilted his head as if he’d just heard an extremely obscure piece of military jargon. “I don’t understand.”

“You know. Stepping into the shoes of a character in a fantasy world, going on adventures, buying and selling stuff, and building up a party,” Shinji tried to explain. “That kind of game. People from all over Japan, and sometimes even abroad, play it. And this particular game is an especially permissive entry in the genre... You can fight other players, create your own fortresses and mazes, tame monsters... anything you can think of. It’s really popular.”

“Aha... And your girlfriend is inside this game?” Sousuke asked.

“Well... yeah. Something like that.”

Kaname smiled in relief. “Oh, ha ha. You shouldn’t get so worked up about it, then.”

Shinji scowled at her. “This is no laughing matter. In exchange for the freedom the game grants you, it can also be a harsh mistress. Even more than *UO*.”

“You owe?”

“Oh, never mind. Point is, if you die in *Dragon Online*, it’s pretty much over. Trying to build back up from scratch comes with serious penalties. And if you’re captured by the enemy and they lock you in a specially made Soul Prison, you’re just trapped!”

“Why not just reset, then?”

“You can’t! Your character’s status is saved after every action you take, and the data’s stored on their server. They do it to prevent cheating. So you’ve got to get out on your own, or have someone else save you.”

“So if someone gets trapped like that, they just can’t play at all?” asked Kaname.

“Yeah. You can end up wasting all the time you’ve put into the game. It does add to the sense of stakes, but...” Shinji sighed for the umpteenth time that day. “It also causes lots of people to quit the game.”

“Right. So the girl you like got kidnapped and locked up, and doesn’t want to play anymore?”

“No, apparently she still wants to. She messaged me to say she was waiting for me. She really believes I’ll come to save her, I think.” A true sense of longing infused Shinji’s words.

“So go save her already,” Sousuke prompted him. “You shouldn’t even be wasting time in class.”

“I don’t think it’s quite that serious...” Kaname muttered in response.

“I’m trying! I spent all night trying to breach the enemy base. I’m even skipping classes to build up my character on a laptop. But it’s no use,” Shinji protested. “That sorceress, Yoko, is really powerful. I’d heard the rumors

before, but... even my allies in the game told me I should give it up."

"So, you have no more comrades?"

"Yeah. And there's no way I can save her all on my own."

"We'll help you, then," Sousuke said.

"R-Really?" Shinji looked up at him.

Kaname winced. "Um... We? Did you say 'we'? I don't even know how games like that work," she pointed out. "And you've never even played one, Sousuke."

"I do have some experience with video games," Sousuke said in self-defense.

"R-Really?"

"Affirmative. And I'm the most skilled in my squadron, if I do say so myself," Sousuke said with a curious confidence.

Kaname stayed back for a while, not taking part in the game at all—until one lazy evening off, she remembered that they were playing, and booted up her computer on a whim. Nowadays, you could buy a PC with pretty good specs for about the same price as the consoles of years past, and Kaname had a desktop PC she'd gotten from relatives to celebrate her entry into high school. She mainly used it for sending the occasional email and browsing, but she'd told Shinji her specs, and he'd said they would be enough to run the game. However...

I wonder if it'll really work, thought Kaname. She had zero experience at all with such games, after all. Nevertheless, she accessed the homepage of *Dragon Online* that Shinji had given her, downloaded the game's software, and followed the instructions on the homepage to install it. She then waited about a minute as the install completed and she updated her 3D drivers. Lines of English text appeared, but Kaname had lived in the USA, so she just skimmed through it and clicked 'OK." She then rebooted and started up the game.

But the first message she saw read, To begin playing, you must pay the monthly fee.

"Yeah, guess you have to pay after all..." She took out a gift card Shinji had given her at school and punched in the code written on it. Shinji had nobly paid

out of pocket for monthly fee vouchers for all of them.

Once authenticated, she was instructed to enter her name and address. She was creeped out by the idea of some random company having her personal information, so she filled in a random fake name and address. Once these were accepted, she waited a good four or five seconds, and then...

The logo for *Dragon Online* appeared. A grand full orchestra BGM played.

“Huh...” She hadn’t expected the graphics and sound quality to be this good.

Kaname then went about creating her character: gender female, age sixteen. She put in her own specs without thinking about it too hard. Class came next. After a good deal of thinking, Kaname picked Fencer, which seemed like the simplest class; she just had to charge in close and mash the attack button. There seemed to be a few specific sub-classes of Fencer, but she didn’t understand what they meant, so she chose a random one.

“There... Hmm?”

Her avatar was showing an awful lot of skin. She wore a cape, but her miniskirt left her belly button and thighs on full display. The hairstyle looked a bit like Kaname’s as well, as did the face. *Wouldn’t fighting in close-quarters in this outfit leave me open to grievous injury?* she thought, but dismissed it as a sales tactic. The girl, carrying a rapier and small shield, continued to spin around on the screen. Kaname gazed at the character a while, hummed to herself, then said, “Well, whatever,” and pressed confirm. She’d learn much later that she could’ve changed her character’s appearance, but hadn’t realized that at the time.

As she attempted to complete character creation, though, a new message came up. You have not entered a name. “Oh, forgot that,” she mumbled. “Let’s see...”

Kaname spent the longest time on this one. She didn’t really care, but found herself really thinking it over. *What about KEY, based off of my name? Or the name of my favorite singer, BROWN? Or my favorite baseball player, ICHIRO? Or SABA, the fish I ate for dinner earlier? Oh, Maruzen Mart’s big sale is tomorrow. How about MARUZEN? Oh, I just remembered I’m out of cleaner for the tub... MAGICLIN? I’m out of TABASCO, too. And I’ve gotta buy TOILET PAPER soon... Hmm...* She punched in and erased a few random names, then pressed the

enter key on a whim.

“Ah...” On the final display screen she saw the large letters, WAIZ. She didn’t know why, but it had apparently given her a random name. “Waiz, huh...” She was sick of stewing over names, so she decided to go with it. She clicked the final confirmation button, and entered the virtual other world.

What she didn’t realize at the time was that “Waiz” was actually the god that her character served. The actual name of her character was written under it in small letters... But again, Kaname didn’t realize that.

And thus, the adventures of the beautiful swordswoman TOILET PAPER began.

●

She was standing in a town square, surrounded by stone buildings. There was a fountain at the center, presided over by the statue of a beautiful goddess holding an urn. The sky above her was as blue as could be, with trails of clouds drifting leftward.

She heard the song of the birds, the water of the fountain, the commotion of the people coming and going in the plaza, the sound of hymns from a distant church... Smoke rose up from a blacksmith shop facing the plaza, and a house nearby had their laundry on a line, swaying in the breeze (on a regular movement cycle, if you watched long enough). It looked like an old European city, the kind you saw in movies and travel shows. It was surprisingly immersive.

“Let’s see...”

Shinji had said there was an inn nearby called the Arleigh Burke. Shinji was a regular there and it was the first place he went whenever he stopped in the city of Pinckney. She didn’t know where the inn was, though, and it was a very big city...

Kaname pulled out her map, but the parchment was almost entirely blank. Apparently she had to walk around for the map to appear.

Should I ask someone? she wondered. There were lots of people around her in the plaza—male and female fencers like her, as well as sorcerers, summoners, clerics, monks, and rangers. She could also see merchants and

farmers, foreign travelers dressed in strange clothing, and demihumans with animal horns and tails. These all looked very realistic as well, aside from having their names and levels hovering over their heads.

"Um, excuse me?" Kaname asked a short demihuman girl who was stood in front of the fountain looking bored. Above her head was the name Mazzle. She had cat ears and carried a cute wand.

"Ya? ^^" Mazzle asked.

"I hear there's an inn nearby called Arleigh Burke. Do you know it?"

"Toilet paper? Lol."

"Huh? No, it's called 'Arleigh Burke.'"

"Nya ha ha. I think it's that way," said Mazzle, pointing west with her wand. "It's a PC-run place, right? That stuff is all over there. If you get lost, just ask someone else. ^^"

"Thanks," Kaname said, then left the plaza. The flagstone path took her into a market lined with open-air stalls carrying countless goods for sale. Foodstuffs, weapons, armor, clothing, dry goods... even cooking utensils, building materials, books and flowers were available for purchase.

Amazing, she thought. *You can really buy anything.* It was an amusing atmosphere as well. Hustling and gossip, attempts at recruiting party members, info on dangerous regions of the world, and get-rich-quick schemes flew back and forth (though talk about the Giants-Yakult game or the previous night's anime detracted from the atmosphere somewhat).

There were also some unsettling discussions between characters.

"Did you hear? The strongest party in Stout got wiped out."

"In the Twilight Forest? It's gotta be Sorceress Yoko, right?"

"It's gotta be. That witch is amassing a whole lotta power. Soon she's gonna have a dark army powerful enough to take over this kingdom."

"Yeah. Some of her men are even showing themselves in the Wastes of Ramage."

“Scary. What are the Royal Paladins even doing?”

“You can’t count on them. They’re just trolls who like to play hero. They can’t beat Yoko-tan, lmao.”

“Yeah, lol.”

“Evil Queen Yoko rules. Ha ha. Wish she’d step on me...”

That was a common topic in the square—it sounded like some kind of powerful witch was threatening the peace of the city.

But Kaname still couldn’t find the inn she was after. She tried asking more passersby where the Arleigh Burke was, but each time, for some reason, the first response she got was “Toilet Paper?”

“No, it’s called the ‘Arleigh Burke.’”

“lol that way.”

She’d been seeing a lot of ‘lol’ lately, and didn’t understand what it meant. She would learn later that it stood for ‘laughing out loud.’

Eventually, Kaname found the inn she was after tucked away in the city’s winding back alleys. The sign hanging from the eaves had an intricate design that read, “Arleigh Burke.”

“Finally here,” she muttered.

Incidentally, Sousuke’s unreliable promise of aid had come a few weeks earlier, and in the meantime, Shinji had apparently tried to recruit other friends and acquaintances to help. She didn’t know who had agreed, but she’d heard a few of them had already started playing. She figured that if she came here, she’d have to run into someone she knew.

“Hello,” she called as she passed through the door. The inn’s first floor was a tavern, a dimly lit place with few people around.

There was a sorcerer in a black robe seated at the table. Above his head was the name Zama. His level was 99, the highest possible for the game. He was a super-elite compared to Kaname.

“Can I help you?” the sorcerer said languidly. He had sleek black hair and the glasses of an intellectual. His form cast deep shadows from the light streaming in through the window. Beside him leaned a large staff with the head of a dragon, which looked like it had to be a very powerful artifact.

“Is this the Arleigh Burke?”

There was a long silence. The sorcerer let out a sigh, then said, “Yes. But this is no place for newcomers. It’s existed since the early days of the game. It’s a place for veterans who’ve seen their share of combat.”

“Um, but...”

“Don’t you get it? I’m telling you to leave.”

Kaname was struggling to figure out what to say when the bartender, polishing dishes behind the counter, spoke up. “Sorry about him, miss. He’s in a bad mood for various reasons. Not only did the self-styled Demon Queen Yoko steal his girlfriend, but the party members he recruited to save her have all been completely useless.”

“Lay off,” Zama muttered.

“Oh, calm down,” the bartender retorted. “Anyway, sorry he’s in a bad mood, honey, but beginners belong at the guild office in the first district in the south.”

“Um, but—”

“Get a clue already.” The sorcerer burst out of his seat, staff in hand. “Did you know you can even PK in town here in *DO*? And there’s lots of ways to get away with it. I know just how to fool security. You want to try me?”

It might have been an empty threat, but Kaname was already at the end of her rope, so she struggled to explain. “S-Sorry. But a friend of mine from school told me to come here...”

Here, the sorcerer stayed his aggression. “Would your school be Jindai High?”

“Um, yes?”

“Who are you?”

“Um, my name’s Chidori. We’re classmates...”

The sorcerer suddenly froze up. His sprite remained expressionless, but he seemed somehow panicked.

“Um? What’s wrong?” she asked.

The sorcerer responded, still expressionless, “S-Sorry, Chidori-san. I didn’t think anyone else was coming, and you didn’t seem especially interested... I was even feeling kind of bad about forcing that gift card on you. Um...”

“Kazama-kun?”

“Um, yeah, that’s me. Normally, I’m really nice to new players. But I’ve had so much bad luck lately... I told you the story, right? And everyone from school did come, but then they all ran off. They won’t help me at all. So, I was kind of sulking... I mean it! Hey, isn’t that right?!” The Zama the Sorcerer, AKA Kazama Shinji, turned to the tavern master for help.

The tavern master responded, “lol.”

“Zama the Sorcerer” then went on to explain the situation. The Jindai collective had started out earnestly trying to level up and make it through the Twilight Forest, but after being ambushed and routed countless times by enemies, they’d begun to get opinionated—and their opinion happened to be, *“This isn’t happening. Just give up already.”* In other words, the same advice his veteran comrades had given. They seemed to be getting sick of grinding, too, and Shinji himself was hesitant to force them. He’d decided that if they weren’t passionate about his cause, they wouldn’t be of any help anyway.

“Maybe it was an unreasonable thing to ask from the start,” he said, hanging his head. “But I can’t beat that woman, Sorceress Yoko, by myself. I need at least two strong fighter-types and a high-level cleric. Yoko’s got a lot of strong PKs on her side.”

“Hmm...”

“I don’t have anything against people playing villains,” he went on. “The freedom to do that is one of the game’s points, and I’ve had a lot of fun with people like that in the past. But...” Shinji fell silent for a while. “Yoko just really sucks. Conspiring to go after beginners and steal their fun... But if you try to

keep new people from joining the game, the whole thing is just going to end up dying...”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yeah. All kinds of people come to games like this. Most of them are nice, but you sometimes get someone with a really twisted personality. They bully players who are trying to level up and earn money in the limited time they have, and enjoy watching them get mad and disenchanted.”

“Sounds like the kind of person who likes making crank calls,” Kaname commented.

“Yeah, kind of. They look down on your average player, saying if you get mad because you got PKed it’s because you take the game too seriously. But games like this have a social element—there’s real people with real feelings on the other side of the screen, so it’s really not *just* a game. It’s the PKs who take the game too seriously anyway,” Shinji argued. “They don’t have any sympathy for strangers, and when they see someone in trouble they’ll just say, ‘u suck’ or something. It’s like they don’t even have basic empathy. It really grosses me out.”

“Oh.”

“I mean, it’s kind of like those old fighting game obsessives from a while back,” said Shinji. “They’d scout out places where new games were undergoing location testing and get really good at them. Then, when they’d see a regular person at the local arcade trying to play it for the first time, putting in their hundred yen coin and looking at the instruction card while struggling to learn the controls, they’d charge in and beat them up. They’d just say ‘get good, scrub,’ and make the person feel like there was no point in trying. Then that person would leave the arcade and never come back. It’s why fighting games aren’t as popular as they used to be. Game companies tried to make games that would appeal to beginners, but it was too late by then—potential new players had already stopped coming to arcades. We’re starting to see the same thing happen in the online game world, too. Though it might be too late already...”

“You know a lot about it, Kazama-kun,” Kaname, who’d been listening attentively, left the computer while Shinji was going about his explanation. She

poured some milk tea into a glass in the kitchen, then returned. “By the way,” she said, changing the subject so she didn’t have to hear any more about the last one, “where’s Sousuke? He said he’d play, right?”

“I don’t know where Sagara-kun is. He died early on our first adventure, then said he’d come back later. I haven’t seen him since. He won’t respond to any chats I sent him, so I’ll bet he gave up too.”

“What’s with him? He said he was good at video games.”

“Oh, not like that, lol,” Shinji said with a laugh. “As we headed out on our adventure, he said, ‘So, when do the blocks appear?’”

“Huh?”

“He thought it was a falling block game, I think.”

Like *Tetris* or *Columns*... The kinds of games that soldiers on the front lines played while killing time. Kaname decided she’d smack Sousuke upside the head the next time she saw him.

“Anyway, that’s the story. I’m on the verge of giving up myself. Though I feel a little bad about it now that you’ve come out of your way.”

“But what about your girlfriend?”

“Yeah... Well, she’s waiting for me to save her, but I don’t see how I can. After I pack up for the night, I’m gonna send her an apology email, ask her to give up on her character and start over.”

“I see...” Though they were having the conversation in text, Kaname sensed a sad note in Shinji’s words.

“Chidori-san, as long as you’re here, do you want to play for a bit? There’s some good places people go to level up. I’ll help you. I know you’ll have fun.”

It would *be a shame to give up after just wandering around town for a bit,* she decided. “Sure, I’ll take that offer,” Kaname said, and began preparing for her adventure with Shinji.

Shinji and Kaname soon left the city of Pinckney and began to walk down the main road toward the Ramage Plains. She'd heard it was an area for advanced players, but Shinji insisted it was a perfect place for beginners.

Barren hills stretched out all around her. Even the sky, which had been so beautiful and blue in the city, took on an ominous hue here. "A-Are you sure about this?" she asked.

"Don't worry. I'm with you," Shinji said reassuringly.

Just then, three trolls emerged from the brush. They were violent, burly, copper-skinned man-eaters, each about three meters tall. The lead enemy let out a river of drool, raised its log-like club, and charged straight at her. *Graaaah!* it roared.

It was so intimidating that Kaname let out a shriek, genuinely stunned.

"Chidori-san! Don't move!" called Shinji, brandishing his staff behind her. His black cape flapped in the wind and the air around him distorted. A white flash rushed out of the staff, and there was a powerful roar of thunder.

"Go!" Shinji shouted. A blinding electric shock ran through the three trolls, charring their flesh as they each let out a throaty roar.

"Yikes!" Kaname shouted in panic.

Meanwhile, Shinji slowly relaxed. "You're safe now, Chidori-san. They're paralyzed."

"What?"

The trolls weren't dead yet, but they also couldn't move.

"Attack," he prompted her.

"Um... sure," said Kaname, swinging the weapon Shinji had given her earlier. The troll's HP ran out in one shot and just like that, it died. The first troll's figure burned away like a bit of scrap paper on fire, followed by the second, and then the third.



Kaname’s level skyrocketed, and her gold increased twenty-fold. “Wow,” she

said, “awesome.”

“Right? lol,” said Shinji with a smile. “Power leveling like this is sort of against the game’s rules of etiquette, but there’s really a lot of exploits like that. You can get pretty high level in just an hour, but then you run into diminishing returns.”

“Really?”

“It’s more fun to play as a fencer after you’ve gained a couple levels,” he commented. “It might not seem interesting now, but hang in there a while.”

“Ah... right,” said Kaname. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Now, let’s keep going,” Shinji responded merrily, and once more resumed his walk through the wasteland.

Is this really the Kazama Shinji I know? wondered Kaname. From this angle, his silhouette was strangely noble and reassuring.

While she was preparing for this adventure, the tavern master of the Arleigh Burke had told her that Shinji’s character was nicknamed ‘Zama the Gale’, and that he was a fairly well-known adventurer among the regulars. He was a powerful fighter, with smooth navigation of the game commands and clear-headed judgment. It was easy to understand why his girlfriend, a girl named Cia, had fallen for him so easily.

“Do I just have a weakness for this sort of thing?” Kaname asked herself. She’d have to reevaluate her ambiguous feelings for Sousuke at some point, if so. After all, at school, he was utterly useless. And here in the game, he’d run away and then gone no-contact...

It’s not like I’m actually going to fall for him like this... Still, Kaname had to admit that Shinji seemed pretty hot right now.

After about an hour of fighting, they arrived at an old, ruined castle.

“Up for more?” Shinji asked.

“Yeah,” said Kaname.

“Great! Then stick with me,” he told her, just as a powerful rush of flame

assailed them. Thanks to the defensive spell Shinji had cast in advance, Kaname avoided instant death... but she definitely wouldn't survive another hit like that one.

"What?!" she exclaimed.

Quickly using a recovery item on Kaname, Shinji readied for battle.

"Drat, you survived! Typical Zama the Gale!" A summoner stood before them—a demihuman girl with bunny ears, dressed in a swimsuit-like costume beneath simple armor and a long cape. The explosion had kicked up a wind that sent her chestnut hair and crested apron streaming.

"Y-You're..."

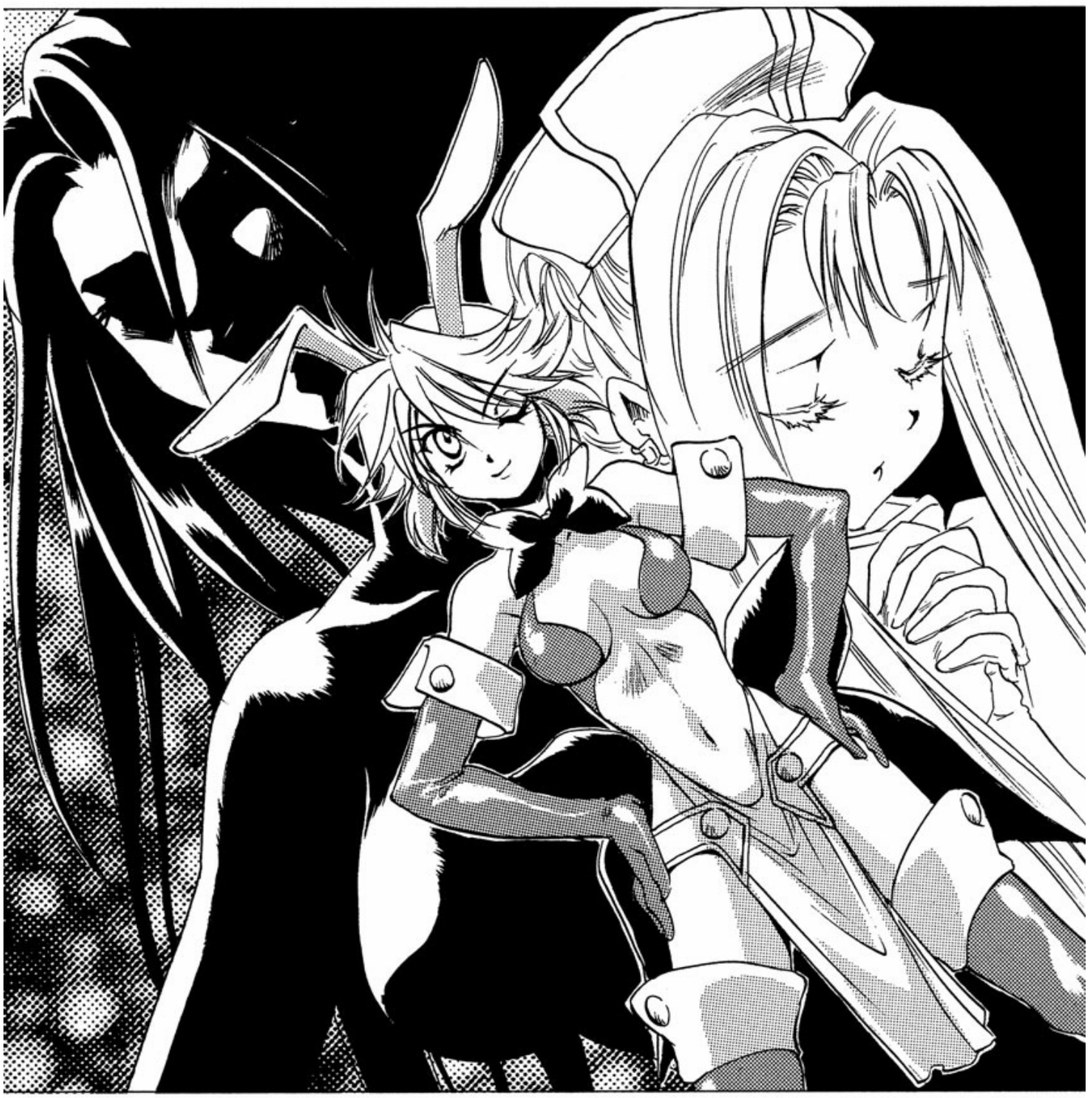
"But can you dodge my attacks while protecting that strangely-named girl?" she asked, over his objections. "I'm Sorceress Yoko's most trusted retainer, after all!" Above the girl's bunny ears was the name Mizu.

Zama—Shinji—shouted. "Inaba-san?!"

Kaname's eyes went wide as she heard his words. "H-Hey," she asked. "Are you Mizuki?"

"Inaba-san," he yelled, "why are you working with that woman?!"

Mizu (AKA Inaba Mizuki) let out a high-pitched laugh. "As if you didn't know! This kingdom will someday belong to Yoko-sama. No one will be able to resist her overwhelming power! Zama the Gale, why do you continue to oppose her?!"



“I told you all about that at school! Why are you so mean? I was so patient

with you during your initial leveling process! Give back the money for the gift card I bought you!” Shinji yelled as he landed back on the ground.

“Heh... sorry, Kazama-kun. Killing you will earn me 100,000 gamels from Yoko-sama. And her royal guard is made up of the most beautiful people, so you know. I love having them fawn over me!”

“She’s got you fooled!” he fumed. “Their players are all probably fat, ugly nerds!”

“Be quiet! Why do you insist on destroying my beautiful dreams?! You’re my enemy, understand?” Then Mizu the fallen summoner raised her hand, and dozens of orcs popped up around them.

Kaname walked out and shouted. “Hey, Mizuki! If you’re Mizuki, you have to stop this! Didn’t you originally promise to help Kazama-kun?!”

“Eh? Don’t act like you know me, bathroom tissue,” the rabbit-eared Mizuki said coldly.

“What was that?!” Kaname demanded. “Even if you are my friend, there’s some things I won’t take! Okay...”

“But that’s what you are, isn’t it?”

“Nngh!” Kaname trembled in anger.

Meanwhile, Mizuki finished preparing her attack spell. “Now, Zama the Sorcerer. I don’t know what Toilet Girl there is talking about, but I need you to die now.” Mizuki’s body took on a white glow as she called upon an ancient monster.

“Hng... Yoko’s power has made her stronger!” said Shinji.

“Don’t worry,” she told him cheerily, “I’ll treat you to a Sekiha Ten-croquette Roll from Hanamaru Pan when we get back to school. Now, let’s begin!”

“Chidori-san, get back! Graaaah!” A scorching aura flared up around Shinji.

Mizuki and Shinji’s magical fields expanded. “Take this!” they shouted in unison. The flame-wreathed dragon and blinding arrow of light streaked towards one another and collided in an earth-shaking explosion.

Kaname was tossed around and thrown against the ground. “Geh...”

When the flame and smoke cleared, only Mizuki remained standing. Shinji was kneeling on the ground, panting in pain.

“Kazama-kun?!”

“I never thought... Inaba-san would grow this strong,” he wheezed. “At this rate...”

“V-Very impressive, but... bwa ha ha ha!” Mizuki seemed to have taken plenty of damage herself, but she still stood confidently as she made her proclamation. “I’ve won today! Now, my orc servants! Tear those two apart!”

The orcs squealed in glee, raising their wicked weapons as they approached Kaname and Shinji.

Shinji was hurt so badly he was having trouble moving—a victim of the “stunned” status effect. Kaname wasn’t at a high enough level to face the orc horde herself. She couldn’t even run away. *Is this the end of everything?* she wondered.

But just as the two were preparing for their fate, an arrow plunged deep through the head of the lead orc.

“Eh?!” Kaname shouted.

The orc let out a scream and pitched over backwards. Another strike came, then another. The arrows were taking out the orcs one by one. Mizuki was shocked, but the shots continued raining down.

At the same time, a human figure appeared out of nowhere and tore into the confused orc horde. It was a man dressed in foreign-looking clothing; he didn’t have any weapons, but swung his mercilessly trained fists and elbows at their evil enemy. His raging fists tore through the air, and the punches hit hard.

“Ugh... get back! Get back!” She must have realized she was at a disadvantage, because Mizuki gave the order and the surviving orcs retreated.

In an instant, it was quiet.

“We’re saved...” Kaname marveled. A rotund statue the size of her palm lay in the spot where Mizuki had been standing before she fled. It had big button

eyes, and a face halfway between a mouse and a dog. *What kind of item is this? Feels like it'll be important later...* Kaname decided not to think about it too hard as she packed the statue away. For now, she turned her eyes to the man who'd saved her. "All right, Kazama-kun... who are these people?"

"I... I don't know," Shinji said.

The foreign man who'd saved them was a monk named Baki, and the man who'd unleashed the arrows from the brush was a ranger named Seagal.

Baki and Seagal...

"Wait... Tsubaki-kun and Sagara-kun?!" Shinji demanded.

"Affirmative."

"You finally realized?"

They both gave confirmation. Then they said:

"I've been fighting this unpleasant fool in the mountains for days."

"I ended up leveling up quickly somehow. I learned the controls as well."

The level above both of their heads read 55, even though they'd only started playing one week earlier. It was the kind of growth that might barely be possible if you'd spent that whole time fighting without sleep or rest.

"They're even at each other's throats here?" said Kaname.

"Looks like it..." Shinji agreed.

"Still, it's incredible. They got their levels that high just from fighting each other?" asked Kaname, who was still only level 18 and thus very impressed.

"Well, yeah... You don't just get experience from beating enemies, but from the act of fighting itself," Shinji explained. "I guess keeping up a fight that could get both PCs killed would get your level up pretty fast. But usually one of you dies in the process, or a monster interrupts and kills you both."

"Uh-huh."

Ignoring the surprised and slightly aghast aura that hung around Kaname and Shinji, Sousuke and Tsubaki Issei leaped away from each other and assumed a fighting stance.

“We called a brief truce to save you, but...”

“...Now it’s time to finish this.”

Kaname quickly interposed herself. “Hey, you two! Cut it out! I’m grateful you saved me, but this is ridiculous!”

The two of them, who usually did whatever Kaname asked, were extremely curt with her.

“Who are you?”

“Get out of here, bathroom tissue woman.”

Kaname was stunned into silence.

According to the Annals of Laboon, recorded later...

The four heroes who would save the kingdom from its greatest crisis happened upon each other in the rose garden of the old imperial palace, recognized a valiant ally in each other at a glance, and immediately swore a fellowship. But this was how it really happened.

[To Be Continued]

The Obligatory Virtual Reality (Part 2)

At last, the (self-declared) heroes were assembled! The unparalleled sorcerer, Zama (Shinji), the noble monk, Baki (Issei), the invisible hunter, Seagal the ranger (Sousuke), and the beautiful fencer, Toilet Paper (Kaname)—the fearless foursome were about to mount their final challenge against the evil witch! Their eventual destination would be Yoko's grand fortress in the Twilight Forest, in whose deepest dungeon the cleric, Cia (Zama's beloved), was being held! A new chapter of the legend was about to be written!

"Sorry to chill the enthusiasm," Kaname said casually, "but Kazama-kun's our only magic-user. You said we needed a cleric. Will we be okay like this?"

"Hmm... I think we will, for now," Shinji speculated. "As a monk, Tsubaki-kun should also have a small repertoire of healing and defensive spells."

"Me? Spells? I had no idea," Issei said in surprise.

Sousuke snorted. "You fought without knowing your own machine's specs? Fool..."

"Shut up! You were fighting with a club until just yesterday, too!"

"Hmph." As a Ranger, Sousuke was best suited to wielding bows, but he'd only just realized that then.

"We'll figure out the cleric problem later. For now, I'm gonna teach Tsubaki-kun how to cast. You'll want to set up your shortcuts. Sagara-kun, you should build up your skills. Bows aren't too powerful, but if you build up your skill level enough, they can really pack a punch."

"R-Right..."

"We need to focus on teamwork from now on. Chidori-san and Tsubaki-kun in the front, Sagara-kun and me in the back. I'll teach you all how to do team attacks too. Don't worry, it's really simple."

Shinji gave swift and precise orders, and the two of them awkwardly did as they were told. *"Do this, like that,"* he'd say, and they'd respond, meekly.

“Sorry, what do I do here?” and *“That’s so hard,”* and such. It was quite the role-reversal from the standard situation.

“Chidori-san, just keep doing what you’ve been doing,” Shinji told her. “You’re getting really good.”

“Am I? Heh heh heh.”

“Okay, let’s move on,” he finally decided. “We’ll spend some time learning the controls while we level up.” With that, they began walking out through the wasteland in a group. A cold wind blew past under the gloomy sky, causing the branches of the dead trees around them to sway.

Issei called out to Kaname at the lead. “Chidori. I’ve been wondering...”

“Hmm?”

“Why in the world did you choose that... ah, you know what? Never mind.”

“What?” she asked. Normally you could see your own character’s name above your head, but some strange bug in Kaname’s install had changed her settings somehow. All she could see was her level (18), so she hadn’t realized yet that her name was Toilet Paper.

“It’s nothing,” Issei said hastily. “Everyone has their own tastes... I was just a little confused.”

“Huh? You’re being so weird...” said Kaname, continuing to walk ahead of the party.

Behind her, Sousuke and Issei whispered to each other.

“I really am curious, though.”

“Hush,” Sousuke advised him. “Let it be.”

Soon, a new set of monsters appeared—a mixed band of trolls and orcs—and battle instantly commenced. Sousuke fired. Shinji cast. Kaname sliced. Issei punched. The enemies were defeated in a flash.

Sousuke and Issei were surprised by how much stronger they’d become just by changing their equipment and fighting style in accordance with Shinji’s

instructions.

“That’s a surprise.”

“To think it would change this much...”

“Right?” Shinji agreed. “Though Chidori-san took some damage. Tsubaki-kun, you should heal her.”

“Oh? Right...” said Issei, using the casting method he’d just learned to heal Kaname.

“Thanks!” she said brightly.

“Sure thing. Just let me know when you get in trouble. I’ll heal you anytime.”

“Thanks again, I’ll do just that.” The exchange almost had a romantic cast to it—serving as the team’s two front-line fighters seemed to have brought Issei and Kaname closer very quickly.

Sousuke immediately interrupted their exchange. “I took a hit from an enemy projectile as well—”

“Who cares. Suck it up,” Issei barked.

Sousuke was too shocked to respond.

“Chidori, let’s go!” Issei called, ignoring him.

The next battle began. A horde of hellhounds appeared and attacked Kaname and Issei on the front lines. These were fast-moving enemies—One was about to jump on Kaname when Sousuke shot an arrow into it from the side. But he ignored Issei, who was struggling hard. Without Shinji’s help, Issei would’ve been caught in a chain attack and died.

“Hey, Sagara! What’s with the lack of support?!” a beat-up Issei demanded when the battle was over.

“What? I gave my support,” Sousuke said. “Chidori is unharmed.”

“And I’m all beat up!”

“Who cares? Suck it up.”

“You...!”

Issei attacked! Sousuke dodged. Sousuke attacked! Issei blocked.

“Oh, come on. Not this again! Just cut it out, you two!” said Kaname, interposing herself with a light swing of her sword. The tip accidentally caught Issei in the process, and...

Ker-pash! What should have been a light hit came with an impressive sound effect and animation. Kaname was wielding a powerful weapon that Shinji had lent her, after all. And Issei was already beat-up from battle, almost out of HP.

Kaname’s striked proved to be the finishing blow, and Issei collapsed.

“Ah... sorry,” said Kaname. “Are you okay?”

Issei didn’t respond.

“Issei-kun?” She took him in her arms and shook him, but Issei remained silent. She turned back to the others and said, plainly, “He’s dead.”

Meanwhile...

Among the dense trees, in the deepest depths of the Twilight Forest, there sat a fortress. Mizu, the bunny-girl summoner, was down on one knee with her head bowed, showing reverence towards the master to whom she’d sworn loyalty. Lines of knights clad in blood-red armor stood in the grand audience chamber, their spears pointed at the ceiling and glowing with a dull light.

“I beg your forgiveness, Yoko-sama,” said Mizu. “A pair of unexpected obstacles interfered in my efforts to rid us of that meddling sorcerer, Zama the Gale.”

Yoko, sitting on a marble throne, frowned at Mizu’s report. “Obstacle?” she questioned. “Who?”

“Ma’am... a monk named Baki and a ranger named Seagal. And there was a girl with a bizarre name to whom the sorcerer was giving his aid.”

“Oho...” The dark witch flashed a dazzling smile. “Interesting. So, there are others who would dare to defy the great Yoko, eh? I’ll have to teach them how foolish such insubordination truly is...”

“Indeed,” Mizu said solemnly.



“So, what, are these more of your school friends?” asked Yoko.

“Yeah. I think so.”

Having grown tired of their previously theatrical conversation style, they both went back to standard speech.

“Don’t they have anything better to do?” Yoko asked pointedly. “Shouldn’t students be studying? They’ll never become mature adults without a proper work ethic.”

“Er, aren’t you a civil servant, Yoko-san?” Mizu wanted to know. “How do you even find time to play during the day?”

“I turn off the sound effects and play on my computer at work, which means free internet access. Wah ha ha!”

“That seems way worse than anything we’re doing...” Mizu mumbled under her breath. “Er, so what do we do about Zama?”

“Let him do what he wants. He’s the only one who stands a chance at beating me now, so he’ll be coming here sooner or later... especially since I have his true love sealed away in my soul prison in the basement,” said Yoko, referring to the beautiful cleric, Cia.

Having grown weary of simply PKing and looting other players, Yoko had lately been resorting to capturing intermediate-level PCs and locking them away in her fortress’s dungeon. The PCs couldn’t move while being held there—they still had all their equipment and money, but couldn’t leave unless someone let them out.

Most players really hated this system. Even if you logged into the game, you’d be stuck in a tiny cell with no means of escape. There was basically no point in playing anymore, and there were no small number of players who quit when it happened. Many of them sent emails to the company complaining about this, but the company just sent a template letter that amounted to, *“Interpersonal issues should be worked out between players.”*

It did take tons of work and money to create and maintain a soul prison, which meant that Yoko’s faction had to channel a great deal of funds to that purpose. Still, forming a PK group willing to rob and cheat others made it possible to do so.

Upon capturing a PC, the allies of that PC would come to save them—what kind of person wouldn't try to save a comrade in need?—but Yoko had surrounded her fortress with forces and traps capable of destroying even high-level PCs. Then she'd steal all the equipment and money from the rescue parties in order to sell them off.

"That lure-and-trap plan is pretty effective," Mizu commented.

"Heh heh heh," laughed Yoko, "you bet it is!" This cruel and effective strategy had allowed her to dominate the player killer rankings. Many players found her enraging or frustrating, and vented about it to no avail on anonymous message boards.

Still, evil had its own allure, and the more cynical side of the player base had come to join Yoko's side in droves. She even held offline parties for her minions—even IRL, Yoko was a beautiful, buxom, and single woman who enjoyed drinking and karaoke. A member of her hater faction had once infiltrated one of these parties as a spy, taken a picture of her and uploaded it to smear her. Unfortunately, the act had the opposite effect of what was intended. Part of it was her attractiveness, but her response to the picture being posted was just a chilly, "Do what you like," which just made her more popular. Even more high-level PCs added themselves to her ranks, until Yoko had amassed enough military might to destroy the entire kingdom.

Mizuki's choice to join Yoko's forces, then, had been brilliantly opportunistic. She had immediately distinguished herself and was given expensive equipment and items, leveled up in a flash, and climbed the ranks to executive level in Yoko's dark kingdom.

"But there's something I'm even more concerned about," Yoko said, swishing around a glass filled with high-level healing potion. "Very soon, the kingdom's knightly order will attack in force. They're even recruiting volunteers on the official forum."

"Looks like," Mizu agreed. "There could be a lot of them... What should we do?"

"Heh heh... Fortunately, I just gained a very promising tactician. Diono!" Yoko called out. "Is Diono here?!"

“Yes, right here!” A handsome swordsman in blood-red armor stepped out from behind one of the towering stone pillars in the center of the open space.

Like Mizuki, Diono had only recently joined Yoko’s army. His true appearance was unknown and his level was still low, but his loyalty to Yoko was on par with even her long-time executives, and he served her so fiercely it made one worry about his real life. If she ever told him to kill himself, he’d likely do so without hesitation. His service to the dark queen was unquestioned.

“My mistress,” he greeted her. “Drilling and the reorganization of our forces are proceeding apace. We’ll soon have a stratagem for how best to fight back against the kingdom’s attack as well.”

“What’s going on with the planning?” she asked him.

“I put together three proposals and sent them to you in an email, milady. See the attached Excel files.”

“Ah, well done.”

“You honor me, milady,” Diono said humbly. “And if we win this battle, please give me what you promised.”

“Heh heh heh... to let you rest your head on my lap at the next offline party? I won’t forget.”

“Ma’am. You honor me!” The tactician scraped and bowed.

Yoko stood up from her throne and threw back her cape with a flourish.

“At last, it’s time for the final battle!” the dark queen proclaimed. She’d switched to shout mode, so she could be heard by all those around her. “First, we must slay every one of the royal paladins who comes to attack this fortress! Then we’ll send our spare forces to ride on the castle town of Pinckney! Destruction and pillage! Turn the city into a ruin, reigned over by despair!”

The forces of darkness dwelling in her fortress let out a howl, pounding their weapons and shields to make noise. Yoko herself let out an evil cackle. In a standard movie or anime, this is when a thunderbolt would ring out and a full orchestra piece would play over a scene transition, but...

“Hey, hey. *Can* we turn Pinckney to a ruin?” Mizuki asked plainly.

“No. The city’s a peace zone,” the black-clad witch responded sadly.

Meanwhile, back at Zama's party...

The game imposed serious penalties for dying, but it wasn't impossible to bring someone back—It just cost more money than your typical player could afford. The cost for resurrecting Issei after returning to Pinckney from the wasteland was exorbitant, but Shinji paid it. However...

The moment he was resurrected at the church, Issei immediately resumed fighting with Sousuke. Sacred statues toppled. Priests were running about willy-nilly. It was only a matter of time before the NPC guard came running.

"I'm saying it's all your fault!" yelled Issei.

"You erred first by not healing yourself," Sousuke replied.

To avoid looming catastrophe, Shinji cast a paralysis spell on the feuding duo with a sigh. They'd never get anywhere if he let them go on like this.

"Sorry for all the trouble... Ha ha ha..." Kaname said to the priests as she and Shinji left the church behind, dragging the paralyzed pair. "Um... Sorry, Kazama-kun..."

"It's fine. I should've been more careful," Shinji said with a wince. "But what do we do? Resurrecting Tsubaki-kun took most of our money. I was hoping to buy everyone enhanced weapons and armor..."

"We'll have to earn more. I'll contribute what I can."

"But to work up the money we need will probably take about a month," he said regretfully.

"What?!"

"Games like this are way more stingy with money than normal RPGs."

"R-Really?"

"The max level is 99, so everything past that comes down to purchasing power," Shinji explained. "If we had 500,000 gamel apiece, I could buy us equipment strong enough to face Yoko... but I only have 10,000 on hand right now. I don't know what to do."

Just then, they noticed a large crowd forming on a streetcorner. It seemed a

player had opened a new shop and was holding a sale.

The salesgirl called out, “Come one, come all! The pharmacy you’ve heard of even in the capital, Masumoto Hiyoshi, has opened a branch in your town! Tons of wares at low, low prices! A Masumoto Hiyoshi in your very own town! Everything is on sale for the grand opening! Act now and get a dozen healing potions for only 80 gamel!” That price must have been cheap, because people were coming from all around to buy.

Kaname and Shinji peeked into the shop out of curiosity and saw a bespectacled elf in an almost nurse-like costume doing the selling. Her character name was KYO. She said, “Ah, Kazama-kun! Hey!! >w<”

“Tokiwa-san. You’re still playing? ^^;” Shinji asked.

A few customers around them said, “Zama’s real name is Kazama, eh? Noted, noted...” but Shinji just ignored them.

“Yeah. I found a good job,” said KYO. “By the way, who’s that weirdo? You didn’t get a new girlfriend, did you?”

Kaname gazed in disbelief at KYO, who was clearly her friend Kyoko. “Kyoko,” she said, “It’s me.”

“Huh? Is that you, Kana-chan? So you *did* start to play! @@”

“Yeah. I figured, why not?”

“O-Ren-san! Kana-chan’s here!” She called to a girl inside the shop.

The girl’s costume was clearly from the eastern side of the continent, and her long black hair was adorned by delicate ornaments. The name over her head was REN, exactly the same as her IRL name. She was dealing courteously with the customers who had formed a long line at the register when she looked over at them, along with the customers.

“Kaname-san? Oh... and Kazama-san is with you. Who are those two frozen people behind you?” Mikihara Ren asked curiously as she looked at the still-paralyzed Sousuke and Issei.

“Oh, them? You can just ignore them,” Kaname told her.

“Oh, I see,” Ren said, and did just that.

“Now... Kyoko and O-Ren-san, why are you salesgirls?”

“Oh. I know that Kazama-san invited us to play, but... neither Tokiwa-san nor I seem cut out for fighting,” Ren explained, “We were wandering around when we ran out of money and had trouble finding food and lodging.”

“Uh-huh...”

Ren began crying waterfalls. “In the end, in desperation, I was forced to the brink of selling my body just to obtain a crumb of bread. Mock me as a fallen woman, if you like...”

“Um... I don’t think you can do that in a game like this?” questioned Kaname.

“You can,” Shinji whispered to her.

“Huh?”

“Oh, never mind.”

“No way,” said Kaname, “this game goes that far?!”

“No, no, no! But you can mess with appearance data and use the chat to do... you know, stuff,” Shinji whispered in embarrassment.

“Do you do that too, Kazama-kun?!”

“Of course not!” he responded, excessively indignant.

“...Well, okay,” Kaname said, turning back to Ren. “So you guys ended up getting a job here?”

“Yes. I eventually thought to throw myself in the river, unable to stand my poverty... but the master here rescued me.”

“I survived on mushrooms I found outside of town, lol,” said Kyoko, “and then O-Ren-san invited me along.”

“I’m impressed by your dedication to roleplaying yourselves as starving peasants...” Kaname said in disbelief.

Kyoko then showed off her pristine nurse outfit. “But hey, look at the great uniform I got now! This is the sixth pharmacy branch we’ve opened. We’ve made a ton of money here in just a week! ^^”

“Oh? The owner must be a shrewd businessman.”

“I’m honored by the compliment,” said the approaching alchemist, who was tall and pale, with a calm air about him. He wore a robe with a high collar, had gray hair tied in an old-fashioned samurai’s knot, and wore intellectual glasses. The name over his head was ATSUNOV. Though he appeared quite decked out, he was only level 5.

“Oh, sir! Great timing!” Kyoko said enthusiastically. “We just sold out of our attack speed enhancer potions on the floor!”

“Master,” said Ren. “We just exceeded our daily sales quota.”

“I see,” said ATSUNOV. “Keep it up, Tokiwa-kun, Mikihara-kun.”

“Right! Oh... and that weird girl there is Kana-chan. Anyway, I’m going to set out whatever we’ve got in storage. See you later, Kana-chan! ^^” said Kyoko, returning to her sales promotion work.

“Um, are you Hayashimizu-senpai?” Kaname asked.

“Of course, it is I,” the alchemist said, nudging his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Kazama-kun,” she said next, “you even invited Senpai?”

“Yeah. I invited everyone in the student council, actually. But they all gave up on fighting Yoko and went off to do their own thing...” Shinji said regretfully.

“I’m sorry to be so neglectful of you, Kazama-kun,” said Hayashimizu. “I’m still playing in my own way, though. The rest of the student council members are running our second branch store.”

“Ahh...”

“Did you start this chain of stores, Hayashimizu-senpai?” Kaname asked.

“Yes. I tried a variety of effective trade, pricing, and marketing strategies. Even in a fictional world, it all works,” he added. “It’s been very educational.”

It was apparent that, since joining the game, Hayashimizu hadn’t done much in the way of leveling up or fighting. Instead, he’d opted to just wander around to different towns, comparing the prices of various goods he found there,

listening to stories from countless merchants, and investigating various market trends, popular items, and how to get them. After learning the ins and outs, Hayashimizu had borrowed 10,000 gamel from Shinji and turned it into over a million in just three days.

“Incredible business acumen...” Kaname marveled.

“It’s not nearly as difficult as doing it in the real world,” Hayashimizu said offhandedly. “This, for instance... This amulet is a single-use item for sleep resistance. Until a few weeks ago, nobody cared about them. There were a lot of monsters with sleeping attacks in the Ruins of Eternal Night to the west. Sleep was an annoying attack to deal with, so the Ruins weren’t a popular hunting ground. But because the witch had taken over the much more popular Twilight Forest, adventurers who’d been driven out of it moved there instead. Obviously, that increased demand for sleep-related items. I was able to buy them up in massive numbers in the east where they were cheap, then sell them here. Updates to the game itself can also change the dynamics at play. If you keep abreast of that information, you can make quite a profit in those sorts of small exchanges.”

“Ahh,” said Kaname.

“Marketing is important as well. I took great pains to choose a brand name that would be positively received and let customers feel safe buying here.”

“Image tactics... you mean that shop name, Masumoto Hiyoshi, helps your sales?” Frankly, it sounded like a rip-off to her.

“Of course. In a fictional world, those sorts of familiar, cliché names paradoxically have more impact. If you can just make customers unconsciously think ‘Hah, look at that,’ you’ve won,” he told her.

“Is that how it works?”

“Yes, that’s how it works.” Hayashimizu nodded, then checked something above Kaname’s head that she couldn’t see. “I must say, I’m very curious about that name of yours.”

“Huh? How’s Waiz a weird name?” She couldn’t see the name over her own character’s head, so Kaname still hadn’t worked out the misunderstanding. The

others had also actively avoided the subject.

“Never mind,” he said politely, before turning to Shinji. “Kazama-kun?”

“Eh?”

“This is good timing. Come with me, there’s someone I want you to meet,” said Hayashimizu, walking further into the shop. Kaname and Shinji followed him, leaving the paralyzed Sousuke and Issei behind. “I’m doing more than just sales here. I’ve also been coordinating various factors in hopes of aiding your cause.” They passed through the door, climbed up a narrow stairway, and entered an office.

A knight—his white plate mail bore the crest of the Royal Paladins— was seated in a chair there. The name over his head read GOTO.

“Who’s this?” Shinji asked.

“Sir Goto, leader of the Royal Paladins,” Hayashimizu said by way of simple introduction.

The knight stood up and gave a courteous bow to Shinji and Kaname. “We’ve never met before, but my name is Goto Shouji! Your reputation precedes you, Lord Zama. It is truly an honor to meet you!”

“A pleasure. So, what did you want with me?” Shinji asked suspiciously.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the witch, Lord Zama. We can no longer abide her treachery!” Sir Goto declared earnestly. “Thus, last week we paladins decided to form a raiding party to take her down. The elite and brave forces of the Paladins number 138 in total! With this venerable band, we will attack and destroy the fortress of Yoko!”

“Oh,” said Shinji, “you were recruiting on the official forums, right?”

“Well, yes, that’s right,” Sir Goto agreed, slumping over a little bit.

“But Sir Goto’s forces will only be strong enough to hold down Yoko’s subordinates,” said Hayashimizu. “In terms of military might, the Paladins and the enemy are more or less equal. But the enemy fortress has additional defenses as well—Losses are expected to be quite severe. And only high-level and skilled PCs could make it deep inside the fortress... where they will

eventually run into the witch, who has powerful items equipped."

Shinji said nothing.

"We need someone who can fight on even terms with Yoko," Sir Goto declared. "She's defeated so many high-level characters in the past... which means the only one who can defeat her, Kazama-kun, is you."

"So, you want us to take part in your raid?"

"Please, Lord Zama," said Sir Goto.

Hayashimizu, too, jangled a bag filled with gold coins and smiled. "I'm covering expenses," he added. "I can provide all the equipment you need."

"I don't understand," Shinji interjected. "I get it with Sir Goto, there. But Senpai, you don't have any reason to support the fight, do you? After you abandoned me to focus on your business like this..."

"Yes, you are indeed correct," Hayashimizu said with a nod. "But I've expanded my business to things besides pharmaceuticals. Weapons, armor, provisions... and the Paladins are loyal customers."

"Hmm..."

"And Yoko's power has become too great. She'll go after my trade networks sooner or later, and I simply can't have that," he added flippantly. He'd only been playing for about a week, but Hayashimizu already conducted himself like a years-long veteran.

Is Hayashimizu-senpai actually the student from our school most invested in the game? Kaname wondered to herself, though she didn't type it into the chat.

"Well, one way or another... You can trust that I will offer support for good-faith reasons," offered Hayashimizu. "It's not a bad deal for you, is it?"

Shinji thought a while, silently. "All right," he said at last. "But I'm bringing Chidori-san and the others too. I want to upgrade their equipment to the best available. And we'll need lots of potions."

"Yes, I'll prepare it all."

While Hayashimizu and Shinji were having their serious discussion, out in front of the pharmacy...

“Hey, O-Ren-san,” said Kyoko, “I think the two frozen guys are hurting our business.”

“Yes, their expressions are so fearsome, and their postures so unnatural...”

“Let’s throw them out.”

“Agreed.”

Kyoko and Ren worked hurriedly to move the paralyzed Issei and Sousuke (our protagonist, if you’ll recall) to the garbage dumping area behind the pharmacy.

●

The Yoko raiding party that gathered in the Twilight Forest in fact numbered not 138, but close to 200. In a real war, you’d have a hundred times that many throwing themselves at each other, but obviously the server couldn’t handle that. In fact, even a force this large was unusual for the game.

Standing before the horde of veteran players—Paladins and volunteers fortified in all kinds of equipment—the Captain of the Guard, Sir Goto, spoke first. “Good evening, everyone! ^^”

“Good evening! ^o^ノ” The hot-blooded soldiers responded vigorously.

Sir Goto nodded in satisfaction, and began to deliver his briefing to the assembled heroes with gusto. “I’m the Captain of the Paladins—or rather, their coordinator, Goto. According to our scouting party’s report, there are no ambushes set up in the forest. Our force ended up being larger than theirs lol, so they probably intend to avoid losses by hunkering down in their fortress. Although if you don’t have anything more urgent to do, I do hope you’ll protect the siege weapons. If you make it to the enemy fortress, please attack the way Atsunov-san outlined. Oh, and Atsunov-san paid for the various expenditures for the battle. So, Atsunov-san, if you’d say a few words as well, lol.”

Thunderous applause rang out.

Hayashimizu stepped forward. “Hello, there. I’m the sponsor of this

expedition. Carrying everything from healing herbs to potions—Friend to adventurers, Masumoto Hiyoshi. Open 24/7—Masumoto Hiyoshi. The all-purpose pharmacy, Masumoto Hiyoshi. Please stop by. Our newly-opened sixth branch in Pinckney is having a grand opening sale right now. Make sure you stop by on the way back from the battle."

"Yeah!" The men thrust up their fists in response to a speech so stirring it would linger in the kingdom's history.

"All right, thanks all! Now let's give Yoko-san a good ass-beating! lol" Sir Goto proclaimed.

"Yeeeah lol!"

Sir Goto held up his shining sacred sword, the Mithril Sword—the ultimate weapon feared by dark-attribute monsters—and proclaimed, "All forces, move ouuuuuut! lol"

Drums began to pound as the soldiers split up into the dark forest, their nervousness plain to see.

"Chaaaaarge lol!"

"Off to die > <ノ"

"wahhh lolol ok rofl"

"I'mmm fulll of powerrr!"

"tomahawk+3 on sale 300k chat only plz."

Their brave and valiant voices echoed all around—and so the strongest army in the kingdom's history launched their campaign!

"They don't seem very nervous to me! What the hell?"

"It feels more like a school trip than a battle."

"Like they're here to pick mushrooms..."

Kaname, Sousuke, and Issei all complained as they came along with the army.

"Well, that's just kind of how it goes," Shinji said without apology. "Anyway, have you all checked your equipment? It's way better than anything you've had

so far, so don't forget to equip it."

The responses came.

"Sure."

"Indeed."

"Done."

Kaname and the others were far more powerful now than when they'd first fought Mizuki. During the preparation period they'd done lots of leveling with Kazama, and he'd taught them everything they needed to know about their skills as well. Obviously, levels were important in *Dragon Online*, but the system was designed so that player skill made a huge difference to one's success. It was important for a player to understand not just how battle and skills worked, but how to hone their reflexes, their kinetic vision, and their ability to make snap judgments on the fly.

Being athletes in their spare time, Kaname, Sousuke, and Issei all had natural talent in those regards, even though they weren't particularly accustomed to video games. They were able to understand, execute, and combine the game's actions much better than your average player. This was why Shinji was so willing to spend time with them, even if their levels were on the low side.

Hayashimizu's suggestions had also been a huge help. Thanks to the stat-boosting potions and top-class armor Kaname was wearing, she'd grown strong enough to fight enemies of a far higher level than her own.

Issei, similarly, had equipped the rare item "SPT Knuckle Shot," powerful enough to crush a tough Mithril Golem in one strike.

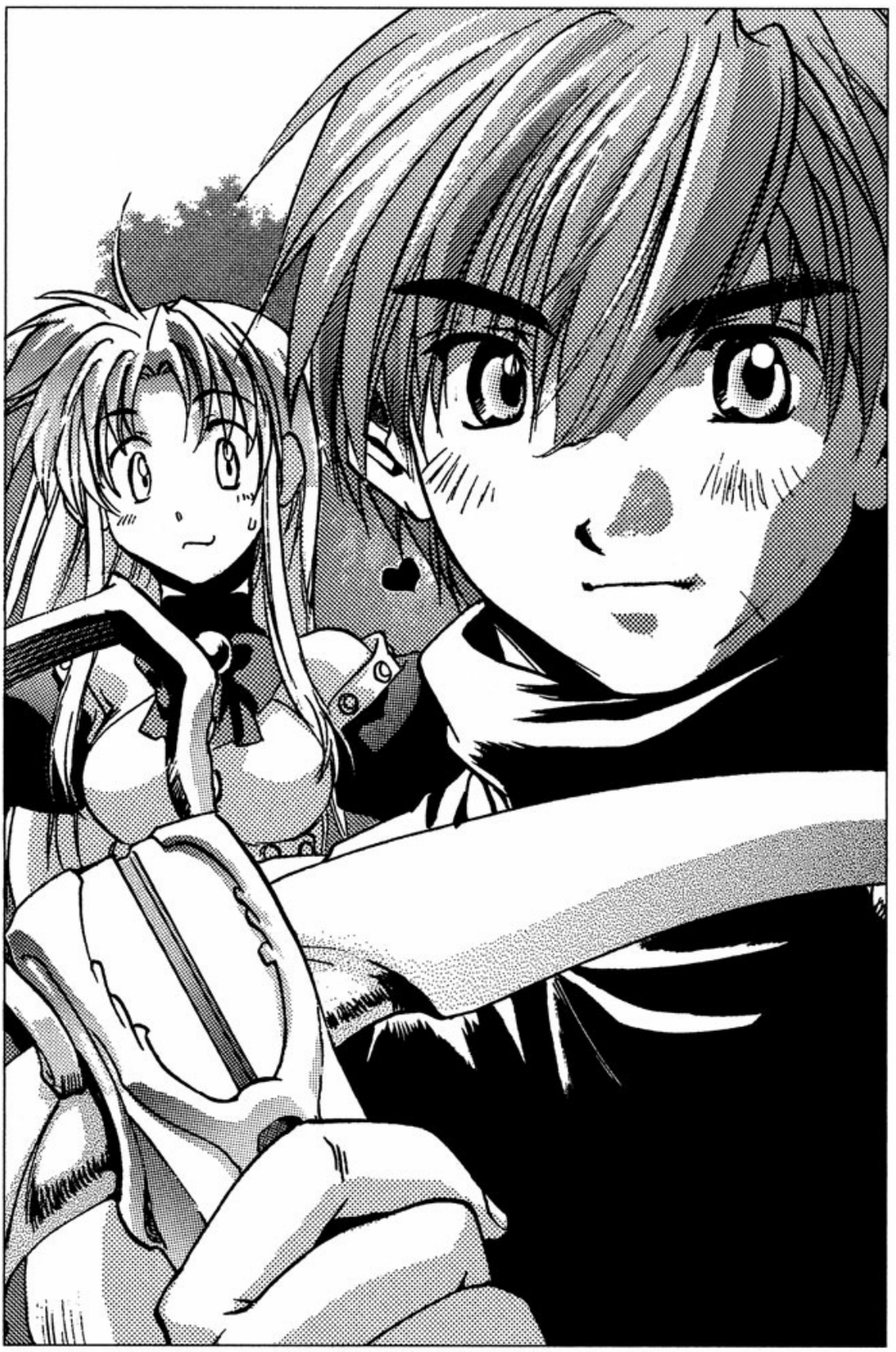
Sousuke had been given countless scrolls to increase his skill level. That had let him unlock the archery skill usually only accessible to high-level Rangers, "God Bowgun Quiver Shot." They'd also given him the ultimate longbow, "Hellfire RF"... yet Sousuke was instead using a sturdy crossbow a tier lower in power.

"How come?" Kaname and Shinji had asked him at the time.

In response, Sousuke had opened up his equipment window and showed

them. “Look at the weapon’s name.” The weapon’s name read ARBALEST—a kind of large crossbow from medieval Europe. “This one’s a good omen,” he told them.

“I feel you. Ha ha ha.” Only Kaname understood the reason, and laughed merrily.



The scouting team’s reports had been correct; there were no ambushes

waiting on the way to Yoko's fortress. And so, their force of two hundred arrived at the gate.

The scenery was gloomy. A grim song played. A cold wind blew through the battlefield.

"Ahem! I am the Captain of the Royal Knights of the Sacred City of Laboon, Baron Goto Shouji!" said Sir Goto, who began by introducing himself. Then he addressed the enemy: "Black Witch Yoko, we have your castle surrounded! Atone for your crimes and surrender, and you may be spared! If you refuse, we will crush you in the name of justice! What is your response?!"

A human form came into view on the rampart. It was the Black Witch Yoko. "Hmph," she sneered. "Take this!"

A streak of light flashed, and then an electric arrow came shooting out from within the fortress to pierce Sir Goto through the heart. A critical hit! Sir Goto fell back and lay twitching on the ground.

"Sir Goto?!"

"Oh, sorry. Someone else should take command," he managed to choke out. " Erk... lol." And so, Sir Goto died a hero's death.

The vice captain gritted his teeth and shed waterfalls of tears as he glared up at the rampart. "How dare you!" he cried out.

"Ho ho ho!" chortled Yoko. "How weak you are!"

"I'll teach you a lesson, you vulgar witch! Start the battle!" the vice captain bellowed. "Catapults, fire! Fire! Fire!"

The siege division began hurling flaming rocks and giant arrows at the fortress. Suddenly the ramparts were spotted with flame, which burned higher as soldiers fell from the castle walls.

"Charge! Charge!"

A cavalry call began to play on a bugle. Following this effective and thorough siege of weapon fire from the Paladins, a squadron of hastily-made, low-level characters charged the castle gate with explosives strapped to them. The suicide squad fell to the rain of arrows one after another, but these low-level

characters felt no fear; they always knew they could make a new character if they died here.

One brave soul shouted, “Yeah! Got me 10,000 gamel!” as he charged the castle gate and exploded. A second wave came, then a third. The castle walls shook and black smoke rose.

“Yes! Heavy infantry, to the front!” the vice commander yelled. “Archers, focus on support! Just move forward! Forward! Don’t be afraid! If we fail now, there’s always next week!”

The battle was wreathed in flames, like a scene out of hell.

Mixed in with the volunteer soldiers, Kaname spoke, her small shield held desperately above her head to shield from falling arrows, “Hoo boy, I hope Go****-sensei doesn’t read this battle scene...”

“What are you talking about now? Anyway, look alive! We’re almost through the gate!” Sousuke shouted back, while shooting an enemy soldier on the wall with his crossbow. The next instant, the gate broke in noisily, and the royal army’s men flooded into the fortress. Issei flew in ahead of the group, laying out the troll warriors that stood in his way. Shinji turned his staff to a surge of incoming orcs and cast a few spells, causing rushing arrows of ice to riddle the orcs with holes.

“Take that!” he bellowed.

“Gwaaaah!”

The moment Kaname entered the castle, she was crossing swords with a knight in black clothing. She took him out immediately with outstanding swordsmanship. “Yes! Who’s next?! Try me! Take that, and that... erk!” Just then, at the utmost edge of her peripheral vision to the right, an explosion of flame roared out.

Kaname just barely managed to dodge it. She looked in the direction it had come from and saw a familiar bunny-eared summoner standing on the stone stairway, about two stories up.

“Ugh! Dodging my killing blow... you’ve grown stronger, bathroom tissue!”

“Mizuki?!”

“Don’t talk like you know me!” said Mizuki as she summoned another fire wyrm, which fired a ball of flame at Kaname.

She dodged this one, too... but not entirely, and the resulting blast of hot wind knocked Kaname back into a wall. “Hrk...” she choked.

“All right, bathroom tissue! You’re really ticking me off!” Mizuki declared. “I’ll take your head and present it to Yoko-sama!”

“Sto—” Kaname tried to say, but was cut off as another fireball from Mizuki came streaking at her. Kaname managed to dodge that and leaped into the air, whereupon she landed on a catapult platform and pleaded with her further, “Stop this, Mizuki! I don’t want to kill a friend!”

“Hah, stop talking nonsense!” Mizuki scoffed. “I have no idea who you are! Shut your mouth right now or I’ll bury you with my ultimate summon!”

“Mizuki!”

“Hahhhh!” A dragon appeared behind Mizuki.

There’s no way I’ll survive an attack from that. I’ve got no choice, then... Kaname swiftly leaped and raised her rapier. “Ngh... Mizukiii!” she howled.

“Diiiie!” Mizuki screamed back.

There was a flash as red flame burst out, enveloping the two as they crossed ways. A violent shockwave burst out next, which sent nearby orcs flying backwards, and in turn caused the walls of the inner castle to collapse.

The thick black smoke gradually cleared. Two forms stood there, unmoving... but once held its posture while the other eventually fell. Kaname was the one left standing.

“Rk... You got me,” Mizuki choked out.

“Mizuki!” Kaname scooped up her shallowly breathing friend.

Mizuki lay on her side, stained in blood, gazing up at the sky. “I’m... going to die, aren’t I?”

“No! Don’t talk like that!”

“A shame that I died... to such a strange woman...”

“Wake up, Mizuki! Noooo!”

Here, Mizuki returned to normal, and looked up at Kaname, who held her in her arms. “Boy... you really don’t have any boundaries, do you? You keep calling me by my first name... who *are* you?”

“It’s me, like I said.”

“Eh... Wait, are you Kaname?” Mizuki asked ncredulously.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, hell! So I was fighting a dear friend this whole time? Sorry, Kaname. I... I was just a puppet, manipulated by Yoko...”

“You didn’t look very manipulated to me...” Kaname grumbled.

“But why the heck did you choose that weird name, Kaname? Ah...? Urk...” In that moment, upon questioning her name, Mizuki expired.

“M-Mizuki? Mizuki?!” Kaname shouted. Whether it was predestined that she kill a friend, or simply a twist of fate, a sense of gravity welled up within her, and the BGM volume with its heavy drum beat sounded louder in her ears. “You’ll pay,” she shouted. “You’ll pay, Demon Queen Yoko!”

Pulling Mizuki’s dead body to her chest, Kaname pressed the ‘shed tears of blood’ command. Then, using the ‘loot enemy corpse’ command, she took 100,000 gamel from Mizuki’s dead body. She also leveled up!

“Watch me, Yoko! For the sake of my lost friend, I will defeat you! Graaaah!” Kaname used the self-buff spell ‘ATK Boost’ to make her aura flare up even brighter as she ran deeper into the fortress.

Meanwhile, back with Sousuke and Issei...

The two of them had never gotten along, but once they were working together, there were few who could match them as a fighting duo. Just moments after they broke through the gate, Sousuke and Issei stood back-to-back and polished off every one of the rampaging hordes around them. They were just absurdly tough. Wherever they went, mountains of enemy corpses

followed—it wasn't just NPC orcs and trolls. Even the black knights controlled by PCs would say, *"What's with them?! Don't they have any blind spots?!"* and run in panic.

"Hmph. Cowards," Sousuke whispered, brandishing his crossbow.

"They're skilled enough, but lacking in tactics," Issei muttered, his fists at the ready.

Over days and days of squabbling, each had unconsciously become an expert on how the other moved and fought. Of course, both were thinking that they'd kill the other and make it look like an accident the first chance they got... but it was clear that, while at the center of all these fearsome enemies, it would be suicide to fight alone. Those were the circumstances under which Sousuke and Issei reluctantly worked together to beat the enemies.

It was then that a new enemy—a handsome fencer, clad in red armor—appeared and said, "Heh. You've finally arrived." The name above his head was D-ONO. He flipped back his bangs and said in a nihilistic tone, "Heh... My name is Diono, a fencer sworn to Yoko-sama. I give you credit for driving back my troops and making it this far. However..."

Immediately, Sousuke fired his crossbow and Issei executed a roundhouse kick. Diono the fencer was slammed into the wall and speared with an arrow, then hit and shot again and again and again and again.

"Hey... hey! Wait!"

Again and again...

"C-Cut it out! I'm—"

...And again and again... They just wouldn't stop. But at last, their attacks trailed off.

"Who was that guy?" Issei asked.

Sousuke shrugged and said, "Who knows? Let's go."

Leaving the expired Diono behind, Sousuke and Issei bounded up the stairs.

Shinji headed straight for the dungeon, but upon realizing his beloved Cia

wasn't there, he knew where she had to be. "The central tower?!" he hissed to himself. *I'm worried about my comrades, from whom I got separated from in the fight... but Cia's more important right now,* he thought. *Yoko's probably waiting for me. She's waiting for me, Zama the Gale, the one enemy she could never finish off no matter how many times we fought. I know because I've fought her—Yoko's that kind of woman.*

He ran up to the tower, pausing briefly to insta-kill any enemies he met along the way. At last, he ascended the stairs and came out on an open roof that resembled a heliport. Atop that roof stood his mortal enemy... Yoko.

"Heh... you've finally made it, Zama." A gust of wind blew across the roof. It tousled the hair and cape of Yoko, who was using a beautiful blonde girl—the cleric Cia—as a hostage.

"Z-Zama-san?!" Cia choked out.

"Cia... I came here to save you," he promised. "You're safe now."

"Heh heh heh... playing the white knight, are we?" Yoko taunted him, herself playing the cornered villain to the hilt.

Kaname came running a few seconds later. Sousuke and Issei were with her.

"Kazama-kun?!"

"Kazama!"

"Ngh..."

It was four against one. Victory was assured.

"Look, Yoko. The three of them are formidable. No matter how you struggle, there's no way to get out of this," Shinji said coaxingly. "Let go of Cia. Your hopes of raising your own kingdom are over."

"Heh heh heh. Look at you, now. And to see the incompetent royal army become this strong... is this your doing, as well?" replied Yoko.

"I couldn't say. But that doesn't matter anymore, does it?" Shinji asked.

Here, the black-clad witch smiled with self-reproach. "You're right, of course. However! That's no reason for me to wave the white flag to you!"

“What?!”

“This girl is my hostage!” Yoko announced. “I’ll do whatever it takes, Zama the Gale, to end your life here and now!”

“Hrgh!”

Yoko, using Cia as a shield, began chanting her ultimate spell.

“Z-Zama-san,” said Cia, “run!”

“Like hell I’ll run!” Shinji screamed, and formed a mudra with his fingers. He chanted swiftly. Before Shinji’s eyes, white flames flared up.

The ultimate spell—It channeled the wielder’s own life into a fierce rush of non-elemental lightning that enveloped its target. There was a 60% chance that the wielder would die using it. But in exchange, it dealt extreme damage that most enemies couldn’t survive.

“I don’t care if this takes me out of play,” he snarled. “I just... I just won’t let you survive this!”

“Very interesting, Zama,” Yoko taunted. “To put an end to you... that’s the meaning of my life! It’s my world!”

“Very well, Yoko! I’ll give you everything I have!”

“This is fun, Zama! I feel it... this is the whole world!”

Zing, zing! Pop-pop! Whoosh! A swirl of graphical effects burst into being around Shinji and Yoko. It was truly intense... The two strongest characters on the server were gambling with their lives on the game’s strongest and most indiscriminate area-effect spells.

Kaname and the others unconsciously drew back.

“Does it... um... feel like we’re gonna get caught up in that?” Kaname ventured to say.

“And what about the hostage? This isn’t good. Run!”

“No... it’s too late...”

While the three of them watched, Shinji and Yoko’s eyes snapped open, and both roared,

“Zammmmmaaaa!”

“Yoooookooooo!”

There was a flash as Zama and Yoko unleashed their full power upon each other. Light raced. The earth boiled. The huge explosion enveloped the tower roof. It became so loud, so suddenly, that Kaname quickly had to turn down the volume in her speakers. It was hard living in an apartment at night.

As their magical powers slammed into each other, it became clear that Yoko had the advantage. While Yoko could ruthlessly bring all her energy to bear, Shinji couldn’t use his full power, as he hoped to preserve some of Cia’s HP.

Shinji, AKA Zama, hit the floor and lay motionless. Needless to say, the same happened to Kaname and the others. The damage was enough to kill them all instantly.

The only ones left were Zama and Yoko—both on the verge of death—and Cia. Thanks to a rare item that let one escape just before death, Yoko had managed to survive. Cia had also survived thanks to such an item, but she was unconscious and in critical status.

Shinji choked out, shoulders heaving. “Ah... Chidori-san... Sagara-kun... Tsubaki-kun...”

“Heh... It seems your comrades have expired. And your own MP’s down to zero. Poor thing,” said Yoko, relishing the opportunity to let her villain flag fly. “Too bad for you, but I still have enough power left to finish you. It’s checkmate.”

“Urk... hrk...”

“Prepare to die, Zama the Gale! Now, I kill you! Here, I kill you! And so, my life will truly begin for the first time!” Yoko declared, and began to chant her final spell.

Shinji, in his fading consciousness, thought something like, *I don’t think our grudge ran that deep, but that’s a damn cool line.*

Just then...

Skrik! Kaname’s sword pierced Yoko’s chest from behind.

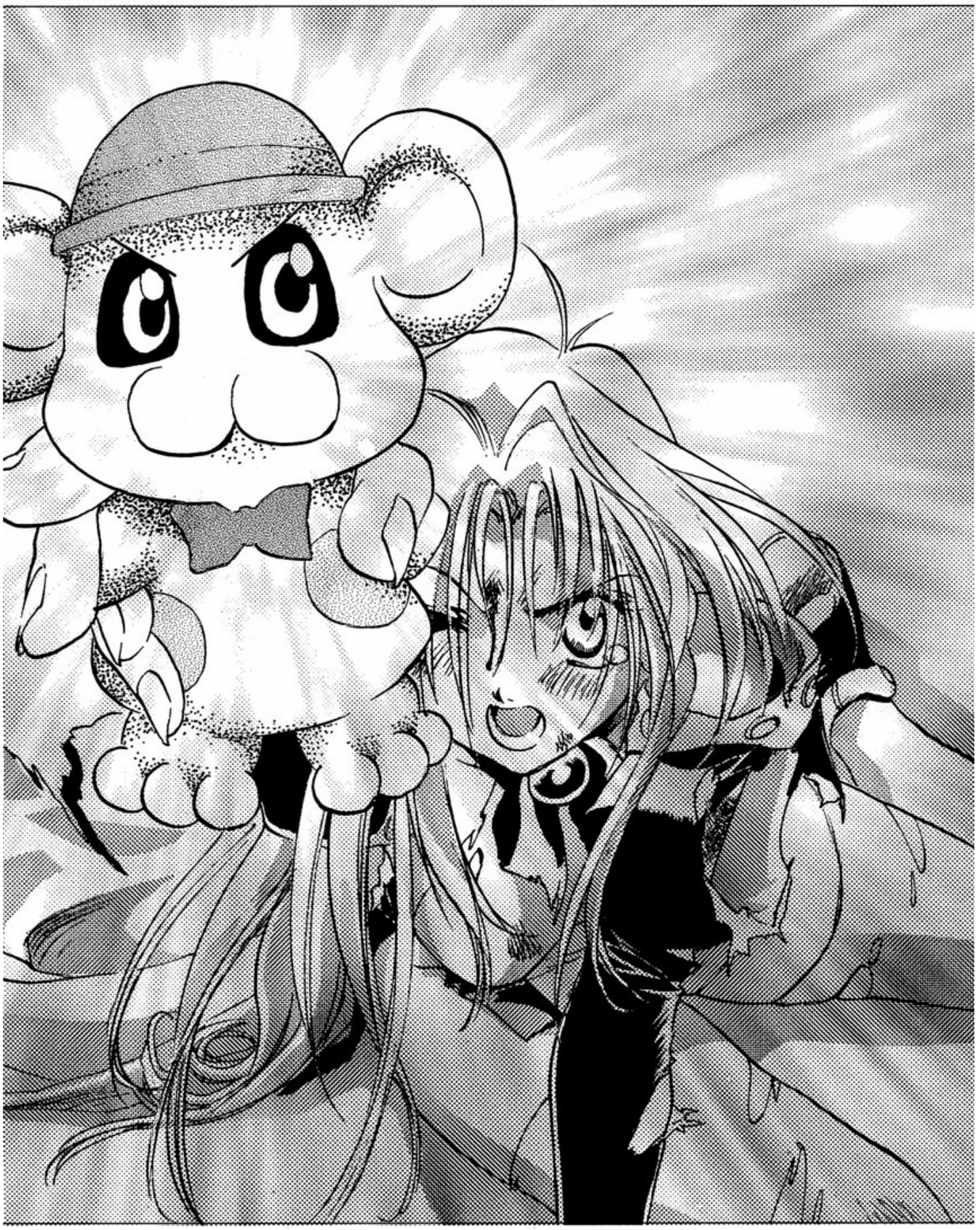
“What?!” *The low-level fencer, still alive?* Yoko wondered incredulously. *How could it be?!* Out loud, she said, “I-Impossible!”

And right there, Yoko had sealed her fate. She had said the line that meant death for any villain: ‘impossible!’

Kaname heaved for breath as she spoke. “I don’t quite know why... but I’m not dead,” she panted. “Most likely because of... that statue Mizuki dropped before.”

“A Swap Doll? No... Is that... the Fumofumo Tears?! Why do you have that rare item... oh, ohhh!” Yoko fumed.

Yes, the statue that Mizuki had dropped during their first encounter, the cute little statue with the moffle-y mouth, was a rare item that fully restored the HP and MP of the wielder at the moment of their death, and drastically increased all their stats!



The all-powerful God that reigned over the whole world, the mighty Moffluno, had used Kaname as his avatar to slay the dark witch!

“Also... I think I know who you are, Yoko-san!” Kaname told her defiantly.

“Curse you! Curse you, bathroom tissue!”

“Just get back to work already, you lousy cop!”

“Gah... gwaaaah!” Yoko let out a death rattle as her body caught fire. In an instant, she was gone, and so the terrible evil was vanquished.

Cia, having regained consciousness, cried into Shinji’s chest. Shinji himself was all aflutter. Despite all their expectations, as far as Kaname could make out, Cia’s player did seem to really be a girl... But her identity remained a secret. She didn’t seem to be a student at Jindai High, at least.

But let the mystery remain a mystery, she decided. *In a world like this, it’s all right to let some things go.*

Incidentally, Sousuke and Issei were totally dead. And when they met up at school again the next day, they blamed each other and took their fight into the real world.

As for Kaname, who’d taken out Yoko...

“I did it! I beat her! I took out Yoko! Pretty awesome, huh?!” Kaname declared in shout mode from the tower’s roof.

“What?”

“Seriously?”

“No way!”

The crowd buzzed.

Kaname stood on the edge of the wall and swung around the staff that served as a symbol of Yoko’s evil. “It’s true! Look! I totally beat her! Let’s end the battle without any more unnecessary bloodshed!”

“Ohh...” The royal army’s expressions grew visibly brighter. And in time, they began to shout. They sang the praises of the girl who was their hero and savior.

“Waaaah! She’s the one who did it?!”

“Savior of our land! Banzai!”

“Toilet Paper! Banzai!”

Kaname frowned discontentedly as the Royal Army raised their swords and kept on shouting en masse.

“The hero, Toilet Paper!”

“The beautiful Toilet Paper!”

“All glory to Toilet Paper!”

While Kaname stared in confusion, the cries for Toilet Paper echoed out again and again.

●

The hero’s name became legend. The Royal Knights gave her their highest award, the Medal of Honor, and spent massive funds to erect a giant statue of her in the Pinckney plaza. And even months and years later, the people who lived on the continent still talk about her:

About she who brought peace to their lands.

About she who shone the light to drive away the darkness in a hopeless battle.

About the courageous maiden who had valiantly and selflessly stood against the Queen of Darkness.

Her name... Toilet Paper.

Savior of the land, Toilet Paper.

Those who had been there would never forget her name—Toilet Paper!

Never, never.

▼The next day, from an unofficial fan site interview...

○Comment from Toilet Paper: “I’m telling you, I quit playing ;~; Yeah... I’m never logging in again. I wish one of you guys had just said something (TT)”

○From Zama: “Well, we all thought she knew... But we are grateful to her ^^”

○From Baki: “I was wondering. It seemed strange (sweats)”

○From Seagal: “Not an issue (>_<)b ← Successful use of emoji.”

[The End]

The Showbiz Kagemusha

Kira Kousuke, the quintessential idol, possessed the trifecta of cheerful character, a warm speaking voice, and sharp looks. He was popular with everyone from teen girls to 40-something housewives. This all meant he was never lacking for work—but indeed, that was exactly his problem.

For instance, one day's schedule would have his manager waking him up before five o'clock in the morning, at which time he'd travel from his home in Aoyama to Okutama in order to shoot on location for a drama. When that shoot was over, he'd return to the city for a live radio program. This was inevitably followed up by a magazine interview, then taping a variety show, and finally a live event that would take him into the evening.

Even when attending sponsored parties at the Akasaka Hotel, Kousuke was so busy greeting others that he never had a chance to eat himself. He ate all his meals on the go, in the car, memorizing his lines for the next job while rushing through his boxed lunch.

He had no free time for himself, of course. When he saw a rumor in a magazine speculating that he was having an affair with a certain female station announcer, he'd been halfway between laughing and crying. *We just bumped into each other in front of a studio near Kojimachi,* he thought incredulously, *and they deduced we were having an affair from that interaction?! I* wish *I had time to conduct an affair!* Indeed, the aloof and famous announcer had invited him to dinner several times, but after he'd turned her down three times, she'd stopped calling him entirely. It wasn't that he didn't like her. He really did have work to do. But of course, she wasn't going to believe that.

Kousuke hadn't been able to go to his middle school class reunion, either. He'd had to turn down multiple invitations from old school friends over and over again. On the surface, they all expressed understanding about his strenuous work schedule, but during their phone conversations he sensed that they thought he'd become a stuck-up star.

But even outside of his social life, Kousuke had a feeling that his packed

schedule was negatively affecting his performances. He felt himself spacing out while filming, and he'd been complaining to his make-up artists about it more and more lately. He found himself sighing a lot when he was on his own, and he wasn't sleeping well at night.

That's more or less how every day went for Kira Kousuke. And at last, one night...

"I've had enough!" he shouted, laying into his manager at the agency, from where they were shooting on location at an abandoned factory outside of Tokyo between effects scenes for an action movie. "I'm completely exhausted. I know it's better than having no work at all, but at this rate, I'm gonna go crazy, and soon! It's just a matter of if my brain or body gives up first. How do you expect me to live this way?! I want to go back to my normal life. I only need one day, just... just let me take some time off!"

His manager, Imura Kotomi, dithered a bit as she responded, "W-We can't do that. We have your entire schedule booked for a whole year in advance..." Kotomi was a plain woman, dressed in a gray suit and black-rimmed glasses. She was short, had a childlike face, and looked like a high-schooler at first glance.

"Imura-san... You know what I live like every day, don't you?" he pleaded.

"Of course I do," she told him. "But this is an important time for you, Kira-san..."

"It always is! Every time I complain, you bring out that 'important time' nonsense. 'Let's hang in there a bit longer,' or, 'Just ride out this last bit.' How long is this 'important time' going to last?" he demanded to know. "What year, month, day, hour, minute will it end?! You need to tell me! Isn't scheduling your job?!"

"P-Please don't be cruel. The agency really needs you right now. We've been in administrative trouble lately, and Lightning Troupe, our rival agency, is on the verge of elbowing us out of the market. We all just have to work together to get you out there, okay? Okay?" begged Kotomi, looking at him with puppy-dog eyes. This was always her next move—she knew he was too nice to say no.

Realizing it was pointless to fight back anymore, Kousuke stood up. "I get it.

Fine.”

“Wh-Where are you going? The shoot isn’t finished yet.”

“I’m getting some fresh air,” he said. “I’ll be back soon. Leave me alone.”

“Don’t go too far, all right?”

“For heaven’s sake, I won’t!” he burst out, leaving the greenroom and passing through the shooting staff rushing here and there. It was hot in there from the bright location lighting.

After leaving the factory, he walked through the dark and empty surrounding area. Coming up to a place where a few rusted cars had been abandoned, he muttered, “Maybe I’ll run away.”

In truth, Kousuke was sick of this demanding life. In his third year of middle school, he’d been chosen from an audition of 3000 and had given up on high school in order to focus on his work. Some in his life had been against the decision, and there had even been schools he might have attended while acting...

Yet his resolve—his desperate determination, one might say—hadn’t wavered. That was how seriously Kousuke had taken his work all this time. But lately, he’d begun to miss his old life, chatting with friends during break periods in school. Even for just one day, he wanted to enjoy life as a normal high school student.

Just one day, he thought. *That’s all I need. If I could return for a little while to a world where no one treats me as special...* With that faint wish in his heart, he was sitting down on the hood of a nearby abandoned car, staring up at the sky, when...

“Who are all these people? I thought this factory was abandoned,” a sudden voice asked from out of the darkness.

Kousuke held an arm up defensively and squinted into the shadows, whereupon a man silently revealed himself from behind the dead trees.

The speaker turned out to be a young man in a high-collared school uniform. He had disheveled black hair, a sullen expression, and wore a tight frown. There

was a cloth case slung over one of his shoulders, possibly for a guitar or some other instrument, and his right hand was hidden behind his back.

“Eh?” Kousuke said with a start when he saw him. It wasn’t the sight of some random teenager infiltrating a closed shooting location that shocked him, but rather his appearance—e had the exact same build and face as Kousuke’s own.

The fine lines of the jaw, the tightly-drawn expression... If not for the slight harshness in his gaze and the muscular body, which suggested the practice of some martial art, they could be twins. Or at least, it was a close enough resemblance that he wouldn’t mind the comparison...

Actually... He reconsidered, calmly. They did look very similar—enough so that, at first, he really had thought he’d hallucinated himself coming out of the darkness—but this was clearly a different person. It was just that attractive men and women tended naturally to have certain things in common. He’d seen a show once proving that if you took facial portraits of a few hundred random people and created a computer-generated composite of all of them, the result would be an extremely attractive person. In that sense, the resemblance shouldn’t have been that big a deal, but...

But even with that in mind, he looks really similar to me!

As Kousuke stared as if he’d seen a ghost, his ‘doppelganger’ narrowed his eyes and inspected him carefully. “Should I call an ambulance?” the man asked.

“Eh?”

“You’re bleeding from the shoulders and head.”

“Oh... th-this is makeup.” Kousuke had been filming a shootout scene, so currently he looked pretty bad. His shirt was covered in soot, and there were bloody patches all over his body.

“Makeup? Curious makeup indeed... It surely can’t be for social purposes,” the stranger commented.

“The point is, I’m fine.”

“I see. Has there been an explosion or a murder there?” The man asked, looking toward the factory.

“Eh?”

“All the people coming and going.”

“No... we’re actually shooting a movie,” Kousuke explained.

“Ah. And you’re some kind of gofer?”

“No, I’m the lead actor.”

The man didn’t seem familiar with Kousuke at all, nor did he show any interest in the fact that their faces were nearly identical. He mostly seemed concerned about Kousuke, perhaps viewing him as a poor man in a daze from the shock of his injuries. “How long will you and your group remain here?” he asked.

“What? I dunno... I heard we’ll be shooting here every night for a few days, though...” Kousuke responded without confidence.

The man scowled and let out a sigh. “I see. It will have to wait a while, then.”

“Um, what were you planning on doing here?”

“I came to test fire my new silencer. That old factory is perfect for indoor shooting, and I’ve been using it frequently for a while. I’ve just acquired a new Heckler & Koch, and I was hoping to test it immediately...” As he spoke, the man pointed back at the “guitar case” hanging off his shoulder.

Naturally, Kousuke had no idea that it was actually a rifle case, or that it contained a submachine gun designed for special forces.

“It appears I have no other choice, though,” the stranger lamented. “I’ll come back another day.” Having wrapped up the discussion entirely on his own, the man turned around and moved to disappear into the dark of night.

Kousuke found himself calling after him. “W-Wait!”

“What?” The man stopped and turned back to face him.

“I know this is a strange thing to say, but...”

“Hmm?”

An idea had formed inside of Kousuke’s ragged and overworked mind. The more he looked at the teenager, the more he felt sure that their faces looked

alike. Yes, the shape of the other man's eyebrows, the faint lines around his eyes, and the musculature from his neck to his jawline were different. It was also true that his hair was disheveled and seemingly untended. His skin was tanner as well, and he was perhaps a bit broader in the shoulders. Their most distinct difference was a look of total focus in his eyes. But... wasn't there a possible they could work it out? *Yes,* Kousuke decided. With the help of a former Hollywood makeup artist he had met on a previous job, he might just be able to fool even his most die-hard fans.

"I have a favor to ask you!" Kousuke cried. He had no idea who this double of his was, but he didn't seem like a bad person. If he asked him for help in good faith, and perhaps offered him compensation... Yes, of course it would work!

Sousuke looked at him questioningly.

"I'll compensate you however I can. I promise I'll make it worth your while! Please!" Kousuke placed his hands on the ground, prostrating himself in front of the other man, who looked at him dubiously.

●

It was morning, in the classroom at the very start of the day. Chidori Kaname had come to school with time to spare, for once, and sat looking at the weekly magazines which had come out that day with Tokiwa Kyoko and her other class friends before class started.

"Oh, c'mon! There's no way it's true!"

"I wouldn't know. But it does seem like *something's* going on, right?"

"No way! I don't believe it!"

Kyoko and the others were offering their uneducated opinions about an article concerning a recently popular idol—Kira Kousuke—and his supposed affair with a TV announcer.

"It does seem like they're going out, though..." Kaname whispered. She didn't really follow entertainment news beyond American soul singers, but even she recognized the name of this new talent who'd just had his big break.

"Speaking of which. I've been thinking for a while... doesn't Kira look a lot like

Sagara-kun?” Kyoko mused, gazing at Kira Kousuke’s picture.

“Sousuke?” scoffed Kaname, “hah, no way.”

“Right? Kira-kun has way softer looks.”

“Yeah! Totally different vibes!”

Kyoko alone tilted her head and hummed to herself speculatively... But just then, Sagara Sousuke himself entered the classroom. “Oh, it’s Sagara-kun. Morning!” Kyoko waved to him.

Sousuke didn’t respond, but looked nervously around the classroom, checking the sign for class 2-4 multiple times. He seemed strangely nervous about something.

“What’s with him?”

“No idea. Probably checking for enemy traps or something,” Kaname muttered with disinterest.

“Sagara-kun? Hey!” said Kyoko, calling to him one more time.

This time, Sousuke noticed that he was being addressed, and peered closely at Kyoko’s face. Then he replied, without much confidence, “H-Hey.” He raised his hand to her with a gentle smile.

The Sousuke they knew... had just said...*“H-Hey.”* For a second the entire class froze up, stiffening like people who’d just sighted some kind of indescribable otherworldly cryptid

“What’s wrong, guys?” he added casually, a wan smile on his face.

●

They were at the shooting location for a lifestyle information program aimed at housewives, where the host was currently smiling as she spoke to the studio camera. “All right, we’re back,” she announced confidently. “Today’s guest is the hot star showing up in all the dramas and photo books lately, Kira Kousuke!”

There was a round of vigorous applause, and cheerful BGM began to play as Kira Kousuke, the rising male idol, entered the venue. He looked around the

area, eyes peeled, with a hand behind his back.

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to come see us,” the host said.

Kira Kousuke said nothing, but nodded in response.

“Come on over here!” the host said, politely indicating the guest sofa beside her.

The famous star glared hard the sofa for a moment. He then knelt down in front of it, removed the cushions, carefully put his ear to it, then grabbed the backrest and shook it back and forth a few times.

Unsure of how to react to her guest’s strange reaction, the host simply sat there and watched uncertainly alongside the audience. Then she said, “Excuse me?”

“This seat is unacceptable,” Kira Kousuke announced with a short shake of his head.

“What?”

“There don’t appear to be any traps or explosives mounted within the seat, but it’s in too conspicuous a location. I’m a sitting duck for an enemy sniper.” He looked up at the control room that looked down the studio, and spoke to the show’s producer on the other side of the window. “Shut off the lights. Make it darker.”

“But then the cameras couldn’t—”

“Then use night vision scopes,” said Kira Kousuke. “If that is unacceptable, we can go with audio only.”

The staff behind the camera were in a panic, while Kousuke’s manager paced back and forth in a corner of the studio.

The host managed to regain her sense of place and let out a forced laugh. “Ah, is this method acting, I guess? We haven’t gotten into this feature yet, but you’re taking on your first action role, right?”

“If you mean tactical action,” he replied, “that’s a constant for me.”

“Ah-hah... Well, anyway, could we ask a few questions about your daily life?”

“I will tell you what I can,” Kira Kousuke said, eventually choosing to sit at the extreme corner of the long couch, a position from which he could use the host as a shield from the camera’s point of view if need be.

“I hear you’ve been into jogging recently,” she said next. “And that you’re intending to participate in the next Honolulu Marathon.”

The viewers in the studio, mainly housewives, whispered in amazement and began to clap on the assistant director’s cue.

“Jogging?” Kousuke asked.

“Yes.”

“I don’t entirely follow your meaning, but I do run regularly,” he admitted. “Running through the mountains with forty kilograms of equipment on your back is excellent exercise.”

“Wow! You do cross-country as a hobby as well?”

“It’s not a hobby; it’s part of my work. Anyone who wants to survive in this business must be prepared to do at least that much,” Kousuke told her seriously.

“Wow,” said the host. “So the secret to succeed in show business is to run around the mountains with forty kilograms of equipment on your back?”

“No, you need far more than that.” He slowly shook his head. “Firearms, explosives, communication equipment—You must learn to use all of them comfortably, and then regularly hone your skills. A professional that can anticipate various threats and deal with them appropriately—”

“—is a true entertainer?”

“Affirmative. If you aren’t prepared to do that much, you should quit the business immediately.”

●

Back in English class, Kagurazaka Eri was speaking from the lectern. “Okay!” she said.” Example C on the next page, please. Can anyone translate it? Sagara-

kun?”

When Eri called on him, Sousuke panicked openly. “M-Me?”

“Please.”

“I... I don’t know.”

Eri, angry about this answer, scolded him. “Are you making fun of me, Sagara-kun? You’re always speaking fluent English over the phone with your suspicious foreign friends!”

“But... I just... I can’t—”

“What? Is this some new form of rebellion? It’s unsettling, so please stop!”

“No. I just... I just...”

“Oh, forget it,” she said irritably. “Stand in the back of the class.”

“No!” Sousuke protested. “I’m not some elementary school student from back in the day—”

“Don’t talk back to me! Go stand in that usual ‘at rest posture’ of yours!”

Sousuke decided to stop arguing and grudgingly stood up from his seat. Timidly, he took his place at the back of the class.

The students promptly began whispering to each other.

“Did you hear how timid he sounded?”

“Does he have food poisoning or something?”

“He’s definitely acting strange today...”

Needless to say, the “Sousuke” whom everyone thought was acting so strangely was actually Kira Kousuke, who had achieved a flawless transformation into the other man thanks to a former Hollywood makeup artist acquaintance of his. After begging the reluctant Sousuke and offering him a certain form of compensation, they had agreed to swap lives for a day.

To enjoy a carefree high school life, even for just one day...! That had been Kousuke’s wish, but it didn’t seem like it would work out that way. During their lunch break, Kousuke attempted to make cheerful conversation with the

classmates of which Sousuke had shown him pictures of in advance, but every single one of them responded to him as if he were some kind of unsettling creature.

For instance...

“Hey, Kazama-kun. What’s up?” Kousuke said to the young man in glasses, Kazama Shinji.

Shinji, in response, shrunk down and gave him a stiff smile. “J-Just fine. Um... Sagara-kun?”

“What is it?”

“Did you take some weird medicine this morning?”

“What are you talking about? I’m as healthy as ever, man.”

But this seemed to make Shinji even more flustered. “I... I see. By the way, where’s the Ingram silencer you said I could borrow before?”

“I... Ingram what?”

“Ingram silencer,” Shinji repeated. “The used one. The Tokarev, too.”

Naturally, Kousuke had no idea that these were the names of firearms parts. He just assumed they were the names of bands he’d never heard of, perhaps from the indies circuit. “Oh, no, I forgot. Sorry.”

“I see...”

Seeing the look of disappointment on Shinji’s face, Kousuke quickly tried to make up for it. “I-I’m really sorry,” he said. “I have other Ingrams, though. I’ll lend it to you next time. And... the Tokarev? I love the Tokarev. I just wasn’t thinking...” Kousuke went silent as he noticed the strange look on Shinji’s face.

“You love... the Tokarev?” Shinji ventured cautiously. A Tokarev was a kind of old Soviet handgun, primarily known for how cheap it was to make, its inaccuracy, and its prolific use by Japanese lowlifes. It wasn’t an excellent gun by any stretch of the imagination—There was no way a professional like Sousuke would say he loved that brand of gun.

But this was another thing Kousuke had no way of knowing. Feeling the sweat

rise on his forehead, he had no choice but to nod with a vague smile on his face. “Y-Yeah. I never told you?”

“I mean... the Tokarev?” Shinji repeated. “Seriously?”

“What’s wrong with the Tokarev? They could get their big break soon,” Kousuke protested.

Shinji then examined his face very carefully and said, with tremendous seriousness, “Sagara-kun, I really think you should go to the hospital.”

●

Around that same time, Sousuke was eating a fruit-flavored CalorieMate inside the car on the go. He didn’t touch the packed lunch the young person from the studio had offered him, but just pulled the CalorieMate out of his bag and ate it instead.

“Kira-san, what’s wrong with you?!” Kotomi, his manager, asked from the driver’s seat.



“What do you mean?”

“The way you’re approaching your work today! It’s just one issue after another,” she scolded. “Think of the rumors people will start spreading!”

“Don’t worry about rumors,” he replied.

“I can tell you’ve been in a bad mood since this morning, but you need to stop dragging it into your workplace!”

“I’m not in a bad mood. I’m acting normally.” This was true—He was certainly keeping up his guard while in unfamiliar environments, but that didn’t mean his mood was poor. As always, Sousuke was acting in a clear-headed manner.

“Hmph. I-If you insist, I’ll have to inform the director and ask for instructions.”

“I don’t entirely understand,” he said, “but perhaps you should.”

Kotomi was shocked to hear this. Everybody knew that Kira Kousuke was intimidated by the agency director. “You’re sure about that? Really?”

“Reporting to headquarters when you’re uncertain of what to do is standard behavior,” Sousuke reasoned. “I don’t want to work with anyone who falls into the class von Seeckt referred to as being ‘industrious and stupid.’”

“I don’t quite understand, but... f-fine, I *will* tell him. Is that understood?!” Kotomi pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and spoke to the entertainment agency’s director for a while. Then she hung up and said, “He’s very angry.”

“Irrelevant,” Sousuke announced shortly. “Now, please give me the briefing for the next job.”

Kotomi fumed silently, but did so anyway. “It’s a photo shoot. Please promise to treat Shinomiya-sensei well, won’t you?”

“Who is ‘Shinomiya’?”

“A major photographer! It will be a huge blow to both you and the agency if you mess this one up! You have to greet him politely!”

“A photographer? I’ve known photographers. Don’t worry,” Sousuke said confidently.

About thirty minutes later, they got out of the car and entered the studio.

Shinomiya-sensei, the photographer in question, stood before them. “Ah, so you’re Kira-kun,” he said enthusiastically. “You have a great look!” Then the photographer, an oily man in his 50s, clapped him on the shoulder while reaching out for a handshake. It was a fairly common gesture in the entertainment world, and Shinoyama was a major artist—the natural response would have been to put a professional smile on his face and return the gesture.

But the sight of an unfamiliar man—one who was shouting at him while rapidly approaching, and holding out both hands to reach for his shoulder—sparked Sousuke’s mercenary instincts, honed by his time in war-torn regions. As a result, he ducked out of the way with a grunt, causing the other man to stumble.

The photographer caught himself and then looked back at Sousuke, half in surprise and half in rage. “Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Force of habit,” Sousuke said stoically.

It was the worst possible first impression. Both the assistant and the magazine editor turned pale. His manager, Kotomi, also began pacing around in the studio in panic.

“Wh-What do you think you’re—” the flustered photographer started.

But Sousuke interrupted the impending tirade with a blunt question of his own. “Where have you taken pictures in the past?”

“What?”

“I met several of you in Afghanistan and Cambodia,” he continued. “I even saw some die from stray bullets.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You are a photographer, aren’t you?”

“Y-Yes, but...”

“The best place to get pictures right now is the Baliq Republic,” said Sousuke. “Their Civil War has been in a lull for a long time, but starting around next

month, the government army will begin a wide-scale resistance.”

“What are you talking about?” asked the photographer.

“You don’t know about the Baliq Republic?”

“No!”

Sousuke looked genuinely taken aback. “What kind of battle photographer are you?”

“B-Boudoir photographer?!” Shinoyama shouted, misunderstanding him. “What makes you think you can talk to me that way?!”

“Well, I certainly seem to know more about the subject than you.”

“How dare you! How would a young man like you know anything? I’ve shot hundreds of stars!”

“So what? I’ve seen hundreds of bodies,” said Sousuke, who genuinely seemed to think he was bragging.

As the entire venue watched, frozen, Sousuke’s unproductive argument with the photographer continued on and on.

●

Kousuke, meanwhile, was in fourth period gym class doing the 1,500-meter run.

Despite what he told the world, Kira Kousuke was very bad at long-distance running. The notion that jogging was his hobby had been completely fabricated by his agency. Which meant that after about a thousand meters, Kousuke, third from the end, was reduced to walking—bowlegged, heaving for breath, and dragging his feet.

The students, who still thought he was Sousuke, couldn’t help but find it bizarre.

“What’s with him?”

“Look! He’s exhausted!”

“Maybe he’s really sick or something?”

When it came to long-distance running, Sousuke was unbeatable. In short sprints up to 100 meters, there were runners who were faster than him, but runs of 400 meters or more were Sousuke's time to shine. Had he joined the track and field club or participated in city tournaments, he would easily have won them. Experienced soldiers tended to excel in endurance more so than in instantaneous power. The body of a sprinter couldn't handle running dozens of miles through thick jungle, carrying dozens of kilograms of equipment, while under pursuit and trading fire with merciless enemies.

But this version of Sousuke...

"Huff... wheeze..." After finally reaching the finish line with a time of seven minutes and 32 seconds, he simply collapsed.

One of the boys in the class, Onodera Kotaro, hauled him to the edge of the track as he coughed violently and groaned. "Hey, Sagara. Are you okay, man?"

"Hrk... hnn..." Wiping the copious sweat off his brow, he picked himself up unsteadily. He noticed a water fountain located on the edge of the athletic field, and began stumbling towards it. "Water..." he gasped, "water..." There was a flower bed between him and it, which he cut straight through, trampling on the plants rather than a detour around them. That was just how thirsty he was.

Kotaro panicked. "H-Hey! Wait, Sagara, that's—"

Blam! Suddenly, the flower bed exploded. There was a roar and shockwave as flame burst from the ground. Kousuke, trailing smoke, flew meters up into the air, then landed hard on his back.



“Sagara?!”

“Hrgh... nnkh...” Terrified and confused, Kousuke spat and choked violently as soil and sand came sprinkling down around him.

“There he goes again. What did he blow up *that* time?”

“Looks like he stepped on his own mine.”

“Sagara’s definitely acting weird today...”

The observing students in their athletic outfits came to surround him, nevertheless keeping their distance.

“Wh-What in the world was that?!” Kousuke cried torturously, sitting up from where he’d been lying flat on the ground.

“What do you think? A landmine,” said one member of the audience—Chidori Kaname, also in her gym clothes. It looked like the girls, who had been in handball class, had also heard the commotion and come to see what was going on.

“A l-landmine?” he stuttered. “What is something so dangerous doing at a school?! Who put it there?!”

“You did, of course!” Kaname strode right up to him and laid him out flat, without showing an ounce of concern or care.

“Geh...”

“You buried them all around the flower bed, talking about crime prevention or something! And after I told you time and again to get rid of them, you still left some behind?! Give me a break already!”

“But I seriously didn’t—”

“And the fact that you triggered your own landmine is proof that you’ve completely forgotten about it,” she continued. “Are you trying to turn our school into rural Cambodia or something?!”

“I d-don’t know! I’m—”

“Oh, shut up!” Kaname hit him while he was already down, then pointed at a distant flower bed. “If you look closely, you can see small cylinders that look like landmines buried here and there like bulbs! Get rid of them right now!”

“Y-You have to be kidding me!” Kousuke spluttered. “Why should I—”

“You buried them, didn’t you?! Take a little bit of personal responsibility! You stupid little...” she growled, continuing to kick him.

“It hurts! It hurts!” Kousuke wailed as he rolled around under the force of her assault.

It was the established punishment for students of Jindai High School. The other students merely watched from afar, saying, “Here we go again.”

●

Meanwhile, Sousuke was still in the studio.

The various people on site had done their best to soothe the enraged photographer, but the job simply couldn’t go on. Shinomiya-sensei had eventually stormed out, claiming he would never work with their agency again, which caused an awkward air to hang over the venue.

“I told you to be polite with him!” his manager, Kotomi, told Sousuke in the greenroom while fuming. “We poured a ton of effort and money into securing that photographer! In addition to costs, rights, and the contract, we probably spent at least 25 million on that! Twenty-five million! You hear me?!”

“That’s the cost of one Hellfire Missile,” Sousuke informed her.

“Stop saying so many strange things! Honestly...”

At that moment, a man just shy of fifty years old entered the greenroom, dressed in an expensive suit. “Is Kousuke here?!” he demanded to know.

“Yes...” Kotomi trailed off and froze up at the sight of the man, who’s face was twisted in rage, bright red and fuming.

The moment he saw Sousuke, he strode right up to him as though charging. “I heard everything, Kousuke! Do you have some kind of problem?! Have you forgotten everything I did to bring you this far?! Why in the world would you possibly— wagh!”

Sousuke had grabbed the man’s arm, thrown him hard into the floor, and thrust his pistol into his face. “You chose the wrong man to attack,” he told the man coldly.

“Eek!”

“Tell me,” Sousuke demanded. “Who hired you?”

Before he could answer, Kotomi screamed, “Mr. Director!”

“Director?” Sousuke frowned. He whispered, staring in disbelief at his now pale-faced opponent, the director of the talent agency he worked for. “You did seem awfully weak and afraid for an assassin...”

“H-How dare you!” bellowed the director.

A panicking Kotomi tried to interpose herself between the now furious director and Sousuke.

●

Meanwhile, Kousuke was still at Jindai High.

“I’ve... I’ve had enough...” Exhausted from the combined violence inflicted upon his person by both the antipersonnel mine and then Kaname, he sat slumped in his classroom seat. It felt like the end of the day would never come, and he wanted to get as far away from this dangerous school as possible. He would die if he stayed here much longer.

Watching him from afar, the students of the class continued to whisper about him.

“It really is strange.”

“I’ve never seen him so exhausted before.”

“Were Kana-chan’s punishments that hard on him?”

Just then, the classroom door opened with a bang. “Sagara!”

“Eh?”

A short young man was standing in the door. He wore a short uniform jacket and a bandanna, and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Oh, Tsubaki-kun. Come for another deathmatch?” Kyoko waved to him.

But the student in question—Tsubaki Issei—didn’t seem to notice any of the other students present, as he strode swiftly up to Kousuke. “Trying to give me

the slip again?! I *know* I gave you that letter of challenge!”

“What? Um—”

“No more fussing over the location! I’ll kill you right here and now!”

“Wait—”

Smash! Issei’s fist hit him cleanly. Kousuke went flying, carrying his desk and seat with him.

“Er... What?” Even Issei was surprised by how well his attack had gone, and stared back and forth between his fist and Kousuke. “What’s your game, Sagara?”

“Urk... I... guh...”

“Are you mocking me?” Issei demanded. “Are you saying my fist isn’t even worth dodging?!”

“Hrk... hrr...”

Issei grabbed Kousuke by the collar and squeezed mercilessly. “Fine! Then I’ll hit you until you take me seriously!”

“P-Please don’t—”

“Too late. Here I go!”

Crash, bam, pow! Tha-thump! A four-hit combo lashed out as Issei unleashed a flurry of punches against Kousuke, who’d slid down the wall to the floor. For the finishing blow, Issei hit him with his special technique, the Pampas-Growing Rock.

“Gwuh!” Blood sprayed from Kousuke’s mouth as his HP gauge hit zero in an instant. The sight of him slumping limply on the ground made Issei feel even more suspicious, but he wasn’t about to let up just over that. Instead, he interpreted it as more mockery, which caused his anger to only burn hotter. “Damn you,” he snarled. “You still don’t want to fight?!”

“No... please don’t... kill me...”

“Then lie there and die! I’ll give you the move I mastered just last week after pouring blood, sweat, and tears into my training! Haaaah! Daidomyaku Style

ultimate technique! Piercing... Iron... Blow— Hey, cut it out! Let me go!” Issei had charged up his fighting spirit and was about to dish out another extremely dangerous move when Kaname and the others, unable to watch, pinioned him from behind and dragged him away.

Fluorescent lights on a white ceiling... Kousuke woke up in the nurse’s office.

“Looks like you’re finally awake.”

“Eh?”

Chidori Kaname was sitting in a folding chair next to his bed. It was the same girl who had beaten him up during gym class. But right now, there was none of that sense of violence about her. In fact, she looked worried about him. “I’ve been watching you all day... seriously, what’s going on?”

“What? Well...”

“I figured you were just tired from your real job, but if you’re seriously in trouble, you need to tell me.” She looked at him meekly. “You don’t like to make excuses, I know that. But... I feel kind of left out. You really don’t trust me enough to let me in on this?”

Kousuke had only just met her, yet he felt his heart skip a beat. *Hey, now. She’s a nice girl after all. And now I get to be alone with her in the nurse’s office, with her doting on me... Is it possible she even has feelings for me?* he wondered.

“That’s it! This is what I wanted!” he whispered to himself. These sweet moments after class—delicate, fleeting exchanges with the opposite sex. There were no scriptwriters or directors here. Just himself and this girl, trading shy words and glances.

This is it! I’m finally writing this page of my youth! Kousuke sat up, his heart soaring. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you out.” *This might be the girlfriend of the boy whose place I’m taking... but what do I care? I can’t let this chance slip by!*

For the first time, Kousuke tried to earnestly remember how his double spoke, and replicate it. *How did that boy—Sagara Sousuke—speak, again? How*

did he look at people? And did he speak so timidly? No, he didn't speak like that at all. He spoke forcefully! It's no wonder they were suspicious of me... I have to put the reins on my excitement and think before I speak. That's right! I'm an actor, after all!

"It's true... I have been acting strangely today. Just like you said," he lowered his voice and spoke slowly to her.

"But then..."

"I didn't mean to make you worry." Kousuke stared straight at Kaname, projecting an expression of 120% seriousness. "I've never been able to tell you this, but... Kaname. I love you."

"What?" asked Kaname, her face flushing red.

"I've loved you since the first moment I met you," he went on. "You're the only one for me. The only person who can heal my battered heart..."

"Hang on... this is all really sudden..." Kaname said, flustered.

Kousuke gently put his hands on her shoulders. "The timing doesn't matter, does it?"

"B-But..."

He gently moved a hand to the back of her neck, and moved his lips toward hers. She trembled a little bit, but didn't attempt to resist. "No..."

"No?" His lips drew closer to hers.



“We can’t...”

“We can.” *Almost there.*

Suddenly...

“I said no, dammit!” yelled Kaname, grabbing his ears and pulling on them as hard as she could.

“Eh?!” he exclaimed, followed by, “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!

She followed up the ear pulling with a sharp jab to his face. With one hand pressed to his nose to staunch the bleeding, he tried to argue, “Wh-What are you doing, Kaname?”

“It’s ‘Chidori,’” Kaname told him. “That’s what he calls me. And that dumbass would never be that forward with me, either. For better or worse...”

“Uh... huh?”

“Time to confess,” she demanded. “Who are you, really? And just so you know, high school girls aren’t bound by the Geneva Accords.”

“Um, er... P-Please don’t...”

Kaname, having moved back into violence mode, began cracking her knuckles as she bore down on the frightened Kousuke.

●

At the location for the action movie inside the abandoned factory, with sunset light streaming in...

“I’ve had enough,” the director of the talent agency told Kotomi as he lit the cigarette in his mouth. “If he causes one more problem today, not even our agency can cover for him. I hate to say it, but Kousuke is finished.”

“Y-You can’t mean...

“He’s always been a little lacking,” the talent agency director pointed out. “He can’t properly delineate between work and off-time. Performers like that can’t ever be huge. I know from experience.”

Kotomi turned pale and looked at “Kousuke,” who was off in a corner of the set, having a futile argument with the movie’s director about the realism of the depiction of firearms.

“This bright muzzle flash is unacceptable,” he was saying. “It’s telling the enemy right where you are.”

“It’s telling the *audience* where you are!” the other man argued back. “It’s about screen presence! This is why I hate you gun nerds...”

“I’m not a nerd,” Sousuke objected, “I’m a specialist.”

“So?! *I’m* the director! Now go to the greenroom and finish getting made up!”

“Very well.”

“And if you put in another crap performance like that, I’ll risk my career to have you fired, got it?!” The director continued cursing at the popular idol as he left to enter the greenroom. It had been like this even during rehearsal.

The director breathed out a stream of smoke, and said, sadly, “Nothing else to be done, eh?”

“Ah... ahh...” Kotomi stood lamenting in a corner of the factory, but there really was nothing else to be done. In one day—just one day—he’d shattered all of the trust he’d built up over the last two years. He was about to destroy his own career.

What had happened to Kira Kousuke, she wondered? Even if he was lashing out about his busy schedule, this was over the line. If he kept fighting with the crew, then no matter how they tried to cover for him, it would soon all be over.

“Sorry for the wait.” After some time, Kousuke returned from the greenroom to shoot the scene. He was in his bloodied, beat-up appearance from yesterday.

The crew all glared at him. It seemed impossible to shoot the scene well under these conditions.

But he slid through the gap between the shooting equipment and gently said, “Um... I’m really sorry for all the trouble.” Then he bowed to the staff. “My mother has been in critical condition in the hospital all day, and I’ve been completely beside myself. I really am sorry. But don’t worry, she’s past the critical stage. I can focus now. I’m really sorry!”

The whole group stared at him slack-jawed for a few seconds. “I-Is that what it was?” one of them said eventually.

“Yes.”

“Your mother was sick?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

After staring for a moment, the director and the others let out a sigh. “Oh... I wish you’d just told us from the start. Don’t be such a stranger, Kira-kun.”

“I’m so very sorry,” he said again, “and I accept all fault in the matter. I’ll do my best from now on not to take things for granted. In other words...” Kousuke looked down and spoke, as if talking to himself, “I’ve been naive about how the world works. But I learned a lesson today, that there are far more harsh and terrifying worlds out there than I could have dreamed of. And I’ve learned—painfully—that there are people out there going through greater hardships than I could have imagined. I’m no longer enchanted by the idea of ordinary day-to-day life. This world is where I want to be! I can do what I like to do, express myself... and most importantly, I don’t have to be tortured to the verge of death!” Kousuke suddenly had tears in his eyes.

This sudden turn of events had everyone at the location feeling even more confused. They just stared at him silently.

Kira Kousuke wiped his eyes and returned to his usual shining expression. “The point is, I’ve had a change of heart. I’m going to devote myself to my work once again!” he proclaimed.

“K-Kira-san...” Though she didn’t know what was going on, his manager, Kotomi, felt tears filling her eyes as her spirits soared.

Meanwhile, in the brush just outside the factory shooting location...

“It looks like... he might just pull it off?” Kaname said to Sousuke as she watched the temperature of the location shoot cool down considerably.

Once Kaname had extracted the information from Kousuke in the nurse’s office, she’d immediately panicked. “You had Sousuke stand in for you?! That’s stupidly reckless! You’re gonna lose your job! Where is he now? Take me there, right now!”

Fortunately, they'd managed to swap Sousuke for Kousuke in the greenroom just in time.

"Regrettable. It would've been much more realistic had I been allowed to play the role," Sousuke, who now had a large knot on his head, muttered unhappily. Kaname had hit him as hard as she could after climbing into the greenroom through the window with Kousuke.

"Don't be stupid. You can't be an entertainer," Kaname muttered with a scowl.

"But I can," he protested. "I didn't make a single error all day."

"R-Really? Even when you were on TV?"

"Of course. If I ever made my major debut, I could take down the entire entertainment industry in one day."

"It's pretty easy to imagine what your professional demeanor was like..." Kaname muttered listlessly, her eyes staring blankly into the darkness. "By the way, Kira-kun mentioned that you asked for some kind of compensation for doing the job?"

"Yes."

"What exactly did you ask for?"

"That's a secret," said Sousuke, radiating a curious aura of confidence as his eyes began to shine mysteriously.

●

The next day...

Kira Kousuke, guesting on a variety show that started at noon, felt a drop of sweat streak down his temple as he gave a strange promotion. "Yes! Um... the movie you introduced is also important, but... well, I made a promise to a friend, so... Yes, here it is: this picture. It looks like a cute mascot costume at a glance... but it's actually merchandise being sold by Brilliant Safetech in Belgium. And, um..." Kousuke glanced down at the memo in his hand, reading in monotone. "It's high-spec enhanced armor that will change the face of modern combat. It's guaranteed bulletproof up to 7.62mm rounds. It also says it's

excellent for both national defense and low-stability war-torn regions...” He smiled genuinely beside the shocked host in sunglasses. “A-Anyway, anyone interested, please call the number on the screen!”

On a nationwide online livestream, Kira Kousuke put Sousuke’s (business) phone number up on the board.

[The End]

Festival of Opposition

Matchmaking game. Haunted house. Maze. Curry shop. Karaoke parlor. Manga café. Cosplay café. Couples' café. Doujinshi shop. Used book shop. Conveyor belt sushi. Izakaya. Lingerie pub. Topless bar —

"Enough already!" Chidori Kaname shouted, slamming her chalk against the blackboard. Prior to that point, she'd been silently writing her classmates' requests down on it.

It was currently homeroom period in July, during their first school term. The culture festival wouldn't be held until late September in their second term, but it was getting to the point where they had to submit their class's project proposal. And so, the group was having a discussion about what they wanted it to be.

"I know the Jindai culture festival rules are pretty lax, but there's still limits, y'know? Stop yelling out stuff that's totally nuts!" Kaname declared.

In response, her classmates exchanged glances with their friends nearby.

"Huh? But..."

"You told us to call ideas out as we had them..."

"So that's what we did..."

They all muttered to themselves, sulking.

Kaname mussed up her hair and groaned. "Okay, look. How exactly are we going to run a topless bar or a lingerie pub?! Do you really think the school would even approve those things?!"

"Kana-chan, I'm equally impressed that you know what those things are..." Tokiwa Kyoko muttered.

Kaname elected to ignore that comment and resumed her entreaties of the class. "C'mon, guys. We've really gotta pick here. It was the same thing last year —we ran out of time and submitted a totally random plan that had us all scrambling later. Honestly..."

“Yeah, a topless bar might be a little bit too much to ask,” Kyoko muttered again, “but I think an izakaya might work.”

“We’re underage!” Kaname yelled.

“What about one of the cafés, then? What exactly is a couples café, anyway?”

“No comment. I mean, I think those last existed when your parents were children. Everyone was poor. Yes, the old days. Back before they were even karaoke parlors...” Kaname’s eyes became distant, for some reason.

“You say the strangest things sometimes, Chidori...”

“Question: is it perverted?”

“Perverted?” echoed Kaname.

“Could you tell us exactly what happens there?”

“There’s no need for you to know. Anyway, we don’t have any time to waste, so let’s keep going!” she said, deciding to swerve away from that subject and get them back on track. “We just need something that’s actually feasible. So... um, we can erase this one, this one, this one...” Kaname screwed up her face thoughtfully as she removed one idea after another from the blackboard. One unseemly plan after another vanished before their eyes.

Then one member of the class, a boy with a sullen expression, spoke. “What about a shooting range?”

“Conveyor belt sushi is out, I think...” Kaname mumbled to herself. “Used book shop is out... also needs to piss off and die forever... and then, um...”

“I suggest a shooting range,” Sousuke said insistently.

“I think that’s about it,” Kaname announced, ignoring his suggestion. “If you can think of anything else, tell me right away. We’re gonna vote!”

“Shooting range,” he said again. “We can teach the proper handling of live ammunition to reduce accidents and stigma.”

“Ready, everyone?! No other suggestions?! Okay, we’ll go with a simple majority...”

“Shooting—” Sagara Sousuke, who’d continued insisting on his own idea from

his back-row seat, took a hit from Kaname's blackboard eraser and toppled over.

"Shut up!!" she snarled. Then she went on as if nothing had happened. "First, matchmaking game. Raise your hands if that's your choice!"

Five people raised their hands. Kaname silently wrote "Five" on the board.

"Next... Haunted house?"

Eight people raised their hands for this.

"Karaoke parlor?"

After a few minutes, they had their result. The plan chosen by popular vote was... cosplay café.

"Huh? How did that happen?" Kaname slumped over as she cast a sideways glance at the students doing a little dance in celebration. The boys were mostly pleased, and some of the girls seemed enthusiastic, but the others just groaned.

"Um, but... It's pretty fun," Kyoko ventured. "We all get to dress up, right?"

"All nurses and mikos and maids and stuff!"

"Awesome! Awesome! Maids! Incidentally, it's mostly enthusiast magazines that spell it 'meido' in Japanese, but apparently proper newspaper style is to write it as 'meedo'! The chief editor of a manga magazine that has hefty wrestlers cosplaying as maids said so with great admiration. Even though that's kind of irrelevant here!" a member of their class, Onodera Kotaro, rambled on enthusiastically.

"It sure is..." Kaname said with a sigh after casting a glance at him.



“Well, whatever. Any costumes that are weird or too pervy will be rejected,

but treat it like a costume parade and we should be okay. Okay, let's go with that," Kaname announced decisively. "Cosplay café! I'm gonna bang out a proposal about that and send it to the culture festival executive committee. Is that acceptable? Any objections?!"

"No objections!" the entirety of class 2-4 threw in, clearly finding the long debate too tiresome to argue about it any longer.

Two weeks later, in the student council room...

"Why did you reject Class 4's proposal?!" Kaname asked angrily, slapping the sheaf of documents onto the table. She glared breathlessly at the culture festival executive committee chairman, who remained nonplussed in the faith of her rage.

"I don't know where to start," said the chairman, Tomita, while scratching his chin. He was a large second-year student wearing small, round spectacles. "I mean, a cosplay café? There're so many issues with a proposal like that. Remember that we're staging mock businesses in a school, after all. We can't permit exhibits with a sexual connotation."

"It's just a normal café with the wait staff in costumes," Kaname objected. "How is that sexual?!"

"*I* don't think it is, obviously, but the teachers and parents might disagree," Tomita told her. "If someone gets the wrong idea and complains, heads will surely roll. You get it?"

"B-But—"

"Your proposal was rejected, and that's the last word. Sorry and all, but this isn't my decision alone. The executive committee made the decision together, and it can't be overturned. Isn't that right, Hayashimizu-senpai?" asked Tomita, turning to Hayashimizu Atsunobu for confirmation.

Student Council President Hayashimizu was working at his desk. Upon being addressed, he continued paging through his papers silently for a few moments, then at last said, quietly, "If it's been decided by the executive committee, then Tomita-kun is correct."

“Senpai?!” Kaname screamed.

Tomita snorted smugly.

“Tomita-kun. Would you mind leaving the room for a moment? Chidori-kun, come here,” Hayashimizu said, his eyes still on his documents.

Tomita shrugged and took his leave.

Kaname strode up to Hayashimizu, anger on full display. “Senpai, what’s going on here? You can’t really be siding with him!”

“He’s right, Chidori-kun. I must respect the judgment of the culture festival executive committee as much as possible.”

“But—”

“If I were to say, ‘Chidori-kun is right, take it back and reconsider,’ what would the committee’s members think? They’d think the student council president was undermining their authority,” Hayashimizu pointed out. “They’d be unhappy. It would deplete morale. It would sow distrust in the two of us, and have a negative impact on the culture festival as a whole.”

“And so, we just have to let them be completely unreasonable?”

Hayashimizu looked up at Kaname with sympathetic eyes. “Were the complaints from anyone but you, I could have taken Tomita to task for it. But as you are the student council vice president, I’m afraid my hands are tied.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” muttered Kaname.

“You’re right,” he agreed, “it’s not fair. Authority is more constraining than most people assume.”

“Okay, but...” Kaname’s irritation died down, and she lost the will to argue any further. Hayashimizu did have a point, after all. She wasn’t exactly happy about conceding the issue, but... he seemed to have his own principles of noblesse oblige. “What am I supposed to tell my class?” she asked next.

“You can make me the villain if you wish,” Hayashimizu offered. “I’m fully accustomed to such defamation. And more importantly, you should choose a new idea.”

“A new idea, huh?” said Kaname, folding her arms.

After using an overtime homeroom period for discussion, Class 2-4 decided to go forward with a normal café. Sousuke persisted in insisting on a mortar safety course, but Kaname denied him again with a sumo ketaguri move.

Tomita, the executive committee president, looked unhappy about it, but took her proposal readily enough. The next day, they received word that their proposal had been accepted. Now they could rest easy... Or so they thought, until a few days later, when they received the printout containing all the class proposals. When the students of Class 4 saw it, they hit the roof.

Class 2-4 would get to do their café, but...

Class 2-7: Costume Café

That’s what the printout said. Class 2-7 happened to be the class to which the executive committee chairman, Tomita, belonged.

“What the hell?!”

“How is cos*play* different from cos*tume*?!”

“We gotta fight this! We deserve an apology and compensation, so that this tragedy never repeats itself...”

“I feel like it’s a common euphemism lately, but I’m still mad!”

They really were furious. After all, the executive committee had rejected their own proposal, which was exactly the same other than the title. And the prioritized class just happened to be the one to which the committee chairman belonged...

“Unforgivable!”

“They’ll pay for this!”

“It’s tyranny!”

The whole group shouted in rage.

Obviously, as class representative, it fell to Kaname to calm the chaos. *Slap!!* She hit the blackboard with her palm so loudly that it echoed throughout the

classroom. The class immediately fell silent.

“Kana-chan?”

“Heh heh heh... That Tomita’s got some nerve,” she snarled, as the rest of the group stared at her, dumbstruck. A shining aura rose off of her figure, and the backlighting it provided cast her whole face pitch black except for her shining eyes and the beaming crescent of her mouth.

Yes... Kaname was the angriest of them all.

“Fighting this won’t get us anywhere,” she announced. “They’ll just give us the runaround, after all.”

“But Chidori...”

“The lesson we teach them will be completely above board, then!” she announced brightly. “We won’t draw customers in with cheap tricks. We’ll just run a better café!”

“Hmm...” The classmates exchanged glances with each other.

Standing before them, Kaname took on the posture of an old dictator from some country or other and proclaimed, “Aromatic coffee! Delicious food! Fabulous decorations! Above-and-beyond service! We will mobilize all of these things to bring in every customer we can! Manipulating the masses is easy! The smallest bit of calculation, when added to a more or less honest presentation, can be shockingly persuasive! To recover from the political defeat of having our cosplay café proposal refused, we must fight back with the spirit of chivalry! It is only in this way that we can teach the uncultured swine of Class 7 a lesson! We must use this feeling of failure to fuel us, and make them accept the obvious superiority of Class 4!”

“That was all grandiose and urgent, but it’s pretty basic strategy...” Onodera Kotaro muttered.

“Who cares if it’s basic?” Kaname demanded. “It’s the best way to make sure they can’t complain when they lose. Well?!”

“Got it.”

“I’m in.”

“No objections!” her classmates chimed in one after another.

“Okay! Leave the planning to me! I’ll focus on nothing but this, and see this café through!” Kaname proclaimed proudly.

Tokiwa Kyoko then spoke up hesitantly, “But Kana-chan. Are you sure you want to promise that so easily? You *are* vice president, and you’ll probably be busy with lots of other stuff, right?”

“Hah! No worries there. It’s July now. The culture festival is September, so we’ve got plenty of time. Just leave yourselves in my hands!” Kaname cackled, thumping her chest.

When the project list was released, Tomita, head of the executive committee, had a feeling that Class 2-4 would come to confront him, and felt a feeling of anticlimax when they didn’t. “Eh? Maybe they weren’t that enthusiastic about it,” he said, puzzled, as the Class 7 proposal meeting went on around him.

“Either way, there’s no need to show mercy,” one of the Class 7 students told him.

“Yeah, yeah. We need to have our revenge for last year. I can’t believe those Class 4 jerks submitted the same idea as us, just to spite us...” Tomita growled.

“Going to great lengths to make sure you were head of the executive committee was a good call,” his classmates agreed.

Jindai High School didn’t rearrange the compositions of its classes every year; their students stayed the same throughout all three years. Last year at the culture festival, Tomita’s Class 1-7 did a haunted house. But Kaname’s Class 1-4 submitted a proposal for the same. And this was more than just a haunted house—they’d gone with the bizarre concept of “RPG-like matchmaking maze karaoke haunted house with trading curry.”

“Their proposal was baffling, but in the end, the students swarmed to Class 4...”

“What even is ‘trading curry’?”

“One way or another, Class 7 lost big time as a result. That’s why we decided

we'd get them back this year, even if we had to resort to dirty tactics to do it!"

"You get it, Tomita-kun?! You'd better keep putting pressure on their proposal! Got it?"

As his classmates urged him on, Tomita shrugged agreeably.

And so summer vacation arrived.

Classes taking the culture festival seriously needed to start work before August was over, but just as the students of Class 7 had anticipated, Kaname's class was struggling to get things started.

One of the reasons for this was their central organizing figure, Kaname. She was the current student council vice president, and had been the vice chairman of the culture festival executive committee the year before. She'd ended up being called off on one minor culture festival-related task after another, and had barely had time to help out her own class.

Additionally, the executive committee members kept coming to her with questions. *"Where do you start buying materials?"* and *"What do we do if we go overbudget?"* and *"What kind of documentation should we have in the nurse's office?"* It wasn't until after their second term started that she realized this was Tomita's roundabout way of sabotaging her.

And that wasn't her only problem. Kaname had wanted to use her free time towards the end of summer break to work on detailed planning for their class project, but as luck would have it, that time ended up being spent on a terrible misadventure in the south seas. Even after that was over, she was so exhausted by the experience that it took her a few days before she could think about the culture festival again.

But now they were well into their second term. She'd handed in her summer homework and was finally ready to focus on culture festival preparations, when suddenly, a ridiculous transfer student had arrived in Class 4, and thrown Kaname and Sousuke's lives into chaos for about two weeks. By the time she could finally catch her breath, the culture festival was just ten days away.

I haven't made any preparations at all—

Kaname, sweating from every pore and fidgeting, revealed this fact to her homeroom and earned a collective scream from her classmates.

“What?! How can that be?”

“We’ve only got ten days left?!”

“What have you been doing the past month and change?!”

Kaname could do nothing but silently receive her classmates’ rebukes—*“I’m disappointed”* and *“Do you even care?”* and *“After all that bragging you did...”* She did feel quite responsible, and remained abashed for some time, but the jeers kept on coming. A more timid girl would probably have started crying and apologizing, but this was Kaname. After reaching the limits of what she could take...

“Shut up!” She turned it all back on them, shouting and kicking over the lectern in front of her.

“Eek!”

“Wah!”

The students in the front row dove out of the way of the falling lectern. Their teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, who’d been watching the proceedings from the corner, also started in shock.

“I’ve been busy, okay?!” she shouted aggressively. “I almost died time and again... and again and again! I didn’t have time to think about the damned culture festival! What the hell right do you have to complain after you put all the burden on me anyway?!”

“Ngh...”

“But the fact is that I haven’t prepared, so we’ve got to do something. At this rate, we’ll have a café that no one wants to visit. What’ll happen then?”

“What *will* happen then?” the group asked in response to her rhetorical question.

“We’ll end up in the red! And if we’re in the red, we won’t have money for our after party,” she reminded them. “We won’t be able to eat expensive seafood or drink so*rs, bee*, or s*ke!”

“No way!!” the students responded in unison.

“That’s right!” Kaname continued ruthlessly. “Remember the bliss we sampled last year with the profits earned off our inexplicably popular RPG-like matchmaking maze karaoke haunted house with trading curry? Have you forgotten that glory already?!”

Her words had the entire group feeling nostalgic in an instant.

“Yeah, that was something else...”

“Shiori got black-out drunk and tried to take off her clothes...”

“But it was Ono-D who stripped instead and confessed his love to Chidori on the roof...”

“And Enta dented a parked Benz and then ran off. That was a close call.”

“Who was it who took a dive into the lake in Inokashira Park again?”

There were just two people in the classroom who had no idea what anyone was talking about: the transfer student Sousuke, and the teacher Kagurazaka Eri.

“I don’t fully understand, but an after party sounds a bit like some sort of dangerous cult ritual...” Sousuke muttered.

“Excuse me, everyone? I wish you’d told me... or rather, I wish you wouldn’t talk about any of it with me around...” Eri muttered.

But Kaname ignored them and shouted out loud, “This isn’t just about the afterparty! The culture festival executive committee is already cracking down on our use of the home ec room and water fountains, and denying us priority use of materials and ingredients. Tomita of Class 7 is behind this! Doesn’t it make you crazy?!”

“Yeah!” the whole class responded immediately.

“Excellent. Will you work with me, then? We’ll call in seat fillers to help us fight!”

“Seat fillers?”

“If a shop looks empty, customers will assume it’s bad, so they won’t come in.

That’s an ironclad rule,” Kaname told them. “So we’ll want to call in our friends from our middle school days and stuff to make it look like it’s well attended. A whole lot of them!”

“Hmm...”

“Each of you has a minimum quota of five people. Got it?!”

“Okay...”

It was a desperate plan, but no one was going to put themselves out there by objecting.

Several days later, at the Class 7 planning meeting...

“Looks like they’re scrambling to get it done last-minute,” a member of Class 4’s recon team told Tomita and the others. “The food is improvised, the decorations are half-assed, and they’re bringing in seat fillers to make it look like there’s demand.”

“And the classroom where they’re running their café will be on the third floor of the south building, away from the other projects.”

“Looks like Class 7 will be this year’s winner. Heh heh heh...” The Class-7 students smiled at each other, looking like executives for a secret evil organization.

“No... we need to do more. We need to steal away the seat fillers they’re calling in, too,” Tomita said.

“Steal them? How?”

“There’s an orientation booth beside the gate. I’ve placed a committee member there who I’ve got on the take. They’ll tell them that Class 4’s display is ‘effectively’ non-functional, and that they should come to Class 7’s café instead.” In other words, they were going to divert the friends and acquaintances that Kaname’s Class 4 were inviting to their own room.

“But won’t the jig be up the minute one of them calls a friend?”

“A guy from the radio club said he bought a jamming device in Akihabara recently. We’ll borrow that.”

“I see... But that’s a pretty dirty trick.”

“So what? If we’re gonna do this, we’ve gotta be thorough about it. You can never underestimate what Class 4 might pull at the last minute,” Tomita said, the eyes behind his round glasses flashing.

The next ten days passed in a flash. The school was bustling with preparations, and the sound of hammers and saws rang throughout the school after classes finished. With their preparations lagging further and further behind, Kaname and her friends ended up having to stay overnight at school the day before. The main movers of Class 4 had been working on café decorations without rest, but the work was slow. Overnight, things would suddenly need epoxy, or a power tool would break down... but when they went to the executive committee to borrow what they needed, they always seemed to be out of glue, or didn’t have any drills to rent, and turned them away. Apparently, Tomita cast a long shadow over the executive committee.

Kaname and the others, now growing furious, forged a plan to steal what they needed from the committee, but it seemed Tomita and his goons had anticipated that—they had people standing watch over the various work areas, making casual theft a no-go.

Left with no other choice, Kaname sent Kazama Shinji, one of their class’s boys, to bike out to a late-night discount store to buy what they needed. But on his way, Shinji found himself accosted by a tyrannical police officer in the Sengawa Precinct. “It was awful! She took one look at me and without any evidence said I looked like a perv, and that I was probably on my way to peep on the women’s bath or steal underwear!” he pleaded tearfully over the phone.

“Well, she’s not that far off the mark...” Kaname muttered in response.

“Not you too, Chidori-san! You can’t just—”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. Don’t worry about the shopping. Just be back by morning, okay?”

“Hey—”

Click. Kaname hung up and rubbed her eyes sleepily. “Right. In that case...”

She called up the cell phone of Sousuke, whom she hadn't seen since evening fell. The EC had some items and tools they absolutely needed, and she was hoping to ask the battlefield veteran to embark on a proper robbery, but...

"I'm sorry, but I can't help the class," Sousuke responded coldly. "I have student council preparations. My hands are full. There's a job I'm staying up all night to do alone."

She didn't know what kind of job it was, but it sounded important, so she didn't press the issue. They didn't have a choice but to keep working on their decorating job.

And so that bloody last night of preparations ended, and the morning of the day arrived. The opening ceremony took place on a specially built stage in the courtyard under a clear blue sky.

It was a finely built stage. Banners had been hung up over the courtyard beside the flags of various countries, streamers, and ribbons decorating the school building. There were speeches from the executive committee head and the health committee heads, too.

Then the PA committee member acting as MC said, "Okay, next we have some words from the head of school security and aide to the student council president. Sagara-san, take it away."

Sousuke took to the lectern under the eyes of all. "I am the aide to the president," Sousuke said into the mic. "We've been blessed with good weather today, and the culture festival will proceed without issue. I cannot tell you how pleased I am. But in order to enjoy the event, please heed my next words regarding the open house period." He cleared his throat, took out a sheet of paper and began to read aloud.

The students gathered in the courtyard breezeways and on the rooftop watched him curiously.

"First, if you see any suspicious figures, please report them immediately. Do not approach. The student council SWAT team will take care of it. If you see a suspicious object, report it immediately. Do not touch it. The student council bomb squad will take care of it."

The students looked on, dumbstruck.

“Next,” he continued, “do not bring any objects of a length of more than fifty centimeters to the roof. If you break this rule, it will be assumed that you’re carrying a sniper rifle, and you’ll be shot to death on sight.”

The students continued to look on, dumbstruck.

“Additionally, anti-personnel mines have been planted around the school perimeter to prevent unlawful entry. Please see the detailed diagram of mine layout on the sheet provided with your pamphlets. Also, two dobermans at the front gate will attack anyone who might be smuggling in explosives. Please be advised, they are trained to go for the throat. These measures were taken in the interest of security and terrorism prevention. Anyone caught breaking them or causing any kind of trouble should be prepared for the consequences.”

A mood ill befitting a festival settled over the crowd.

Here, Sousuke wrapped it up. “That is all. Now, have a fun culture festival, everyone.”

“As if!” Kaname, who had been quietly watching in her capacity as vice president from the back, suddenly charged and kicked him off the stage. “Is *that* the job you spent all night on?! You were planting mines?!”

“It was quite difficult,” he told her.

“Oh, shut up! And you did all that without helping our class... you creep!” she said, leaping off the stage after him and standing astride him.

The MC eyed Kaname as he said, “Um... A-Anyway, let’s have a word from the president.”

Hayashimizu stepped up and spoke into the mic. “Testing, testing. I hereby declare the 49th Annual Jindai High Festival open.”

“Um... is that all?” the MC asked.

“That is all, yes,” said Hayashimizu. It was as barebones a declaration as could be imagined. The students, shaken out of their daze, let out a cheer and headed off to their own exhibits.

After lecturing Sousuke and neutralizing all the mines, calling off the guard dogs, and returning to Class 2-4... Kaname learned that the café still wasn't ready to go.

They'd truly worked at it all night, but there was just no fighting the EC. The room was still strewn with lumber and construction paper, and they hadn't even finished the entrance sign. They hadn't set up the cooking space, the wall decorations, or even the menu. It was as far from the café they'd originally envisioned as could be.

"How's it going?" Kaname asked.

Kyoko, who'd skipped the entrance ceremony to focus on preparations, just groaned in response. "It's no use," she said. "I'm not sure we'll even be done by noon..." The students of Class 4 all looked at Kaname in exhaustion. The classroom they'd been allotted was still sixty percent ready at best. "I'm really not sure how it could possibly work out..."

The whole class slouched and sighed, but kept on working regardless.

In the morning after the culture festival started, Onodera, who went to scout out Class 7, came running back.

"How was it, Ono-D?"

"Amazing," he told them. "I just looked in and the place is packed. The decorations look amazing. And the waitresses..."

"The waitresses?"

"They're wearing aprons over swimsuits."

Kaname gasped.

"The people are loving it," Onodera went on. "The costume café thing was just a front. It's basically a lingerie pub. And for the female patrons, the waiters are wearing aprons over swimsuits too. And they're all totally hot!"

"Th-That's so sneaky!" Kaname was too disgusted to say anything more than that. After Tomita had said in the first term that 'cosplay' would give parents the wrong impression, now his own class was wearing aprons over swimsuits!

“We can’t win by fighting fair. If only we’d fought back with a no-panties café...” Onodera said.

Kaname glared at him. “It’s not too late. Why don’t you spearhead that one yourself?”

“Hmm? You wanna see it? Wanna see it?” Onodera started working on unbuckling his belt.

Kaname knocked him out flat and then let out a sigh. “Ahh... Looks like Class 4 is a loser this year. I hate being the victim of a dirty trick like that, but it is what it is.”

The whole group sank upon hearing Kaname’s words.

Realizing that her admission was depressing morale, she worked hard to put on a cheerful front. “But... oh, you know! We did call in our friends from other schools! So we should at least make it look nice for the people who are coming to see us!”

“Right...” they all said despondently.

“I’m gonna work hard and make up some awesome sweets for us to serve tomorrow. Even if we give up on the after party, we can still do a good job, okay?”

“Yeah...”

“Okay, so let’s hurry! Our friends from other schools are on the way!” Kaname clapped her hands and the rest of them went back to their jobs.

“It’s weird, though,” Kyoko muttered. “My middle school friends should’ve been here by now. I definitely asked them to fill seats here. But there’s no sign of them yet...”

“You too, Kyoko?” Shiori, another girl in the class, said. “My friends said they’d come in the morning too. I’ve been trying to call them, but I can’t get through.”

“You too, Shiori?” Kyoko said

“Yeah, me too,” said a boy. “It’s weird.”

A few other students nodded in agreement. *Nobody's friends have shown up to the culture festival yet?* Kaname wondered suspiciously.

Sousuke, beside her, tilted his head, thinking. "I see... So it wasn't just me."

"You called friends too, Sousuke?

"That was the rule, wasn't it? I put in a few calls last week through every route I could."

"Not to Mithril people, was it?" Kaname whispered.

"Actually, Mithril is busy testing the just-repaired submarine. The colonel seemed truly disappointed about missing it... but regardless, none of them are coming."

"Uh-huh..."

"Instead, I called old friends not involved in my current line of work. The last time I spoke to them, they all said they were nearby, but..."

"Your old friends?"

"Yes," he told her. "From my mercenary days."

"They're here?"

"I believe so."

A strange atmosphere had fallen over Tomita's Class 7 café, and not at all the good kind—it was as if the smell of gunpowder hung over the proceedings.

The majority of the people there weren't teenagers. They weren't even Japanese. White, Black, Asian... Some Arabic, some Latino. They were all dressed in street clothes, but seemed to have a few things in common: their gazes were shrewd, and although they weren't smiling, they were still strangely polite. They had large, muscular bodies and seemed to have things hidden under their jackets and around their ankles. They had their attention focused on their surroundings at all times, and were sitting in such a way that they could rise from their seats at a moment's notice.

In other words, they were all just like the "problem student" of Class 2-4.

"E-Excuse me..." a waitress said timidly.

"What?" a middle-aged man of African descent replied in English, his brow furrowing. In addition to his Jindai High Festival pamphlet, he was holding a sightseeing map of Kyoto for some reason. "Excuse me, Miss. I'd like to see Sergeant Seagal. Where is he—"

"Oh, er... E-Excuse me!" The terrified girl retreated into the back of the shop, crying.

Tomita and the others watched, faces pale, and began to argue urgently.

"What's going on? Why are these our customers?!"

"How should I know?!"

"They're all scary foreigners!"

"This is so bad. They're driving the other customers away!"

Even as they spoke, a customer who'd come in hopes of seeing waitresses in swimsuits appeared in the door, then turned right around and ran the other way. Those who'd already been seated when the men first arrived left without finishing their tea, unable to bear the quiet menace of the scene.

"Ahh... This is a terrible atmosphere for a café," Tomita moaned. "Normal foreigners are bad enough..."

“Tomita! Tell them to leave!”

“Are you crazy,” he said, “I don’t speak English!”

Tomita and the others remained engaged in their hurried conversation, when a member of the group of Arabic-looking men sitting in a corner of the room raised his voice.

“Excuse me!” he called out. “Excuse me!”

Tomita and his classmates looked up and saw him beckoning to them. Unable to refuse, Tomita approached the group.

The man then began speaking in broken Japanese, holding a notebook in one hand for reference. “Doko, Kashim? Watashi au. Watashi kita. Tooku. Tawku.”

“Huh?” said Tomita. “Um... um...”

“Kashim! Musuko. Tora, Badakhshan. Musuko. Al Majeed!”

Tomita was just about on the verge of tears in his confusion, when...

“Zaid, Fahim, Gulrose!” came a voice from the door.

He turned and saw Sousuke running into the room.

“Zaid. Thank you for coming. You too Fahim, Gulrose.” His expression was as sullen as ever as he greeted the three Pakistinis who met him with broad smiles. He’d completely ignored the confusion of the Japanese kids around them.

“Kashim,” said Zaid, “you’re looking well. Why are you dressed like that?”

“It’s this school’s uniform,” Sousuke explained.

“School? Is this a school?” Zaid and the others looked around, as if something had finally snapped into place for them.

“And where’s Muhammad?” Sousuke asked.

The three Pakastinis immediately turned grave. “We haven’t seen him for two years. He took the Rk-91 you left him and volunteered for the civil war in Tajikistan.”

“I see...”

“I don’t know how things are going there. The enemy apparently has a lot of

French ASes.”

“Mistral IIs? Too much for that beat-up old Savage to take, I’m sure...” said Sousuke, trailing off regretfully.

“Yeah, but Muhammad’ll work things out. Now, Kashim...” Zaid glanced around him. “It seems you have a number of other friends here. Shouldn’t you attend to them?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. We’ll catch up more later.” Leaving Zaid and the others looking surprised by his apology, Sousuke went to greet his other visitors.

A stern-looking Black man raised a hand to Sousuke and said, in English, “Seagal. You’re looking well!”

“Thanks for coming, Zimmer,” said Sousuke. “How’s everything at the training camp?”

“Well enough, though we’re going to be busy. We’ve had issues with our ammo resupply routes. How are Weber and Mao? Things going well for them?”

“I think so. How’s Major Estes?”

“In a bad mood, as always. We got a real snotty little trainee in recently, and he half killed him in hand-to-hand combat practice,” Zimmer laughed. “By the way...”

They continued talking about one thing and another. The Class 7 café had been transformed into a reunion venue exclusively for Sousuke and his friends —in other words, a danger zone populated by veteran mercenaries from dangerous regions throughout the world.

“Just who *is* Sagara-kun?” Kyoko asked Kaname as they peeked in the door, sweat pouring from her brow.

“You know who he is. And yeah, dangerous men like that are the only friends he has,” Kaname muttered back to her.

“Geh... I heard he grew up in some scary foreign countries, but it never felt real until now.”

“Well, this confirms that those Class 7 guys tried to swipe our customers, at

least," said Kaname.

"Yeah," Kyoko agreed. "Maybe we should be grateful, in a way..."

Just then, Sousuke—who'd been engaged in conversation with a man who looked like an American mercenary—turned back to Kaname. "Chidori!" he shouted.

"What now?"

"How are preparations for the Class 4 café coming?" he asked. "I'd like to move everyone back there if I could..."

"No! No freaking way!" Kaname crossed her arms, forming a large X in his direction. "We won't be able to open for a while yet, sorry."

In fact, Class 4's café would be opening very soon, but Kaname lied without regret and then strode away without even waiting for his reaction. Sousuke apparently believed her, and resumed his hushed conversation with his old battle colleagues. The members of Tomita's Class 7 could only look on while silently praying for them to leave.

"Sorry, Norris. I'll have to ask you to continue killing time here," Sousuke said.

The American mercenary frowned. "I'd love to, but... Sagara, for a while now..."

"What is it?"

"Don't turn around, all right? At your four. Those two Latinos... They look just like men I fought in Colombia"

"Costello and the others? Don't be ri—"

"No, I'm certain of it. They've seen me too, and they're radiating hostility." The mercenary, Norris, spoke casually, adjusting his posture so that his hand could dart into his coat at any moment. That kind of strangely relaxed posture, in a professional soldier, was a sign of high alert.

Meanwhile, Tomita and the others were in a full-blown panic.

"Sagara. Are they really your old comrades?" the mercenary asked. "You didn't invite them here through some other route or third party? There's no

chance they used you to lure me out here?”

“No. You’re worrying too much.”

“Sagara, you saved my life. But I’m sorry, I can’t trust you.”

“Norris.,” Sousuke said coldly, “there will be no killing here. I told everyone else the same thing.”

Norris swallowed hard. “But neutralizing them without killing them is on the table?”

“Norris!”

They were all veteran soldiers, after all, so the other men reacted immediately to the malice that Norris was now projecting. Some laid their coffee cups down on the tables, while some undid the buttons on the front of their suits, and others surreptitiously moved their chairs back to the walls. The Latino soldiers, too, took a stance that suggested an expectation of action.

It was unusual for a culture festival exhibit to reach this level of unpleasantness.

“Um... gentlemen, please... If you want to fight, I’d like to ask you to do it outside...” Tomita said, but of course, nobody listened to him. Barely any of them even understood Japanese.

And anyway, it wasn’t going to be a fight: it would be a war.

The air in the café, strained and chilly, was at last broken by one of the waitresses. “Please... Please, no more!” she shrieked, running out of the room. This had the same effect as a tossed coin hitting the ground in a duel scene in a Western.

The customers snapped into action at almost exactly the same time. There was chaos and shouting, followed by more chaos. Glasses broke, tables were overturned, and several men were thrown into walls or the floor. Movements so fast that the eyes of amateurs couldn’t follow were exchanged as the dozen men brawled, resulting in an unprecedented scene.

●

“Well, they’re not so bad once you get to know them,” Norris said later, a

bruise around one eye.

“You’re a good man too, Señor,” said his Latino companion, Costello, as he took a shot of tequila. He was bandaged up as well.

“Honestly, I was worried for a minute back there,” Zimmer said, turning up the glass of bourbon he’d brought.

“Good thing we’re in Japan, so none of us have guns. What do you usually do, Kashim?” Zaid asked, a cup in one hand.

“That’s a secret,” Sousuke said with his usual sullen expression. “But what were you thinking? This was my first culture festival. I wish you’d shown more self-control. I hand-picked you, after all. I hoped it would be a show of the faith I had in you...”

“Hey, we’re sorry,” Sousuke’s old comrades said in unison.

“It’s just a small world in this business.”

“It makes you really paranoid.”

“I feel sorry about what we did to that shop, too.”

They had moved from the Class 7 café to the Class 4 one. The Class 7 café had been completely destroyed in the brawl. And while the soldiers had apologized to the students of Class 7 and offered to help clean up, Tomita and the others had just stared at them, tears in their eyes, and asked them to leave.

“Now, my new friends,” Norris said, after a long round of talk and laughter in the Class 4 café. “Now that Sagara’s introduced us, what do you say we meet again here in this classroom at the next culture festival?”

“Oh? I like it. It would be a great chance to swap info.”

“And have another brawl? That’ll be something.”

The mercenaries shared a hearty laugh.

Sousuke, his expression as sullen as ever, just nodded along occasionally.

“Don’t come again! Never again!” Kaname, who was listening in, shouted at the mercenaries, sweat rising on her face.

Obviously, they weren’t listening.



Once the culture festival was over, the sales for Class 4 and 7 ended up being

roughly equal. The accidental terrorism of the first day had really set Class 7 back, while Class 4 ended up doing pretty good business, just barely recouping their budget.

And so, Class 7 swore a quiet oath that they'd never pick a fight with Class 4 again.

Incidentally, there were other tales of chaos that came out of that culture festival...

But that would be another story.

[The End]

Festival of Love and Hate

One afternoon, not long before the culture festival...

Some of the boys of Class 2-4 were murmuring excitedly as they stared at the flier that had been passed around to each class. It was a recruitment flier for that major culture festival event, the Miss Jindai High pageant. Last year's winner had been a third-year who had since graduated, which meant there was no obvious favorite to win this year. This led to a lot of speculation among the boys.

"Who do you think it'll be this year?"

"Saeki-san from Class 1 would be the obvious choice. She placed second last year, and she's pretty and classy."

"There's room for debate, for sure, but she's a pretty solid choice."

"And she's in the drama club. She's got that presence, that aura... all on another level."

"But Mikihara in Class 3 is great, too. She's more the quiet, unassuming type."

"Yeah, I get you! She's got lots of secret admirers."

"And she's got hidden assets. She wears a long, modest skirt and acts like a good girl, but in her gym uniform..."

"Yeah, those projectile weapons. Once I was timing their sprints, and..."

"Yeah, I saw it! The jiggling..."

"Amazing. Almost did me in."

The boys offered their unsolicited opinions one after another.

Incidentally, this was going on concurrently with our last story, while Class 2-4 was still struggling to prepare their café in time. Even though it was lunch time, they surely had better things to do than engage in such leisurely conversation, and yet...

"But enough about the other classes. What about our own girls?" Onodera

Kotaro, the main instigator of the topic, offered.

The other guys had a look around the classroom.

“Of course, if you’re just basing it on looks...”

“...There’s an obvious choice, yeah, but...”

Their gazes united on a girl sitting nearby, eating her lunch—Chidori Kaname, who had long black hair and excellent curves, a symmetrical face, and pretty features. She looked like the kind of person who might get scouted as a model any day now. Except...

“Ahh... hahm, om nom nom... Mgh! Man, you can’t beat Hanamaru Pan’s yakisoba rolls! That’s what they call filling! There’s no better moment in life. Irresistible!” She laughed heartily, her face contorted in a way that lacked even the slightest trace of eroticism.

“Kana-chan... You’re such an old man.” Tokiwa Kyoko, who was eating with her, whispered disapprovingly while poking at her own bento box.

“Yeah, every time...” Kotaro sighed.

The other boys agreed, chiming in with their own anecdotal evidence.

“Remember what happened last year when we started talking about nominating Chidori for the pageant?”

“But when we saw her like that, we decided not to.”

“If only she could sit and be quiet...”

Realizing that the boys were watching her, Kaname flinched. “Huh? What? You can’t have my yakisoba roll, if that’s what you want. I won this through blood, sweat, and tears.”

“Wouldn’t want it,” they responded in chorus.

“We were talking about Miss Jindai. You might win it if you could clean up your act a little,” one boy said.

Kaname cackled in response. “Miss Jindai? How stupid,” she scoffed. “It’s nothing but sexual commodification and misogyny. I’m anti-pageant and anti-participation.” She laughed heartily again.

“C’mon, it might be fun. You can nominate yourself, or someone else can nominate you.”

“You might do pretty well.”

“And there’s amazing prizes. A DVD recorder and stuff.”

When Kotaro said that, Sagara Sousuke, sitting nearby eating French field rations (renowned for their tastiness as field rations went), perked up his ears. “Onodera. Is this true?” he asked sullenly.

“Yeah. It runs about 50,000 normally.”

“A pageant, you said? It might be worth entering such an event.” Sousuke thought about it seriously for a few minutes while Kaname and Kotaro stared at him in disbelief. “What is it?” he asked. “Why are you looking at me that way, Chidori?”

“Sousuke... could you summarize what you think Miss Jindai is?” said Kaname. “Fifty words or less.”

“Miss Jindai: short for Mission Jindai,” Sousuke replied. “The participants are given a grueling series of tasks—Running a shooting marathon in full armor, indoor CQB, assembling a firearm in a certain time limit—and forced to compete in these fields.”

“The way you can get things so far off the mark... it’s impressive, in its way.”

Sousuke just looked at her in confusion.

Ignoring him, then, Kaname looked back at the other boys and shrugged. “The point is, I’m just not interested. Though it’s an honor to have been considered.”

“Fine, then.”

That was the end of the Miss Jindai talk.

Then the next day, after class, in the student council room...

Kaname was working on minor tasks in preparation for the culture festival, when the door opened and a girl entered. She was tall, with slightly wavy shoulder-length hair and almond-shaped eyes, and fair, smooth skin.

Who's this? Kaname wondered, having never seen her before. *I don't remember a girl this pretty at our school...* Nevertheless, the number of bands on the other girl's uniform sleeve suggested that she was a second-year.

The girl looked around the student council room and said, "Is it just you here?"

"What? Oh, yes... They all left to buy things and discuss things..." Kaname responded quickly. It was just her and the new girl.

"Do you know where Sagara-kun is?" the girl asked.

She knows Sousuke? Kaname felt even warier now. "He's tossing out the trash. He'll probably be back soon."

"I see. Then maybe I'll just wait here." The girl took a seat in a nearby folding chair.

"Excuse me... you mind if I ask who you are?" Kaname asked trepidatiously.

The girl just smiled smugly in response. "You don't recognize me, Chidori-san?"

"No. I'm sorry, I don't."

The girl didn't appear hurt by her lack of recognition. Instead, she smiled in satisfaction. "Excellent. Ha ha ha..."

"May I ask...?"

"Shoji. Shoji Mia."

Kaname hesitated for a second in confusion... then shot up out of her seat. "What? What?!" Shoji Mia from Class 2-2—the vice president of the women's basketball team. She'd caused them a real headache during the first term's inter-class tournament, and Kaname honestly didn't like her very much. They hardly ever talked, and they barely interacted, either. "You're her?!"

"I am."

"But... but you're—" *Fair-skinned. Pretty.* The Shoji Mia that Kaname knew had short hair, a tan, and an overall sporty appearance. *When did she undergo this transformation?* Kaname wondered. *What's going on here?!*

“You already knew that I’m the ‘effort over all’ type,” Mia said quietly, sweeping a stray hair away from her downcast eyes. “After what went down at the tournament, I thought a lot of things over. I lost to you before I even fought; I can admit that now.”

“I... I see...”

“But that doesn’t mean that I lost to you as a human being,” Mia insisted. “And maybe I got a little crazy back there, but I thought I could still beat you in something and knock you down a peg. And then, one rainy day, it came to me.”

“Um... knock me down a peg?” Kaname asked in confusion.

Mia continued, “It’s clear that I can’t beat you at sports. You have the physique of a wild ape. So, I made up my mind... to beat you in beauty!”

“Beauty?”

“Yes. I hate to admit it, but you’re quite popular among the boys,” Mia told her. “‘Pretty as long as she keeps her mouth shut,’ ‘the supersonic old man girl,’ ‘the gift-eater that you wouldn’t want to date...’”

“Hang on, none of those titles are complimentary, are they? And do they really say that about me?!” Kaname asked, with tears forming in her eyes.

Mia shot a glare in her direction. “You must find it quite satisfying, Chidori-san.”

“I don’t. Not at all!”

“It’s that sarcasm of yours that I hate. Anyway, I spent all summer break refining my looks. I spent most of the rainy season going to salons, buying skin lightening oil, and refraining from my favorite hobby—surfing—to keep from getting a tan. I even underwent grueling training, standing in front of a full-length and posing until I fostered the sort of mannerisms that all the boys like!”

Mia, who had always been the tomboy type, posing flirtatiously in front of the mirror... Just thinking about it made Kaname sad in a way she found hard to describe. “R-Really?”

“Are you ready, Chidori-san? I’m going to be Miss Jindai this year,” Mia boasted. “You can’t possibly beat me. This time, I’m going to win fair and

square.”

“What?” said Kaname, her eyes going wide.

Mia frowned at her. “You *are* participating in Miss Jindai, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t have any plans—” Kaname started to say, but just then, Sousuke entered the student council room.

He sat down the empty trash can and said, “I’m afraid the garbage area is almost full. It could be the result of the preparations for the culture festival, but we must think up countermeasures before it becomes a problem... Hmm?” He hummed as he saw the two girls in the room together.

Kaname leaned forward. “Hey, Sousuke, did you see what Shoji-san—”

Interrupting her, Sousuke said, “Shoji? What do you want?” He didn’t seem at all surprised to see her.

“Where were you, Sagara-kun? You promised you’d help the women’s basketball team get their crêpe shop ready,” Mia reminded him. “Did you forget?”

“Did I promise that?”

“You did. And look, see?” Smiling, Mia pulled an apron from the paper bag she was holding, pressed it up to her chest and did a twirl. “I bought it yesterday. I thought I’d wear it at the shop.”

“I see,” Sousuke said neutrally.

“What do you think? Isn’t it adorable?”

“I suppose.”

Kaname watched the exchange taking place between Sousuke and Mia, glassy-eyed. The two of them had barely interacted, as far as she knew. How could they be so friendly with each other now?

After putting on an ostentatious show of closeness with Sousuke, Mia turned back to Kaname and said, “Well, I really should be going. If you want to drop out of the Miss Jindai pageant, now’s your chance, you know? That’s all I wanted to say to you.”

“Hang on,” Kaname protested. “I haven’t even signed up for the—”

“No worries. It’s not as if I’m going to tell everybody that Chidori Kaname ran away from our fight.”

“Grr...”

With a casual smile, Mia told Sousuke that she’d meet him in their club room later, and then left.

Once Mia was gone, Kaname raised her voice to Sousuke and said, “What was all that about?”

“What?”

“When did you get that close to Shoji Mia?”

“As far as I could tell, I was just interacting with her normally,” Sousuke told her.

“Really? That was *normal*?”

“Yes. Ever since second term began, she’s been seeking frequent interactions with me. She always seems to need advice in some way or o— Chidori. Why are you angry?” Sousuke furrowed his brow.

“I’m not angry,” Kaname insisted.

“You seem quite angry to me.”

“I am not angry!” she said angrily.

All Sousuke could do was stare at her in confusion.

The next morning, before class...

“I’m entering,” Kaname proclaimed.

Onodera Kotaro stared, not comprehending. “You’re entering... What, exactly?”

“Miss Jindai High,” she clarified. “You wanted me to, right, Ono-D? Didn’t you?”

“What’s gotten into you?” he replied cautiously.

“I suddenly decided I wanted the DVD recorder. That’s all.”

“Huh? But... well...”

“Are you gonna nominate me or not?” she demanded to know. “Make up your mind.”

“Um, okay, but—”

“Good. Thanks.” Kaname turned coldly on her heel and strode back to her own seat.

“She was rather intense there,” said Sousuke, who happened to be nearby.

“Yeah,” Ono-D observed. “She’s really in it to win it.”

“The Miss Jindai High contest?”

“Yeah. Even though she said yesterday she wasn’t interested... Wonder what got into her. Any idea, Sagara?”

“No, not one,” Sousuke said, and pathetic as it was, he meant it.

The day of the culture festival arrived. While busy with her class project and student council duties, Kaname found moments of free time to preen in front of a hand mirror, mess with her hair, and flip through makeup magazines. That first day proved to be quite a chaotic time, but they’d managed to make it through. Then the second day arrived.

That morning, once they had the class café was finally up and running... “Okay! The class café’s good to go. Time to move on to the next task!” Kaname declared, slapping herself on the cheeks to rev herself up.

“What next task?” Kyoko asked.

Kaname sniffed and smiled indomitably. “Miss Jindai High, of course. It’s going down in the courtyard this afternoon. Didn’t you know? I’ve entered.”

“Oh, right,” said Kyoko. “But what made you decide to take part all of a sudden, Kana-chan?”

“Shoji Mia in Class 2. She decided to pick a fight, but she doesn’t know who she’s dealing with,” Kaname declared. “Just watch me... I’m about to prove my

superiority to her in a whole new field.”

“You seem pretty confident.”

“Heh, of course I am. I’ve got it in the bag,” she said with great confidence.

“I’m not sure I like you when you’re like this, Kana-chan...” Kyoko mused.

“Hmph.”

In female society—especially that of Japanese girls—overconfident personalities weren’t usually considered desirable, for reasons Kaname couldn’t understand. She herself felt that the tendency to work hard on one’s appearance behind closed doors and then be self-effacing about it in public was frustrating and gross. For the same reason, she hated people who studied their heads off for tests, then complained about how poorly they thought they’d done. She figured, if you worked hard and you thought you did well, you should just be willing to just say so!

Kyoko’s comment here was actually coming from a slightly different place, but Kaname had assumed it was more of that typical attitude. *Kyoko’s a nice person, but I guess she’s got that weird reticence like the rest of them,* Kaname decided.

“I-It’s fine! I can be a little arrogant for stuff like this,” she said out loud. “As Muhammad Ali used to say, you can’t do anything without confidence!”

“Did he say that?” Kyoko asked.

“Yeah. Last year’s runner-up, Saeki-san, might be tough competition, but at least I won’t lose to Shoji Mia. And anyway, my greatest competition isn’t entering.”

“Who’s that?”

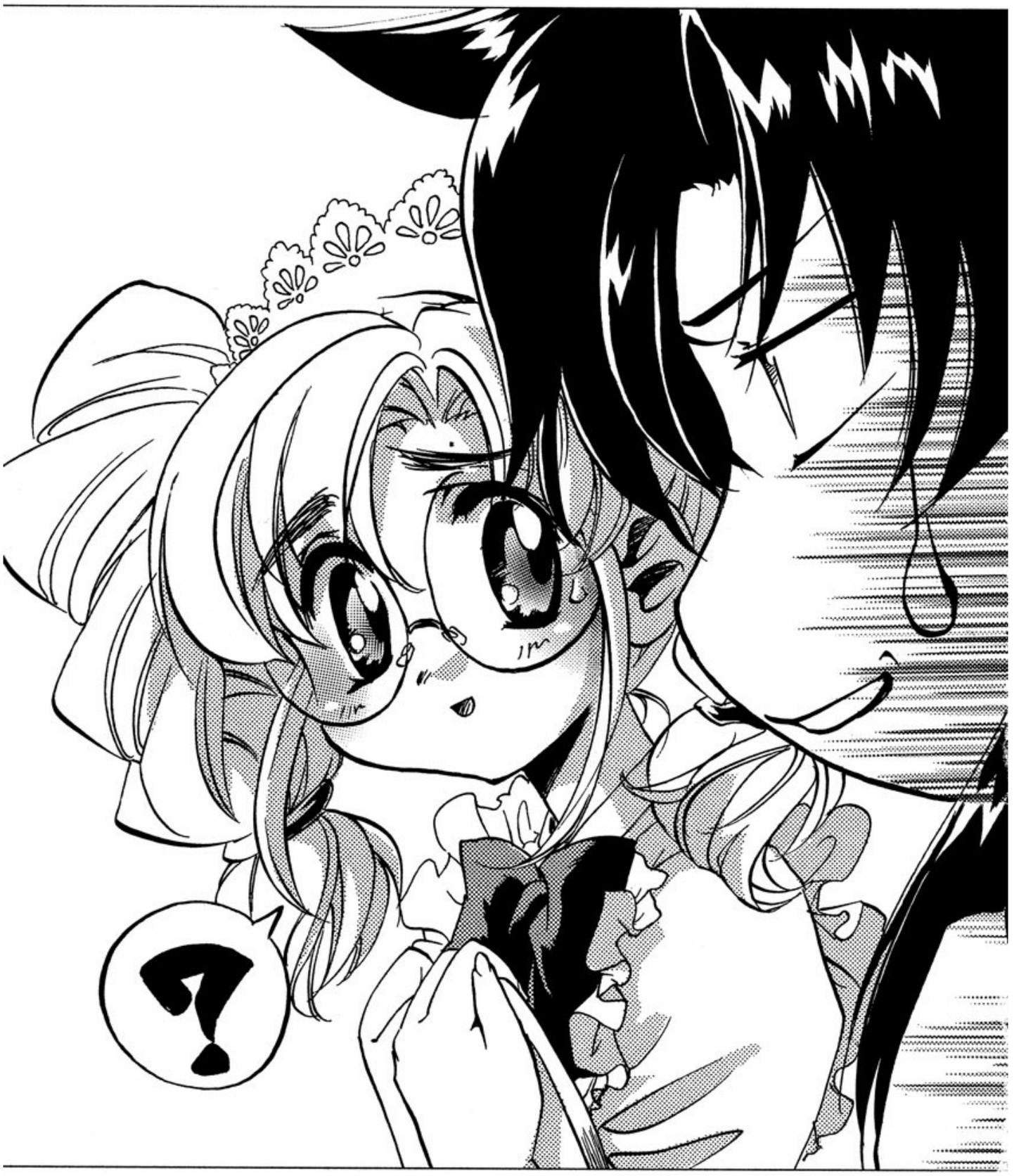
“The girl with supreme innate charm, in a polar opposite way from me. Although she’s an unconventional pick, her potential can’t be underestimated.”

“Wow. No idea who that is...” Kyoko said with an awkward smile.

Kaname side-eyed that angelic face, and whispered, too quiet for her to hear, “Truly terrifying...”

“Eh?”

“Nothing.”



Just then, Shoji Mia poked her head into the classroom. That gesture alone

was enough to get all the boys staring at her. She certainly was pretty right now—she combined a girlish innocence with an air of maturity, without a trace of the sporty girl she'd been a few months before. She now had a noble grace about her, similar to Kaname's own.

"Speak of the devil, huh?" Kyoko asked.

Mia walked up to Sousuke, who was dressed as a waiter by the door, and seemed to strike up a conversation. Kaname couldn't hear what they were saying from here, but it sounded rather intimate... Or at least, so she thought.

"You okay, Kana-chan?" Kyoko asked.

"Okay about what?"

"Shoji-san seems to have designs on Sagara-kun... she might even be serious about him. I've seen her talking to him a lot lately."

Kaname just let it roll off her back. "So what? What's it matter to me who she talks to?" Then she thought, *That's right. And in a few hours, Shoji Mia will know that I'm her true superior. Then she'll be sorry. Let her take in the compliments while she can. She'll see!*

"Who wants to go to New York?!" the student acting as MC called.

The audience just stared at him, nonplussed.

"Sorry," the MC said, looking slightly abashed.

The sky above was blue, and they stood on a specially built stage in the courtyard between the north and south buildings. A horizontal banner in brilliant colors proclaimed the start of the Miss Jindai High contest. For some reason, there were even bouquets sent from the Sengawa vendors' association there. Over two hundred people were in the audience. Students even looked down at the stage from the roof and the breezeways.

"Well, then... who wants to see pretty girls?!" he tried again.

"Yeeeah!" Suddenly, the audience (mostly boys) shouted out excitedly.

"Okay, then," the MC continued. "Our school is well-known for its pretty girls, and we've got another great show for you this year. It's the crown jewel of our

culture festival, Miss Jindai High! Let's cheer so loud that we drown out the objections of the students and teachers who oppose it. The talent known as beauty; the weapon known as charm... Thirty-two goddesses will appear on our stage to compete with these sinful attributes! What a thrill! Everyone, prepare to fall in love or maybe get jealous! Let's bring in the judges!"

As he made that proclamation, a mixed gender group of ten came up to the stage.

"According to tradition, Miss Jindai High will be chosen based on a combination of your votes and those of the judges," the MC announced. "The tallying method is..."

Principal Tsuboi, school nurse Nishino Kozue, and art teacher Mizuhoshi were representing the faculty on the judges' panel. Hayashimizu Atsunobu, president of the student council, and a few others were representing the students.

Sousuke was one of the student judges, and looked like he had no idea what he was doing here.

"Why is Sousuke a judge?" Kaname, standing backstage, wondered in shock.

"Didn't you hear, Chidori-san?" asked Mikihara Ren, beside her.

"N-No..."

"He's representing the student council," she said. "Since you, the vice president, and I, the council secretary, are both competing... well, I thought about withdrawing, but everyone was so enthusiastic about nominating me... I really didn't know what to do." She blushed bright red, her sleek black hair swaying back and forth.

"There's a strong opponent here as well..." Kaname muttered to herself.

"What?" Mikihara Ren asked, confused.

"Oh, nothing. Never mind." *I'll be the one laughing last, after all,* Kaname reminded herself. She'd spent the last few days researching and thinking over ways to steal men's hearts. Classic, yet reliable, ways.

And the one other person here who's thinking about it that way... Kaname's eyes met those of Mia, who was standing some ways away. Sparks flew. *Hm...*

bring it on!

While they glared at each other, the MC declared the pageant open.

The rules were as follows: each of the 32 participants would be given three minutes. They could do anything they wanted in that time—give a speech, perform a routine, anything. They could wear whatever they wanted as well, and the order of the performances was chosen by lottery.

As far as scoring went, participants could earn up to one hundred points. The first fifty were determined by the enthusiasm of the audience response, while the other fifty were awarded by the judges. There were ten judges, each with five points to award.

The MC announced, “Now, our first participant, Sato Kumiko-san! Let’s give her a round of applause!”

Showered by cheers and whistles, a girl with long hair came out onto the stage. “Hello!” she said. “I’m Sato Kumiko! My hobbies are, um... drinking, pachinko, and beating up authors who miss their deadlines! Today I’m gonna chug a whole bottle of Kubota Manju in one go! One, two...”

“Hey, you stop that right now!” The principal and the MC ran up to her, quickly confiscating the alcoholic beverage. The student opted to chug a bottle of POM juice instead, and then left.

Her score appeared on the scoreboard: 42 points from the audience response; 28 points from the judges. A total of 70.

“Oh?! Given the audience response, the judges’ score seems a bit low!” the MC observed. “What does it mean? Please comment, Principal Tsuboi!”

“It’s entirely justified!” the principal said breathlessly, as she held up a card with a 1—the lowest score possible—written on it.

“And President Hayashimizu?”

Hayashimizu cleared his throat and held up a card with a 5—the highest score—written on it. “Of course,” he explained, “it was an excellent performance given the pressure of performing first. Her boldness deserves recognition, and she’s jolted the audience to life. I’d give her a special award for that, if I could.”

Sousuke’s score was a 3, Mizuhoshi’s a 2, and Nishino’s a 4.

“I see!” the MC concluded. “Next up, Niyano Rin from Class 1-1!”

The competition continued in that manner.

Hayashimizu was right that the first performance had jolted the audience to life, and it didn't hurt that the participants—as expected from those who would participate in this sort of event—were all very attractive. The audience score never dipped below 40, and the size of the audience just kept growing. Around the time the thirteenth participant, Saeki Ena—who had taken second place in last year's Miss Jindai contest—came up to perform, the grounds were thick with spectators.

Saeki Ena appeared in a lovely cheongsam (worn over pants) and performed a routine of tai chi, her latest obsession. It was quite a smooth and graceful performance for a beginner, and it got the audience revved up. Her score was the highest so far—a 91, with an audience score of 47.

Another ten participants followed. Many did quite well, but none bested Ena's score of 91. Until...

"Moving on to entry 22!" said the MC. "Class 2-6, Mikihara Ren-san!"

A particular section of boys let out a cheer as the reticent Ren came out quietly onto the stage. Her traditional Japanese clothing bore a pattern of dazzling goldenrod on a muted green background, which complimented her classic good looks.

"My name is Ren," she said, then sat elegantly down in front of the koto that had been placed on the stage in advance. Amidst the hushed silence, her slender fingers began to pluck at the instrument's strings.

It was a sensitive, elegant song, suggesting far more years of practice than any of the previous performances. And as for her expression... Ren wore a peaceful smile as she played the quiet melody from beginning to end. When at last it did end...

"Thank you for your kind attendance," she said politely. "Farewell..." While the crowd stared in disbelief, Ren politely bowed and left. Then two men, resembling members of the yakuza, came up onto the stage and carried the koto away.

It was only after a pause that the audience seemed to remember to clap. The audience enthusiasm score was 42, while the judges' score was a perfect 50, giving her a total of 92.

"Hmm... This is quite a surprise. The audience score seems regrettably low, but rules are rules. Nevertheless, combined, that's the highest score we've seen so far! What do you think, Mizuhoshi-sensei?" the MC asked the art teacher, who was serving as a judge.

Mizuhoshi, in tears, took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. "Ah... it spoke to the heart," he choked out. "The longing sorrow in the song. The canonical infinite progression found in paradox and delusion, a meaningful dual-structured context—

"Yes, thank you for that!" the MC shouted, mindful of the time. "What did you think, Sagara-san?!"

"Very skilled," said Sousuke.

"Thank you for that *brief* comment! That leaves but ten performers remaining," the MC reminded everyone. "Will anyone be able to beat Mikihara-san's score?! Let's all watch and see!"

Backstage, Kaname sighed in relief. Ena and Ren... Their performances had been the ones to watch out for, but unexpectedly, both of them had failed to seal the deal.

Ena's performance had been amazing, but it had lacked sex appeal. Had she worn the same cheongsam, bare-legged, with dramatic slits up the side, she'd have had the audience in a fervor. And yet she'd worn pants? Incomprehensible. Utterly incomprehensible! A truly fatal mistake by Saeki Ena.

The same went for Ren. Of course, she was perpetually oblivious and completely guileless—qualities which Kaname had always liked about her—but as a result, she'd clearly failed to take the audience reaction into consideration. An unexpectedly masterful performance, as elegant as it was, would leave the audience more confused than anything. If she'd given more consideration to the rules, she might have been able to present things in a more appealing way.

Heh heh heh... Neither of them was calculating enough, Kaname thought to herself with a smile.

Still, Ren and Ena had both looked very satisfied as they came back to the wings, and now they were just standing around with the other finished performers, smiling and chatting about how nervous they'd been and how much fun they'd had.

Kaname watched the ocean of smiles with great cynicism. *Hmph*, she thought. *What's the point if you don't even win?*

After all, what place was there for enjoyment? Art was suffering. It was hard! The only place for those shining eyes and breezy smiles was in front of the audience. To be taking it so casually was the proof that these were still amateurs. Effort to work your fingers to the bone, cold calculation and careful consideration—at the end of trials and tribulations, that's what opened the door to true victory.

Yes, that's how professionals behave! Thought Kaname. Not that she herself was any kind of professional... but she wanted badly to win! *And there's one person I absolutely have to beat...*

Kaname looked up and saw Shoji Mia glaring at the other girls, likely thinking the same thing. *Oh, come on... It's one thing to be hostile to me, but leave them out of it! Taking it out on them is so pathetic. I've got to teach Shoji Mia a lesson! And I'll wake up those drooling lechers in the audience, too!*

Mia was next up, as entry 30. Through some trick of fate, Kaname had been assigned the last spot, number 32. These two adversaries were now the only ones standing a chance of beating Ren's score of 92.

"Now, entry number 30—Class 2-2, Shoji Mia-san!" the MC declared.

Mia cast a glance at Kaname, gave her a gleaming, confident smile, and then headed onto the brightly lit stage. She was wearing a school tracksuit that wasn't even a little bit sexy.

"I'm Shoji Mia of Class 2-2. I'm the vice president of the basketball club," Mia said with a businesslike smile. She had a slender face and almond-shaped eyes.

Each time she moved her head, her silky hair shimmered in the light.

The audience reaction was warm enough... but she was still just wearing a tracksuit. She was getting a much more muted response than either Ren or Ena had received.

“I don’t do this kind of thing very often, so I wasn’t entirely sure what to do, but... I decided it’s best to just do what you love. So that’s what I’m going to do. I hope you like it.” She spoke hesitantly and bashfully (in a way that was surely rehearsed), then began to play with the basketball on her palm.

She spun the ball on top of her finger. Three seconds, four seconds... six, seven, eight seconds. But though the audience stared, enraptured, she suddenly stopped, and set the ball on the floor.

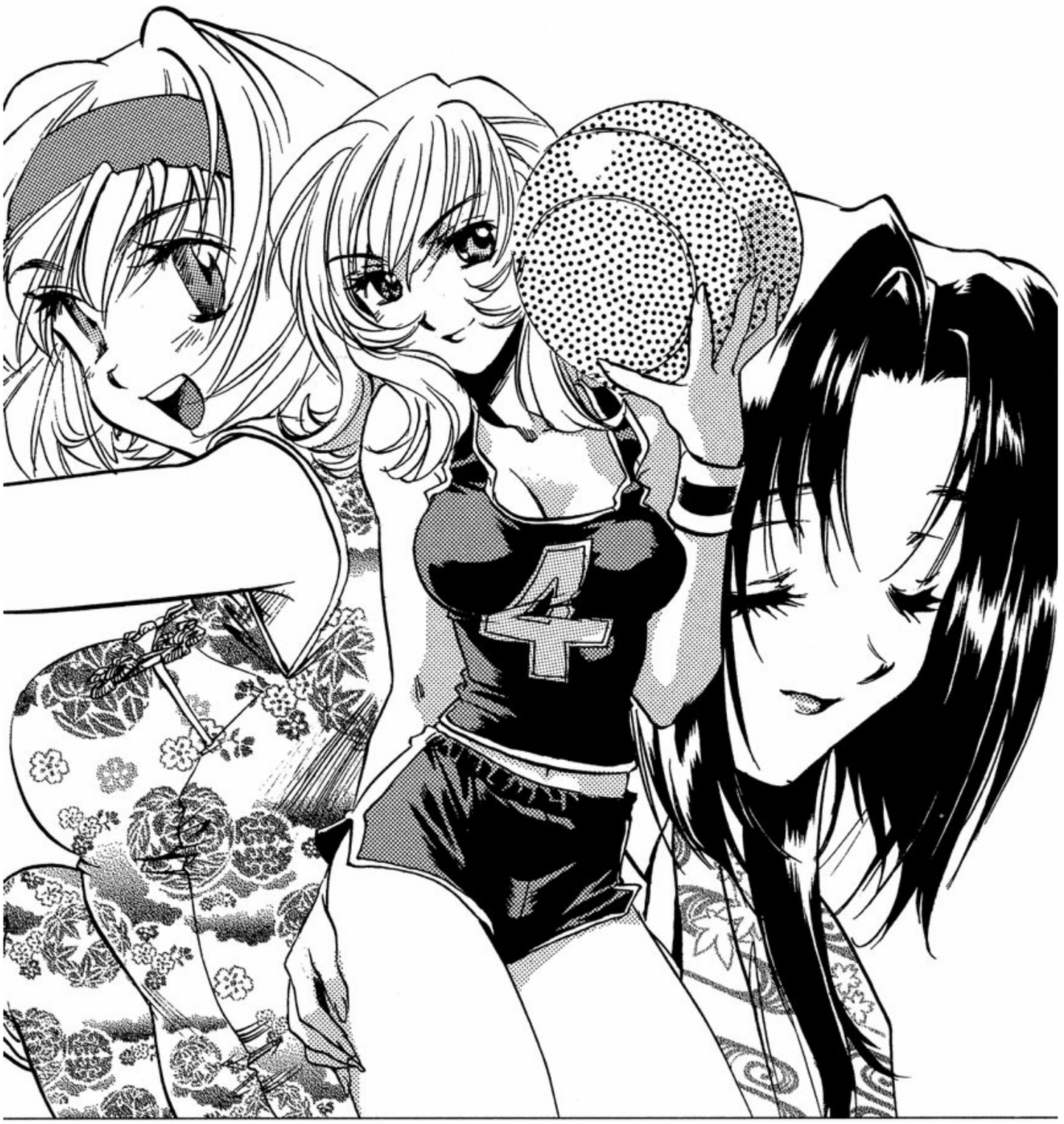
While the audience looked on in confusion, Mia let out a shy laugh.

“I’m sorry. I’m so nervous, I got a little overheated...”

With the ball on the floor, she lowered the zipper on her tracksuit, then smoothly removed her top layer of clothing... Piece by piece, with lots of pauses in between. It inspired shouts of enthusiasm from the male spectators as they watched her, entranced.

Once it was all done, she was dressed in the uniform of the girls’ basketball club—a red tank top and shorts. But she wasn’t wearing the traditional T-shirt or knee-high socks that typically went on underneath them. On top of that... it was all two sizes too small! It was a total fetish outfit. An outfit designed for sex appeal from top to bottom.

Her slender shoulders, her long legs, her ample bust barely squeezed into the tank top, and her slender waist (with a hint of belly button showing) were all on full display!



“Mm...” Maybe actually feeling embarrassed, Mia looked down, flushed, and

let out a small sigh. That mannerism of hers was like a jolt of electricity to the men present. “A-All right... here I go.” She picked up the ball and dribbled a bit. She then began rolling it around her body with practiced motions. It felt more like a rhythmic gymnastics performance than basketball.

But honestly, at that point, she could have done anything. The boys spent the next two minutes hooting and hollering like they were on fire.

“Ngh...” Kaname, watching from the wings, let out a noise of frustration. *Yes... that’s the way to do it. No matter how shameless it is, that’s what you have to do if you want to win. Well done, Shoji Mia!* To start off with a disappointing tracksuit, then strip down—it had sent a shock to the boys’ libido. It was an utterly calculated, extremely crafty performance. *An acceptable rival. Yes... That’s how it has to be. I’d expect nothing less from my true foe!*

“Kaname-san... You seem to be enjoying yourself,” Ren said from the side.

“Heh heh heh... You bet I am. Look at them all, eating out of her hand,” said Kaname. “It means I made the right choice. And now that I know that, I can step on stage with confidence. Shoji Mia just paved the way for me. Heh heh heh...”

“But your appearance seems rather odd to me...”

Kaname was currently wearing a robe with ‘fighting spirit’ written on the back. She’d bought it at a merch stall at an Antonio Inoki fight long ago. “What matters is what’s under it,” Kaname reassured her.

Yes. Underneath the robe, she was wearing the swimsuit she’d bought over the summer. Her plan was to hang off the microphone in a bikini, dancing and singing Madonna’s *Like a Virgin* in the sweetest voice she could muster—and in English, at that. She’d show them the power she’d gained from her time abroad.

The bikini in question was made of white lace, and though very revealing, she felt confident in it. She’d spent a lot of time checking herself out in the mirror, striking corny poses with nobody around. It was a hollow pursuit that almost made her regret her life choices, but the effort had paid off.

No matter what else they said, none of the participants of the Miss Jindai contest had the guts to wear a bikini onstage. They had their pride, after all—

but pride could also be a shackle. You had to break those chains to seize the light of victory!

“Yes... I won’t lose. I won’t run away! I won’t be afraid. I’ll buckle down, and I’ll have my revenge.” Kaname paused a moment to examine herself. “Yes, ready to go!”

“Um... Kaname-san, perhaps you should relax a bit?” Ren seemed a bit flustered over the way Kaname’s eyes were blazing, looking less like a pageant girl and more like a boxer before a match.

“Thank you, O-Ren-san. But I’m afraid I’m gonna give you a taste of bitter defeat as well.”

“Well... I was only trying to get a perfect score from Senpai, but... Kaname-san, you really should—”

“It’s okay,” Kaname said reassuringly. “I’m gonna go out there and pander like nobody’s business!”

“Hahhh...”

Around that time, Mia’s performance was ending, at last, to wild applause. Her score was 96, higher even than Ren’s. She’d gotten a perfect 50 from the audience, as enthusiastic as they could possibly be.

Meanwhile, the judges’ score was 46, which included a full five points from Sousuke. When the MC asked, he’d said, “It’s only natural. You saw how happy she made the crowd.”

The highest score, even from Sousuke?! Whatever... Watch this!

After a few minutes of waiting, the 31st girl finished and Kaname’s turn came up.

“Now, our last performer! Can she beat Shoji Mia-san’s score?! It’s entry number 32, Class 2-4, Chidori Kaname-san!” the MC announced.

“Okay!” Kaname slapped her cheeks and strode out onto the stage. But when she stood up there in front of the hundreds of people, she spoke with intentional hesitancy. “Um, hello! I’m Chidori Kaname. I’m really nervous right

now!”

Even that tentative approach inspired genuine excitement in the audience. When she removed her robe to show off her very appealing, swimsuit-clad body, it filled the venue with the biggest cheers of the day.

Don’t underestimate me. This is what Kaname can really do!

Her singing and dancing were both excellent. She showed real talent, alongside the pure charisma and dazzle that you needed in a song and dance routine.

Obviously, she earned 50 points from the audience reaction, equivalent to Mia’s. That meant it would come down to the judges’ scores. Mia had received 46 points from the judges—if she could beat that score, Kaname would be Miss Jindai.

“Now, can Chidori Kaname surpass the shocking score received by Shoji Mia?! Judges, if you please!” the MC said.

The ten judges held up their score cards. Five, five, five... The “Five” scores came up one after another. Kaname watched them with understandable nerves.

Looking good... Looking good... Hayashimizu held up a 5. *Thanks, Senpai.* Mizuhoshi, also a 5. *Thanks, Teacher!* Principal Tsuboi gave her a 4 with a wince. *Understandable,* thought Kaname, *I went with the sexy approach, after all. That’s the best I could hope for.*

Nishino Kozui gave a 5 with a smile. Then two more uptight judges held up 4s. *Go to hell, all of you!*

Only Sousuke remained. If he gave her a 5, she’d score 97. Higher than Mia’s 96. *Yes, it’s in the bag! Have my back, okay?!* Sousuke had given 5 points to Mia, after all.

Kaname clenched her fists, certain of victory. Sousuke looked as sullen as ever as he held up his card, and...

“Er...”

Sousuke’s score... was a 3.

Shoji Mia bowed her head and cried as she received the winner's trophy from Hayashimizu at the closing ceremony. Her tears were real. Despite the trashy nature of the event, she'd worked pretty hard and won fair and square.

Kaname just held up her second place trophy and gave a strained smile. But once the ceremony ended, she hid behind the school building by herself and cried tears of frustration.

I'm such an idiot. Taking part in that contest I didn't really care about... building myself up about needing to win... even wearing that stupid swimsuit... and after all of it, I still lost. I lost to Mia. And because of his *score, of all things.* She didn't really care about winning, but she'd wanted those five points. *I'm such an idiot.*

As she pressed her head against the wall of the school building, trembling, she heard steps approaching softly from behind.

"Chidori..." came a hesitant voice. It was Sousuke.

"What?" Kaname said, sniffling. She didn't turn to face him as she wiped at her eyes.

"I've been looking everywhere. About what happened... Tokiwa told me everything."

Kyoko. That nosy broad! "So what? Who cares? She's just the girl you like better, right?"

"Well, I—"

"Five points for her, right? Fine, whatever. And I lost first prize because of that. But it's not a big deal."

"Chidori."

"I just don't care, so why don't you leave already?" she said coldly.

"I will. But there's something I wanted to tell you first..."

"Just shut up," she snarled. "I told you to beat it. I don't want to hear any more—"

“I think my point value was correct,” Sousuke said, interrupting Kaname.

“What?”

“The way you were acting wasn’t... you,” he explained. “I’m not good with words, so it’s hard to express... but that isn’t how you really are. That’s how I feel.”

There was a long silence. Kaname turned back hesitantly and looked at Sousuke with red, puffy eyes.

He looked away guiltily, scratching at his temple.

So that had been it... Winking in a sexy swimsuit with an insincere smile, making up a whole plan and putting on an out-of-character performance, getting thunderous applause from an audience and judges who didn’t know her at all... Sousuke was the only one who found that attitude of hers strange.

So that’s what it was? she reflected. Out loud, she said, “That’s why the three points?”

“Yeah. Was that... unfair?” he asked, trying to feel out Kaname’s feelings. He sounded a bit like a child being scolded for a prank.

She felt her anger and sorrow inexplicably fading. “Hmm... I get it. It’s okay now,” Kaname said with a big sigh.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Really, for real?”

“Just drop it already! I said I understand, okay? Let’s forget all the bad stuff and go help our class. C’mon!” Kaname gave him a wincing smile and patted Sousuke on the shoulder.

“If you’d acted like that, you’d have won.”

“Huh?”

“The way you are right now deserves a perfect score,” Sousuke said calmly, and began walking away.

Kaname just stood there for a while, her entire face red.

[The End]

Afterword

This is a revised collection of short stories that ran in *Monthly Dragon Magazine* in December of 2001, January of 2002, and June through August of 2003.

As for the bonus story... er, well, I'm sorry. I couldn't get one out this time (copious sweating). I'd like to collect and present them all in the next short story collection, I think.

At present, *Dragon Magazine* is running my long-form series, so the short stories are effectively on hold. Maybe it's because I wrote *Continuing On My Way*, but I feel like what was previously a delicate balance between short and long stories is starting to shift decisively in one direction in my mind...

Still, I'm the sort of person where, the more serious stuff I write, the more I start wanting to tell more silly stories. So I don't think we're done with the short stories yet? I'm not sure, though. Well, it'll turn out how it turns out (distant gaze).

Anyway, let's do comments for each story.

The Obligatory Virtual Reality

It's a story about an online game... specifically, an MMO. It's a bit like that Cinderella story I did, with all the same characters thrown into a different setting. That sort of thing can be a real breath of fresh air for a writer. In *Urusei Yatsura* and other stuff I read as a kid, you often saw bonus chapters where they used the usual characters to do parodies of famous stories. I just wish I could've published the Japanese version in horizontal text! The emojis and message system stuff doesn't quite work in a traditionally vertical-text story. Even in *Densha Otoko*, which is very popular now, it only works in a horizontally-written medium.

I was torn over whether or not to reveal Cia's true identity in this release, but I think it's this vagueness that makes games like this work... so I'll leave it to your imagination.

Now, about the MMO itself... Honestly, it's really hard to get good at one of those games in just a few weeks the way Kaname and the others do here. In most cases, the only way to dominate in the game is to become a "broken gamer," forsaking school, work, friendships and family to focus on nothing but grinding levels and cash. Only those who can embrace the "thirty-hour-a-day play" can get (relatively speaking) good at these games, so they're pretty much incompatible with a normal life. I sometimes play a certain MMO, but I don't get to log in very often, so it's hard to get my level up there, and I remain very weak. It's discouraging to be teased by high-level players who are unemployed and living off their parents' money.

Still, there's fun to be had. I like to not announce that I'm an author, and wander around the game world as an anonymous character. And sometimes I run into... people using one of my characters' names! I think you know what I'm talking about. Yes, you out there, using the name of a character from a book, if not necessarily an *FMP!* character... It's possible that one of the players who just says hi ^^ and joins your party might be the author of that story, secretly grinning behind their monitor! Once, to test, I tried to make a character called "Tessa" in an MMO I was playing, but someone had already taken that name...

The Showbiz Kagemusha

This is a pretty traditional life-swap story. Incidentally, the Kira-kun in this story has no relation whatsoever to the main character of a certain hit robot anime. I mean it! But I do have, in my mind, images of (fictional) real-life actors who would play the *FMP!* characters. It's kind of like how Tezuka Osamu would have the same character designs playing different roles in different stories (not a good example?). Anyway, I wrote this story imagining the sorts of camera tricks they'd use to have the fictional actor who plays Sousuke appearing in both roles.

Incidentally, the fictional actors in my mind are something like this. (*Naturally, these descriptions have no relation to the voice actors in the current anime.)

Sousuke's actor: Very quiet, not good at violence. Knows nothing about military stuff. He's usually a nice, friendly kid, and he played a lot of side characters before this.

Kaname's actor: Pretty similar to her role. Chosen from a thousand who auditioned. Cheerful and ambitious. She tends to play characters with hidden secrets or a dark side.

Tessa's actor: She's actually thirteen. She's also French. She doesn't speak any Japanese. Her hair is actually black. She's been acting since she was three. She loves pranks, and is very close to the actor playing Sousuke.

Kurz's actor: He's actually an artist with a wife and kids. He loves his family. He's half-Japanese, half-Canadian. He speaks Japanese fluently. He's a vegetarian and an ecologist.

Mao's actor: She's actually Japanese. She comes from a theater family and has been in a few movies already. She leads a small troupe. Like her character, she behaves like a big sister and loves drinking.

Kyoko's actor: An idol getting her big break. She's got a lot of CDs on sale. She doesn't usually wear braids or glasses. She's currently in high school.

Hayashimizu's actor: He's actually a comedian. He speaks in Kansai dialect. He adlibs a lot during filming. He's a huge fan of Tessa's actor, and is sad that they rarely meet on-set.

Gauron's actor: A famous veteran actor. He plays leads in detective dramas and important characters in Taiga dramas. It's his first time playing a really villainous role.

And that's that. None of it has any particularly deep meaning behind it. It's just kind of how I picture them. Though nowadays, Seki-san and Yukino-san from the anime are so prominent in my mind, that these ideas have grown a lot foggier...

I also feel like the actors who play Kiribe Seiryo, Takenaka Masaki, and Father O'Neil in the short stories I used to write about *Hourai Gakuen* would also be actors in *FMP!*, playing Killy B. Sailor—captain of the US sub the Pasadena—and his XO, Marcy Takenaka, in the long-form series, and Preacher O'Neil in the *Turnabout Drunkards* story, respectively.

These things aren't official or anything. I hope you'll have fun imagining for yourselves what kinds of actors might play the characters.

Festival of Opposition

The first culture festival story. I remember laboring desperately over culture festival preparations myself. I remember practicing with the brass band and doing absolutely everything I could to get our class's cheap exhibit up and running, and the executive committee guys all coming in over summer vacation to build this huge gate... Sorry if you're seeing this, Tet-chan! I didn't help at all! And Tomita, I'm sorry! I forced the committee chairmanship on you and then ten years later I made you a villain!

Incidentally, one of Sousuke's scary friends is Zimmer. I wonder what he's up to around the time of *On My Own*... I hope he's okay.

Festival of Love and Hate

The second culture festival story. Honestly, if there's a Miss Jindai pageant there should be a Mister Jindai pageant, but I didn't address it due to page count. I liked that we got to see the full lineup of Jindai High's female characters, including Mia.

I agree with Sousuke that Kaname acting so unnaturally and pandering doesn't feel right, but what do you think? In fact, Kaname crying alone and in secret over losing the pageant is way more appealing to me. I think Sousuke's starting to realize that lately too.

And that's that. This book is coming out in 2005, and in July, the third season of the anime, *Full Metal Panic! The Second Raid* is going to debut on WOWOW. It's being headed by Kyoto Animation's Director Takemoto, returning from *Fumoffu?*. The "Second" in *Second Raid* refers to the fact that it's a continuation of the first novel series. I've seen an almost complete version of the first episode, and it's amazing. Such action, such fighting! The sound design is great, too. Watch it on 5.1 channel if you can. It's so powerful.

And in spring, a new comic from Hiroshi Ueda will start running in *Monthly Dragon Age*. It's taking over from the Tateo comic that finished recently, and it'll start up where we left off in *Ending Day By Day*. It's packed with story and impact. I hope you get a look at it.

I've caused so much trouble to a lot of people once again in the course of

getting this book out. Thank you so much for everything, and I'm also extremely sorry. I feel like you're going to take me to task for apologizing, but I'm still sorry. (On my hands and knees.)

Well, see you later.

Next time, Kaname's fan will roar again.