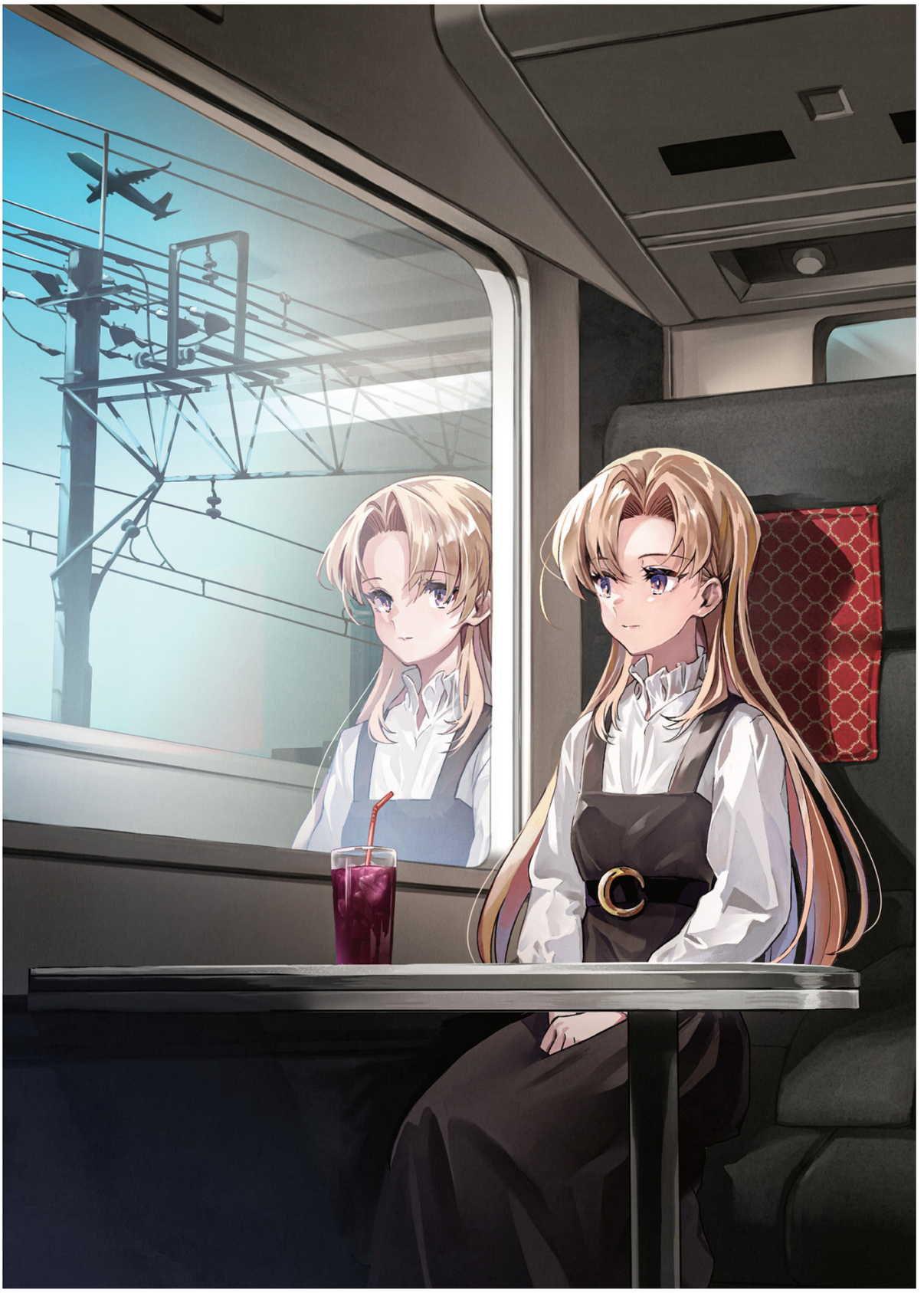

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NOVEL
6
MODERN
Villainess
IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
A CORPORATE EMPIRE
BEFORE THE CRASH

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“Sorry for putting you in danger, Keikain-kun.”
Keikain Runa
“Please lift your head, Prime Minister.”
Koizumi Souichirou


NEWSFLASH!
Lady Keikain Runa
puts on an angel-wing harness!
The blushing, trembling young noblewoman
is overwhelmed by cries of “So cute!”

MODERN Villainess

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A CORPORATE EMPIRE
BEFORE THE CRASH

NOVEL
6

WRITTEN BY
Tofuro Futsukaichi

ILLUSTRATED BY
Jaian

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MODERN VILLAINESS: IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
A CORPORATE EMPIRE BEFORE THE CRASH VOL. 6

Gendai Shakai de Otome Game no Akuyaku Reijou
wo Suru no wa Chotto Taihen Vol. 6
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

KEIKAIN DUKEDOM

KEIKAIN RUNA	This story's protagonist. Reincarnated into an otome game world as its villainess
TACHIBANA RYUUJI	Runa's butler
ICHIJOU SUSUMU	Keika Holdings CEO
TOUDOU NAGAYOSHI	Keika Corp Holdings managing director and CEO
ANGELA SULLIVAN	Runa's secretary. Former CIA agent
OKAZAKI YUUICHI	Young employee of Keika Corp Holdings
SAITOU KEIKO	Maid and former Ginza queen of the night
TOKITOU AKI	Maid
KEIKAIN KIYOMARO	Current head of the dukedom
KEIKAIN NAKAMARO	Heir to the dukedom
WATABE SHIGEMA	Driver and violinist
SONE MITSUKANE	Driver
AKANEZAWA SABUROU	Driver
TAMIYA MAKOTO	Guard
MICHIHARA NAOMI	Guard
TACHIBANA YUKA	Apprentice maid. Tachibana Ryuuji's granddaughter
ICHIJOU ERIKA	Apprentice maid. Ichijou Susumu's daughter
ANISHA EGOROVA	Maid. Former KGB member
KITAGUMO RYOUKO	Maid. Former Northern Japan government spy
EVA CHARON	Maid. Transferred from CIA

NAGAMORI KAORI..... Maid. Concierge at Keika Hotel
WATSUJI TAKAMICHI..... Chef. Head chef at Keika Hotel
KATSURA NAOMI..... Keikain branch family member. Naoyuki's mother
KATSURA NAOYUKI..... Member of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's integrated development department

RUNA'S LOVE INTERESTS

TEIA EIICHI..... Son of family that owns Teia Motor Co.
IZUMIKAWA YUUJIROU..... Youngest son of major politician Izumikawa Tatsunosuke
GOTOU MITSUYA..... Only son of Ministry of Finance official Gotou Mitsutoshi

RUNA'S SCHOOL FRIENDS

KASUGANO ASUKA..... Father is a lower house member
KAIHOUIN HOTARU..... Comes from religious family
AMANE MIO..... One year younger than Runa; like a little sister to her. Father is employed by the Keikains as an art dealer
KATSUKI SHIORI..... From a Keikain branch family. Daughter of Katsuki viscount
MACHIYOI SANAE..... Daughter of Machiyoi count. Asagiri Kaoru's friend
KURIMORI SHIZUKA..... From a local zaibatsu. Daughter of Kurimori family. Main bank is Keika Bank
TAKAHASHI AKIKO..... Father, the director-general of the prefectural police, knew Tachibana. Practices kendo
ASAGIRI KAORU..... Daughter of Asagiri marquess. Older sister, Sakurako, is married to Keikain Nakamaro

IWAZAKI ZAIBATSU

IWAZAKI YASHIROU ..... Imperial Iwazaki Bank president. Keikain (née Asagiri) Sakurako's grandfather

KEIKAIN SAKURAKO ..... Keikain Nakamaro's wife. Asagiri Kaoru's older sister

OTHER RELATED PARTIES

ISHIKAWA NOBUMITSU ..... Photographer

KANBE SOUJI ..... Professor of economics at private university

KOIZUMI SOUICHIROU ..... Fellowship of Constitutional Government lower-house party member. Prime minister

MAEFUJI SHOUICHI ..... Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department's Public Safety Bureau's director of foreign affairs

TEIA SHUUICHI ..... Head of Teia zaibatsu. Eiichi's father

TAKAMIYA HARUKA ..... Imperial Gakushuukan Academy head librarian

IWASAWA MAKOTO ..... Governor of Tokyo. Author

SHIROSAKI KOUJI ..... Movie director

SHISUKA LYDIA ..... Daughter of Karafuto noble Marquess Shisuka. One year Runa's senior

KANNA MIZUKI ..... Heir to Kanna family of fortune tellers/ high-class prostitutes

TAKANASHI MIZUHO ..... Protagonist of otome game *Love Where the Cherry Blossom Falls*

RUNA'S ASSOCIATES

KUSHUNNAI NANAMI

NOZUKI MISAKI

AKIBE RIKO

YULIA MOLOTOVA

IRINA BEROSOVA

ENBUCHI YUNA

RUDAKA MIU

RYUU SUZUNE

GLASYA MARSHEVA

Cast of Characters

Keikain Dukedom

Keikain Runa: This story's protagonist. Reincarnated into an otome game world as its villainess

Tachibana Ryuuji: Runa's butler

Ichijou Susumu: Keika Holdings CEO

Toudou Nagayoshi: Keika Corp's Managing Director and CEO

Angela Sullivan: Runa's secretary, former CIA agent

Okazaki Yuuichi: Young employee of Keika Holdings

Saitou Keiko: Maid and former Ginza queen of the night

Tokitou Aki: Maid

Keikain Kiyomaro: Current head of the Dukedom

Keikain Nakamaro: Heir to the Dukedom

Watabe Shigema: Driver and violinist

Sone Mitsukane: Driver

Akanezawa Saburou: Driver

Tamiya Makoto: Guard

Michihara Naomi: Guard

Tachibana Yuka: Apprentice maid. Tachibana Ryuuji's granddaughter

Ichijou Erika: Apprentice maid. Ichijou Susumu's daughter

Anisha Egorova: Maid. Former KGB

Kitagumo Ryouko: Maid. Former Northern Japan government spy

Eva Charon: Maid. Transferred from CIA

Nagamori Kaori: Maid. Concierge at Keika Hotel

Watsuji Takamichi: Chef. Head chef at Keika Hotel

Katsura Naomi: Keikain branch family member. Naoyuki's mother

Katsura Naoyuki: Member of Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's integrated development department

Runa's love interests

Teia Eiichi: Son of family that owns Teia Motor Co.

Izumikawa Yuujirou: Youngest son of major politician Izumikawa Tatsunosuke

Gotou Mitsuya: Only son of Ministry of Finance official Gotou Mitsutoshi

Keikain Runa's school friends

Kasugano Asuka: Father is a Lower House member

Kaihouin Hotaru: Comes from religious family

Amane Mio: One year younger than Runa; like a little sister to her. Father is employed by the Keikains as an art dealer

Katsuki Shiori: From a Keikan branch family. Daughter of Katsuki viscount

Machiyoi Sanae: Daughter of Machiyoi count. Asagiri Kaoru's friend

Kurimori Shizuka: From a local zaibatsu. Daughter of Kurimori family. Main bank is Keika Bank

Takahashi Akiko: Father, the director-general of the prefectural police, knew Tachibana. Practices kendo

Asagiri Kaoru: Daughter of Asagiri marquess. Older sister, Sakurako, is married to Keikain Nakamaro

Iwazaki Zaibatsu

Iwazaki Yashirou: Imperial Iwazaki Bank President. Asagiri Sakurako's grandfather

Keikain Sakurako: Keikain Nakamaro's wife. Asagiri Kaoru's older sister. Maiden name "Asagiri"

Other related parties

Ishikawa Nobumitsu: Photographer

Kanbe Souji: Professor of economics at private university

Koizumi Souichirou: Fellowship of Constitutional Government Lower House party member. Prime minister

Maefuji Shouichi: Tokyo Metropolitan Police Bureau's Public Safety Bureau's director of foreign affairs

Teia Shuuichi: Head of Teia zaibatsu. Eiichi's father

Takamiya Haruka: Imperial Gakushuukan Academy head librarian

Iwasawa Makoto: Governor of Tokyo. Author

Shirosaki Kouji: Movie director

Shisuka Lydia: Daughter of Karafuto noble Marquess Shisuka. One year Runa's senior

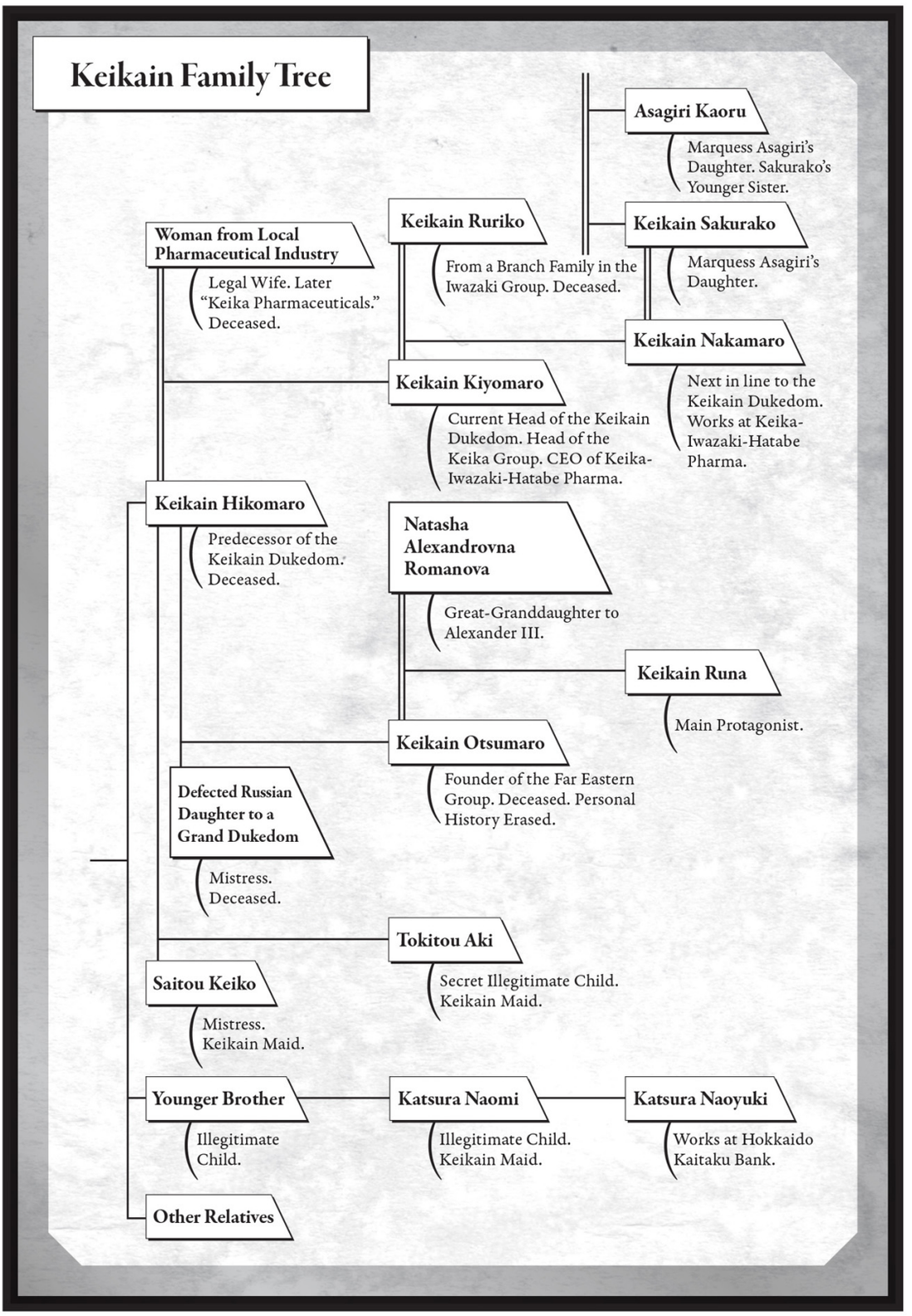
Kanna Mizuki: Heir to the Kanna family of fortune tellers/high-class prostitutes

Takanashi Mizuho: Protagonist of otome game *Love Where the Cherry Blossom Falls*

Runa's Associates

Kushunnai Nanami, Enbuchi Yuna, Rudaka Miu, Nozuki Misaki, Ryuu Suzune, Yulia Molotova, Glasya Marsheva, Irina Berosova

Keikain Family Tree



KEIKAIN DUKEDOM





CHOUFUU COUNCIL

Keika Group
桂華グループ

PRESIDENTS' COUNCIL/CHOUFUU COUNCIL

MAIN THREE COMPANIES

Founded Company

KEIKA-IWAZAKI PHARMA

Financial Management

MOONLIGHT FUND

KEIKA-IWAZAKI CHEMICAL >> JOINED IWAZAKI ZAIBATSU

KEIKA CORP HOLDINGS

Subsidiaries:

- Akamatsu Corporation
- Teisen Ishii
- Teimen Corporation
- Kanegana Textiles

Cell phone companies • Dog Express • natural resource companies • Kitakaba Security • Keika Parts Manufacturing • shipping companies • airplane lease sales companies • textile companies • cosmetics companies • Echigo Engineering Co.

KEIKA RAILWAY HOLDINGS

Subsidiaries:

- Keika Railway Group

Shikoku Shinkansen • KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co. • Kagawa Railroad • Keika Bus • Kuzuryuugawa Railway • Keika Pacific Ferry • Moonlight Resort • Keika Kinugawa Resort • railroads under construction

- Keika Hotel Group

AIRHO • Hokkaido tertiary industry companies • Keika Opera Company • Yufuin Kurokawa development • Keika Advertising Agency • Kudanshita building

- Teisei Department Stores Group

Teisei Department Stores • Sougou Department Stores • Teisei Supermarkets • Hizen Co., Ltd • convenience stores • fashion malls • gyudon restaurants • Hokkaido primary industry businesses

KEIKA HOLDINGS

Subsidiaries:

- Keika Bank
- Keika Life Insurance
- Keika Securities
- Keika Maritime Insurance

KEIKA ELECTRONICS UNION

Subsidiaries:

- Shiyo Electric Co.
- Hope Memory
- Furukawa Telecoms
- Portercon
- TIG Backup Systems

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The Young Lady's Wastefulness

Somewhere in Europe

Afterword



The Daily Lives of Keika Group Office Workers

“I’M HEADIN’ OUT!”

“Great work today.”

“See you tomorrow!”

“Take over for me, would you?”

The financial analytics room overseeing the finances of both Keika Holdings and the Keika Group never turned its lights off for a single minute of the day. Since the group’s rapid and unexpected growth, their grasp on the finances was always changing and falling apart.

That was mostly thanks to the young lady’s shopping sprees. She had yet to learn that the head of finance cradled his head in despair with every one of her massive purchases.

“It just never stops, does it?”

“Akamatsu Corporation, Teisen Ishii, Teimen Corporation, Kanegana Textiles… Maybe she was right about Teisen Ishii and Teimen, but what’d she buy Kanegana for? I still can’t get a handle on their finances with so much fluff in the way…”

The workers stared at their monitors like ghosts, muttering to each other. While they’d been assigned to this department because they were usable Keika Holdings employees, it was true that those who performed poorly were transferred to a financial analytics department as a restructuring strategy.

That was better than being forced to resign. Still, it was the shadowy side of the rapidly expanding Keika Group.

“It sucks that they never have any money trouble.”

“And the Keika Group is doing exactly what Kanegana does…”

Kanegana Textiles had amassed overwhelming profits through its cosmetics division and distributed them to other departments to keep up appearances. As that process continued, the cosmetics division ended up having to fudge their numbers to keep those departments alive. Without a comprehensive understanding of the company’s finances, those divisions couldn’t be reorganized alongside the rest of the company, forcing them to

disclose their financial statements. The Keika Group only diverged from that process in that they didn't have to fudge any numbers to get by.

"Akamatsu Corporation's a whole separate headache..."

"Their resource management department is a total can of worms. Not that we can complain. The Keika Group's profits mostly come from them."

"Yeah. They're the pillar of the Moonlight Fund, and the Moonlight Fund is what supports the rest of the group."

By shifting to current value accounting and simultaneously introducing consolidation accounting, the company had now focused its attention on that consolidation work. That dramatic change left all of Japan's businesses with a lot of work on their hands. In the midst of it all, the Keika Group continued to expand thanks to the young lady's purchases. The financial departments of each company in the group were at their wits' end.

"Should someone explain consolidation accounting to the young lady already?"

"I'm sure she knows what she's doing. It'd be a whole lot scarier if she wiped out our bad debts *without* understanding that stuff!"

Everyone in the room knew that the Keika Group was run entirely by Keikain Runa. They owed her for saving their companies and understood that they'd been placed squarely on the road to success. While the employees never forgot their gratitude, they were currently stuck in the midst of financial carnage, and one simple phrase surely summarized their feelings:

"That was then, this is now."

Ichijou Susumu, Keika Holdings' CEO, entered the room. The workers quickly stood and bowed to him. Hierarchy was still very important in Japanese banks.

"Don't mind me," Ichijou said. "Please continue your work."

Katsura Naoyuki, who was standing behind him, gave a report. "Due to the young lady's purchases, progress is currently delayed."

"I understand. Still, those purchases are what saved us, so it's difficult to protest her choices."

Everyone in the room wiped the expression off their face, listening to the two men speak. These men had once been elites themselves—Katsura coming from Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, and Ichijou from a second regional bank—which positioned them to be respected by the others. That was exactly why Ichijou had chosen to bring only Katsura along.

“The young lady has heard about your hard work,” he said. “I hope you’ll all continue to put in your best efforts, not only for my sake but for hers.”

When Ichijou and Katsura bowed to the workers, everyone stood and bowed back as if on command. Once the pair left the room, a string of murmurs spread from one worker to the next.

“In other words, they’re saying the next CEO won’t come from Far Eastern?”

“The former Ministry of Finance guys will have their executive terms finish up soon. Replacing them will be a game of musical chairs. Speaking of something the former city banks of Hokkaido Kaitaku, Long-Period Credit, and Nihon Credit are proud of…”

“You mean Hokkaido Kaitaku was likely to fail next, but then Long-Period Credit and Nihon Credit’s workers treated Hokkaido Kaitaku’s situation as a blunder and started infighting? Hokkaido Kaitaku ended up joining forces with Far Eastern and Ichiyama.”

“Now the insurance companies must be sitting back quietly, waiting to join up with whoever emerges victorious, don’t you think?”

Despite all their complaints, the people involved in this discussion used to work for Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank, the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan, Nihon Credit Bank, Far Eastern Bank, or Ichiyama Securities. Still, they were merely “elite office workers” who needed to wait longer before they could join the company directors’ game of musical chairs. The source of their complaints in the first place was that they couldn’t join the game unless they actually finished their current work.

“That guy who came in with him… Did the young lady pick him out herself to hire?”

“He’s way too young. He’s not even a branch manager yet, as far as I remember. You’re supposed to make them work as branch

managers in Hokkaido or Yamagata before they become executives. CEO Ichijou was acceptable, since he was part of the first generation, but that won't fly for whoever takes over from him."

"Hey, I'm hearing rumors that we might merge with Imperial Iwazaki Bank. Do you really think it's happening?"

"I can't be sure it isn't, sadly. The young lady's family has relatives in the Iwazaki zaibatsu, and Nakamaro-sama—the next duke to take over—is married to the granddaughter of Imperial Iwazaki's president. Everyone knows that the people the Keikain Dukedom have been bringing into the company are mostly related to Iwazaki somehow."

"Then why'd they remove Nakamaro-sama as an independent director? Couldn't they have moved him into the company and left him in charge of finding CEO Ichijou's replacement?"

"Supposedly, the young lady isn't on great terms with the main family because she wasn't part of them originally. I've also heard that the government is nervous about the Keika Group turning into an institutional bank."

"I assume the same goes for the American government. Angela Sullivan has been promoted to executive director of Keika Securities' North American division, but people say she's a puppet for the United States."

"The U.S. government sent her over here to keep an eye on the young lady, after all. The president won the election, but without the young lady's support in Florida, it's pretty likely someone else would be in the Oval Office right now. He's grateful for her help, but her interference in foreign affairs falls into a gray area, so it's only natural they want to keep a close eye on her."

"Before becoming the young lady's secretary, Angela Sullivan was the Far East fund manager for the Pacific Global Investment Fund. But once she received an unofficial offer to be a fund manager at Silver Woman, President Tachibana Ryuuji of Keika Railway talked her into coming over here instead. She seems like she'll probably become an executive at Keika Holdings too someday, not just Keika Securities."

"If Tachibana-san was doing the persuading, I bet the young lady herself was the one who asked for her."

“Things never go the way you want them to in this industry. A lot of people would hate to see Angela move up to Keika Holdings and then become the next CEO.”

“What ‘people’ are you talking about?”

“Nationalists. Editors-in-chief at major newspapers joined hands with recipients of the highest orders of merit to get Governor Iwasawa Makoto elected. Keika had to step in and cool down the political situation that had been manipulated. That’s just recent history. They tried to take a firm stance—‘Are you sure you want European and American hedge funds to play with the Moonlight Fund, Japan’s treasure, as they please?’—but they ended up making use of Governor Iwasawa Makoto and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa too.”

“Right. So that’s why they’re making such a fuss about Keika Holdings going public.”

“Executive Director Angela is loyal to the young lady, but she started as an American puppet, after all. That’s important when it comes to going public and ensuring that vultures can’t monopolize the Moonlight Fund.”

“The Long-Period Credit Bank and Nihon Credit Bank both catered to Nagato-cho, after all. I wonder how many people aren’t eager to have that investigated…”

“That’s why it’s so convenient from Prime Minister Koizumi’s perspective. Most of that Pandora’s box came from the Hashizume faction, who were living in splendor.”

“Isn’t that the conspiracy theory about why the prime minister wants to eliminate bad debts and shut down general contractors? If that Pandora’s box gets opened, he’ll probably end up getting hurt too.”

“I see. Still, if the government insists on taking us public, the Moonlight Fund will be a real problem.”

“Agreed. It was built without structure for a reason, so it’ll definitely come under attack.”

“The higher-ups will probably go to Akamatsu Corporation to buy time, but now that we’re using consolidation accounting, they’ll be found out.”

Keika Holdings was the main bank of Keika Corp, Keika Railway, and Keika Electronics Union—three massive companies.

Once it went public, Keika Holdings would have a new source of profit. Furthermore, their North American successes would lead them to implement their internet banking and card business in Japan as well, all while they carried bonds from Japan, America, Russia, and other countries as a financial institution. Still, they were projected to bring in smaller profits than other megabanks. Labor costs remained high throughout the restructuring, putting pressure on their pocketbooks. They would also have to release control of the Moonlight Fund, the source of the Keika Group's funds and the true creator of Keika Holdings. Listing Keika Holdings on the stock market would make it a normal company as desired; in that capacity, they would disclose their true strength.

"We may be a megabank, but I'm not sure we'll survive all this."

"After all, we're just a collection of low-ranking city banks that almost went bankrupt."

"We're not as stable as a zaibatsu bank either."

Deposit insurance had come along with the introduction of current value accounting and consolidation accounting. Only ten million yen and interest were insured in the event of a bank collapse, so depositors of large amounts were currently running around like chickens with their heads cut off. During the Showa era's financial panic, bank after bank had ended up collapsing, causing depositors to go with zaibatsu banks for the sense of security they brought and thus strengthening the zaibatsu's power. Everyone who remembered that piece of history was now taking their money to deposit in zaibatsu banks.

"Think they'll break us up and make us go somewhere else?"

"We'd just use the Keika Rules and be fine. I don't know why they'd make us go public and *then* break us up."

"If it's not going to be Imperial Iwazaki because Nakamaro-sama was removed, maybe it's Honami and Gowa Osan?"

"Probably."

Suddenly, the door flew open. An employee with bloodshot eyes threw a stack of documents down and shouted to everyone in the room: "She did it again! The young lady just bought Zugagaga Entertainment!"

People slammed their heads against desks, documents sailed through the air, and screams of rage echoed off the walls of the Keika Group and Keika Holdings' financial analytics room. The workers who would come to take over the next shifts reacted equally dramatically, but such drama would remain entirely unknown to the young lady.

"Isn't it sad?"

"What do you mean?"

"That being at the height of your glory doesn't matter when the next problem arises."

Ichijou had muttered the first question to himself after leaving the financial analytics office, unaware of the screams of despair and rage inside it. Katsura Naoyuki was the one who'd asked him what he meant.

The two were walking through the hallway together, a group of former Far Eastern Bank and Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank employees following behind them. Walking behind important members of a company such as these was sometimes mocked, people calling it a "daimyo's procession"; still, this was customary in banks, given their intense scrutiny of hierarchies.

"CEO Ichijou, we've sworn loyalty to both the young lady and you. Please don't worry so much."

"I know. I've told her how devoted you all are."

At this point in time, bank workers were said to have particularly suspicious smiles. Both Ichijou and the employee who tried to reassure him wore just such expressions on their faces in that moment. They didn't say another word until the "daimyo's procession" reached the CEO's office.

"Katsura-kun, I'm going to let Keika Trust Bank decide where to place you. You'll probably end up in the main office's trust administration division, where you'll be in charge of the young lady's assets."

Given the complex web of financial institutions it managed, Keika Holdings had its own trust bank. Ichijou had allowed only Katsura into the room when he gave him this news. The type of smile on his face suggested he was delivering news of a

demotion, but he'd worn the exact same expression the entire time.

"What's this? You're less rattled than I expected."

"Tachibana-san's already scolded me once, so I was ready this time."

"I see. To be frank, of all the people in the world I'd like to punch, you're in second place."

"Sorry to ask, but who's the first?"

"Isn't it obvious? That would be Okazaki Yuuichi." Ichijou got a sour look on his face, as if envisioning the man.

Meanwhile, Katsura's expression softened. At least Ichijou's decision didn't seem retaliatory. "I accept your decision, but why go to a trust bank at a time like this?"

"Because this company's game of musical chairs is about to get a lot more intense."

Ichijou sat down in his chair and gazed out the window. A view of Tokyo from so high up was proof that you'd made it as an office worker, yet his voice was still vaguely melancholic. "Things would've gone differently if you'd come from Hokkaido Kaitaku's main faction..."

Employees gathering, then forming different factions, was only natural in the workplace. Even Hokkaido Kaitaku had a main faction and others outside it. Those sorts of groups usually formed around people's home regions, family bloodlines, or academic careers, meaning that Ichijou's complaint about Katsura—a man who rejected all those factors in joining Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank—was ultimately pointless. But the current situation was the result of relying on nothing but bloodlines and home regions in the first place, so he really wasn't qualified to speak on it.

"Does that mean it's true that the next CEO will be Angela Sullivan from the North American division...?"

"You certainly pick up on things, don't you? If you'd only joined Far Eastern Bank, I would've selected you to take over the Tokyo branch instead of sending you away to Keika Trust."

"Hi, Jennifer! How've you been?"

"Pretty good. Have you lost weight, Mom?"

“Just a little. My job’s a lot harder now that I’m higher up in the company.”

Wall Street, New York, was the center of the meritocratic society known as the United States. Angela Sullivan was eating dinner with her daughter, Jennifer Sullivan, in her top-floor condominium.

Angela had been promoted to executive director of Keika Securities’ North American division, and everyone on Wall Street who’d picked up on the rumors knew that she’d also been tentatively offered the role of company director at Keika Holdings—Keika Securities’ holding company.

“How’s school?”

“Not great, but I can handle all that. Now that you’ve got another promotion, are you going back to Japan?”

“Probably. The higher up I go, the more I may have to travel back and forth between here and Tokyo.”

“I could hardly believe how tough it was to commute in Japan when you told me about it. Now your commute’s going to get even harder?”

“It’s certainly possible.”

Angela finished dinner with her daughter, whom she’d raised as a single mother, before saying goodbye for the evening. Then her expression returned to the one she used during work. It wasn’t the face of the North American division’s executive director, the position she’d shared with her daughter. This face belonged to a Central Intelligence Agency agent.

“Thanks to Tachibana Ryuuji-shi’s efforts, the coup within the Keika Group won’t ignite. Still, the situation within the companies is unpredictable, and now outside forces are attempting to interfere as well. The young lady doesn’t seem like she’ll fall for their tricks, which is good news for us, but the overall situation is still undesirable.”

“We feel likewise. The new millennium was the start of a war against terrorism, and stability in Asia—particularly the Far East—is our priority now that things are finally wrapping up in Iraq.”

That response came from the head of foreign leadership analysis through a secure line from Langley. The United States hadn’t forgotten the delicate state of affairs in the Far East.

“The Koizumi administration arose amid the anti-American sentiment following the end of the Cold War, but forces within the Fellowship of Constitutional Government have been holding him in check. Still, he managed to prevent anti-American feelings from increasing further and ended up going all in with us on Iraq. We have to repay him after what he’s done for us.”

“I’m well aware. The president said he ‘didn’t want to see our mutual friend the prime minister fight with the young lady.’ Any updates from Maefuji in Japan yet?”

“Didn’t he say they’ve now confirmed that Middle Eastern religious extremists had an influence on the failed Shinjuku Geofront terrorist attack? They’ve made contact with terrorist forces inside Japan, and one job the extremists assigned them was to eliminate the young lady. That’s the report I received from Eva Charon, her personal maid.”

Angela didn’t know whether the young lady was aware that Japan and the United States used her as a means of exchanging intelligence.

“Our investigation shows that the armed extremists within Japan are now capable of nothing more than causing societal unrest through terrorism. We believe that if foreign influences contact them to begin plotting anything, they’ll use Karafuto as their base of operations. These are threats from terrorist organizations too. If something does happen, it could spur anti-American sentiment within Japan.”

“It sounds like the young lady thinks the prime minister intends to open Pandora’s box. Opposition forces are coming together, both publicly and behind the scenes, to put up a fight. They don’t have anyone to rally around, though. I’m worried they may choose the young lady as their figurehead.”

“Just to confirm, she doesn’t plan to antagonize the prime minister, does she?”

“No. She’s said herself that she doesn’t. It seems she truly won’t oppose him this time.”

“……” The head of foreign leadership analysis’s silence spoke volumes about Angela’s response. The dispute between the prime minister and the young lady was well-known within that field.

“And, if she does, the opposition forces will do whatever it takes to drag her into their group.”

“Our job is to stop that from happening. I won’t make any moves unless my lady’s intentions change.”

“I’ll expect good results… That reminds me.” The head of foreign leadership analysis suddenly changed topics—not that the next subject was any less important. “There’s someone I want your company to take in. He’s in the Witness Protection Program.”

“I have no reason to refuse, but may I ask why he’s under protection?”

“He helped launder money for the Russian mafia. He did the same on Wall Street, but a certain young lady went a bit over-the-top and broke the washing machine very publicly. He came to us with a few souvenirs too.”

“I won’t say no, but I’m cutting him loose if he’s too incompetent.”

“A money launderer for the Russian mafia starts doing the same thing on Wall Street, and you think he’s incompetent? He’d be at the bottom of the Hudson right now if that were the case. That just shows how important the information he brought us is. Also, someone from the young lady’s group is unofficially walking Capitol Hill’s red carpet. He’s always had lots of friends in Washington, so watch out for him.”

“Who is this person?” Angela would receive the related documents soon enough, but she asked his name anyway.

“Tenmabashi Mitsuru from Keika Corp. He used to work at Teisen Ishii, and he’s one of the Japanese businessmen who made quite a fuss in places like London and Jerusalem. Even Okazaki Yuuichi, the Moonlight Fund’s manager, knows to be careful of him.”

That explanation marked the end of their call. Angela stared out at the skyscrapers illuminated against the night sky. When she saw how the sight had changed, she remarked sadly without thinking, “The Twin Towers… They used to be right there…”

Neither she nor the United States had been able to forget the shock of 9/11.

Wall Street, New York, was the place where skyscrapers towered over all. While the citizens could never forget the two

towers missing from the skyline, they still had to live, work, and go about their day.

Looking out at the city from their luxury hotel were two women celebrating their reunion.

One was Karin Viola, the CEO of Keika Electronics Union—a giant electronics maker spanning Japan and the United States. The other was her friend, a former subordinate she trusted above anyone else.

“Congratulations, Karin. You finally made it to the top.”

“Thanks, Chloe. I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

The woman Karin was speaking to was named Chloe Meyers. They’d once both worked for an American computer manufacturer, but they’d ended up leaving together after Karin lost her battle against the company’s founder.

Karin was later scouted to become CEO of Keika Electronics Union, and Chloe understood that their reunion meant it was her turn to be scouted too.

“So, what are you up to these days, Chloe?”

“I’m on the legislative staff in the House of Representatives over in Washington. I wanted to study politics a little after we lost that proxy war.”

“And what have you learned?”

“That our proxy war was nothing more than child’s play.”

They both laughed. Politics was naturally part of important industries like computers and electronics. Karin wanted Chloe as her subordinate because she’d now studied the nature of politics.

After a little casual conversation, she pivoted to the main topic. “Why don’t you come work for me, Chloe? I’ve set up a seat for you. How does ‘executive in charge of North America at Keika Electronics Union’ sound? It will come with stock options, of course.”

“Another executive who used to work at Portercon, huh? Do you think you’ll win out?”

“Quite possibly. We’ve consolidated our factories in Southeast Asia and shipping logistics to the West Coast with Furukawa and Shiyo’s existing computer businesses. We eliminated the middleman, so our prices can’t be beaten. We’re

also doing lots of advertising, mostly TV commercials. My boss turned out to be an effective face for the company."

"You mean the young lady who scouted you. Is it really true that she named you personally?"

"I thought my recruiter was exaggerating until I went to Tokyo myself. She interviewed me in a café, eating cake. Then she turned on the TV, showed me the news story about Portercon being bought out by Furukawa and Shiyo, and told me I should take the job with her. I couldn't say no after all that."

"Wow… So she really *is* as talented as the rumors in Washington say."

The two women could have this lively conversation because Chloe had never intended to turn down Karin in the first place. She'd gone to Washington as a legislative staffer in hopes that it would lead to a career upgrade, as was common in the United States.

"So, what do you want from me in exchange for such a sweet deal?" Chloe asked.

"I want someone on my side who will never betray me. I only have a position in the company because the young lady personally appointed me, so if board members from Furukawa and Shiyo come together to get rid of me, I'll lose my seat before I know it. I might even need to get former Portercon people on my side if worse comes to worst."

"You want to use me to win over members from Portercon?"

"And Furukawa and Shiyo board members too, if possible. You've been a big help to me, because you have so few enemies."

When Karin resigned from the company, Chloe had not only refused to stay on, she'd even rejected a direct offer from the next CEO themselves. She'd decided to leave the company alongside Karin. Things like that had allowed her to rise in her career; she'd moved forward thanks to popularity rather than talent. Karin knew that side of Chloe, and it was why she was eager to bring the woman in as an ally.

"I won't be able to do a job like this on my own," Chloe said. "I'll need my own team. Fifteen employees minimum, and a personal secretary too. I also want offices on the West Coast, East Coast, and in Tokyo."

“Very well. I’ll let you use my authority to build your team. Bring along anyone you think will be useful to you. I’ll be the one to make reports and decisions.”

Chloe didn’t know how to respond to Karin’s instantaneous approval. Scouting an employee like this usually involved long discussions about conditions until a hefty contract to sign was finally drafted. Chloe sensed Karin’s distress from how she skipped those steps completely, eager to obtain someone she could make use of.

“One more thing. If I’m going to work there, I want you to tell me who the key players are. In terms of the whole Keika Group, not just Keika Electronics Union.”

Chloe hadn’t just been sitting back and waiting for an offer to arrive. She’d been using her connections in Washington to investigate the Keika Group. That cunning nature was exactly why Karin wanted Chloe on her side.

Karin smirked and answered, “Well, of course there’s the young Lady Keikain Runa. If you want an audience with her, there are a few lines you can go through. Tachibana Ryuuji of Keika Railway is her butler, and CEO Ichijou Susumu of Keika Holdings is her treasurer. Managing Director Toudou Nagayoshi of Keika Corp sits at the top of the resources division, but someone’s working directly under him at the Moonlight Fund, which is where the resources division’s income comes from.”

She paused there for a moment. That man was the mortal enemy of Angela Sullivan, Karin’s coworker and rival within the Keika Group. Karin didn’t hate him so much herself. After all, he was the one who’d come to scout her.

“Okazaki Yuuichi, the manager of the Moonlight Fund. I believe he’s a key player in the Keika Group.”

Meanwhile, somewhere in Hong Kong…

“Brother! When did you get in? I would’ve come to pick you up if you’d told me you’d be here.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just arrived, and I’m only here for work.”

In a corner of Hong Kong’s financial district, Okazaki Yuuichi was greeted in the luxurious office by an underling in the Hong

Kong mafia—someone who'd been associating with him ever since the incident at the casino. He'd become something of a caretaker of Okazaki's, since he couldn't lay a hand on a confirmed customer of his boss. He'd seen Okazaki pulling out suspicious amounts of money during the young lady's big bet on Furukawa Telecoms and decided to place all his own bets on him, which had allowed his organization to profit massively and raised him to a leadership role within the group. These days, he even called Okazaki "Brother." That Hong Kong office was one of the hiding places where Okazaki had stashed the hundred billion yen the young lady had given him as a reward.

"Gekkou Investment Firm. That's who I want information about."

"You mean the ones imitating you, Brother? We can take them out if they've done something wrong."

"Definitely not, since they've got top Chinese Communist Party officials working for them. Ah...I see. They have an organization other than yours behind them, isn't that right?"

"You're as clever as always, Brother. That organization is made up of people from Shanghai, and they've been making trouble for us too. If you have a pretext, we'll gladly put things into motion."

Before Okazaki could respond, his cell phone rang. When he saw President Toudou's number, he answered the call. "Hello, this is Okazaki. I'm in Hong Kong right now... Yes. I'm looking into Gekkou Investment Firm... Okay. I'll be back in time for the luncheon."

Okazaki then walked toward the door, eager to at least eat at his favorite Cantonese place while in Hong Kong.

"Let's talk some more over food at the restaurant," he said. "I've finally become a manager, so I can't cross any dangerous bridges now, can I?"

"I should be the one asking you that. How're you still alive after that giant gamble?"

Okazaki squeezed his underling's hand and confidently revealed his reasoning, pretending not to see the man's dumbfounded face. "Isn't it obvious? I'm going to bet on even bigger gambles... Hm?"

The underling wouldn't let go of Okazaki's hand. Okazaki looked up and saw that the man had broken into a heavy sweat.

"Why're you still holding my hand?"

"Even I have my own duties and orders," the underling replied. "Yes."

Just then, the door opened in front of the pair. In walked Ryuu Suzune, wearing a qipao. As soon as he saw her there, Okazaki understood everything.

"Welcome, Okazaki-san!" she sang. "I'll be showing you around Hong Kong today!"

Okazaki grabbed the underling, who'd released his hand at some point, so that the two could have a hushed conversation. Of course, the girl in the eye-catching qipao could still hear them.

"Was your boss serious about marrying his granddaughter off to me?"

"You think he wouldn't want to win your favor after you pulled off such a gamble and made it out alive? If the old man hadn't sent you a girl, I'd have sent you a bunch myself."

"It's not right for two men to be whispering in front of a girl of marriageable age," Ryuu Suzune protested in impeccable Japanese. She was also fluent in Cantonese, as a mafia boss's granddaughter, but the way she'd slyly butted into their conversation made her seem clever too—at least, if you ignored the fact that it was a junior high schooler speaking.

"Fair enough. Why don't we get some food for now?"

The three headed onto the streets of Hong Kong, where they stared up at a giant poster of Okazaki's boss, Keikain Runa, plastered on the wall of a Sougou Department Store. The girl was famous in Hong Kong as well—both a leader in fashion and an outright celebrity.

My lady, you're really going to shake this world up, aren't you? That's why I get to have so much fun taking risks. Tell me, my lady, what will you show me next? What will you show the whole world next?

Ignoring Ryuu Suzune and the underling, Okazaki shaped his fingers into a gun and pointed it straight at the poster of Keikain Runa.

“Bang!”

Glossary and Notes

Consolidation accounting: Current corporate accounting requires proper explanations, both when money “comes in from somewhere” and when money “disappears.” Consolidation accounting made it harder to separate accounts to hide losses—or hide profits (evade taxes).

The witness protection program: An American system designed to protect witnesses testifying in courtrooms or Congress from retaliation. Participants are usually extremely vital witnesses, and state protection may last through the trial period or, in some cases, the rest of their lives.

Hong Kong’s underworld: One unique trait was how the underworld coexisted with normal society, with very little separation between the two. That was because many individuals shared ideologies, having fled the Communist Party’s control during the Chinese Civil War. Hong Kong also served as something of an intersection point for those from Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Taiwan. Japanese people with connections to people from mainland Asia also used Hong Kong and Shanghai as locations to mingle.



The Final Chapter of Bad Debt Disposal

ON APRIL 1, 2003, the semigovernmental Imperial Japan Post was born. It was a step toward Prime Minister Koizumi's campaign pledge to privatize the postal service and was a sign of compromise to opposition forces. Still, I knew there was no longer any stopping the prime minister.

More importantly, the markets took this forming of a public corporation as a sign. That is, it foreshadowed that bad debt disposal and problematic banks would be nationalized and forced upon us.

"So you're really going to implement it?"

I'd finished a dinner party to celebrate the end of Golden Week and had called Ichijou to my office to discuss things. If we were nearing the end of bad debt disposal, Keika Holdings couldn't just sit back and watch any longer.

I responded casually to Ichijou's question. "It's not a matter of implementing it or not. It's all about how the markets will see things. It's already a matter of policy that Keika Holdings, which has basically functioned as a garbage can, will be listed on the market as a model case of bad debt disposal methods. Who's supposed to save troubled banks after that? No one is around to fill that role."

"I'd still save them under the Keika Rules, personally."

I smiled awkwardly when I heard that. Eating a spoonful of my after-dinner pudding, I glanced at the recent mass-media publications. Now that they were on the verge of being injected with public funds, megabanks were reacting differently. There were those which could repay the public funds and had bright prospects; but then there were those desperately seeking funds from different fields, which had little hope of surviving.

The latter were being mercilessly beaten down by the markets. They wouldn't collapse, since they were still making *some* progress on eliminating bad debts, but the markets knew they had no way to escape either a merger or nationalization.

"Still, it's strange that no one's come to us for help at this point."

“Well, Minister Takenaga said many times on TV that we’d be taken public. Absorbing a megabank at this point would just delay that and allow you to hold on to your power, my lady. I doubt the minister or prime minister want that after all the antagonism leading up to this point.”

The Keika Rules had always led to higher-ups losing their positions, bad debts being sent to the Resolution and Collection Corporation, and any resources lacking being provided by the Moonlight Fund. We weren’t using that process this time around, though.

Bad debts were an emergency to be handled not through tactics that crossed into a gray area but through fundamental principles in accordance with the law and established processes. That was what we were now seeing.

“The Moonlight Fund’s resource management department will probably move to Keika Corporation before we go public. By the way, is that company going to be a ‘Corp’ or ‘Corporation’?”

“Probably Corp, since it sounds better for the business of resources. Toudou-san went to the main location recently to say hello.”

At the same time, a takeover of the Keika Group was being carried out from the inside. It was a reshuffling of the group, but with me at the very top, as was the case before. Still, my blood didn’t come from the main Keikain family, and even as I’d taken the highest position in the company, I was facing a heavy personnel shortage. I’d have to recruit those whose loyalty was sworn to the Keikain family, not to myself. Keika Holdings going public had itself become a symbol of this reorganization.

“Well, I’m a junior high schooler now too,” I remarked, “so I can’t get away with being reckless any longer.”

“I don’t want to see you leave center stage with nothing to show for it either. Tachibana-san and Toudou-san feel the same way,” Ichijou stated.

At that, I made sure to show my disapproval. I had no intention of leaving Keika Group employees out in the cold, but I was ultimately prepared to bet myself on this gamble. It was Prime Minister Koizumi who’d blocked me at the very end in his

ultimate play. That was why I had no allies in this matter, even internally.

"The hardest part of gambling is quitting while you're ahead. But now you've got the dealer going out of their way to signal you. It's best to obey and head home with your winnings."

"And leave a casino that'll ban me from entering again, right?" I replied. "I'm well aware that that's their next move."

"Yet you're still trying to take on such a high-stakes gamble. I don't even want to know what's going on in your mind."

Ichijou and I had essentially just been chatting up to this point. I finished my pudding, wiped my mouth, and shifted to the main topic. "So, will Honami Bank and Gowa Osan Bank make it out alive in the end?"

"Not Gowa Osan, I'm afraid. They're behind on bad debt disposal, and they've supposedly upset the Financial Services Agency by opposing their audit. I don't think they can avoid being broken up by the Koizumi administration as an example of failed debt disposal. Even *I'm* not sure about Honami Bank."

Angela, who was probably on Wall Street at that very moment, had proposed absorbing the two banks to turn Keika Holdings into a megabank capable of taking on the rest of the world—a plot she'd proposed to me along with her bombshell about subprime loans. But I wasn't going to resort to that. Instead, I was watching the crisis these other two banks were going through. I'd remain an outside observer this time.

"If it came to that, who would absorb them?"

"Imperial Iwazaki Bank and Futaki-Yodoyabashi Bank are competing fiercely over that right now. Even if Honami Bank can't hold out, they don't want to come to us for help. The core banking issue's holding them back."

I whistled and looked away from Ichijou's unrelenting gaze. Keika Electronics Union had inherited Honami Bank's system and hired TIG Backup Systems, which I was vice president of, to help develop it. I'd made the decision to step away from the case entirely.

Doing so indicated the ruin of the faction that firmly spearheaded the use of our system for Honami Bank. It also caused Honami Bank to coin the slogan "We can't go to Keika for

help!” as they proceeded to run around, desperate to find a source of one trillion yen. It probably wasn’t worth reminding them that our company had better pay, and that the threat of nationalization loomed over them. *Probably.*

“Something else has come up that I’m curious about.”

Everything we’d discussed up to this point I remembered from my past life, but what came next was new to me.

Ichijou subtly cast his eyes toward the ground before he continued. “I’ve been hearing rumors about how Karafuto Bank has started operating after nationalizing. It was the central bank to the old Northern Japanese government, and they were forced to take on the entire ocean of bad debts from banks throughout Karafuto. Given all the public funds they had to put toward it, it’s even more chaotic there than here at Keika Holdings. Karafuto might be merged with Honami or Gowa Osan and absorbed by the Japan Post Bank.”

I closed my eyes in thought. At this point, I was pretty certain the version of me from the otome game had disappeared after resorting to money laundering. Having a bank was a necessity for such a scheme, and that was the connection. Karafuto Bank had been the name behind that money laundering, and the institution that controlled me in the game.

I needed to ask something of Ichijou. “Hey, Ichijou. Can you look into Karafuto Bank a little? I don’t intend to buy them, but I think they’ll end up the eye of the storm.”

Sadly, that prediction would prove correct.

I was in an interrogation room at the Kudanshita police box.

“You don’t want any katsudon? But I had some made for everyone…”

“You watch too much TV, little lady,” retorted Ono Kenichi, the inspector in charge of the station, as I ate from my bowl of katsudon.

Director Maefuji, whose ban from visiting the Keikains hadn’t been lifted yet, understood what I meant and started eating some katsudon.

“We don’t usually get calls from you, my lady.”

“Well, I just wanted to swap information with you guys. You don’t have to tell me every last detail, of course. We’ll collect our own evidence to make up for anything you have to leave out.”

“...Most people couldn’t say any of that to police officers in the first place. Hey, this is pretty good,” noted Inspector Ono, finally trying some of the katsudon too.

Eva, the maid, silently watched over the three of us, still carrying the box she’d brought the katsudon in.

Munch. Munch. “Know how the government wants to start injecting banks with public funds to clean up bad debts for good? We at Keika Holdings aren’t directly involved, but Karafuto Bank’s name has come up in rumors. When I got kidnapped, the money given to the criminals came from there.”

“Is that so? We already have our eyes on Karafuto. We suspect it’s the new place chosen to launder underground money that popped up when Hong Kong was handed over to China. A whole lot of money went into revitalizing Karafuto after Japan’s reunification, but quite a bit managed to slip out of sight in the process. Karafuto Bank—managed by the Karafuto prefectural government and the Karafuto Reconstruction Agency—was the entrance and exit for all that money. Also, this katsudon is delicious.”

“It’s made with a combination of quality beef and brand-name rice from Hokkaido. The soup also has Japanese matsutake mushrooms in it. Would you care for tea as well? I’ve brought quality tea leaves grown in Shizuoka.”

“This is *beef* cutlet?! It’s got to be a lot more expensive than our cafeteria meals.”

I’d been craving beef more than pork, although personally, chicken katsu was my favorite kind. I focused on the meal before me. It was delicious, but my goal had been to get the experience of eating katsudon in an interrogation room. Committing a crime for that purpose would be going about it the wrong way, of course.

“By the way, katsudon is actually banned from interrogation rooms. Otherwise, it’ll look like we’re giving suspects special treatment so they’ll confess.”

Clack! I dropped my chopsticks in shock when I heard that, drawing laughter from both policemen.

After that comedy-sketch-like scene, it was time to bring up the main topic. “The opposition party was ruling Japan when the Northern Japanese regime collapsed. The prime minister at that time got high approval ratings when he managed to steer the situation toward unification, but things went sour when that unification’s costs came to light. Once the National Welfare Tax came into the picture, the prime minister was forced to resign. Did you know that tax was essentially a Karafuto restoration tax?”

No, I didn’t. Now that I’d been told, though, it made sense. Still, I tried not to show my surprise on my face as I listened to Director Maefuji continue.

“After that, the administration called off their coalition and formed the main Fellowship of Constitutional Government party that we know today. But the budget for Karafuto’s restoration haunted the next administration as well. They didn’t want to pay it themselves, and that’s part of why they left the zaibatsu to handle it. However, that ended up leading underground money to turn its attention to Karafuto too.”

“Zaibatsu contain nobles, and nobles have diplomatic immunity.”

“Exactly, my lady. That was all complicated by the fact that the prime minister at the time was a noble himself. All the crimes were labeled acts for the sake of Japan’s unification or Karafuto’s restoration, so they were overlooked. The prime minister took the ultimate responsibility, while the government was reduced to a nest of demons. That’s the kind of place Karafuto is, my lady.”

Even after retiring from the political world, the former prime minister was a noble, protected from incarceration. No one wanted him attacked for this either. *Well, one man would probably be happy to attack him—Prime Minister Koizumi.* But for that, he’d need the nerve to go after Karafuto, which had been a major source of support and money for the opposition before the election.

“I probably shouldn’t say this, but there’s no ‘good’ and ‘evil’ when it comes to money, little lady. The yakuza may use homeless people to commit their crimes, but those homeless people still need yakuza money to live. The longer I do this job, the more I

think that's the one problem that can't be solved." Inspector Ono was probably alluding to the period when he'd worked crime scenes as a detective.

Eva, still listening from the side of the room, asked a question. "But are you really going to open that Pandora's box? You might damage the current administration severely."

"Yes, I am," I declared.

Prime Minister Koizumi, who'd secured a seat at the top by reforming his party, would see this as a chance to eliminate the opposition and his ultimate enemy—the faction hostile to him within his own party—all at once. He wasn't scared of a little backlash.

"I know the prime minister would open it if it was him."

I was certain of that, since I'd become his enemy. I was just relieved to know that I wasn't among those he considered his ultimate foes.

"Thanks for having me. Consider the katsudon a gift."

"Please let us pay, or we'll have broken our rules."

"Oh, man. How much would this even cost?"

"I'll finish things up here, my lady. Please head home with Ichijou Erika alone. She's waiting just outside."

"Got it!"

The Keika Group's weekly executive lunch had grown into a massive banquet requiring an entire hall to accommodate all the attendees. There were more than two hundred board members from the major companies of Keika Holdings, Keika Corp, Keika Railway, and Keika Electronics Union alone. If you included executives, the number rose to five hundred employees, and all five hundred were staring straight at me.

"I don't have anything to address. Still, I believe meeting in person like this and eating a meal together leads to a sense of solidarity. The Keika Group has gotten larger in a very short period of time, and I don't want us to spend our days not knowing what our coworkers look like. I hope this can be an opportunity for us to grow closer by meeting face-to-face and sharing a meal… With that, let's dig in."

“Thank you for the food,” the five hundred men and women responded, officially kicking off the lunch meeting. It was all so surreal to me. The meal itself was made with quality ingredients, but no alcohol was allowed—partly because I was a minor.

Eating a meal with someone made it easier to see what type of person they were. For example, many Keika Railway executives had come from an Imperial Railway, forcing the conversation to shift to that industry.

Their leader Tachibana would soon transition to a chairman role with no right to represent the company, so former government officials at both East and West Japan Imperial Railway were fighting a fierce battle to inherit his seat. West Japan had connections to our company through the Shikoku Shinkansen, the Shin-Osaka Station platform, and the Naniwasuji Line, while East Japan had KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co., the Shin-Jouban Railway Company, and the Shinjuku Shinkansen. The next Keika Railway president would have to take on the task of incorporating our card business, leading to rumors that a former government official from East Japan Imperial Railway would take the position.

On the other hand, the employees of Keika Holdings—where Angela was being treated as the company’s next leader—were incredibly unfriendly. Former government officials who’d come from the Ministry of Finance and lost their power in the ministry’s scandal and subsequent reformation were enjoying pleasant lunches and chats, since their only remaining goal was to work until they got the retirement money they needed out of us. Former city bank employees plotted to succeed Angela, while more extreme ones schemed to prevent her promotion altogether. I saw how menacing they looked even from far away. At the same time, the securities division was in high spirits over Angela’s tentative succession offer, while the insurance division had concluded that it had nothing to do with them. One executive from the former Far Eastern Bank was there to represent the regional banks, but that was probably as much power as Ichijou could wield.

Then there was Karin, the boss of Keika Electronics Union. Even from where I sat, I could pick up on her friendly conversations full of English. Surprisingly, few people understood that American society valued making connections even more than

Japanese society did. In other words, she was trying to show off the small but distinct influence she was having on the executives.

Keika Corp was in the middle of a merger, so all the former companies' executives were in attendance. Their game of musical chairs was in full swing, and the tension as they tried to sound out each other's motives was palpable. The man named Okazaki alone simply ate his lunch near me, completely ignoring the rest of that drama.

Once I'd finished my meal, Tachibana—who'd been sitting next to me—brought a man over to us.

"May I have a moment of your time, my lady? There's someone I'd like to introduce to you."

I recalled that the man had been sitting in a Keika Railway seat. The eyes of the West Japan Imperial Railway personnel were incredibly focused on us.

"Nice to meet you, my lady. My name's Mikihara Kazuaki."

I see. So this is Keika Railway's next president. "I'm Keikain Runa. I trust Tachibana, so I look forward to seeing you live up to his expectations."

"Thank you for saying so."

Keika Railway would absorb organizations like Teisei Department Stores and Keika Hotels after it restructured. They needed a pro at the helm, so meeting this man came as a relief.

Eva, my maid, had brought a foreign man over to me. This one had been sitting with Keika Holdings' securities division.

"May I speak with you for a moment, my lady?"

"Very well. Who's this?"

"My name is Mark M. Barnes, boss, and I was scouted by Miss Sullivan. I used to be a fund manager for Silver Woman, and now I've come to Keika Securities as an executive."

This was someone Angela had recruited for the company. I didn't know whether he was ex-CIA, but I should probably assume it, just to be safe.

"I'm Keikain Runa. Whatever Angela's told you, please carry out her exact instructions for how to do your job. This company has quite a lot of demons lurking too."

“You’ve still got a long way to go in terms of skyscrapers over here, though. And you haven’t fired anyone big yet, have you?”

Mark cast a bold look at the VIP seats for Keika Holdings. The moods of the people sitting there seemed to plummet at once.

Ah. This is a man of Wall Street, not any company. “That’s not my style. At least wait until Angela takes Ichijou’s position before you fire people.”

“If those are my orders, I’ll accept them, my lady.”

Mark bowed to me theatrically. It was amazing that even *I* sensed open hostility in the air, though it was hard to say just where it came from.

“I have someone I’d like to introduce to you too, boss.”

Karin had seized the opportunity to bring a woman over—another employee she’d recruited.

“Nice to meet you. My name’s Chloe Meyers, and I used to work for Karin.”

She must’ve been something like a very close aide to Karin at her former company. Karin, a hired CEO, would need to quickly solidify her faction within the company if she wanted any real power. After all, if my desires directly changed the way the company operated, it would be bad management.

“I’m Keikain Runa. I end up working under Karin too sometimes, so I’ll see you then.”

I stood and shook Chloe’s hand. The lunch meeting had been a way to unveil these three particular guests, so if that had been accomplished, then my job was done.

“That was a wonderful lunch. Please enjoy the rest of the time among yourselves.”

The guests couldn’t have any real conversations if I was around, so I decided to leave before the lunch was finished. They could use that time to strengthen friendships, or to antagonize enemies if they wished. For me, however, it was time for dessert in a private room. I’d normally have asked Tachibana or Ichijou to handle any truly important matters, but things went a bit differently that day.

“Please wait, my lady.”

I'd just been about to enter my private room. My bodyguard maids sprang into defensive stances, but I waved at them, signaling them to back down. *I remember this old man. He was sitting in a Keika Corp seat.*

"I'm glad I caught you. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Tenmabashi Mitsuru, and I work at Keika Corp's main office in Osaka. Forgive me, but I'd like to discuss something briefly with you."

"Very well. But please *do* keep it brief."

I knew he probably wouldn't, but I decided to reward him for having the courage to rush me at a time like this. Then I remembered something. This old man used to work for Teisen Ishii, and he'd been the one who approached me in Osaka, suggesting I relocate the resources division to their headquarters there. His simple statement now wouldn't remain brief at all. In fact, it was something I'd predicted to an extent. It was also something I couldn't avoid.

"My lady, a coup d'état is currently underway within the Keika Group to remove you from power."

"Would you like to have some bubuzuke?" I knew what I was asking him when I made that joke.

"Thanks a bunch. Can I have seconds too?"

We'd gathered in my private room. With us were Tachibana, Ichijou, Toudou, and Okazaki, along with Eva, who provided surveillance. In other words, the Keika Group's central figures were meeting in this one room, yet the old man was focused on his ochazuke.

"Delicious. It'd be even better with pickled veggies and a bit of tea."

"Could you ask the kitchen to bring us some, Eva? All right. I expect what you're going to share with me will be well worth the price of that bubuzuke."

I stared at him. Unfortunately, my attempt to be serious just sounded like a child imitating an adult. I hated how bluffing at important times was an ineffective tactic against men like this.

“It’s not just Keika Corp but Keika Holdings, Keika Electronics Union, and Keika Railway. The whole Keika Group is on the verge of a coup.”



It was on a bigger scale than I'd imagined.

Tenmabashi Mitsuru set his rice bowl and chopsticks down and tried to talk sense into me. "You're still young, little missy. That's why the prime minister treats you like nothin' more than a gambler."

I was lost for words. Or, rather, I wasn't sure why he'd brought up Prime Minister Koizumi. I cocked my head, which prompted the old man to take two dice out of his pocket. He must've come with them for this purpose.

"Now, tell me, do ya want odd or even? You've got lots of chips left to bet. Head home now, and you can still have yourself a triumphant sushi feast."

I was startled. "I see..."

Of course, Okazaki understood first. Somehow, he just managed to *perceive* the old man's meaning. When he'd gained more experience, he'd probably turn out similar to this old man.

"My lady, Prime Minister Koizumi defeated you. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes. It was a thorough defeat. What are you getting at?"

Okazaki stuck a cigarette in his mouth but didn't light it; he must just have been after the calming effect of having it between his lips. He quickly stopped himself before he could grab his lighter.

"Being defeated has given you a chance to cool your head. In fact, despite being defeated, you picked up a lot of victories in the lead-up. But since spectators are betting on the side, my lady, how do you think they'll take it when you keep going all in on risky gambles?"

Suddenly, it was clear to everyone in the room. This coup wasn't targeting me because I'd been defeated. It was because I was winning and needed to be removed from the table.

"They owe you for saving them, little missy. However, only a few of 'em—even inside the giant Keika Group—are capricious enough to bet the rest of their lives on your gambles. That's how it came to this."

This was the trouble with having companies run by small numbers of people. I probably could've dragged them along with

my momentum if it hadn't been for my single defeat.

"It's hard to quit while you're ahead. Ichijou said the exact same thing to me."

I looked over and saw Ichijou's strained smile. He had tried to get me to throw in the towel while I had the upper hand, but since the two of us were in the same boat, he hadn't pressed me. Apparently Keika Group wasn't full of people like Ichijou, ready for whatever happened next.

"If you walk away now, we'll come out with our winnings. You can buy some sushi to take home with you, hop in a taxi, and look back fondly on the memories of all the fun you had someday. But if you stay behind and spend all your chips, none of us will get to go home either. Doesn't it just make sense that people would try to stop you?"

Now I suddenly knew how normal people felt. *"Your company's a mishmash, but not only did you avoid a crisis, you saved up enough money to live as you please for a while. Why must you push yourself to keep going? It's time to head home, my lady."*

If it were just a matter of a few thousand yen, I'd gamble the way they wanted, and we could walk home together from the casino that night like friends. But these people had millions of yen in their hands. If the coup's instigators were part of company leadership, their share would be in the tens of millions of yen. They were nervously watching *me* gamble with hundreds of millions. Our organization had expanded so quickly that parts had come out warped, and those parts were now causing a reaction.

"Keika Holdings and Keika Electronics Union are acting in ways that make their intentions obvious. The Japanese members are coming together to get rid of the foreigners you've brought in. The eastern and western sides of Keika Railway are at odds, but they have to work together on the Shinkansen. Well, that's a government project, so they're the ones who need to be appeased in the end. Anyway, Keika Corp, where I'm from, remains stuck in a game of musical chairs. You're payin' the price for not purging those people with your iron fist when you had the chance."

"You make it sound like getting rid of them now wouldn't do anything, Tenmabashi-san." Toudou, his boss, spoke sternly.

The old man smiled like he didn't care in the slightest. He was good at this, all right. He knew how to make the people in the

room less hostile toward him. “You guys won’t be able to stop the coup on your own if they coordinate their moves to happen at the same time. Even with the Keika Group reorganizin’, a revolt in the pivotal Keika Holdings would mean game over for you and the Keika Group, little missy. I know Ichijou-san had to bring people in from other companies, but you shoulda been havin’ heart-to-hearts with those folks.”

“Sadly, no one listened to the stories of the young employees from regional banks.”

Companies had boards of directors to make decisions, but Ichijou was a minority on his board, having come from a regional bank. He’d been able to carry out operations flawlessly all this time because he enjoyed protection as my spokesman, and also because he was one of the few with access to the Moonlight Fund—the Keika Group’s backbone.

“But why now? Even if they got rid of Ichijou, I’d just call a general shareholder meeting and have another of my people replace him.”

Tachibana spoke up for the first time in the whole meeting. “Have you forgotten what’s being considered in the National Diet right now, my lady?”

His words left me completely dumbfounded. Indeed, I’d completely forgotten. “Injections of public funds…”

“Gowa Osan Bank is on the verge of dissolution, and with Keika in disarray even after clearing up bad debts, it’s like we’re just sitting here waiting for someone to take advantage of us.”

Ichijou was pouring salt in my wounds as I struggled to find any words. Public fund injections were a way to forcibly increase capital to promote the disposal of bad debts, and all megabanks would receive that cash simultaneously. As for banks that had already finished working on their bad debts, we were supposed to return the money because we didn’t need it. But what if the board of directors, who were supposed to authorize the return of those funds, refused to cooperate?

“Still, as long as we have the Moonlight Fund…” That fund was my heart and soul, and even with these looming threats, it should remain safe. I was grasping at straws, already planning to use the fund to turn the tables on this coup.

But Tenmabashi finished me off mercilessly with a single blow. He looked like a silly man, but I'd forgotten that tanuki were—despite their looks—ferocious carnivores. "That's exactly why the people behind the coup are tryin' to build up your pops, the Keikain duke. That's how they're goin' to keep you locked away for good, little missy."

"Let me ask you two things... First, why are you telling us this? Second, why did you suggest moving the Moonlight Fund to Keika Corp headquarters during the meeting about our reorganization?"

To put my questions in another way, Tenmabashi must've come here because he'd determined that I still had a shot at coming out victorious. I needed to know just how long he'd stay on my side. If I wasn't certain of that, this conversation would be over.

"Let me think. I guess the biggest reason is that I think you'll give me the best returns. As for your second question, it's a bit of a story. Mind if I dive into it?"

This seemed like it would take a while. I nodded and commanded Eva, "Before the story, bring us tea and pickles to share with everyone."

"As you wish." She bowed her head and left the room.

I'd wanted to take a bit of a break, but this old man really commanded the room. He ignored my signal to pause and continued the discussion. "Gekkou Investment Firm. Ever heard that name before?"

Okazaki was the one to respond to that question. He was apparently well-informed on this subject. "They're a Moonlight Fund knockoff from mainland Asia. Not only are they blatantly imitating us, we've received inquiries about whether they're connected to us. We always have to respond that they aren't. I believe we asked their government to change their name too."

"They didn't change it, either because the bribe wasn't good enough or because big political figures are involved with that fund. Or it could be both."

Toudou added on to Okazaki's description. Society on the Asian continent, which heavily valued connections, was also a

world where bribes dictated all. Lies became truths if you had enough money to pay for it.

The sly, tanuki-like old man who'd brought up the fund's name casually lobbed another bombshell. "They're imitating the Moonlight Fund's actions to perform their money laundering. You've done too much, little missy."

The old man's statement caused Okazaki and me to fall quiet. Indeed, I *did* regret going overboard with the thirty-five billion dollars I'd recently made off with.

However, Tenmabashi seemed to be enjoying himself as he spoke to the rest of us—the people yet unable to see the path out of this. "It's not money they want, little missy. It's fame. Just like 'the man who broke the Bank of England,' what they're really after is the Moonlight Fund's reputation as Her Majesty's Escort Fleet."

"Her Majesty's Escort Fleet"? What the heck is that? It actually sounded kind of cool.

But then Ichijou clapped his hands in realization. "I see. Weren't the policies of the Ministry of Finance called a 'convoy system' previously? Now that financial institutions have been protected, that's been upgraded to 'escort fleet.' If that's the name they're using, London must be involved."

It seemed the cool name actually had some history behind it. The First and Second World Wars had essentially been battles to decide the United Kingdom's fate. They would've been over without the help of the escort fleets protecting the convoys that constantly carried supplies to the country. Then there was the Bank of England, the heart of the country, which had failed to defend the pound thanks to the "man who broke the Bank of England." This old man was telling us to look at that event and consider how people in London might see the Moonlight Fund.

"I think I understand now. They're after banks that don't want to be rescued under the Keika Rules, but still need to eliminate bad debts. It's all so that foreign funds can target the Japanese market."

This event had happened in my past life too, when foreign vultures purchased Ichiyama Securities and the Long-Period Credit Bank of Japan and squeezed them for cash. But despite my confidence that those two companies were their target, the sly old

man shook his head as if informing me that I'd been tricked. *He really gets under my skin.*

"They aren't goin' to all this trouble for such a little thing. You used your fund to defy the prime minister, meanin' you picked a fight with this country itself, little missy. Take a second to think about what that really means."

"……"

Okazaki went pale first, followed by Ichijou and Toudou. *That* was the point of the coup. Since I now refused to take on the prime minister, they'd get me out of the way and sell a story to the markets about how I'd intended to challenge him after all. Their end goal was…

"It's the yen, isn't it?"

The Japanese yen. They were targeting our currency itself. Seeing my grave look, Tenmabashi applauded me for reaching the answer. It was so irritating.

"If you get that, you probably know why I want the Moonlight Fund moved to our headquarters. You like attackin' by changin' things fast when somethin' comes up. But when the war turns defensive, you won't have the resources for it. You'll need proxies to act for you, since you ain't a grown-up yet either. Overpowerin' you like that is how the prime minister beat you too. Sure, these people may not be him, but that's why they can play even dirtier."

Tachibana had been silent all this time, but now he finally spoke. "Where did you obtain all this information?" He was probably the one who could argue with this sly old man—someone who acted cleverly both in public and in private.

In fact, the old man was like a totally different person when he turned from me to look at Tachibana. "General trading companies in this country basically contain their own intelligence agencies. It's only natural that someone out buyin' and sellin' things all over the world will come back with some intel. If you want to see the state of the world, just look at what's goin' on with weapons trading."

Now that he mentioned it, I recalled some related connections Teisen Ishii held. This old man must've gone through those connections to get his information. What he'd obtained was

enough to shock even former CIA agent Eva, who'd returned with the tea and pickles.

"It sounds like things aren't goin' so smoothly with Iraq. Turkey is basically in a civil war over the issue of the Kurds, and the territories they occupy are gettin' more stirred up too. There's even a rumor that the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State are both gonna be replaced, since Iran came in and took advantage of them."

Small waves rippled in the tea Eva served me. She would've undergone training to control her emotions in the CIA, but even she was visibly disturbed. The old man was seemingly telling the truth.

"That's why the market prices have gone so high for both weapons and mercenaries. The United States has to fund the war, so it'll need monetary easing and to issue government bonds all over the place. Between the twin trade and budget deficits, the yen's gonna rise a lot."

These "twin deficits" were the cause of Japan and America's economic crisis leading up to the collapse of the bubble. It happened over and over again until now; hedge funds and vultures had been loading up on yen to prepare for what came next. What mattered most in large-scale speculative efforts like these was having a "banner" and a "story"—both things fulfilled by having money.

"Gekkou Investment Firm is gatherin' loads of cash by pretending to be the Moonlight Fund's shell corporation. Once they get you out of the picture with their coup, they'll use your trump card to take on this country itself. No one would doubt a story about you goin' after the prime minister. To anyone on the outside, it looks like you two have a deep-rooted grudge against each other. At the same time, the opposition party will declare that they have your support, make Izumikawa's faction change sides, and drive the prime minister to resignation—if not a full-on dissolution to destroy his administration. You won't have any luck protectin' the yen if it gets to that point."

"That plan falls apart if she never opposes the prime minister at all, which is why they've shifted targets to the duke himself. Once rumors start going around that the prime minster was behind the Keika Group coup, His Grace will have no choice but to

fight against the prime minister to protect Lady Runa. Everything the coup does inside the Keika Group will be a distraction…" Tachibana sounded astonished, almost as if he were impressed by it all.

Even I couldn't help admiring such a grand scheme. This plan would be vital to financial institutions who needed to make large investments into funds. One such financial institution came to mind, and I said their name out loud: "Karafuto Bank."

The silly old man's eyes suddenly changed to those of a fearsome carnivore. So Karafuto Bank *was* the source of Gekkou Investment Firm's money after all.

"That was just a guess, but it looks like I was right, wasn't I? That bank's been in trouble when it comes to clearing bad debts."

Well, that bank hadn't existed in my past life, and I was certain by now that they were involved in money laundering during the events of the game. I simply felt that they'd try to reach me by any means possible as long as I was Keikain Runa. Not that I intended to say that to the room.

"Pretty sad, ain't it? If you'd just been born twenty years earlier, you probably could've climbed to the very top of this country…"

"Sad? I don't want to have to shoulder any more burdens than I already do. Toudou, make this man a vice president and put him in charge of stopping the coup. He has to do it, now that he's told me this much."

"My lady!"

"Thanks a bunch!"

Toudou and Tenmabashi responded simultaneously. Since he'd brought me such valuable information, I felt I should purchase it from him at the highest possible price.

"I'll give it all I've got," said Tenmabashi. "Oh, and one more thing."

Now that I'd given him the ultimate repayment, the old man brought up the one last bit of information he'd been holding on to. It was something I absolutely couldn't ignore.

"You know Barnes-san, that man at the luncheon? I hear he was a fund manager at Karafuto Bank's New York branch before leaving for Silver Woman Securities. They say he was up to no

good there, so it's probably worth hearing it straight from the horse's mouth."

Keika Corporation, a planned four-company conglomerate, has announced its organizational structure and select personnel. The company name is changing to Keika Corp as they create a holding company for Akamatsu Corporation, Teisen Ishii, Teimen Corporation, and Kanegana Textiles, at which point company reorganization will occur. Keika Corporation, now Keika Corp Holdings, will appoint Toudou Nagayoshi president of Akamatsu Corporation and Tenmabashi Mitsuru, senior managing director of Teisen Ishii, its vice president. Toudou-shi once worked for Keika Corp and is a central figure in its current reorganization. Hailing from the resources division, he has a long-standing relationship with Duke Keikain, the Keika Group's owner. Tenmabashi-shi also holds deep connections to foreign countries through his time at Teisen Ishii. Following the merger, he will additionally take the role of chairman of organizational reform, putting him in charge of internal restructuring among the four merged companies. However, his appointment comes before the selection of many other vice presidents and officers, which will likely provoke speculation within the company…

After this article appeared in an underground economics magazine, the man in question sat before me, cradling his head—while seated in his newly established spot at the next executive luncheon. This was the price he'd paid for access to the Moonlight Fund.

"I'm surprised no one's tried to kill me over this. If they knew what was goin' on behind the scenes, they'd come for my *life*, not just my name."

I had nothing to say. He was right, after all. I decided not to tell him about the hundred billion yen Okazaki was hiding that wasn't even listed. I'd already informed the old man that the Moonlight Fund—the value of which was expanding through multiple private banks—was enough to make people threaten *my* life. We started discussing what to do about that.

"Coups happen in stages. If they wanna shut you away, little missy, they've gotta get control of the Moonlight Fund. It's where your power comes from, after all. Only President Tachibana of Keika Railway and Ichijou-han, CEO of Keika Holdings, can access

the fund. Tachibana-han has already lost his power, so it all comes down to getting Ichijou-han out of the picture next."

I was surprised to hear him say all that in front of Tachibana himself, although Tachibana kept a calm look on his face. Checking his calendar, the old man started working backward to unravel the plan. A coup wouldn't succeed unless it was carried out strictly according to schedule, but that strictness just allowed us to predict the conspirators' timeline.

"The National Diet are debatin' whether banks will actually be injected with public funds. Even if they extend the session, it should all come to a head around July. They probably don't want an election around Obon, so July will also be their target if they decide to start a political uproar to provoke a snap election."

If it depended on a snap election in July, predicting the Keika Group coup's timeline would be quite simple. The two events would occur simultaneously.

"A coup at Keika Holdings in June. Once they force little missy out of the picture, Lord Keikain will get Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa to bring a vote of no confidence against the cabinet, leading to a snap election in July. That's probably the crux of it all. If they manage to boot CEO Ichijou from Keika Holdings, it'll leave a pretty ugly scar."

Ichijou was still a key figure who'd helped grow Keika Holdings as my proxy. The coup would have until June to leave such a scar.

"Of course, ousting Ichijou-han will hurt other parties besides Keika Holdings. Not countin' Keika Corp, since they're all in a frenzy reorganizin'. You don't know who in that company is a friend or foe either, do you?"

An organized chaos. As contradictory as that sounded, it was a definite necessity for the coup. The last thing they'd want was to poke the hornet's nest and tear apart Keika Corp from the inside amid all the upheaval, only to lose control and see their plans fall through in the end.

That left two companies—Keika Electronics Union and Keika Railway. I thought about what the old man had told me so far, then chose the company that seemed likeliest to my mind.

“So is Keika Electronics Union the trigger? Karin scouted someone from outside, and it’s turned into a rallying point for everyone else in the company to oppose her?”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you? That’s why they’re gettin’ the better of you, little missy.” He grinned like he was pleased he’d tricked me.

I was irritated, but I had to ignore it. “Keika Railway? But their only obvious leverage would be Tachibana, and he plans to step down soon.”

“No one’ll fall for a trap if it’s in plain sight. Traps are traps because they’re laid where you least expect ’em. The ones behind the coup within Keika Railway plan to turn the money being poured into the company into bad debt.”

Keika Holdings paid the entire construction budget for Keika Railway’s projects, like the Shinjuku Shinkansen and Shin-Tokiwa Railway. If those payments turned into nonperforming loans, that would definitely be just cause to oust Ichijou from his position.

As I thought this over, Tenmabashi hit me with another bombshell. “That failed terrorist attack on the Shinjuku Geofront… I’ve got a hunch about where some of their money came from.”

What? I needed a few moments to process his words. *What is he talking about? The attacks were supposed to be in 2001… Ah, I see now.* “So the plan to remove me has been in the works for quite some time.”

Once I said that, Tachibana and Eva both broke eye contact with me, which told me everything I needed to know.

“I made sure to send anyone who made fools of the Keikains to other places in the Keika Group, at the very least.”

This was modern-day society, so Tachibana couldn’t simply purge them all. Judging by his words, it sounded as if he’d taken the optimal actions to keep those fools in check without allowing me to suffer any backlash. That, however, was how the coup had shifted from the Keikain family to the Keika Group itself.

Seeing Tachibana’s expression, Tenmabashi smiled awkwardly as he continued. “It’d be a lot easier if you could point to a single conspiracy that connected everything. Well, what’s left of such a conspiracy is tryin’ to defeat you. It was time you found out for yourself, don’t you think?”

If they were being backed by Karafuto Bank, why had they wanted to get rid of me for so long? If that had to do with Keika Holdings, I could think of only one reason.

“Karafuto Bank’s bad debts are still lurking, aren’t they?”

“Domestic banks fell under the former Ministry of Finance’s jurisdiction, but the Karafuto Reconstruction Agency and Karafuto prefectural government managed Karafuto’s affairs. The Karafuto Reconstruction Agency is under the Cabinet Office’s direct control.”

Once Ichijou explained that, it finally all made sense to me. It was a matter of jurisdiction. They were outside eyeshot of the Ministry of Finance, which had let this bomb keep ticking without anyone noticing. Since these factors hadn’t existed in my past life, I’d never noticed them in my rush to clear bad debts.

“It didn’t help that Barnes-han never opened his mouth until Angela-han came to work for us.”

Eva, who had CIA connections, answered Tenmabashi’s words with silence.

I’d wanted to hear from Mark, a fund manager for Karafuto Bank. But Angela had stopped me over the phone, telling me to wait until she was back in Tokyo, since this was something serious that couldn’t be discussed in a phone call. Now I knew just how much darkness must lurk under the surface of this matter... *Wait, what?*

“Hang on! If the terrorist attacks were intended to turn Keika Railway’s funds into bad debt...”

When the old man saw that I’d figured it out, his smile turned to that of the carnivorous tanuki. “Didn’t I tell you? These guys are going to use dirty tricks. We’re talking about gambles with trillions of yen, after all. What’re a few terrorist attacks if they’ll get spare change out of ’em?”

Imperial Keikain Memorial Hospital was a facility built in a prime location within the city, with full monetary support from the former Keika Pharmaceuticals company. Since it was also constructed within the Keikain Dukedom’s territory, the hospital had the unique capacity to indulge the special privileges afforded to nobles. Many politicians or businessmen caught up in scandals

would flee there under the pretense of illness to avoid investigation.

It was the rebel battalion responsible for the Second February 26 Incident that brought the hammer down on those types of people, and in a country that tended to cheer for tragic heroes, they couldn't be convicted as mere terrorists. This hospital was also something of an inner sanctuary to my grandfather, meaning that it used to have fairly impressive security. However, I now kept it protected by a platoon of guards from Kitakaba Security in case of an unlikely threat.

I stepped into the hospital with Tachibana right behind me. All the employees, even the hospital director, came out to greet me briefly. Then I went and knocked on the door of the VIP room, where a gentle voice from inside answered me. I said hello to the room's occupant, handing him a bouquet.

"I'm glad to see you looking well, former Prime Minister Fuchigami."

"I *do* get my treatments here, even if it's a nice place to lie low and avoid arrest too. It sounds like the prime minister's unchallenged National Diet plans to look the other way. You truly never know what fortune will bring you in life."

It was now clear that the Tokyo Public Prosecutors Office's Special Investigations Department had targeted former Prime Minister Fuchigami in the corruption scandal involving the Foundation for the Development of Small- to Medium-Sized Companies. The opposition party had tried to inflame the situation, failed, and now he'd been hit with other accusations too. I'd heard he basically never left this hospital these days, telling the world he was a patient there. I was impressed. It made sense that someone with such keen senses would get all the way to the prime minister's seat. In fact, I wished he'd take better care of himself, since he really *was* ill.

"So, are you here because of the Privy Council?"

Prime ministers were conferred a one-generation title, becoming counts, which allowed former Prime Minister Fuchigami to be sent to the Privy Council where Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa had become chairman. There, the two planned to take anti-Koizumi positions behind the scenes, but then came an outcry over suspicions regarding his ownership in Imperial Mobile

Phones. He'd fled to this hospital to avoid damage from the investigation, both as a former Diet member and as someone with special noble privileges. I thought the accusations fell into a gray area, but I also secretly believed Prime Minister Koizumi might've been the one who leaked them to the opposition through the mass media.

It was often said that "politics is about numbers, numbers are power, and power is money." Prime Minister Fuchigami himself was more or less the head of the faction of the person that quote first came from.

"We'll talk about that some other time. I want to ask you about Karafuto."

As soon as I spoke, former Prime Minister Fuchigami's eyes closed slightly.

Sensing that this was a messy subject, Tachibana nonchalantly added information. "A plot is underway within the Keika Group to remove my lady from power. We could deal with that if it were an issue with the Keika Group alone, but there are signs this plot may have been engineered by the political world and even foreign countries. Karafuto Bank sits at the heart of it all. You were the one who handled the aftermath of the Northern Japan unification that the opposition coalition government pressed forward with, so we came to speak to you, since we can't figure out just how deep this all goes."

"It's pretty deep. A lot of people left politics when they encountered it—more people than I could count with all my fingers and toes. But I'm not so ungrateful that I won't help Her Little Majesty with her dilemma."

After saying that, former Prime Minister Fuchigami took his eyes off me, looking out the window. I knew from the reflection of his face that he was trying to decide what to tell me and what to take to his grave. That told me just how much darkness surrounded this matter.

"Let me start with some advice. Your Little Majesty, where do you intend to become queen?"

I didn't understand, but I would admit that I could possibly become queen of Karafuto if I really wanted to.

As I thought that, though, former Prime Minister Fuchigami raised his voice. “Your Little Majesty, you shouldn’t be in control of a country.”

Now I *really* didn’t understand. I cocked my head, but the former prime minister still kept his eyes off me.

Then he spoke to me in the friendlier voice that he’d once used when he was the prime minister. “You shouldn’t be queen of Karafuto, Russia, or any country. International society—history itself—treats actresses like you like you’re disposable. Once they’re done with you, you’ll be lost to time. First and foremost, you need to realize that that’s the kind of person you could become.”

Former Prime Minister Fuchigami stared out at the city, his face turning melancholic. As someone who knew all the secrets, he was revealing what little information he could to me.

“Everything changed when those planes struck the Twin Towers. The end of the Cold War and the Pax Americana following it will have their opposition centers erased, and the world will begin an asymmetrical war. It’ll be divided into America against everyone else, but this country will probably take America’s side. That’s not a terrible thing. The country hasn’t forgotten the lesson that America isn’t a nation to take on—not after the bloody war we fought half a century ago. When it comes to deciding who’s a friend and who’s a foe, those without power would be foolish to choose neutrality. I believe it’s good that Prime Minister Koizumi is currently leading this country. If you and I set aside our personal motives, of course.”

I couldn’t help but nod. That was my honest response. In this world, this country had been defeated, but we were paying compensation through blood and iron. In other words, this country was prepared to pay with more blood and iron if we needed to.

“You’re already a superstar of history who can’t run away from anyone. Your stage was chosen the moment you were born. The more dazzling and glorious that stage is, the more time preparing it will take.”

There was no escaping the lessons of the past. Today still connected to yesterday, yesterday connected to the past, and the past always connected to history. If the stage produced by such a

long period of time was magnificent and beautiful, what was my role on it?

Former Prime Minister Fuchigami said it, didn't he? "Your Little Majesty."

When I was born, the Eastern Bloc had still seemed to be going strong after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In reality, that was smoke and mirrors, which the Eastern Bloc kept up until the Soviet Union fell in December 1991. Maybe I wasn't suited to a role in Russia, but I would be perfectly cast in Karafuto.

"Thank you, former Prime Minister. May I visit you again before you're discharged?"

"I don't mind. Do your best, Your Little Majesty."

I was incredibly angry. That was why I had such a nice smile on my face. Slamming the table, I unleashed the reason for my anger upon the muscular foreign man.

"Why are more of our boats being sent to the Persian Gulf? These ones are still under construction!"

I knew things were bad in Iraq. Rather, I'd played a major part in that bad situation, at least up to a point. That was how two of our ferries had ended up in the Persian Gulf. We hurriedly constructed two more ships to replace them, but we'd received demands to send those over too. I was fine with that, but it was the first I'd heard of it at all. To top it off, there was now discussion about selling all four boats to the U.S. Army. Not even Angela or her successor Eva knew about that. That was why I'd set out to the American embassy to demand an explanation. Naturally, the ambassador's face was completely pale.

"I'm aware of the situation in Iraq, and I wouldn't hesitate to assist an allied country," he said. "Don't you see the logic in it?"

This was all an act, of course. I was only unleashing my rage on the ambassador as a cover story while Eva looked for concrete information. Still, the ambassador's face was as blanched as it was because he knew I had direct connections to the president.

Once I'd finished my little act, I left the embassy and received a phone call from Tenmabashi Mitsuru, who'd been investigating this matter from the Keika side.

"It's an alarm trap."

An alarm trap. In other words, a trap that gave off noise when the enemy approached.

I cocked my head, but the old man continued his explanation, sounding like he was having a lot of fun. “Those ships belong to our subsidiary company Kitakaba Security. On paper, they’ve been rented to the Japan Self-Defense Forces dispatched to Iraq, but they’re really bein’ used by multinational forces. The story goes that those multinational forces took a likin’ to the boats, so the JSDF and Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted to please them by handing ’em over. That’s all it was.”

“But they went out of their way not to tell me. Why would that be?”

I’d found out about this when the designs for the ships still under construction were altered. They’d gotten rid of luxury rooms I would’ve used while traveling on the boats, leading to a cancellation fee for the interior design and equipment. Keika Pacific Ferry was paying the construction fees, but the money for the luxury rooms came out of my own pocket—that is, the Moonlight Fund—and the bill had ended up with me. I looked into what was going on, and that was how we wound up where we were.

“When you look at it from their perspective, you can see what cards up our sleeve we’ve now revealed. First of all, it shows how much control you have over your organization, little missy.”

Well, all I’d done was pay with my own money after my late-night bus trips—a hobby of mine—became an issue. But if it hadn’t been for that, I’d never have noticed anything was wrong. I’d revealed how much control I exerted, even as the entire Keika Group underwent reorganization.

“This also revealed that you haven’t given up yet when it comes to influencin’ the political situation in Iraq. Once they knew that, it was a bad move to go hollerin’ at the American ambassador.”

“How come? It’s the Americans actually using the boats.”

“Do you really think pressurin’ the embassy will get the Americans to give them up? Normally, you’d want to go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or JSDF to talk about this sorta thing.

Maybe you gave the ambassador a bad headache, but you're just provin' your eyes and ears are focused on Iraq."

Oops. I'd completely forgotten about those other routes, and I could've gone straight to the president if I'd wanted to. I'd made the fatal mistake of revealing enough for them to guess my motives.

"So, you skipped the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and JSDF to go straight to the American embassy. Puttin' aside the two groups you publicly ignored, people know you've got trouble with the prime minister. Know what they'll think? 'She's forming connections with the United States to oppose the Japanese government.' That's some good material you just gave the people tryin' to overthrow ya."

Still holding my phone, I brought my hand up and clutched my head. I'd been careless. I'd neglected my own country's institutions, since I could directly access high-level information thanks to the American and Russian intelligence connections I kept close to me. Of course, it wasn't like I had no connections to those Japanese institutions at all. Angela and Tachibana kept up those relations. As an aside, Tachibana was being ousted as company president thanks to the scandal led by Prime Minister Koizumi, while Angela was working on Wall Street to prepare to take over Keika Holdings. Eva was probably still a working agent, but she wasn't as familiar with Japan on a societal and economic level as Angela was. I'd dismissed the people I could actually use, all to put on my little show of anger.

"There're all kinds of people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and JSDF, including quite a few who'd side with the prime minister, I'm sure. If they know you're on bad terms with the prime minister, they're all sure to think, 'That little lady hasn't given up her dangerous games yet.' Basically, they're one run ahead of you right now."

His baseball reference made me realize he was probably a fan of *that* team. *They're sure doing well this year. But that's off topic.*

"It's only the first inning. No one can complain so long as I manage to win by the ninth, can they?"

"You've got that right. But you ought to be thinkin' in terms of the whole season, not this one game. When it comes to baseball, there's always a slump in the summer."

Okay, okay, I get it. I needed to be sure of what caused this defeat if I wanted to launch a counterattack.

"Is this related to Karafuto after all?"

"I haven't gotten that deep into it yet, but I'd assume so. The JSDF absorbed the Northern Japanese army and took on a lot of their troops. Since they'd be paid for it, most of the ones who asked to go to Iraq were from Northern Japan. As for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, do I really need to say anything?"

"No, you don't."

That ministry was still dysfunctional. They'd filled it with blue-blooded nobles, but the problem wasn't their powers. The nobles had fallen on hard times economically. The bureaucrats also formed factions based on which countries they were assigned to, and when Northern Japan reunified, the ministry had absorbed their government's diplomats, who now worked there as bureaucrats. They were an incredibly corrupt institution that could pull a prank like this and not be found out.

"I think it was people on our side who decided to sell your toys before you could play with any more fire. These kinds of things weren't properly checked during the company reorganization. But I don't know who's pullin' the strings just yet. This is just my hunch, but I think they've got professionals on their side."

Professionals. That meant intelligence agents, or in other words, spies. It seemed I'd completely fallen for their introductory moves.

If I ignored whoever was pulling the strings, the people at the bottom and middle of this plot were definitely thinking, *We'll do whatever it takes to rebuke the young lady when she plays with fire.* That came from a place of good intentions; it was so incredibly wicked. It was also a model case for the coup that would likely arise against me that summer.

"I want you to come up with a countermeasure. That's why I made you vice president."

"I understand that. I'll bring you good results soon. See ya."

I hung up and saw that Eva's face was even paler than the ambassador's had been. She was still reading the report from the

embassy. The United States had asked to buy our four ships because the situation in Iraq had devolved so badly.

When Eva noticed my eyes on her, she smiled stiffly and explained the American military's situation. "Turkey is illegally entering Iraq over the issue of the Kurds. Kurdish armed forces were heavily supporting the American troops against the Iraqi military. Turkey is a NATO member. Iran is making no attempts to enter negotiations with the United States either."

Iraq was on the verge of a terrible situation: Both sides were split internally, and both would gun each other down with American weapons. Furthermore, Iran hadn't built diplomatic channels after the Iranian Revolution, and their military had failed to begin fighting with Iraq after the invasion only because Japan and the United Kingdom—with their signature double-dealing diplomacy—had put so much effort into the country.

That caused strong anti-Kurdish sentiment to linger in Turkey. The Secretary of State, who'd planned to revitalize Iraq with the help of international society—of neighboring countries, in particular—had completely lost face.

That much would've been fine, but Eva was about to reveal something much more troubling. "After the fall of Baghdad, Iraq's leadership went underground to hide. The Multinational Provisional Authority governing that territory expelled and banned Iraqi leaders and the Ba'ath Party from public office. An estimated six hundred thousand armed Ba'ath Party members have now been set loose."

Even I understood what that meant. I finally recognized why things had gone the way they did in my past life.

There, in the deserts of the Middle East, Vietnam was trying to rear its ugly head.

Glossary and Notes

The noble prime minister: Led the Hosokawa ministry. Hosokawa Morihiro-shi had not only the blood of the Higo-Hosokawa clan's daimyo, but also that of the Konoe dukedom.

Injection of public funds: These public funds will be turned into preferred stock or subordinated debt. As stock, they can

become useful in shareholder meetings. In other words, if they inject money into the company worth more than Runa's own stake, and that money is converted to stock, it will become possible to initiate a legal takeover of the company.

Staging a coup (oshikome): In samurai society, chief vassals could confine a daimyo in a type of coup called *shukun oshikome* ("detention of a lord"). In the Edo period, a daimyo's bad behavior could lead to their samurai status being stripped. There were many instances of a daimyo being locked away so that others could search for a successor.

"The Man Who Broke the Bank of England": George Soros. This man's name is always mentioned in discussions on currency speculation. His fund made off with between one and two billion dollars in such speculative trade.

Teisen Ishii's connections to weapons dealing: The Douglas-Grumman scandal. American aircraft manufacturers used Japanese trading companies as proxies to pay bribes throughout the political world, influencing their decisions about what military aircraft Japan would purchase.

The Imperial Mobile Phones stock scandal: The NTT Docomo scandal.

"Politics is about numbers, numbers are power, and power is money": Said by Former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei.

Blood and iron: Said by Chancellor Bismarck of the German Empire. Blood and iron = military and political measures.

Baseball: The 2003 Hanshin Tigers were governed by the Hoshino "administration." It was a year of glory for the Tiger Party.

Multinational Provisional Authority: In real life, this is called the Coalition Provisional Authority.

The First Time’s a Tragedy; The Second Time’s a Comedy

“AH-BAH!”

“Isn’t he just adorable?”

I stared at the soul who was never supposed to have been born, touching the baby’s hand as Sakurako-san instructed me. One goal of my visit to the main Keikain residence had been to meet my newborn nephew.

“What’s his name?”

Nakamaro-oniisama grinned as he answered me. He looked so much like Father when he smiled. “Michimaro.”

When it came to our nobility, the Keikains were still a burgeoning family. They’d probably wanted to maintain a sense of unity by continuing the family’s string of similar names. The boy’s status as Keikain family heir had been decided when they gave him a name ending with “-maro.”

Sakurako-san eagerly asked me a question: “Will you stay for dinner tonight, Runa-san?”

“Yes. I don’t come here very often, so I was hoping to eat with you.”

“I’m so happy to hear that. I’ve been wanting to hear about your school life.”

I later learned that Sakurako-san had graduated from Imperial Gakushuukan Academy herself. Though her grades had been average, the Asagiri family had trained her well in social education and manners, raising her for the purpose of strengthening the Iwazaki zaibatsu through a political marriage. She’d likely ended up marrying Nakamaro-oniisama because he was seen as a capable man—not because of the bond their family shared with the Keikains. In truth, the main family’s company, Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma, was using their strategic partnership with Arts Nova, a megapharma company, to steer internally. They weren’t powerless whatsoever.

This was how Angela praised my brother: “He’s a capable man, so long as you ignore the fact that he knows what he lacks.”

She was right. Oniisama was the type of worker who could stabilize and develop a company in its second or third generation

of ownership. Even with me there with my unfair advantage of possessing past-life memories, he wasn't fit to essentially found and grow a company from square one. My brother stepping down from his post was a major reason the Keika Group could reorganize around me—someone with blood other than the main family's—at the very top.

"Mind if we take a little time to talk as siblings, Sakurako-san?"

"Of course not. I'm going to put the baby to bed now, so please call me once you're finished."

I was surprised to hear Oniisama call her "Sakurako-san" even now that they were newlyweds. While I processed that meaningless piece of information, Sakurako-san left the room, at which point Oniisama and I began a warm but depressing sibling conversation.

"There's a plot in place within the Keika Group to remove me from power. Your son is one reason for that, isn't he?"

"That's right. I'm doing my best to put a stop to it too, but people get uglier when more money is involved. You'd do well to remember that."

Despite my relationship with the main Keikain family, the fact that I was female complicated things. It was impossible to rule out a future in which some outsider man came into my life and manipulated me to get the Keika Group under his control. I'd like to see any man who was more of an "outsider" than Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, or Mitsuya-kun, though.

"If the main family can't get the plot under control, it must be coming from people close to them, correct?"

"You've got it. This could be coming from one of two sources. First of all, there are the Keikain branch families and successive generations. We've given up on restoring the Keika Group's leadership, but they haven't. Tachibana pacified them once, but there's still talk within the family that Father or I should lead the Keika Group."

My junior high school age put me at a disadvantage at times like these. I was the group's actual leader, but I ended up hauling Father and Oniisama along, since they were my legal guardians. Tachibana used to act as a proxy guardian, but in these situations,

his stepping down from his position was a huge demerit. Instead, I held the true power while I dragged Father and Oniisama behind me. It wasn't as if I didn't understand the branch families and successive generations who thought that was strange…but I wouldn't try too hard with them. I had faith that Father and Oniisama would get them under control in the end. It was the *other* source I was worried about.

"The second source is the people who do us favors so they can cozy up to the Keikain family. It sounds silly, but they're more of a threat than I first thought."

I belonged to the generation that had built up the current Keika Group, so I didn't really have any aides or potential successors. Yet the Keikain family were still involved as my guardians. That could draw people to speculate: *If we arrange for the Keikain family to owe us favors, maybe the brownie points we win will let us dethrone the young lady.*

The trouble was that if the Keikain family accepted those measures, they could look to eliminate threats with their diplomatic immunity—legally or illegally. Even more concerning was that that sort of thing had happened many times before.

"After giving you the Keika Group, we don't know what idiots like them might be planning. Honestly, since there's no way to know who will explode and when, I've told Tachibana to be prepared. But I wanted to let you know directly too."

Nakamaro-oniisama sighed. If the conspiracy had been woven neatly into a single plot, this would've been an easy conversation. However, the truth was that many separate plots were being pursued to remove me from power, making this the ultimate headache to deal with. On top of that, setting aside the future of Japan and this world for a moment, these idiots had determined that I had a better chance of surviving if the Keika Group was taken from me, and they saw that as a justification for their actions.

We didn't know how many such idiots might be out there, so my father and brother had gone through Tachibana to circulate the story of my planned ousting and downfall to determine how safe I was.

"How much do you think Father can do?"

“He says he won’t do anything about this incident. If the government turns out to be influencing the plan to overthrow you, he’ll use the Privy Council to protect you.”

That was just about the worst strategy I could imagine. I cradled my head in my hands. *If he’s going that far, why not stop the coup first…? Well, I guess if my safety is his biggest concern, allowing me to be removed from the company is what’s best.*

That would also mean that the government, which had been pulling the strings in secret, would take a stance to protect me—to protect the Keikains.

“You can’t stop him?”

“Definitely not. Father won’t let there be a repeat of what happened to my uncle, your birth father.”

Nakamaro-oniisama spoke casually, and I could tell he must’ve had a long talk about this with Father. The past he then spoke of was like a slap in the face.

“The Fellowship of Constitutional Government’s administration in those days was what drove Uncle to commit suicide. He was backed into a corner to escape America’s wrath and protect then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Katou. Father and I don’t want you to end up like he did, and we have no intention of putting you in that position.”

Ah. When you put it like that, Father, it makes me want to go and support the opposition…

While bringing a report to the college for class, I decided to stop by Professor Kanbe’s seminar room. I’d told him in advance that I’d be there, so I knew I’d get to speak with him for the first time in quite a while. It seemed he’d heard about the disturbance within the Keika Group.

“Oda Nobunaga thought he had enough soldiers to rule the world, but he was still attacked by Akechi Mitsuhide. Caesar thought he had full control of Rome, but he was still stabbed by Brutus. Hearing those things, what do you think?”

“Nothing in this world is guaranteed?”

“That’s a nice way of interpreting them. But let’s try describing your present situation. ‘There’s a reason behind

everything.’”

Ichijou Erika, dressed in her maid uniform, had prepared cups of black tea for us. We both sipped them as Professor Kanbe continued his explanation.

“The organization you rule—the Keika Group—has a fatal flaw. Do you know what it is?”

“That I, the leader at the top of the organization, don’t have the right to control it?”

“Correct.”

In other words, even with my unfair edge, loyal subordinates, and large sums of money, I had to belong to the organization itself to make it function. That “belonging” was this coup’s root cause. My only official title was Vice President of TIG Backup Systems, the Keika Electronics Union subsidiary I’d launched with my friends. That was a problem.

People like Tachibana, Ichijou, and Toudou operated within the Keika Group under my direction, but I had no actual power. It was a warped structure; though it had been successful all this time, it had allowed distortions to form.

“Wait. Don’t you own the Moonlight Fund, my lady?”

Ichijou Erika had been listening to us on the side, so I answered her question. It was my best option at the time. “I do, but do you think they’d let a child withdraw hundreds of billions of yen? Tachibana and Ichijou made withdrawals as my guardians. At any rate, there’s no *official organization* called the Moonlight Fund.”

“Huh?! Then what’re all those people in Kudanshita Tower doing?!”

“They work for Keika Holdings or Keika Corp’s resource management departments on paper. They’re still attached to those original companies.”

Professor Kanbe added to my explanation. It seemed he studied organizational theory too. I’d heard that the relationship between geniuses and organizations was one of his research subjects. “That’s meant to protect you from fallout if they mess something up, isn’t it? It’s gone well, and you’re still using it effectively. Actually, I’d say *too* effectively.”

After I met a crushing defeat between my company's reorganization and the political strife with Prime Minister Koizumi, my defense mechanism had overreacted to protect me from harm. I could look at this coup as part of that, in a way.

"There's an easy solution. You could take a job that controls them all at once. However..."

"Power comes with responsibility. I wouldn't have time to talk to you like this anymore."

I would control every part of the Keika Group, although it was already so oversized. If I did so, no one could complain about my role anymore, but it would mean taking on responsibility for absolutely everything. It would steal so much of my time away too.

"Right. We call that 'growing up.'" Professor Kanbe sounded amused.

That raised a question in my mind. Physically, I was a child, but my soul was an adult's. How should someone like me perceive the difference between the two? "Just what is an 'adult,' anyway?"

"That's a tough question. I already know you can influence this world and take responsibility for everything you do too. But this society's legal system sees you as a child. Society and laws. Those are the things that truly keep you tied down."

Professor Kanbe sounded like he was having fun, and he almost certainly was. He lit a cigarette, then put it on the ashtray without smoking it.

"However much you've accomplished, I doubt most adults in this world will take your words seriously. That's because you still look like a child. I know exactly what they'd say: 'Stop babbling and go to school.' They might look self-satisfied and tell you that you need more life experience, maybe because they don't want those of you leading the future to solve the things they couldn't."

I suddenly sensed just how much this man looked up to "geniuses." He hoped that geniuses would change society and its laws while being aware that he wasn't such a genius himself.

"That's how societies arise, and laws put them in order. What do you say? If you really wanted to, you might be able to destroy society and its laws."

If I read between the lines, the professor was telling me to topple those things and become an adult. If I did, society, laws, and the whole world would function as I pleased.

“I thought that once I was an adult, responsibilities would follow me around.”

“That’s true. Proper adults take responsibility—or, rather, are made to take responsibility.”

Taking responsibility meant facing decisions. A company’s entire fate could depend on a major project’s success. My decisions meant carrying the lives of hundreds of thousands of Keika Group employees—up to a million if you included their families. That was what becoming an adult meant.

“That doesn’t sound too different from my life so far.”

“That’s not true. I’m talking about being forced to make decisions about everything and taking responsibility for every last thing too. History calls such people ‘dictators.’”

Professor Kanbe’s expression became serious. Ichijou Erika and I both stiffened at the sight.

“You’re still a child, Keikain-kun. Or, at least, that’s how you’re defined by society and the legal system. That’s why the prime minister scolded you like you were a child. It’s adults’ duty to scold children when they go down the wrong path.”

“What about my path was wrong?”

“Don’t misunderstand. You, personally, haven’t made any wrong choices yet. But I don’t know what the future will hold once the poison of power infects you. It’s your *position* that’s wrong.”

“My position…”

The professor had gotten right to what was in my heart, just as the prime minister had once seen through to my heart. In that moment, I felt like I understood; that must be what it meant to be an adult.

“You aren’t considering your own happiness at all, are you? We speak quite frequently, but you’ve never once told me your dreams, your future aspirations, or what makes you happy. At the very least, you’re aware that you carry the Keika Group on your shoulders, and you’ve maintained the people around you so that you can take responsibility.”

He spoke as if reasoning with me, using words that were the polar opposite of what he believed, all so he could convey what being an adult meant.

“Keikain-kun, this country and present-day world are the culmination of trial and error by many adults who strived to make progress little by little. You probably have the power to change the world on your own, but you’ll have to become a victim of this world to do it. Let me be clear, Keikain-kun. It’s all right for you to seek your own happiness. You’re a child, so you can choose the people at your side—it’s not for this world, or for history, to decide for you. Let me tell you some magic words for when you’re an adult and you’re hit by a child’s irrationality: ‘Give up. We adults have already learned to accept that.’”

I wanted to accept the kindness he was showing me. But if I did, I’d have to resign myself to my future ruin alongside Professor Kanbe’s magic words. All I could do was shake my head from side to side.

“It’s a tough thing to be *too* much of a genius. I guess it’s natural to reject those magic words, since you can see the future.”

After saying that, Professor Kanbe just smiled awkwardly.

When I left his classroom, I went to the submission box to turn in my other report. There, I ran into Eiichi-kun.

“Huh? You’re here too, Runa?”

“I didn’t expect to see you, Eiichi-kun. Now that I think of it, we *do* take the same class here.”

We were the only short boy and girl standing out in a sea of tall ones, which felt awkward already. On top of that, though, we were carrying reports for a class that was considered extremely difficult for normal students at the college.

“Have you got some free time? I wanted to check out the cafeteria, but it feels weird to go alone…”

“You leave me no choice. I’ll be generous and order nothing more than a parfait.”

“You mean you want *me* to pay?!”

I couldn’t help enjoying that exchange, and I couldn’t help wanting to become an adult with Eiichi-kun and my friends. That

was why I also couldn't help being aware that I was one step behind on the coup.

It took about two hours by plane from Haneda Airport to reach Nagasaki Airport. We then took a ferry to Holland Town. I gazed at the city from the ocean; looking at the steeples made me think of Venice.

"It's the real deal. I guarantee you that much."

Eva and I listened to an explanation from Mark, who'd come along for the observation. It was amusing how Honami Bank executives were following us too, as if they knew we were putting out feelers. They were desperate, since to them this was the critical moment determining whether two hundred billion yen of their bad debts would be wiped out. Rumors about this town's management crisis had circulated for a while, but now there was talk of the banks being injected with public funds; Honami Bank would receive that money, since they couldn't handle their bad debts. The person who wanted me to buy them was the man to whom I addressed my next question.

"Mark, if that's true, why is it performing so terribly?"

"Isn't it obvious? *Because* it's the real thing."

Mark sneered at my question. I didn't know whether that sneer was directed at the town, at Honami Bank for failing to support it properly, or at me for not understanding. Still, his answer made sense to me.

Mark turned his eyes toward the buildings resembling a residential area. It seemed he'd mastered knowledge of systems like this like the professional he was.

"The amusement park business doesn't get returns from the parks themselves. Their goal is usually to gather people in one place and use them as a driving force to earn money from elsewhere."

That was why many amusement parks and theme parks were backed by railway companies. They recovered the construction fees by transporting people to the parks.

"However, construction fees are very steep, and the amount of money they hand over when it's time to pay the bills is no laughing matter. So there's a trick to making back their initial

investment. They build residential districts alongside big parks like these, then sell them."

I see. Transportation methods were set up to accommodate people coming in, and that transportation could also be used for things like commuting to work. That was why the areas around amusement parks could be sold as residential districts.

"Still, a residential district in Sasebo?"

"It's impossible. The properties would all turn into vacation homes."

I agreed with Mark. Sasebo was a provincial city with a population of 250,000. They didn't need to construct a new residential district. Or, rather, there was no demand for it.

The town before us had been built during the resort craze at the peak of the bubble era.

"They probably wouldn't be in so much trouble if they'd sold this holiday-home district during that period, but the company president at the time refused. He said it'd be like predicting rice profits while the paddies were still green."

"Rice profits?" That was another description I wasn't used to hearing. Was it like speculative selling? I cocked my head in confusion.

That led Mark to shrug his shoulders and explain it to me. "You buy rice when the paddies are green, right? But he was talking about *selling* them while they were green. In other words, the area was under significant demand before they developed the land for this holiday-home district. Still, they didn't sell. They said their motive was to avoid reselling or trouble that might pop up after the development."

I see. At that point, I looked at the Honami Bank executives, who seemed to be shriveling in place. Return on investment was the most important thing to a bank. If Mark could explain this concept, the Honami Bank executives would've had no reason not to recommend selling the land themselves.

"Why didn't the bank point this out?"

"W-well…because…"

It was hard to watch the sweaty, mumbling executives, so Mark ended up revealing the answer. It was a very Japanese reason that stung even me.

“Commercial Bank of Japan was the one promoting that project at the time, and their charismatic former president proposed this theme park.”

“Ah…”

His charisma had made him untouchable, but that was his fatal flaw. I felt like I might fall into a similar category.

“Things could turn out the same way for me if I mess up.”

“I believe two hundred billion yen is a small price to pay for that lesson, my lady.”

I didn’t want to be reduced to a charismatic businesswoman who ended up in a situation like this. As long as I could truly hang on to that desire, Mark was right—two hundred billion yen didn’t seem like such a steep price. At the moment, I was wealthy enough that such a sum seemed cheap.

“Shelving that for now, what do you think operations will be like after the bailout?”

“Pretty tough for a theme park. No one comes to Sasebo for tourism.”

Mark made that declaration bluntly. Tourism in Kyushu started at Fukuoka Airport or Hakata Station. If tourists were going to visit Saga or Nagasaki from there, they usually stayed overnight in either Fukuoka or Nagasaki. Furthermore, those two cities had hot springs resorts like Ureshino Onsen, Takeo Onsen, and Shimabara, so it would be a battle against them. Some tours took a day out of their schedule to visit the theme park, but Japanese people commonly preferred to stay at a hot spring.

“However, I’ll say again that what’s here is the real deal. The Dutch government has a keen eye on this theme park too, and environmental issues are the main theme of the park, because they promote industry academic research. As far as corporate patronage goes, this is a good deal for you.”

The Netherlands belonged to the EU, and it didn’t seem like a bad idea to have some leverage in the face of the obvious tension between the United States and Europe. Environmental issues would also become a hot topic in both political and economic worlds in the twenty-first century, so this park would make a nice attraction for the Keika Group—a company criticized for its political connections.

“It’s rude to call this a theme park. Still, if you can take it on for fifty or a hundred years, it should become an irreplaceable source of profits for you and the Keikain family.”

“Oh? Are you suggesting I turn this place into my own country?”

Mark didn’t laugh at my joke, which meant he *was* indirectly telling me to use my two hundred billion yen to make it my country. His face was incredibly serious. I couldn’t read anything in those eyes of his, which gave me a sense of deep darkness.

I felt like I heard former Prime Minister Fuchigami’s voice in my head. *“Your Little Majesty, you shouldn’t be in control of a country.”* I understood what he meant completely. Leading a country was something my blood made me capable of, and I also had political power. However, I laughed it off, mentally expressing my gratitude to the former prime minister.

“I don’t feel like playing queen here. But let’s have Keika buy this place for the sake of patronizing culture and get them as far out of the red as possible. Dismissed!”

“As you wish, my lady.”

Mark bowed respectfully while the Honami Bank representatives desperately wiped their sweat with handkerchiefs.

On the way home, I whispered to Eva, “He’s capable, but how much can I trust him?”

“You should ask Angela that question. It’s best not to trust him, but as you can see, he’s someone you can use.”

In other words, Eva didn’t know exactly how trustworthy he was either. Learning that, I smiled weakly. Understanding why, she smiled too.

I was both a junior high schooler and a company executive—the vice president in charge of operations at TIG Backup Systems, a subsidiary of Keika Electronics Union. That was why I’d gone to visit the main TIG office. But…

“Hello…! Who are you?”

Someone with a commercial video camera followed me and Tokitou Aki-san, my new secretary, into the building. I thought they were filming us for TV at first, but the cameraman showed me a one-page document. It turned out that he belonged to a

team CEO Karin Viola had hired to create a company training guide.

“Ah. So you’ve met them? I gave them strict orders not to interfere with your work, so please continue your usual routine.”

On the other end of the phone, Karin sounded like she’d predicted my call, since she showed no hesitation as she explained. The cameraman was even recording our conversation.

“I have a question. Does a place like this really need a training guide?”

“It does. Places like this are exactly the ones that need training guides.”

Karin made that claim boldly. I could tell she’d planned to convince me during this call.

“When I first came to this country, I was shocked that you have no beginner’s training guides in the truest sense.”

“What’s a ‘beginner’s training guide in the truest sense’?”

Her tone was so intense. I could only assume she must’ve had a bad experience.

“The person in charge told me things like ‘Learn to do the job by watching everyone else,’ and ‘If you want to learn the techniques, steal them from someone else.’ How could I ever do that?!”

“...Karin, I understand what you’re trying to say, but that process has been working well in this country.”

“I completely understand. However, my lady, I’m in charge of Keika Electronics Union—a multinational corporation. What was the point of purchasing the American company Portercon if we’re to operate solely on Japanese logic?!”

She’d won me over. In fact, I remembered this having been a major problem in my past life too.

“I see. You think we need a company training guide for people who don’t understand the first thing about business. Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

I was on Karin’s side now, but I’d decided to play the devil’s advocate so that I could better understand her logic.

The answer she gave me came at once. “Multinational corporations are ‘multinational’ because they do business with many countries. Keika Electronics Union has a wide range of business interests within Japan, but it also has to sell products manufactured in East Asia and Karafuto to the United States and many other places in the world. In other words, the employees in the United States and East Asia won’t understand things based on Japanese logic alone.”

It was a dream to think that everyone would figure things out just through simple words. Training guides were necessary because some things couldn’t be comprehended without them.

“You’ve convinced me of that. But what’s the camera for?”

“It’s easier to understand the work when you see it. I’ve also asked an American research institution to analyze the footage.”

“Analyze?” I cocked my head, still holding my cell phone to my ear.

Karin described an example case for me. “A recent example is a certain manufacturer noting discrepancies on their production lines’ yield rates. They checked the footage to see what the veteran workers were doing, versus the newbies, and found that a machine on the production lines was malfunctioning slightly. The veterans recognized that and had it fixed right away.”

“Ah. The newbies didn’t know because no one taught them…”

“Exactly. The manufacturer was immediately able to call for repairmen and have their machine fixed too.”

This was very common in Japanese organizations. Workplaces in Japan held a lot of agency, so work tended to be left to them if their company felt like they could do it. But that meant they also hated interference from higher-ups, as things were supposed to be left to the people doing the work on-site. This tension wasn’t just a Japanese matter, actually; it was a never-ending battle in any organization.

“Here’s another example. One division of a business had a good track record of securing contracts. When the company looked into their methods, they found that the female employees who served the tea memorized regular customers’ names and favorite teas. With the permission of those women, the company

listed those clients and their preferred teas in a manual and shared it in the office kitchenette."

"They figured that much out...?!"

Shocked, I focused on the grape juice Aki-san had prepared for me. The cameraman filmed this too; it would probably be analyzed later as well.

"That's the strength of the United States, my lady. We know how to analyze things and put them into training guides. It's because we can do things like that that the United States has successfully incorporated immigrants from so many countries."

I see. However, I was still curious about one thing, so I didn't hesitate to ask Karin about it. "But what if people find out about that?"

On the other end of the phone, Karin laughed. She'd seemingly prepared for this too. "My lady, you said it yourself, didn't you? This training guide is for people who don't know the first thing about business."

Now I understood.

Karin's explanation continued, however. She'd apparently felt pent-up about this. "I looked at the training guides from both Furukawa and Shiyo, and they'd be useless to any new hire, much less a temporary worker expected to perform right away. Can you sell a product just by looking at a training guide? Can you manufacture goods just by looking at a training guide? A worker has to understand the training guide from the start, or they won't be effective. This problem needs to be solved sooner rather than later."

It took a worker time to become productive, and that time should never be compromised. Karin seemed to care passionately about that principle. I decided to ask her something a little meaner now.

"But you're going to restructure the company, right?"

"Of course."

Karin responded so dryly that I could only be impressed. She was an American manager, all right.

Regardless of whether she could tell how I felt, she continued her explanation. "Letting people go is a last resort. The point of the restructuring is to stabilize the company and organize

it in a way that puts cell phones at the heart of the business, as is your vision, my lady. That means we need to get things in order and extract money and people to bring your vision to fruition. Well, short-term layoffs are also a possibility if stock-price pressure becomes too much. If I'm going to reduce the workforce, I have to provide the employees and stockholders something equally valuable in return, or I'll be fired too. Laying off workers after a merger is the worst thing anyone could do. The company would lose all the techniques and training guides it acquired."

American restructuring was interesting in that way. They prioritized seniority and cut new workers loose because they wanted the know-how possessed by their longtime employees.

"I see. Thanks for thinking about major stockholders like me."

"You're welcome. You've given me three years, so I aim to restructure the organization without harming it. I hope you'll accept my filming, analysis, and training guide creation as part of my efforts in that direction. I'd also like to ask you for a favor. I'm interested in introducing quasi-stock options."

"Quasi-stock options? If I remember correctly, don't stock options give managers and employees the right to buy shares in their own company?"

"Correct. I want to distribute one share's worth of payment to all workers, even irregular employees, in addition to their bonuses."

"I see. Since it's such a large company, the employees will all learn how important the stock price is."

"I also want them to understand how the money increases or decreases based on their hard work."

I knew there were different kinds of bonuses, but showing such generosity to even irregular employees had to be related to the restructuring. The Keika Electronics Union stock price, inherited from Furukawa Telecoms, currently hovered around three thousand yen. Karin was essentially suggesting we add three thousand yen to all employees' bonuses, but if results were poor next year, the stock price could go down to twenty-five hundred yen. If the results were good, it could be thirty-five hundred yen. Those stock prices would directly influence how much money the workers took home. It was the perfect method

to motivate all the employees in such a massive organization, but setting the company up to provide those funds would also make restructuring much more intense.

"Karin, I'm sure you understand that..."

"Of course I understand. Please think about it, my lady. If stock prices could be raised through layoffs, no businesses would ever struggle."

"I thought that was a pretty popular method in America."

"I won't deny it. It's not a terrible idea to do that and then use your stock options to become a millionaire..."

On the other end of the line, Karin paused for a moment. She was a female manager in America, part of the first generation who'd broken through that glass ceiling. With her next words, she made her pride and determination known.

"...But how could I ever run the company so disgracefully when I know my successors will have to follow in my footsteps? Besides, my lady, you're someone who started out on the other side of that glass ceiling that I had to break through. People like Angela and me are providing one of the routes you can take in life."

"...Thank you, Karin."

They were carving a path for me. Karin said it so confidently, as if it was merely the natural job of an adult. On a deeper level, that also meant that it was my job to take over what they'd started. I was truly glad to have scouted a person like her.

Later, after the cameraman finished filming, a bit of text was added to the training guide: *Lady Keikain Runa, major shareholder. Drinks grape juice exclusively.*

Bonus Story

"I just can't relax like this..."

"Keikain-san is so experienced with this sort of thing."

"I get distracted when I'm being watched..."

The company was run by Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, Mitsuya-kun, and me, so the four of us frequented the TIG Backup Systems meeting room where we made final decisions about things.

But now they were cringing, unable to focus on the meeting while a cameraman filmed them.

Filming the entirety of Keika Electronics Union—including this meeting—revealed that smokers were being secretly sweet-talked at work prior to official meetings. That led to a big fuss over meetings and smoking bans, but that's a story for another time.

Glossary and Notes

"Stop babbling and go to school": Jeremy Clarkson replied to Greta Thunberg with this message on Twitter (currently "X").

Theme-park business practices: A classic example is Hankyu Railway and Takarazuka. Tokyo Disneyland also recouped its initial investments by selling residential land, only to—amusingly enough—struggle to expand their park later on.

The charismatic president: President Nakayama Sohei of the Industrial Bank of Japan—the banker referred to as the "Kurama tengu of the financial world." While he boasted of many achievements, two wounds he suffered were Huis Ten Bosch and Sogo.

Training Guides: Around this period, Japanese companies became unable to take the time to train people, so they sought temporary workers who could perform their jobs as soon as they were hired.

American restructuring: Layoffs. When reemployment is the intention of temporary layoffs, it proves how companies value experienced workers and know-how. In some cases, however, it results in management worsening until the company can no longer rehire those laid off.

Smoking and meetings: As more businesses separated smoking and nonsmoking areas, smokers took breaks in designated areas. Workers from other departments would gather there and chat. That meant smoking rooms became more like secondary meeting rooms, a common place for employees of Japanese companies to conspire behind the scenes. As a result, nonsmokers started to miss out on information, which really isn't a funny story at all...

The Young Lady's Friends and Their Decisions

"OH, IZUMIKAWA-KUN. Are you on your own today?"

"Hi, Kasugano-san. I'm alone, as you can see."

"That's perfect. Would you care for some tea? There's this one cafe I go to all the time."

"Sure. It'd be rude to reject an invitation from a girl."

Kasugano Asuka had *just happened* to call out to Izumikawa Yuujirou as he *just happened* to be heading home from his after-school club. It was impossible to know how likely such a coincidence was, but at the very least, a lot of work had been done behind the scenes in the lead-up.

The boy and girl, dressed in Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's junior-high uniforms, sat by the window in a fancy café. Asuka ordered a coffee refill to have with her cake, and then it was time to discuss their business.

"Would you like to become a teacher, Izumikawa-kun?"

Yuujirou, who'd ordered a black tea and cake, took a bite before answering in the form of a question. "If I did, the Ehime electoral district would go from my surname to 'Kasugano,' wouldn't it?"

"Sounds like you understand!" Asuka sang.

The upper class had their own obligations, and Asuka was doing whatever she could to grab a bit of happiness in the midst of those. In that sense, she was no different from Yuujirou.

"At this rate, I doubt my dad will make it any higher than cabinet minister. At that point, the opposition candidate will most likely beat him. Given the economic recovery and the next generation, younger candidates are the most appealing."

"You're talking about something that's still at least ten years away."

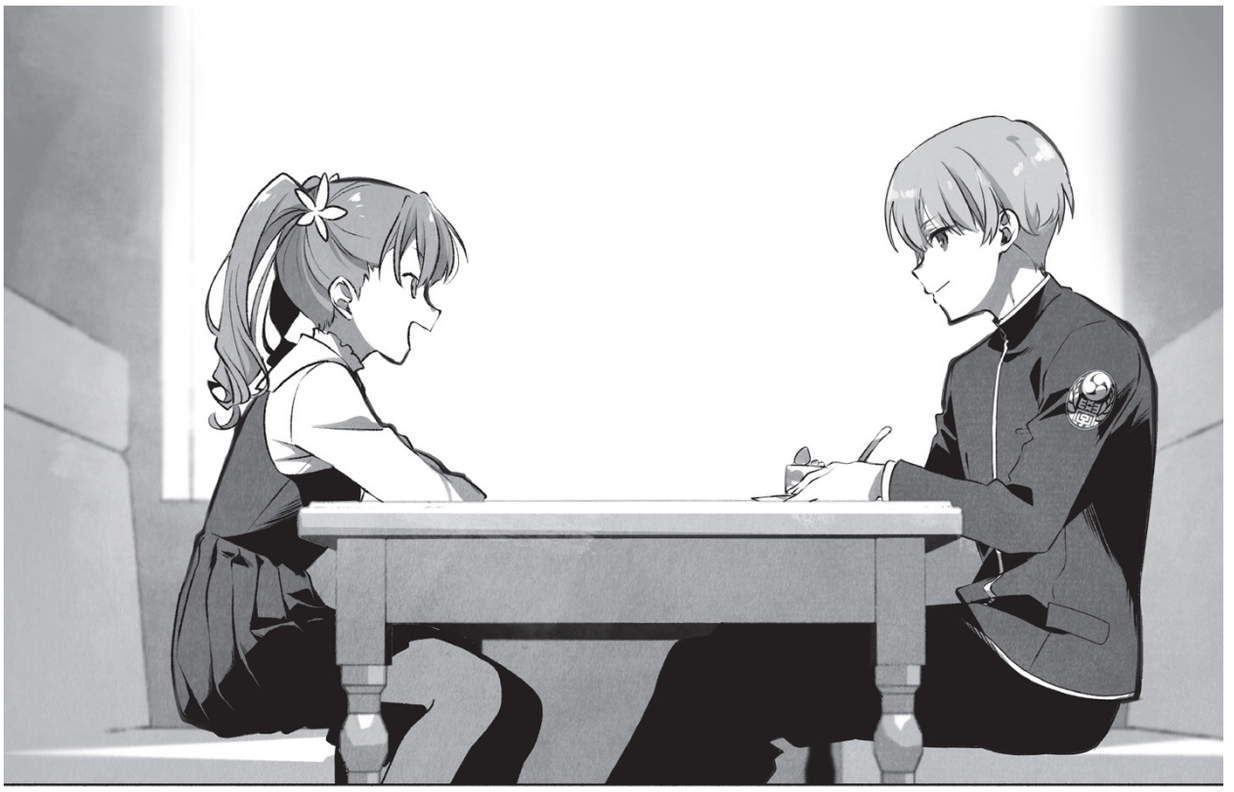
"*Only* ten years away."

Asuka put a newspaper on the table. The politics section was going wild over Koizumi's political theatrics, and bad debt disposal was on the verge of concluding thanks to injections of public

funds. The politics section was influencing these situations and bluntly describing a looming dissolution of the Diet.

“I still can’t predict what that prime minister will do next, but I’m sure there’ll be a dissolution this year. We can still win this election, but the next one will hurt. I really don’t know what’ll happen after that. Between urban population increases and rural depopulation, it’ll come down to swing voters.”

The House of Representatives was elected through single-seat constituencies and proportional representation. The latter was a form of insurance, but you generally couldn’t hold on to power unless you came out with the most votes in your electoral district. The Kasugano family maintained a base of support in a rural area near a city when their electoral district elected multiple members, so their support was in danger of being absorbed by urban swing voters. Candidates were eligible to run for the House of Representatives at age twenty-five. In other words, the two people at the café table could run in the latter half of 2010. Considering a representative’s average term length, they could calculate that there would be five more elections before they became eligible.







“If Dad wins the next election, he should be made a vice minister or parliamentary official. After that, he’ll be promoted to minister. If he keeps rising afterward, though, he might not be able to beat the opposition. If he lost the third election, he’d go back for revenge in the fourth one, but if he lost again, it’d be all over for him. And replacing him as a candidate would be too shameful, so I want to clear a path for my dad’s future.”

Now that the system comprised both single-seat constituencies and proportional representation, it was easier to control people central to the party. Factions used to fight for power, regularly refusing to endorse candidates after elections, but with the backup of proportional representation now part of the system, the party needed to endorse candidates to win seats. In other words, they would no longer have to fight without insurance for endorsements after independents launched candidacies, and once they lost, they’d go back to being normal people. It was free and easy, to put a positive spin on it. A negative description would be that, given how the Fellowship of Constitutional Government was always disconnected outside election times, control over the center of their party had started to become a real focal point during this period.

“Why don’t you run instead?”

“It’s really hard out in rural areas. We live next to a city, which makes it a little better. Still, a woman running is a real demerit. I don’t even *want* to run after watching Dad.”

Asuka’s life had already been decided. Her only two choices were to become a politician or to become a politician’s wife. Now she was putting up a fight to choose a better future for herself.

“So you’re asking me to?”

“Your family trouble is pretty exciting these days, isn’t it?”

“Ugh… If it’s bad enough that you’re pointing it out to me, I guess I don’t have much of a future either.”

The eldest Izumikawa son’s transfer to Hokkaido had caused a war over who would inherit the family’s support base, and that was getting a lot uglier in private. Izumikawa Tatsunosuke was still deputy prime minister and kept a watchful eye on things as a political leader. When it came to the succession dispute that would follow his retirement, though, he had yet to interfere in any way.

“I don’t care. If it falls apart here, then that’s as far as it goes.”

That was the levelheaded response Yuujirou’s father had given his secretary when she delivered a report. He’d probably allowed Yuujirou to witness it to show him what his job actually consisted of—what the world of Keikain Runa, whom Yuujirou’s father had joined hands with, looked like.

“You know you’ll be in trouble a little over a decade from now, like me, right? If you refuse to think about taking over your family’s support, then I’d be a great bargain!” Asuka said melodically.

She smiled, her face truly resembling that of a politician’s daughter. It was a smile that could charm everyone, but it was also masklike, allowing no one to peer through. Reflected in her eyes was Yuujirou, the exact same smile on his face.

“Can a politician’s son really give the answer ‘I’ll think about it’?”

“That’s more than enough. I’m your escape route, Izumikawa-kun. Please don’t ever forget that.”

At times like these, women could see through everything. Asuka must’ve made her offer because she could read Yuujirou’s blossoming love for Keikain Runa, as well as the turmoil in his heart over the feelings his friend Teia Eiichi had for the same girl.

“I’ll be sure to remember. By the way, Kasugano-san, what are outsiders hearing about my family’s scandal?”

Yuujirou was only seeking confirmation in asking that, but the answer he got wasn’t something he could turn a blind eye to. Whether Asuka knew that or not, she gave it as though it was no more important than the cake she was eating.

“I don’t know which, but one of your brothers-in-law is supposedly in touch with someone from the Keika Group. Councilor Izumikawa managed to move to Hokkaido because he had the Keika Group’s support, and now your brother-in-law is trying to get that same support, right?”

Keikain Runa was generally open about things unless she wanted to keep them hidden. She also tended to prioritize both duties and humanity, so if she was intervening in the Izumikawa family strife without telling Yuujirou, something about that was strange.

I wonder who my brother-in-law is in touch with?

After his tea party with Asuka, Yuujirou would contact Runa. This news seemed to surprise her greatly as well, and she expressed gratitude to both him and Asuka. But all that would take place later.

Gotou Mitsuya lived in a rich urban neighborhood.

His family had been bureaucrats ever since his grandfather's generation, and though they seemed like average people compared to Keikain Runa, Teia Eiichi, and Izumikawa Yuujirou, he couldn't deny that they were definitely part of the upper class compared to *actual* average people.

"Go bring your father an umbrella."

Mitsuya's mother had asked him to wait at the train station with an umbrella for his father. The star of the accounting field in the renamed Ministry of Finance, a man still climbing the career ladder, had no reason not to take a taxi home. Making an opportunity for Mitsuya to go see him probably meant that his father wanted to speak to him about something. Mitsuya thought about that as he wandered through the rainy city at night.

His punctual father was already waiting for him, and he waved at his son once he spotted him. "Sorry to make you come all this way."

"It's okay."

"While you're here, why don't we grab dinner? I already called your mother, so she won't worry."

They headed to a family restaurant near the train station, where they both ordered sirloin steak meals. Since it was late, the restaurant was crowded with families and couples.

"You sure eat a lot, huh?"

"Yeah. My job's kind of like a test of strength that you can't do unless you eat. I usually eat meat when I stay at work overnight. Your mother's been nagging me to stop."

Government officials, especially elite ones, never went home at a scheduled time. Another appeal or negotiation always needed their attention. Mitsuya's father took out a cigarette to smoke,

then realized they were in the nonsmoking section and put it back. His unthinking way of doing it made Mitsuya chuckle.

"Should we go to the smoking section?"

"No, it's fine. If you were just a little older, I'd let you try a taste of alcohol."

"What about cigarettes?"

"I know they're bad for me, but I just can't get by without them. They're just like work in that way. Someday, you'll have no choice but to experience those things, so don't try them until you absolutely have to."

The waitress arrived with two sirloin steak meals, each of which came with salad, corn soup, and rice. The pair picked up their utensils and dug in.

"Tell me, Mitsuya, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I've been thinking I'd be a bureaucrat like you. Why?"

"I see. I'd be lying if I said that didn't make me happy, but I want you to decide what to do with your life."

"Is this about something at work?"

The father and son conversed over their meal. The discussion certainly wasn't pleasant, but the atmosphere was still a bit warm. Mitsuya's father set his knife and fork down to stare out the window.

"Something like that. My higher-ups told me I need to think about the good of the ministry. I'm going to tell you this like you're a man, not a boy. This is a discussion between men—between a father and his son."

Mitsuya was mature enough to understand what was going on. The Ministry of Finance suffered a lot of damage during its reorganization and was now desperate to regain power and protect the department. The revised Bank of Japan Act had taken the ministry's financial authority away and given it to the Financial Services Agency, stripping them of an incredible amount of influence. The Ministry of Finance hadn't even been able to keep the characters in its name identical, and now its officials were planning how to recover power and clean up their reputation.



Prime Minister Koizumi had arisen as a brand-new star in the middle of all this. As someone with close ties to the former Ministry of Finance, he began to steal the reorganized ministry's officials and the power that Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa had been amassing. Keikain Runa wasn't only a friend of the deputy prime minister's son, Izumikawa Yuujirou, but also a sponsor of the deputy prime minister himself. Mitsuya's own friendship with Keikain Runa meant his father was being perceived as a member of the Izumikawa faction within the ministry.

Bureaucrats rose to power in their careers based on a lack of demerits, not an excess of merits. The closer they were to politicians, the more rival politicians they attracted as enemies, and those rival politicians counted against them as demerits. Mitsuya's father had just revealed that his own son was holding back his career. Still, he'd told Mitsuya to choose his own life. He was essentially giving up on advancing his career for his son's sake.

"Is this really what you want?"

"Of course not!"

Mitsuya's father had seemingly raised his voice more than he intended, drawing looks from other diners before they returned to their own conversations.

Slightly embarrassed, he paused, then revealed his true opinion more simply. "I was determined to become an undersecretary like my father. I poured my heart and soul into that dream. I made it through the ministry's scandal and reorganization, and as I continue to rise, my outstanding son is becoming my weakness. I was angry at first, but then I was at a loss. I questioned what I'd spent my whole life doing."

In other words, there'd been a lot of conflict leading up to this point. If Mitsuya's father was revealing this now, it meant he was at a dead end, with no choice but to take a clear stance.

Mitsuya had theorized that Keikain Runa was dealt a crushing defeat by none other than Prime Minister Koizumi. He'd been the one to lead the country into Iraq with a goal of quickly ending the war, causing everyone else to start planning for what would come after that.

Things had become turbulent in the National Diet, and the anti-Koizumi faction within the party incited Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa to try and defeat the prime minister. Speculation about dissolution of the Diet was now rampant, and it had come time for Mitsuya's father to make a choice. He'd chosen his son.

"Still, I'm so proud to have you as my son. After all, I have such an outstanding child. Did you know you've already made a lot more money than I have?"

"You know about that?!"

"Don't underestimate the Ministry of Finance's star accountant. I'd never have made it to my position if I didn't have the connections to figure something like that out."

The Ministry of Finance's current power sources were tax collections and budget drafts. Taxes were levied from businesses, so it was only natural that Mitsuya's father knew what was going on in that world. For Ministry of Finance employees, businesses were the main source of taxes.

"Even if I end up out of the running for further promotions, I can still make it to assistant vice minister. After that, maybe I'll end up somewhere random in the private sector. But it sounds like that young lady friend of yours is willing to get a seat ready for me somewhere. The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry have their eyes on your company; they see it as a model for student start-ups. I don't want to keep climbing the career ladder if it means ruining your future."

Mitsuya's father sipped his after-dinner coffee. His cheerful expression wasn't from the satisfying meal.

"Ah. I feel a lot better now that I've finally said that. Do your best in life, Mitsuya."

"...I will."

After their dinner, rain was starting to drizzle. Mitsuya remembered a quote from an anime Keikain Runa watched—a quote he liked as well.

"'...It doesn't matter if some people dance in the rain without umbrellas. That's what it means to be free.'"

"What's that quote from?"

“Who knows? But it’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s nice. What do you say? Should we walk home without umbrellas too?”

“I like the sound of that, Dad. Let’s run home like we’re dancing, okay?”

Of course, that drizzle turned into a downpour, and the pair arrived home soaking wet—totally dumbfounding Mitsuya’s mother. Mitsuya even caught a cold and had to stay home from school. On the day of his return, the Quartet’s members were equally dumbfounded.

“Keikain, about that offer to give my dad a job at one of your companies… I don’t want you to do that.”

“Hang on! That’s the first I’m hearing of this!”

Mitsuya had never expected that a cold would allow him a glimpse of something creeping around the dark side of Japan. Now he felt like it wasn’t such a bad thing to act stupid and catch a cold from time to time. Of course, he didn’t have the slightest intention of saying that out loud.

“Eiichi, I want to talk to you about something.”

Teia Eiichi was at his home in Aichi Prefecture when his father, Teia Shuuichi, summoned him for a talk. They broached the topic not as father and son but as boss and subordinate. That was probably because Shuuichi’s son was already earning money as president of an IT startup.

“I’ve heard secondhand that there’s a little trouble in the Keikain family.”

“What trouble?”

“It involves adults being busybodies, giving advice like ‘Stop babbling and go to school.’”

“Ah, I see.”

His father’s tone was all business; Eiichi matched it. Shuuichi made a mental note to thank Karin Viola, the CEO of Keika Electronics Union and his son’s boss, for teaching him that behavior.

He continued the discussion like a superior would. “The prime minister reportedly scolded a certain young lady for trying

to cross dangerous bridges. Now the people around her are uneasy and want to put a bell on her."

"Could you tell me what kinds of dangerous bridges these were?"

Of course, Eiichi's father was happy that his son asked him about that, but he also felt the same parental unease that those around the young lady did. Still, he answered concisely, with both joy and sadness at his son's growth.

"Iraq. It sounds like the young lady drafted plans for all the logistics involved in the war."

Seeing his son lost for words, Eiichi's father averted his eyes with an unreadable look. Little by little, he changed his words from those used in a business discussion to those spoken by a father to a son.

"I don't care whether she plays computer games or financial games, but war games would make her a death merchant, and that's not a title any child should hold. The prime minister chastised her, and the people in her life stepped in to stop her. That's what this is all about."

Teia Shuuichi could only laugh at his own words. Developing countries were using Teia Motor Co.'s lightweight but sturdy pickup trucks as weapons. Indeed, a certain civil war was widely called the "Teia War" due to images of soldiers loading their prized pickup trucks—all with the easily recognized Teia logo on the side—full of heavy weapons. While he couldn't decide how people used their products, Eiichi's father knew well that he, too, could be considered a death merchant in some sense.

"So now people are saying that you should 'stop babbling and go to school' too. What do you say?"

His son responded with his own question—not as a son but as a subordinate. "If someone said that to you, what would you have done, as a leader?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'd have ignored them."

Shuuichi laughed not as a superior but as the boy's father. Then he revealed his own shameful history to the dumbfounded son in front of him.

"I grew up as the young master of the Teia Group, just like you did. I worked so hard to acquire anything I could with my own

abilities. I managed to get it, but still, I'm now nothing more than the Teia Group's leader. Eiichi, you should treasure the position you have right now. And study well. If it's what you want, I wouldn't mind seeing you go as far as to throw away the Teia name."

"D-Dad?!"

His father went on to reveal the internal state of the Teia Group. The discussion revolved partly around being exploited by that internal situation, but he kept that aspect secret.

"Our company used to be on the outskirts of the Futaki zaibatsu, but between our expansion and the public outcry to dismantle the Futaki zaibatsu over their bad debts, they ended up cutting us loose. You know that much, right? As a result, our family owns only a small share of the Teia Group, which was almost exploited by a business looking to take us over. They failed, but the situation hasn't changed."

Around this point, the question "Who does the company belong to?" would often be asked. Nonetheless, seeing what his son possessed, Eiichi's father spoke to how precious it was.

"It's your fortress, so as long as you can take responsibility for it, I want you to do as you please."

"All right."

"I also want you to learn what alcohol tastes like. Drinking will become very important on certain occasions, so long as you don't overdo it."

"Really? You're sure?"

"Teaching children bad habits, then scolding them, is an adult's job. You can leave now." His father sounded like he was enjoying himself.

The boy bowed and was about to leave the room when his father picked up his phone and said something aloud. He intentionally spoke loudly enough to be overheard, indirectly revealing the source of this meddling in their family.

"Ah, I need to make that call to MITI..."

His son was no fool. He recognized that acronym, which stood for the institution's former name: Ministry of International Trade and Industry. It was now known as the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. In short, they'd been the ones to set things

up. Eiichi could guess why, judging from his conversation with his father. Keikain Runa's massively expanded Keika Group had joined hands with this industry.

Under his breath, Teia Eiichi muttered his conclusion out loud: "This is about oil...?"

I loved music—both singing and listening to others sing. One day, I encountered a certain voice.

The girl sang with the timbre of an angel.

Ah. I was born to hear this. I basically accepted it as my destiny.

"Keikain-san has such a lovely voice."

"I think so too. I'm so grateful she came, even if just to help out."

"It's such an honor to get to sing with her at the choir competition in the fall."

I, Machiyoi Sanae, had fallen for Keikain Runa's singing voice. When she'd starred in a courtyard opera during the elementary school's cultural festival, I was completely enraptured by the way she looked and sounded.

"You really don't think Keikain-san will pursue music?"

An upperclassman in the choir asked the same question that was on my mind. We'd heard that she was already receiving offers to study in Europe. I was jealous, but at the same time, I knew it was only natural for her.

"Is it true that famous musicians are going to come see her too?" I asked my friend Asagiri Kaoru-san in the Courtiers' Hall. She was Keikain Runa's relative now, so any information from her would be reliable.

"Yes. It's well-known that the Berlin, Moscow, and Vienna Philharmonics all performed in Japan this summer because they wanted her to join, after all. The Teia International Philharmonic is a first-rate orchestra as well, but if she really wants to make it big, she should go to Europe."

Although this was a personal conversation about her relative, Kaoru-san talked like it had nothing to do with her. Tea

parties in our meeting area were elegant, refined affairs, but I thought they were too formal.

“Besides the Teia International Philharmonic, the Keika Group patronizes the other three orchestras, so they must be coming to meet Runa-san. I feel like the screen world will be the one to sweep her up at this rate, though.”

I couldn’t help but agree. Supposedly, reruns of a drama Runa-san starred in had dramatically increased viewership for a TV station. Watching her acting on the TV screen made her seem like someone from a different world, but the Runa-san I knew was the person who liked to sing songs with us in our classroom.

“Huh? Is that true? That’s the first I’m hearing of it.”

During a break, I told Runa-san everything I’d heard from Kaoru-san. “But I’m sure you’d fit in anywhere, Runa-san. After all, music centers like Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow have all invited you. Which one do you plan to go to?”

“Um…” Runa-san sounded a little hesitant to respond.

Since I was curious, I decided to ask her casually, “Or maybe you prefer being in movies now?”

“Ah ha ha! Yes, I like that too.” Runa-san laughed shyly and looked up at the ceiling, probably trying to make some decision only she knew about. “Still, I should probably study music abroad if I can…”

With that, Runa-san picked up the sheet music for the song we were practicing: “Daichi Sanshou.” She sang it beautifully, but her face always looked sad.

“Our noble families will take control of us someday, you know. I just wonder how far they’ll manage to go.”

That was the fate of anyone born noble. You had to marry and carry on your bloodline through children. These days, the purpose of rank-and-file nobles had been diluted to that degree.

“I couldn’t survive without your family’s support either, Runa-san. I’m really grateful to you. Beyond that, though, I just want to listen to you sing forever.”

“Wait. What’re you talking about?”

“Your family sends the main members of the Courtiers’ families tokens of appreciation, saying they’re payment for joining

the Courtiers… Ah! Sorry! I shouldn't have mentioned the adults' jobs…"

"Ah, I see. We're children, so we can't comment on the jobs adults do." I sensed hidden anger in her voice for some reason. "Tell me, Sanae-san, do we have a duty to be happy?"

I didn't understand what she meant, but I answered honestly anyway. After all, she was talking about something you couldn't obtain just by wanting it. "I think so. I mean, we don't want people who know us to see us unhappy, do we?"

I was only saying what came naturally to me, but Runa-san was lost for words. I cocked my head, wondering if I'd offended her and should say something.

She beat me to the punch, though. "Ah ha ha! You're right. It's so obvious, but I didn't even see it."

The sight of the smile on her face, though it was an embarrassed one, made me smile too. I wasn't someone who would do great things one day like Runa-san, but in that one moment, I truly felt happy.

"All right. Shall we start rehearsing the song?"

"Let's do it."

How could I *not* be happy when I got to hear Runa-san sing from the front row?

Takahashi Akiko, whose father was the head of the prefectural police, had a dojo attached to her house. She practiced kendo there and often witnessed other police officers coming and going as well. Though she was a child, the people with whom she crossed bamboo swords were all her comrades in arms, so she made a lot of older friends.

"All right, let's have a drink. Don't let the girl have any."

"I know not to. I won't give her any of our foamy barley tea."

At that point, Akiko was handed some orange juice. It had been produced in Ehime Prefecture, so she realized it was probably a gift from Kasugano Asuka. She sipped the juice as she sat back and observed.

In this country, judging whether someone was an adult outside of the legal definition usually came down to their

presence at these kinds of parties. If they could drink alcohol at such events, they fulfilled the bare minimum of what counted as an adult. That was an old convention, but it was still effective in rural areas and situations like these. In other words, the adults had allowed Akiko to attend their party to show her how to be an adult. Thus, the more they drank, the more boring their conversation became.

"You know, I heard from Maefuji-san that you're going to keep climbing the career ladder, Ono. I never expected that. I thought you loved to work crime scenes, and now you manage the Kudanshita police box?"

"I'm too old to say no when Tachibana-san bows his head to me. Natsume, I don't want you to forget this. This is how you get tied down by obligations."

"I'm going through that myself right now. I came to get training as a head of security, so how did *I* ever lose?"

"Don't you think my daughter's a prodigy? She even beat the young lady."

To sum things up, Inspectors Ono Kenichi and Natsume Kentarou had come to make connections under the guise of training, and this party was intended to introduce Akiko to them.

Of course, they naturally started to talk about the young lady, so the adults let Akiko hear their work discussions, pretending to be drunk.

"Ugh. If you'd only felt like climbing the ladder a little sooner, I could've had you come work with me, Ono."

"Well, Takahashi and I graduated the same year. He's the one who foisted Maefuji on me."

"Yep, and that's why I'm where I am now. Maefuji-senpai sends his apologies for the trouble he causes you."

"Right. The 'trouble.' I can feign ignorance, since I work in another prefecture, but have people around the young lady started acting suspiciously?"

"I'd be lying if I said no. The Shinjuku Geofront terrorism proved that this county is threatened by terrorists too, and the young lady is such a likely target that the people around her are on edge."

“It’s only natural that she’d be targeted. After all, she’s friends with the American president. I heard the Keikain family wants her to lie low too.”

Evidently, they wanted Akiko to pass this information on to Keikain Runa. She sipped her orange juice and stayed silent.

“Then why doesn’t her father, Lord Keikain, step in?”

“Noble families have their own issues. Tachibana-san’s stepping down, and there’s been a lot of chaos over picking his successor. Supposedly, not even Lord Keikain has a good grip on the situation.”

Akiko didn’t move. No, she *couldn’t* move. It was too late to leave, but this was too shady to listen to. Breaking out in a cold sweat, she realized she needed to grow up more to learn the timing of such things.

“You better not endanger my daughter.”

“Of course I won’t! I’m just saying that she should flee alongside the young lady if she can.”

“...The problem is that the young lady isn’t the type to just give in and run away when she needs to. I wonder if someone can talk some sense into her...?”

On that day, Akiko thus became an adult. As a symbol of her understanding, she gulped down a cup of the clear liquid the adults drank and instantly collapsed. Her drunk ears overheard her mother lecturing the three men while making them get on the ground and bow in apology.

“Hey. Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Katsuki Shiori had been stopped in an empty hallway by Shisuka Lydia—a senpai of hers, but one she had no connection to. Of course, this conversation would be about their mutual acquaintance Keikain Runa.

“Could you deliver Keikain-san a message for me? Tell her, ‘Keep a little distance.’”

Shiori wasn’t such a child that she didn’t know what that meant. In fact, her own parents had told her the same thing. “As you wish. All right—I’ll be on my way now.”

“Wait a minute. Keikain-san would hang back first.” Seeing that Shiori looked astonished by this remark, Lydia gave her a smile—one appropriate for her age.

Shiori didn’t know if it was an act or not. “But I’m not Keikain-san…”

“No, you’re not. What you were doing was normal. But if you just ran off, it’d be like I’d sent a child on an errand.”

“That’s only natural. We’re still children.”

By now, Lydia sensed that her plan had failed. Keikain Runa and her aides only acted like adults, but Shiori didn’t even behave that way, and she wasn’t interested in overstretching herself either.

“Very well. Just listen for now. If Keikain-san falls, our positions will get a little worse.”

“So? In that case, we’d just live perfectly normal student lives.”

“Perfectly normal… I see. Katsuki, what’s ‘normal’ to you?”

Lydia’s voice was deep enough to make Shiori shudder. The Russian accent to her Japanese told the story of her past on its own.

“Normal is when you can expect tomorrow to be the same as today,” she continued. “I believed that too. At least, until the Berlin Wall came down.”

“I sympathize with you, but I don’t think that has anything to do with Keikain-san or me.”

“But it does. Keikain-san is going to put together a faction and take over my own.”

Even in schools, which were like miniature gardens, politics and power struggles were inevitable. That was inescapable so long as humans lived in societies.

“Keikain-san hasn’t joined the Courtiers or the Lords. Of course, she won’t join the Heralds or the Stewards either. Power with nowhere to go will become a target.”

Asagiri Kaoru led the Courtiers, a faction for noble students in the same grade. The Lords, a faction for the children of zaibatsu, was organized by Teia Eiichi. There would be discord if Keikain Runa joined either faction. Of course, she had no reason

to join the Heralds or the Stewards—factions for the children of politicians and bureaucrats, respectively. Instead, she'd formed an independent faction to be run by herself, Shisuka Lydia, and Amane Mio across three different years. That was convenient to Lydia, as the eldest. But Shiori finally realized that Keikain Runa deciding to join some other faction would bother Lydia not only because that would cause discord, but because Lydia would lose her own faction's next leader.

Seeing that realization on Shiori's face, Lydia shoved an envelope into her hand. "This is a list of Keikain and Iwazaki family members who acted badly in response to this turmoil. Be sure it gets to her."

With that, Lydia took off like the conversation was over. Shiori was left with only an envelope with a wax seal on the back. She stared at that seal, which bore the crest of the defunct People's Democratic Republic of Northern Japan, and smiled slightly. She'd realized that some of these people who'd "acted badly" were probably part of her own Katsuki Viscountcy. Shiori had seen her parents complain about Keikain Runa's wild actions many times already, so this letter was most likely a warning—a caution from Lydia that she'd spotted the estrangement between Katsuki Shiori and Keikain Runa.

"What should I do with this…?"

If she considered her parents' best interests, she should probably throw it away. However, it came from the girl Keikain Runa called "senpai." Ordinary measures wouldn't cut it.

"Katsuki-san?"

She turned to see Keikain Runa's aides Kushunnai Nanami and Enbuchi Yuna standing there. Shiori smiled bitterly, realizing Lydia must've planned this. Average people were satisfied with nothing more than the joys of school life. They wanted to steer clear of being cut out of their factions as traitors or getting involved in power struggles.

Showing the aides the letter, Shiori chose the best option that had been left open for her. "Could you get in touch with Tachibana-san for me? I'd like to give this to Keikain-san through her."

Tachibana Yuka later told her that the paper inside the envelope was blank, but Shiori didn't seem particularly interested

in that.

“May I speak to you for a moment?”

Tachibana Ryuuji, the butler, stopped Ichijou Erika in Kudanshita Keika Tower. They headed to the workers’ break room, where they met secretary Tokitou Aki, head maid Saitou Keiko, and assistant head maid Katsura Naomi. Erika noticed that their faces looked stiff—or, rather, that they seemed deep in thought about something.

Once she’d taken a seat, Tachibana spoke. “I brought you here because some people are beginning to criticize the young lady’s future. I wanted to bring it to your attention.”

The three women other than Erika nodded with serious looks on their faces, as if they knew what this was about.

Erika, still a normal college student to her core, raised her hand hesitantly. “Um, are you sure you didn’t bring me here by mistake?”

Tachibana Ryuuji merely gave her a troubled smile. He had no intention of scolding her.

“I’m sure. The people in this room, including myself, were the very first whom the young lady employed. And you’re one of the few people she’s ever scouted, Ichijou-san.”

Thinking about it, Erika realized he was right, but she didn’t understand just how much weight that held. Her own father, Ichijou Susumu, had been scouted by the young lady as well and was now CEO of Keika Holdings. Erika felt like she’d ridden his coattails a little, but this didn’t seem like the place to say that out loud, so she nodded in silence.

“We intend to serve as a breakwater should the main family deliver any advice regarding the young lady. Please come consult us if someone approaches you about this.”

“Thank you.”

Ichijou Erika cocked her head. Tachibana had to mean the “main family” of the Keikain Dukedom, which the young lady had been adopted into, and which essentially kept her under their protection. But Erika couldn’t hide her confusion about why there would be any trouble.

“Is she fighting with the main family?”

“No…not *fighting*, exactly,” Katsura Naomi corrected her.

Despite Katsura’s gentle tone, those words definitely implied something further. Erika stared at her with confusion, urging her to explain more.

However, it was Tachibana Ryuuji who answered her question, taking a seat across from her. “Both we and the main family want the young lady to be happy. There’s no doubt of that. However, to that end, sometimes the young lady’s own will must be ignored.”

That shocked Ichijou Erika. She didn’t understand. “What…do you mean?”

“Ichijou-san, what do you think would bring her the most happiness?” Tachibana questioned her suddenly.

She answered with the first thing that came to mind. “Huh? Isn’t that obvious? Being able to smile as she lives her life. Isn’t that what I’m here for?”

“That’s true. I agree with you,” said Tokitou Aki. Then she asked Erika the next question. “So is the young lady happy right now?”

As her secretary, Erika knew Keikain Runa’s entire schedule. Some of the things on it were much too advanced for a junior high schooler. “She comes home from school, immediately starts her opera lessons, and then approves measures from various companies until dinnertime. She has school, of course. But even when she plays games or watches TV at night, she has to deal with any emergency reports as soon as they come in. So she really has no time to rest.”

The current Keika Group ran entirely thanks to Keikain Runa’s talents. Of course, adults like Tachibana Ryuuji and Ichijou Susumu handled lots of things for her, but she *had* to be involved in anything critical. Keikain Runa didn’t object to that process; neither did she deny that the group’s growth had relied too much on those talents of hers.

“Ichijou-san, as children, we were told to ‘study hard and play hard.’ Of course, my generation grew up in the lingering postwar mayhem, so many of us worked at Lady Runa’s age. But her motto

right now is ‘work hard, study hard, play hard.’ What she needs more than any of those things is time to rest.”

Katsura Naomi said that with a sad look on her face. She likely felt ashamed of her words, since the young lady’s work had saved her and her son.

“She’s only in junior high school, yet she’s incredibly involved in politics. That’s by no means a good thing, which is why we want her to be able to live like a normal girl. But—”

“What do you think about that, Tachibana-san?” Ichijou Erika cut off the pained-looking Katsura Naomi to seek the opinion of Tachibana, the highest authority in the room.

“I think it’s wrong for others to make her do things she doesn’t want to do. But…we mustn’t forget that those people also wish her to be happy.”

The situation would be easier if the young lady were in the right and everyone else was in the wrong.

Tachibana sighed, an unreadable look on his face. “Lady Runa is trying to save people as she saved us. As her debtors, we’re merely worried she’ll exhaust herself.”

“Like in ‘The Happy Prince.’” That came from Saitou Keiko, who’d been silent up until then.

In the end, that glorious statue of a prince was abandoned, and the swallow distributing wealth to the needy at the prince’s request ended up dying at the statue’s feet. The young lady currently also held a great fortune. They dreaded the idea that, if she kept giving it out to help people, she’d end up like the prince and swallow.

“God let the prince and the swallow into heaven. Still, we don’t want Lady Runa to go through what they did.”

Saitou summed up her thoughts bluntly. After many nights in Ginza, she’d experienced both the sweetness and the sourness of having power, so there was no hesitation in her voice.

“We don’t get in her way, but we just want her to be happy, so we won’t let her be *unhappy.* If she’s in trouble, it’s our responsibility to support her. If someone needs to put a stop to her, it’s a job for Tachibana-san or Ichijou-san’s father. Simple enough, isn’t it?”

That alone was indeed simple, but it was much easier said than done. Katsura Naomi, Ichijou Erika, and Tokitou Aki all knew that, which was why they couldn't answer.

Saitou Keiko, however, was blunt. "All right. That's all we had to talk about. Let's get back to our usual jobs."

The group began to split up, but Erika called out to Aki, who was near her age. "What Keiko-san just said... Do you think it's possible?"

"Nope. All we can do is pray for Lady Runa's happiness. You want to help her out when she's in trouble too, right, Ichijou-san?"

"Well, of course," Erika said confidently, then smiled.

"All right. Then let's work hard too."

"I'm on board. I'll make an effort not to fall short of your pace, Aki-san."

Neither woman noticed Tachibana Ryuuji, Saitou Keiko, and Katsura Naomi watching them with smiles on their faces.

Glossary and Notes

Damage to the Ministry of Finance: The book *Princes of the Yen* (Richard A. Werner, Soshisha Publishing Co., Ltd., 2001) describes the relationship between the Bank of Japan and the Ministry of Finance.

"It doesn't matter if some people dance in the rain without umbrellas. That's what it means to be free.": Spoken by Roger Smith, protagonist of the anime *The Big O.*

The Teia War: The Chadian-Libyan War. Both sides used Toyota pickup trucks, leading it to be called the "Toyota War."

Takeovers: Through Koito Manufacturing, foreign capital fought Toyota for ownership rights from 1989 to 1991. However, Toyota managed to hold on to those rights.

"The Happy Prince": A children's short story by Irish author Oscar Wilde.

The Young Lady's Daily Life and the Shark Movie

"OKAY, YOU THREE. Smile!"

Click! The picture captured Yulia Molotova, Kanna Mizuki, and me in our swimsuits at a private pool in a Keika Hotel. It was taken by none other than Ishikawa-sensei, the photographer.

I sat down on a beach chair. "Why do I have to get in a swimsuit and take pictures on my day off…?" I muttered under my breath, then drank my grape juice through a straw.

Teisei Department Stores' director of sales had come and bowed to me, asking me to put on a swimsuit for their summer fair. I'd been told that the department stores had seen an explosion of sales once I started modeling for the children's department. I couldn't bring myself to say no, since Teisei were in a sticky situation themselves, which was how I'd ended up wearing a swimsuit here. I was dressed in a white bikini with a pareo covering my lower half, as well as wearing an intentionally oversized straw hat to give me a more playful look.

"What was that, now? I believe you agreed to take on this job, my lady."

Yulia Molotova, who wore a black athletic swimsuit, tried to console me with a strained smile. She'd only come to guard me, but she'd ended up joining me in the photoshoot anyway. That photographer was hungry for beauty and wouldn't let someone like her get away.

Yulia had the kind of body you might find in a gravure magazine, and he didn't hesitate to order her, "Okay, peel off for this one." She refused, of course. I was all too familiar with rejecting that direction from Ishikawa-sensei myself.

"But *I'm* the one who got roped into this…"

Kanna Mizuki struck a pose in her red bikini. When the photographer involved Yulia, she'd offered up Mizuki as a sacrifice, telling him, "I actually know a girl with a better body than mine." Although she'd dragged in Mizuki, the photographer refused to let Yulia get away either, so the three of us ended up wearing swimsuits together.

“Dressed like that, you guys don’t look like you’re in your first year of junior high at all. You’d get hit on as soon as you set foot on a beach,” Ishikawa-sensei muttered.

When he did, Mizuki answered very bluntly, “I just tell men I’m in high school when they hit on me.”

That kind of response—and going from man to man all the time—probably just makes your reputation worse in the end. I wanted to tell her that, but I kept my mouth around my straw.

“I don’t think you should do that. Earning yourself a bad reputation would hurt Lady Runa.”

“Someone like me could hurt this young lady?”

That kind of thing is exactly what I was thinking about, Kanna Mizuki. Saying things like that could make you enemies, which probably explained why Mizuki was always alone in the game. But she’d sought that solitude herself, since she was a fortune teller.

“Well, the truth is that fortune tellers can’t date.”



Yulia and I exchanged glances. *What's this girl talking about?* We already knew she went through men one after another.

However, the photographer pressed her on the topic as he stared at her through his viewfinder. Maybe he wanted her to relax so he could take even better photographs. "They can't? How come?"

Mizuki's secret—her many romantic entanglements—was about to be revealed. It was something that had never come to light in the original game.

"Well, for example, if you got a bad reading for your boyfriend, could you tell him objectively, Yulia-san?"

Fortune tellers could go on to stand beside those who held power, taking a jester-like role. As the ones who admonished the powerful, they never lost sight of their own positions.

I wondered what this had to do with fooling around with boys, but then Mizuki smiled. "That's why the Kanna fortune tellers usually spend their lives as single women. The talented ones are chosen to succeed the family. As my master has said, the next generation of fortune tellers is raised as if they're grafted plants."

The Kanna family were talented fortune tellers, but also famous as a clan of high-class prostitutes.

The "master" Mizuki mentioned was Kanna Sera. She'd been the mistress of my grandfather Keikain Hikomaro, and she'd tipped him off before the Second February 26 Incident, thereby saving his life. Thanks to that, the Kanna family had prospered with his substantial support.

I lifted my straw hat with one hand and cocked my head. "But how's that connected to you fooling around with boys?"

"I'm saying that it's wrong to be bound by one man. Being bound by many is better."

Are you sure about that...?! I felt like things would just get worse if I said that, so I kept my mouth on my straw and stayed quiet. Then I heard a shutter click. The photographer had captured Mizuki in an amazing shot.

"I see. I've come to understand you two as people, Mizuki-chan and Yulia-chan. It's all in how you undress."

“How can you understand someone from that?!” I shouted, unable to contain myself.

Just then, the photographer turned his camera toward me. *Click!* He’d captured my shocked face in yet another amazing photograph.

Seemingly pleased with that, the photographer began boasting of his talents. “Isn’t it obvious? How many hundreds of women do you think I’ve gotten to strip off so I can capture them with my camera?”

Teisei Department Stores’ summer swimsuit campaign poster was so popular that people constantly stole it off walls moments after it’d been hung up. Naturally, Ishikawa-sensei’s photo compilation of us flew off the shelves too. The summer swimsuit campaign was ultimately a massive success, and it went without saying that more daring young women spent that summer enjoying their time around the water’s edge.

“Runa,” Eiichi called out to me at school.

“What is it, Eiichi-kun?” I turned to look in his direction, only to get a surprising response.

“I just noticed that you smell nice.”

You’re skirting sexual harassment there. At our age, though, boys were just like this.

I puffed my chest up proudly and tried to act fashionable. “That would be the perfume Teisei Department Stores made me. They’re selling it as a special item in their fragrance exhibition.”

“Ah. The one from the poster? I see.”

I knew those posters had been put up all over the place. Still, I was embarrassed to hear Eiichi-kun mention them to my face.

My head maid, Keiko-san, had insisted that I always make sure to wear a fashionable scent. She reminded me that you can’t smell posters, and that ladies also needed to pay attention to things other than just their appearances. Of course, I couldn’t understand about half of what she tried explaining to me.

“Anyway, they said the scent is supposed to represent me. Doesn’t it smell good?”

“…”

Eiichi-kun, can't you do something more than just cock your head? I stared at him.

Ignoring that, he clapped his hands together. "Ah. I knew I recognized that scent! It smells like the grape juice you're always drinking."

"You're *so* stupid, Eiichi-kun!"

A while after that…

"…and that's what he said to me. Isn't Eiichi-kun just the worst, Yuujirou-kun?"

"Uh-huh. I don't know how to reply to that."

Having been worked into such a rage, I naturally couldn't even look at Eiichi-kun, so I ranted about him when Yuujirou-kun came over to help patch things up.

Once I was done complaining, Yuujirou-kun started to reason with me. "Keikain-san, let me ask you something. This happened during the lunch break, right? Did you eat your usual lunch?"

"Of course. What about it?"

I'd devoured that day's lunch menu in the gold-badge cafeteria, and I always got my favorite foods as a matter of routine.

"Then you drank grape juice as always, didn't you?"

"Ah…"

I'd been eating and drinking a lot, since I was going through a growth spurt. Had I drunk five hundred whole milliliters of grape juice? The juice was 100 percent farm fresh too, of course.

"That's why we can't smell your perfume at all."

"Hmph…"

I lowered my head, my blonde hair forming a curtain to hide my face. Its gentle scent, dissimilar to that of grapes themselves, helped calm my anger.

"Fine. But I'm not talking to him for the rest of the day!"

"I guess that's your way of compromising, isn't it? I'll tell Eiichi-kun he should apologize to you."

Yuujirou-kun stuck his hand out toward me, so I took it to reconcile.

Then he said something else to me. “By the way, Keikain-kun, I’ve been smelling some kind of herbal scent. Is it from your perfume?”

“I didn’t expect Eiichi-kun to understand, but you too, Yuujirou-kun? You’re awful!”

My anger flared up again. This time, I went to the library to complain to Mitsuya-kun, who was there studying. He hardly engaged with me at all, but he *did* seem to be listening. His mechanical pencil stopped moving whenever I got to an important part.

“Keikain, can’t you wait until they’re a little older before you quiz them about subtle stuff like that? I honestly think it’s more important to memorize math formulas than scents.”

I knew you’d say that, Mitsuya-kun. Still, I had more complaining to do. “True, but still, girls want boys to appreciate this stuff!”

“That’s foolish. Putting aside Izumikawa, Keikain, did you really expect *Teia* to understand a woman’s heart like that?”

“Erk…”

He was right. Part of Eiichi-kun’s appeal was that he was an extremely cocky character who dragged the player along. Mitsuya-kun was correctly pointing out that it was pointless for me to demand that he understand a lady’s delicate heart.

“Hmmmmph! I know you’re right, but still!”

Pounding on the table would’ve been too loud, so I flailed my hands in the air like a spoiled child. *Flap flap flap.* Then I snapped out of it.

“Fine. I understand. I’ll just have to bet it all on you, Mitsuya-kun! Try and guess what scent I’m wearing!”

Mitsuya-kun’s hand stopped moving over his paper, and he sniffed the air. Then he revealed his answer without even turning to me. “It smells like soap.”

“All *three* of you?! Really?! I give up! I should never have worn something I thought you guys would recognize!”

I ended up stress-eating that night. My dinner consisted of steak with garlic and spaghetti. Men definitely loved scents like

those, even if they couldn't wear them as cologne. *Those foods are delicious, after all.*

"Maybe boys their age can't distinguish between fragrances, my lady?" Ichijou Erika commented from her place behind me.

In truth, I'd wanted to avoid getting food smells on me once I applied this perfume. The day I finally tried it, though, I'd still ended up eating such an aromatic dinner. *But who'd dare stop me from eating my garlic steak and spaghetti? I mean, they're just so tasty.*

"By the way, my lady, I understand that you were up late again last night. Do you remember what happened this morning?" Saitou Keiko-san, my head maid, asked that question in a calm tone.

"This morning?" My hands froze still gripping my knife and fork as I had a flashback.

"Eeeeek! I'm going to be late! And if we take a car, the traffic might be too bad..."

"This is why I've been asking you to stop playing video games so late..."

"I understand! It's all my fault! See you later, Keiko-san!"

Clink. Keiko-san placed the unopened perfume bottle on the table, its seal still intact. The silverware slipped out of my hands with a loud metallic bang like a punishment for my mistakes.

"My lady, we need to talk. First of all..."

Keiko-san's lecture lasted two hours. I spent that time in the seat of honor, desperately trying to think of how I could get rid of this garlic smell.

"You caught a cold, Runa? And it's so bad you're wearing a mask?"

"Take it easy, and be sure to go to the nurse's office if the symptoms worsen. You won't get any better if you overwork yourself."

"You probably wouldn't need them, Keikain, but if you have to leave for the nurse's office, we can take notes for you. You've got to let your body heal, or else the cold will get worse."

You're all wrong. My body's fine thanks to that garlic. I just can't get rid of the smell…

I could never say that out loud to the boys, so I was forced to suffer the guilt of receiving their kindness.

It went without saying that my associates stared at me with very cold eyes.

Amane Mio had three "elder sisters." They weren't related to her by blood; still, she always called them "Oneesama," even once they entered junior high.

"What do you think?"

We were in my room in Kudanshita Keika Tower. I, the eldest sister, struck a pose as the scent wafted off me. Despite my confident posture, I was still reeling from the way the three boys had defeated me. Not that anyone else in the room knew about that.

"It's such a nice scent. I can smell roses, but what else could it be?" Mio-chan cocked her head.

Asuka-chan, the second oldest, sniffed the air and made her guess. "Musk, and what…? Grapes?"

"You're very close, Asuka-chan. The top note's clary sage, the middle one is attar, and the base note is musk."

Girls loved discussing these sorts of things, so it was only natural that our conversation had gone in this direction.

"If I had a fragrance, I wonder what notes I'd go with?"

"Wouldn't you pick something with oranges?"

"I'm sure it would include those, at least."

Nod nod.

The second-oldest sister glared at our instant responses. Maybe she knew how much she already smelled like mandarins. "Well, I won't deny that. But let's go with mandarins specifically. What other notes should I choose?"

"I think you're a very lively person, Asuka-oneesama. How about picking something that represents that part of you?"

"How about a marine note? I think something like salt water would smell nice too."

Tug tug.

The youngest of the elder sisters tugged at us, showing us that she was holding a bottle of perfume oil. She seemed to be offering it, so Mio-chan took the bottle and opened it up.

“Ah… This is so nice.”

“Is that lilac? You picked a good one, Hotaru-chan.”

“I’d expect nothing less from Hotaru-oneesama.”

Hotaru smiled shyly.

At that point, the rest of us wanted to pick out scents too.

“What would Hotaru-chan wear?”

“…The aroma of incense.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

Grin.

Young people tended not to like the smell of incense, but this particular older sister would wear it proudly. She closed her eyes, nodding in approval. The specific incense scent would be white sandalwood. She picked up another of the perfume oil bottles in front of Asuka-chan.

“Mandarin…? You mean, you want us to wear matching scents?”

“Hotaru-chan loves the scent of oranges too.”

“Matching scents…? Yeah, that could work too.”

Finally, there was one last scent to come up with.

“I wish all my big sisters and I could be connected by a scent…” Mio-chan murmured to herself.

Clap!

“Mio-chan! That’s a great idea!”

“In that case, you should choose a note from my perfume,” I suggested.

Hotaru-chan ended up selecting clary sage as her final note. Now that we’d settled on our notes, Mio-chan just had to pick notes from our selections.

“All right. I’ll borrow one note from each of your perfumes.”

“Take the sandalwood from Hotaru-chan’s.”

“Hotaru-chan’s already using the mandarins from my blend, so I think you should use lilac for me. What do you say?”

Shove.

Hotaru held out the white sandalwood perfume oil. Now we could all complete our own original perfume blends.

Keikain Runa: clary sage, attar, musk

Kasugano Asuka: marine notes, mandarin, lilac

Kaihouin Hotaru: white sandalwood, mandarin, clary sage

Amane Mio: clary sage, lilac, white sandalwood

“Let’s wear these scents next time we hang out somewhere together.”

“Definitely.”

Nod nod.

“That sounds nice.”

But when that day finally came…

“Urk…”

“Blegh…”

“This smell…”

Gulp.

We’d learned how to apply these scents, but when all four of us eagerly covered ourselves with them, they all mixed to create a dreadful smell. When we carpooled to reach our destination, it only got worse. Naturally, in the face of this difficulty, we returned home and washed off the perfumes.

The next day, we got together to both thank and apologize to each other. Then Mio-chan told us something.

“If I ever get a boyfriend, I’m going to wear this perfume.”

“…Really? Be sure to introduce him to us. We’d definitely like to say hello.” The words came out of my mouth devoid of all tone.

“That’s true. It’s important to greet people properly. After all, this is our adorable little sister’s boyfriend we’re talking about.” Asuka-chan’s response came out a little forceful somehow.

Grin.

Even Mio-chan could tell that Hotaru-chan's smile, usually a source of comfort, contained no such warmth at that moment.

I had a whim to see the ocean, so I started planning a trip. Then I remembered that I'd won a bicycle as a prize on a TV show but had yet to use it at all.

"All right. I'll ride my bike to the ocean!"

Once I'd decided that, we set out to visit the beach that evening.

"This town is closer to the sea than I thought."

Enbuchi Yuna and Glasya Marsheva were with me as I exited the first floor of Kudanshita Keika Tower with my bike. Tachibana Yuka had tried to insist we drive, but my desire won out in the end, so my guards agreed to follow us in cars. I was well aware that catering to my whims like this made life very hard for my guards and associates, but my wish to ride a bike was simply overwhelming. That was how I came to invent a lovely new trend —young ladies dressed in racing gear riding girls' bicycles.

"I'll let the riding suit slide, but do I really need a helmet, elbow pads, and kneepads too?"

"What would you do if you got hurt in an accident, my lady?!"

"Exactly. Bicycles can be very dangerous!"

"I-I see..."

Yuna and Glasya had managed to overpower me. They were riding road bikes, though I had no idea where they'd obtained them. I'd tried one out for myself, and its lightness had surprised me.

"Would you prefer to ride my bike?" Glasya offered.

"No thanks. My stuff won't fit on it."

I shook my head and stuck my knapsack in the bike's front basket, which was filled with bottles of tea and Saitou Keiko-san's homemade sandwiches. It really felt like we were heading out on a picnic.

"All right! Let's hit the road!" I sang.

"....."

"....."

My associates were pointing at the traffic light ahead. As a young lady, I wasn't brave enough to enter the crosswalk while the light was red.

"We're going slower than I expected."

"Yes. There are lots of traffic lights in cities."

Kudanshita was seven kilometers from Takeshiba Pier, where you could see the ocean. But those seven kilometers involved cutting through central Tokyo, which contained tons of traffic lights. Pedal, stop, Pedal, stop. That cycle just kept repeating. On top of that, we couldn't even take our bikes on the sidewalk unless there were signs allowing it. They were usually there, but still, cars were parked between the road and sidewalk most of the way.

"Should we walk our bikes along the sidewalk?" Yuna suggested.

Instead of answering, I silently started walking my bike forward. Then I heard certain voices nearby.

"Isn't that Keikain Runa?"

"Wow—it's really her! Isn't she a model for Teisei Department Stores?"

"She's the young lady who won an Academy Award. Incredible."

"Her scenes in *Imperial Bodyguards* were so cool..."

"Sorry, but I don't give out autographs in my private time."

Thanks to the pressure not to stand out in Japanese society, people usually didn't approach me once I said those words. I just had to pretend not to see them snap pictures of me with their cell phones. Now I understood why my associates had suggested that I dress up just in case. I was wearing a bit of the perfume I'd made with my friends recently, which I hoped would help please the crowd. The convenient part of traveling by bike was that you were faster than anyone on foot, and before anyone could work up the nerve to come over for an autograph, I was already on the other side of the crosswalk. In the end, we spent two hours riding our bikes where we were allowed to, walking them down sidewalks on foot, and getting back on them to go through crosswalks. But we finally reached Takeshiba Pier.

"Phew... This is exactly what I wanted to see."

The Rainbow Bridge was bathed in crimson light. I turned around and saw that the skyscraper lights had started coming on. Day and night were mingling, their light reflecting on the water's surface. From somewhere in the distance came the sound of a ship's steam whistle.

"But bike riding through the city wasn't the best idea, was it?"

I handed sandwiches and tea to the two other girls as I gazed at the sunset. Looking out at Tokyo Bay, I spotted a lot of houseboats on the water. I thought those had disappeared during the Showa era, but they'd apparently reappeared during the bubble due to steep land prices. They currently functioned as homes for residents of what used to be Northern Japan, while the Tokyo Metropolitan Government aimed to eradicate the boats—their mobility and isolation made them hotbeds for criminal activity.

That was why the government was experimenting with remodeling ships like tankers to become houseboats, forming so-called ark cities. Their ulterior motive was to have a way to screen high-risk individuals. They were already building an ark city off the coast of Kisarazu, where there was said to be an extremely high demand for housing. Once the Shinjuku Geofront City—a project centered around the Shinjuku Shinkansen—was complete, the underground city could house up to a hundred thousand people.

"A bicycle is a big help to the average citizen, though. People from Karafuto, like me, see a bicycle as their first asset in life."

Taking a bite of her sandwich, Glasya patted her bicycle. Residents of old Northern Japan usually worked manual-labor jobs. Because so many of those jobs were located around the coasts, the workers opted to live in houseboats. Those were people who'd choose bicycles as their way of commuting to make it to the next job site more quickly.

The same went for my cycling—if you forced yourself, you could travel ten kilometers by bike in a little over an hour. That made bikes an increasingly popular choice for commuting to urban jobs too. However, that had led to an increase in bicycle accidents in recent years, which the Tokyo Metropolitan Government was struggling to deal with. They were making progress on things like bike paths, but they'd mostly been held up by red tape over use of the land.

Their next success was the ark cities, and they were currently working on assimilation policy in the form of new mainland housing developments. Still, I was skeptical of how far they'd get, considering Japan's increasing internationalization.

"We don't want to stay out here too late, my lady..."

When I heard Yuna say that, I downed the rest of my tea. This country had seen the economic bubble burst and the influx of twenty-four million former Northern Japanese citizens. Nevertheless, public safety was improving, but it wasn't necessarily *good*. In other words, we couldn't ride our bicycles back home.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

In light of that, I obediently became one with the car for the trip back. A grand total of six cars had been secretly tailing us, including a HiAce to store our bikes. That came as a surprise.

"Do we really need so many guards?"

"Even this is on the conservative side. I think you'll understand that the next time you visit the United States."

Eva told me that; she'd been waiting in the car. I *would* experience it for myself later, when I flew to America to attend the Academy Awards.

Hollywood, California. A studio on the outskirts of the city was producing movies constantly—the kind there was demand for, but not the kind one went to a movie theater to see. Most were about zombies or sharks, and they were all meant to fill late-night slots on television.

But they were still movies, and Hollywood was still Hollywood. Rather than being bright young actors brimming with hopes and dreams, some people here struggled to make a living and ran into setbacks, longing for something more. Such people had gathered for a movie audition at the studio on the outskirts, dreaming that they might become stars of the silver screen.

"What's this one about again?"

"It's a shark flick, right?"

"Guess we're here to wear swimsuits and get eaten, huh?"

“At least there’re no sex scenes in this one.”

These beautiful women—auditioning for the role some would call “shark bait”—chatted as they smoked cigarettes and showed off their sensual bodies to intimidate the others present.

In America, the land of the free, it was almost hard to tell that movies like these weren’t actual pornography. But, for example, lines were drawn between glamour modeling, stripping, and having sex.

Some inexperienced actresses taking “bait” roles in zombie or shark movies like these couldn’t make a living from glamour modeling but didn’t want to resort to actual sex. Other women auditioned seeing it as no more than a part-time job that made use of their bodies. They were decently beautiful, but had few brains to speak of.

One woman, a struggling glamour model, was discarding her cigarette ash outside the window when she noticed something strange. “Wow. Look at that. A Cadillac just pulled up. There’s a bunch of guards and everything.”

“Did they take a wrong turn? Someone should go tell them they’ve got the wrong place. If they’re looking for the stage they’ve always dreamed of, this sure isn’t it.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha!”

The women didn’t know the truth. They had no idea that the guards who’d just pulled up belonged to the Secret Service, and that the short girl with the nice body in the Cadillac had just won Best Supporting Actress at the previous night’s Academy Awards.

“Hi, everyone!” she sang. “Is this the audition for the shark-bait role?”

Despite clearly being in the wrong place, the girl strolled inside with her guards and a female secretary. That was when the actresses realized just how strange this was. The girl’s face was one they’d seen all over television—even yesterday, of course. She was the daughter of a duke, had the Romanov family’s blood in her veins, led a Japanese zaibatsu, maintained a friendship with the president, and had snagged an Academy Award. She was a massive celebrity in the United States as well. There was absolutely no reason for someone like her to be in a place like the studio.

“Aren’t you the Runa Keikain who won Best Supporting Actress?”

“I have many titles, but I believe you’re referring to me. Did you see me wearing a kimono on the red carpet?”

A chill traveled through the room. A dazzling actress who’d claimed an Academy Award had come to the depressing studio to play the role of shark bait.

As if sensing the confusion, she explained herself like it was the most natural response in the world. “I mean, the shoot will only last one day, right? That makes it nice and easy.”

Her absolute confidence in boasting like that proved to the other actresses that the girl really *was* who they thought.

America was a land of greed. As citizens of a free country, its people were straightforward about their desires, perceiving that greed as a virtue. The girl hadn’t meant to put on this much of a show, but her secretary had taught her this behavior to illustrate the American class system, then allowed her to do as she wanted. Showing off her position here was a form of mercy.

“So, yes, I’d like to be in this movie. Still, I’ll pay the travel expenses of anyone who doesn’t get the part.”

The girl snapped her fingers, prompting the secretary to open a duralumin case and reveal bundles of used ten-dollar bills.

“Why didn’t you get hundreds?”

“People would suspect they were counterfeits, my lady.”

Those at the studio would never know that the girl and the secretary had had such an exchange.

America was the land of the free. Since this was a movie studio on the outskirts of town, the girl was able to perform minor bribery—though, to the actresses, the bribes amounted to an amazing sum. There was no way they’d turn them down.

On the other hand, the studio president—himself the movie director—was frightened. He’d been bluffing when he made the girl an offer, never expecting her to actually show up. That was like the price of fame for a star. He’d intended for an actress who *looked* like this same young girl to get eaten by a shark. This was no more than a third-rate B movie, but there was demand for that sort of thing. The director had only offered the girl the role to

cover himself in case the movie was criticized. He'd never expected her to actually say yes.

Why didn't you show up at a studio that was actually in the heart of Hollywood...? I shouldn't have tried to imitate a famous actress with some look-alike, but that doesn't mean it's okay for you to come to a place like this. What am I supposed to do now, God...?

The studio president was only reaping what he sowed. He'd later receive a long lecture from the Secret Service, experience a flood of concentrated jealousy and resentment from his colleagues, get chased out of Hollywood, find himself the target of a bidding war between TV stations looking to get broadcasting rights to the girl's movie, and finally end up gracefully retired in Florida as a millionaire. But right now, all he could think about was fleeing the girl's smile—something more frightening than any shark or zombie he'd ever devised.

"It looks like I'm the only one here for the shark-bait role," she said. "So it's decided, right?"

"Uh, I'm sorry, but this movie's been canceled. We couldn't get any sponsors..."

Deciding to use her zaibatsu connections to her advantage, she called his bluff. "Then my company can find you sponsors. We do business in the United States as well."

Now the president's back was to the wall. He came up with a second excuse to try and escape. "Oh—but we lost our screenwriter, camera crew, and director. Too bad, isn't it? I'm sorry you came all this way..."

She called his bluff again. Her secretary handed her a cell phone that worked overseas, and she placed a call. "Hi, Director? I'm filming a shark movie where I'll be playing the bait, but they're telling me they don't have a screenwriter, camera crew, or director. Think you could make it over here? Okay, I'll let him know," the girl sang.

She returned the phone to her secretary and smiled sweetly. The studio president later called it a more terrifying sight than any monster he'd ever put in his movies.

"He won the Academy Award for Best Director this year," the girl added in the same musical tone, "so I promise he's good at what he does."

The studio president was cornered. That was how a half-day shoot and week-long editing rush job came to produce *Samurai Ghost Shark vs. Swimsuit Noblewoman*. Perhaps the most accurate description of it was that it was a recreational project of the girl's that exploded thanks to all the guards and paparazzi. The only reason it never aired in theaters…

"You know, I sure don't want to win any awards for this movie."

"Me neither."

…was that the girl—who'd gone from shark bait to lead actress—and the director she'd brought in had most certainly threatened the studio president.

The lack of a theatrical release was acceptable, since the movie was meant for TV in the first place. It went on to be aired not only in late-show slots but during prime time as well.

An amusing phenomenon occurred throughout more than one society in that Americans—as well as Japanese viewers, when the movie later aired there—spit out their snacks and drinks when they watched it.

(movie review: *Samurai Ghost Shark vs. Swimsuit Noblewoman*)

"First of all, please watch this movie with a snack or a drink. If you spit it out, I'll take that as a victory." - the lead actress's message before the movie begins

Shark movies generally fall into the B movie category. A shark B movie is defined by the following unique traits:

1. Cheap budget

2. Cheap plot

3. Cheap CGI

You'll find that Samurai Ghost Shark vs. Swimsuit Noblewoman *fulfills all these criteria. However, the lead actress has still walked away with a ton of wins, due to the power a director has over an actress.*

Allow me to state that more clearly: This is *a B movie, but it was filmed in total earnest by the absolute best of the best in the industry.*

In terms of the first "unique trait," the movie's official budget is listed as no more than $243. That was enough to buy the lead actress's swimsuit, food for the day, and gasoline. If you think that's an amazingly small amount of money to make a movie with, you're missing something important. The director and lead actress both refused appearance fees.

"What? An appearance fee? I don't need spare change like that."

"So long as I can film her, nothing else matters. The reviews and compensation will come later on."

They were right about that. This director and actress wouldn't work on any project unless it'd bring in hundreds of millions of dollars. Actually, this actress could still refuse hundreds of millions, terrifying as that is. The movie was filmed on the private California beach where the lead actress was staying, while the director paid for his own film equipment and completed the entirety of the editing on his own. When you watch this movie, it's hard to believe they did all of it for free.

While I'm pointing out ridiculous things, this movie depends on the lead actress's performance alone from beginning to end. The soundtrack consists of classical music—both copyright-free recordings and those sung by the actress herself—because that was the easiest way to include a soundtrack at all.

The credits are listed as follows:

Director

Lead actress

Script: (director & lead actress)

Music: (lead actress)

Camera: (director)

Editing: (director)

That's the end of the list. It's a style of moviemaking that practically mocks the current trend of major projects. This strange production that made TV station staff cradle their heads when it aired will become a hot topic around the world.

The second "unique trait" of a B movie is its cheap plot, and you'll see that shine through. The lead actress plays a young noblewoman who comes to her private beach to escape the summer heat. She's unaware that the souls of soldiers who perished in World War II now wander that beach.

The ghosts fuse with a shark that happens to swim by. Once it transforms into a samurai ghost shark, it begins hunting for food. Having changed into a swimsuit to escape the heat, what will the young noblewoman do when she sees the samurai ghost shark draw near? That's the basic outline of the movie's plot. In a normal shark movie, the noblewoman would be devoured as shark bait, but this particular shark must be unlucky. This *is a young noblewoman who can pull off stunts like jumping out of an exploding building, and his "bait" is also interested in martial arts.*

The director sets himself apart from typical B movie makers by using his camera from the shark's perspective. In other words, the viewer can watch the noblewoman in her swimsuit as she's attacked. As you'd expect, the swimsuit gets torn up, and it becomes harder for the noblewoman to move. I was unexpectedly thrilled by the chase's perspective.

I also want to note that the noblewoman only has a single line in this movie, immersing the audience in the samurai ghost shark's perspective through the sounds of fleeing beachgoers, screams during attacks, heavy breathing, and footsteps on sand.

Though this noblewoman may be shark bait, she's not going down without a fight. She's still a young girl who cowers, cries, and flees while under attack, but she's no airhead either. She gathers information about the samurai ghost shark little by little and formulates a plan.

Finally, a B movie's third "unique trait" is its cheap CGI. But since this movie's camera mainly takes the samurai ghost shark's perspective, CGI is only really used supplementally to show the shark's extremities or a glimpse of its mirrored reflection. The shark being a ghost also makes the cheap CGI look more natural. The audience won't look at those parts too closely anyway, so the CGI's cheapness adds to the movie's character.

A masterful director knows how to use his tools, since they'll outshine anyone who isn't a first-rate director themselves. This movie is such a good example of that.

With these three "cheap" elements covered, the plot moves as you'd hope, culminating in a swordfight scene between the samurai ghost shark and the noblewoman (whose fighting is performed entirely by the lead actress). Despite the tension, the noblewoman finds the path to victory, only to realize that her half-destroyed

swimsuit is getting in the way. That's when she speaks her one and only line in this movie:

"That's it! I should put some clothes on!"

That's the scene that caused many viewers to spit out their food and drink, giving the leading actress a "victory." It's no exaggeration to say that the ninety-minute movie was made for that scene alone.

That's when the story takes a turn. It starts as horror, transforms into mystery, and evolves into suspense as the samurai ghost shark battles the girl to stop her from putting more clothes on.

As soon as she gets dressed, the movie begins its climax: the pivotal swordfight scene. The camera captures the quarter-Japanese girl wielding a katana in her sailor uniform almost voyeuristically. I'd like to praise the director for a job well-done from the bottom of my heart.

The noblewoman evolves from shark bait to detective until, finally, she becomes the hunter. In the end, it's us *fleeing from* her.

The plot takes a 180-degree turn, boomerang-like, as the samurai ghost shark—itself a vessel for the audience—goes from hunter to hunted.

Monsters are monsters because they don't speak. In that sense, the girl herself is another monster. But the samurai ghost shark figures that out too late. The beast is chased down, drained of its strength. As it tries to flee from the shore into the ocean, the young noblewoman in the sailor uniform—her otherworldly beauty illuminated by the moonlight—blocks its path with a smile.

Ah, what a beautiful smile.

Ah, how can such a smile be so bone-chilling?

Just as you find yourself thinking that, the girl draws her katana like a ninja and…

I've shared just about everything, but I hope you'll watch this movie to the very end. It's a mysterious film that even sent White House medical staff into a frenzy when the president choked on his pretzel during a viewing. Please be sure not to watch with anything in your mouth.

That is, if you don't want her to win the bet she made with you.

"We went too far."

“I agree.”

The director and I had ended up in a greenroom at the TV - station, having just released what was supposed to be a fun break from work—our latest movie—into the world. *Didn’t we say we didn’t want to win any awards for this?*

“I had no idea everyone would start saying it deserved Emmys as a TV movie…”

“The TV station that bought the rights didn’t hesitate to air it on prime time. Now they’re saying we’re a shoo-in for the Golden Globes too.”

We’d learned that the movie had brought in over fifty million viewers in America. *Surely there were other things to watch…*

“It’s all the president’s fault. The news ran wild with that story about him choking on a snack while he watched our movie. There’s a hard-fought war with Iraq going on, but the nuclear button was transferred to that hard-liner vice president for a few minutes because of that. Why’d they have to announce that part at all? Someday, they could make this whole thing a documentary called *The Nuclear War That Almost Was*.”

As the situation in Iraq deteriorated, debate about the use of nuclear weapons was heating up rapidly in the United States. The world was learning from Afghanistan that they needed to inflict more fear than was inflicted, or else their people and land would be the next ones turned to scorched earth.

A nuclear war brought on by a shark movie. Such a plot wouldn’t exist even in a B movie… *Well, yeah, it would, as a matter of fact.*

Apparently, the vice president had even seriously considered pressing the button, but his aides stopped him with one simple sentence: “If you press it because of this movie, we’ll get a Golden Raspberry Award.” That snapped him out of it.

The president regained consciousness, and he cracked up with laughter when he heard the story later, but maybe that part went without saying. On the other hand, it was no laughing matter for the vice president, Secretary of State, or Secretary of Defense.

“You say that now, Director, but you’re the one who felt bad about releasing this movie as a DVD with no other content and

made me do an image video to go with it. It almost got labeled pornography and banned from release!"

"It's *your* fault. You're only in junior high, but your body is voluptuous for no good reason. You could've been the Marilyn Monroe of the Heisei era, you know. Not that you'd have had to start from the bottom like she did."

This director's acting instructions had made me mad, but I went along with them anyway. The result was a cheaper release of the movie with no extras that cost 980 yen, as well a full version with bonus content that cost 1,980 yen. It was the full version that flew off the shelves. As an aside, I was a little depressed to hear that the full version was sold in the adult sections of used DVD shops. Japan as a country didn't draw those sorts of lines; however, the United States did.

"The police told me they looked into arresting me for releasing indecent material. They gave up when they realized I'd escape arrest using my special privileges as a noble, though."

"You were just enjoying a day off on a private beach in America. What's so indecent about that?"

The police had been joking, of course. But it was an inspector from the Kudanshita police box who'd spoken with me, so they probably *had* looked into it.

"I thought this movie was supposed to be like taking a break, but I had to get even more guards."

"That shows how famous you've gotten."

Eva glanced at me from where she stood to the side of the greenroom. A few more members of my staff were outside, and my team of guards waited outside the TV station itself. That seemed like too much, but I had no choice but to accept after my maids like Eva and Tachibana Yuka pleaded with me. Even Angela, who was back in North America, had insisted on such a large entourage.

"My real life is turning into a movie too now. After the shark flick, I've had enough of movies, thank you very much."

"I feel the same way. After all, you have to accept reality for what it is, even if reality's script is total trash."

Terrorism plotlines were standard in late-nineties action films, but after 9/11, Hollywood was full of stories about delayed

movie releases and script alterations. Still, movies were made continuously.

"And, as you'd expect of a B movie, I hear imitations are already rolling out."

"That's the price of fame. Just smile and accept it."

Not much time had passed at all, but there was already *Last Shark Samurai*, *Shark Noblewoman*, *Jaws Slayer Junior High School Girl*, *In Love with the Ghost Samurai Noblewoman*, and *Shark Samurai Legion*...

The list went on after that. Then the word "noblewoman" took on a life of its own with movies such as *Noblewoman vs. Mushroom Man*, *Noblewoman vs. Rabbit Freak*, *Metal Girl Noblewoman*, and *Ghost Hunter Noblewoman*...

Don't they know they can't just add that word to anything?

Those movies had even higher production costs than ours, and they later duped buyers trying to purchase our movie, causing those buyers to appeal to their local consumer affairs centers. I felt it was a pleasant outcome.

"Anyway, I've received a whirlwind of new offers. What should I do about that?"

"Turn 'em down. After all, no ordinary person can capture your entire being on film."

"I didn't intend to accept them anyway, but it's pretty nice to get offers from big studios. I even received a few from the *major* studios."

Many major movie sequels were being made around this time. First, I turned down the role of the heroine in a very famous spy series, since there was a love scene. Then I was offered a part in a space opera, but I refused because I'd have played a senator who preserved the republic. I didn't want to work on that movie if I couldn't at least play a close associate of the chancellor. Viceroy was the real goal.

Then there was a fantasy movie that was a big hit that year. I was offered the role of an elf in the sequel, or rather, prequel. I thought they understood that I wasn't an actress, but apparently I was wrong. I turned them down too.

"It's because you've shown that you can do just about anything in the action genre. That shark movie will probably be

your magnum opus."

"Even though you told me before that *Imperial Bodyguards* would be my magnum opus?" I retorted.

When he heard that, the director's face turned serious. "Of course. If you constantly make art, your magnum opus will always be something in the future. Don't forget that. Humans can grow so long as they always believe that, but the second they realize their magnum opus is in the past, they start going downhill. Try to make your magnum opus something that's always in the future."

His ability to say things like that made this man the very best of the best.

That was when the AD called us.

The walking encyclopedia of the Japanese TV world greeted us with a smile. "Today we have the director and lead actress of the film that caused a commotion in Japan and the rest of the world. I hope we'll get to hear some fun stories."

The show started, its silly theme music playing in the background. The host went on to roast us mercilessly, and it went without saying that the two of us could do nothing but smile in embarrassment.

Glossary and Notes

Bicycles: Bikes with baskets usually cost twenty thousand yen. You can get them for around ten thousand if you buy a used one, but the bike will be much less functional. An amazing thing about cities is how choosing what kind of bike to buy affects someone's job options.

Late, Late, Late Show: *It Came From the Late, Late, Late Show: Attack of the Late-Night, Third-Rate Lowbrow Movie!!* (Suzaku Games, 1997).

The president: In January of 2002, he choked on a pretzel while watching a football game and temporarily passed out.

The "TV movie" category: Category requirements state that the movie must air during prime time.

The nuclear button: When President Reagan underwent surgery, the button's rights were transferred to Vice President

Bush for eight hours.

Image video: Also known as nonnude erotica. A gateway to success for junior idols.

The spy movie: Part of the *James Bond* series.

The space opera: *Star Wars.*

The fantasy movie: *The Lord of the Rings.*

The TV program the two ended up appearing on: *Tetsuko no Heya*.

Failed Terrorism Outside Narita Airport

ANGELA, MY SECRETARY and the company director of the securities company under the Keika Holdings umbrella, was returning from Wall Street. I wanted to head out and welcome her when she arrived, but Eva held me back for a moment.

"I won't stop you from going, but how will you get to Narita?"

"I guess the car would just get stuck in traffic on the highway… So a helicopter?"

"I don't particularly recommend that. The wind is very strong today, although maybe you could take anti-nausea medicine for your helicopter ride."

Hmm. I certainly didn't want to throw up as soon as I greeted Angela. I pondered what to do.

As I did, Eva made another suggestion. "If that won't work, then why not take the train? You haven't even used the one prepared for you."

That option had completely slipped my mind. I clapped my hands. "Good point. I totally forgot my train was ready. Does that mean they're setting it up for me?"

"Yes. It's currently waiting for you on Kudanshita's detention line."

"All right. I'll use that, then."

I was about to ask her to prepare my things for the trip when Eva stopped me again. Although usually quiet, she was particularly talkative that day.

"Why not take some attendants with you while you're out too? Well—that request comes from Miss Angela, actually. She told me, 'I'll interview you on the train to see whether I can leave the young lady in your care while I'm away.'"

"Angela's such a worrywart. Did she suggest I take the train too?"

Eva smiled mischievously at my exasperated look, shrugging her shoulders like she knew she'd been caught. "That just goes to show how worried she is about you. Why not show up at the airport with lots of staff? It'd make her feel better."

“Okay, okay. You can decide who I’ll take and what their assignments will be. Take care of that for me, will you?”

My personal train was a 253 series with three cars. The luxury area where I’d ride was in the second, middle car. The first and third cars would carry my attendants and luggage.

“Doesn’t this seem like too many people?”

Underneath Kudanshita Keika Tower, I muttered that question aloud as we walked along the direct route to the detention line.

Tachibana Yuka soothed my worries. “You don’t use your personal train very much, so I’m told they want to use this opportunity for training as well. After all, personal trains hardly ever run on this line, right?”

It did make sense that they were using my trip as an opportunity to drill a potential escape by train. My guards were on alert too, naturally, not just my trained maids.

“Hey, Kushunnai-san. I get that they called for all hands, but how come you’re *armed*?”

Kushunnai Nanami, Enbuchi Yuna, Irina Berosova, Glasya Marsheva, and Yulia Molotova were wearing sunglasses and armed with nonlethal sonic weapons. Meanwhile, Tachibana Yuka, Nozuki Misaki, Rudaka Miu, Akibe Riko, and Ryuu Suzune carried riot shields like those police used. All their maid uniforms incorporated bulletproof materials too.

“We had to check in with the subway line and East Japan Imperial Railway, so we told them we’re doing our very first evacuation drill.”

The Tozai Line was a disaster that day, as it often was, and sending a special train of merely three cars down the line was a tall order.

Misaki murmured under her breath, “Why don’t we just mention our lady’s name so that…”

When she saw Nanami’s eyes on her, she fell silent, needing no further explanation.

Ryuu Suzune patted my shoulder. “My lady, it might help your subordinates if you acted selfishly from time to time, like a

normal young noblewoman would.”

“Okay, okay. I’m being selfish! Yes! Tell them I’m coming through!”

“That’s the young lady I know,” Suzune sang. “I, Ryuu Suzune, am impressed by your broad-mindedness!”

Uh-huh. Enough with that obviously insincere praise.

Kitagumo Ryouko and other armed maids arrived fully equipped too. Even the special forces who guarded this route, operating on former general Nakajima Atsushi’s orders, would join us.

“…Taking advantage…”

“I know, I know! It’s my fault! This is all my fault!” I waved my hand, cutting Ryouko off.

She was equipped with a real gun. She’d have to use the real thing during training, which meant Inspector Natsume Kentarou and cops from the Metropolitan Police Department’s Security Bureau would also join us.

“But it’s kind of exciting, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t help laughing. This was like going on a dangerous picnic. I felt like that in that moment, at least.

After a few complaints from the subway and East Japan Imperial Railway line operators, we finally departed on the special train for Narita Airport. We’d start traveling on the Tozai subway line, then take the Sobu Main Line all the way to Narita. As we passed stations, the commuters on the platforms stared at our train in confusion, but our windows were one-way glass. The trip lasted about an hour. Then we stopped at the special platform that Narita Airport had gone out of the way to prepare. But the doors wouldn’t open.

“Hm…? What’s going on?”

Eva pulled me further back into the passenger car. Glancing around, I saw that the faces of the other maids in the car looked stiff, and the armed maids on the platform had drawn their guns. In this world’s Japan, security guards and other qualified individuals needed police permission to carry guns, but that meant those with permission *could* handle them. Something must’ve happened to make them carry their weapons visibly like that.

“My apologies, but would you mind waiting in the train a bit longer?”

“That’s fine. Did something happen, though?”

“Yes. The police informed us that gunfire was heard at the perimeter of the airport. We want you to stay here for your own safety. Will you agree to that?”

The VIP-exclusive platform had increased security in case of an incident like this, and the platform itself was like a fortress. My maids inside the car remained on alert too while Kitagumo Ryouko and the security guards exited to lock down the platform. The terrorists targeting the airport turned out to be operating on a larger scale than I’d imagined.

“A gunfight?!”

Inspector Natsume confirmed the information through his radio. The police had been tipped off about a warehouse near the airport, only to find a terrorist organization that wouldn’t go down without a fight there. The Chiba Prefectural Police’s airport-security forces had surrounded the warehouse, where they were now exchanging gunfire with the terrorists.

“Despite this, public safety has still improved compared to before. It’s those Russian-made firearms coming in through Karafuto that’re the problem. The Northern Japanese government’s collapse meant their former military’s arms ended up on the black market. They’ve mostly been recovered by now, but some are still out on the streets. That’s what happened here. This country’s involvement in the Iraq War could have something to do with it too.”

My mind suddenly pictured very troubling things. Underground money usually involved sex, drugs, and violence. If they were smuggling guns into the country, sex and drugs had to be part of the picture too.

“I’m sorry to ask something so unpleasant, but are human trafficking and drug sales mixed up with the weapons smuggling?”

Plastering a fake grin onto his face, Inspector Natsume confirmed my suspicions. “There’s no reason the mafia *wouldn’t* get involved with those things.”

Meanwhile, at the Kudanshita police box

"What's going on?! I thought the terrorists were supposed to come to Kudanshita!" Inspector Ono Kenichi shouted at Director Maefuji over the phone.

He could hear the chaos on the other end of the line. American intelligence had reported that a plan was underway to storm Kudanshita Keika Tower and assassinate Keikain Runa, but that all turned out to be part of a plan to let her get away. The problem was that a thread connected the multiple criminal organizations carrying out this plot.

"We already caught most of that group. Narita is a separate incident."

"Separate incident?! Who's behind it?"

"The Russian mafia. These guys are a lot scarier."

They'd only increased their power since the Soviet Union fell, establishing footholds in the United Kingdom and Japan for their global business. Now, they provided weapons and smuggled drugs for criminal organizations—industries in which they boasted large shares throughout the world. They were said to be behind up to a third of global money laundering.

"According to the information on the planned attack we got from the U.S., it's those same Islamic extremists who've been spreading fear worldwide. The ones with Russian citizenship have been immigrating illegally into the country through Karafuto, where they came to the mainland to launch an attack on Kudanshita. It was only going to be a few suicide bombers, but their goal was to force this country out of the Iraq War by killing the young lady who campaigned as if she was an idol for the American president. We picked up on that from American intelligence, had her flee to Hokkaido, and stormed the terrorists' houseboat hideout in the city where we arrested them. There might be others, so don't let your guard down yet, but things are going smoothly so far."

Director Maefuji paused for a moment. When he spoke again, he started connecting that history to the present incident at Narita.

“The problem for them was that it’s hard to get weapons here on the mainland, since we’re on such high alert for terrorism, so they went to the Russian mafia to supply their weapons. The shoot-out outside Narita Airport is taking place at one of their armories.”

“*One* of them?” Inspector Ono questioned him in confusion. He couldn’t ignore that part.

As he continued his explanation, Director Maefuji barked orders at his men. “…Get a warrant to search the other location too! Charge in there and put a stop to this! Sorry. Where’d I leave off? Oh, right. The armories. You know that after the unification with Northern Japan, the Russian mafia started using Hokkaido and Karafuto as bases to expand their power, right? The ones who kept starting trouble with the yakuza in the process organized a bunch of ex-soldiers and advanced into Kanto. They’re headquartered in Russia, so we don’t know their full scope yet, but they’re still under investigation. This all started when the Russian mafia accepted our plea bargain at the eleventh hour and sold out the terrorists. They were working on their own plot, but terrorists are still terrorists. The Islamic extremists leaked the Russian plot to Japan for revenge on the mafia that betrayed them.”

The young lady had been evacuated to keep her away from one terrorist attack, only to suffer an unfortunate twist of fate as she ran into another. Ironically, the plan for her escape involved sending her to New Chitose Airport via Narita if there was danger in the city and eventually placing her in the gated community Keika Group had built in Yubari. They never imagined she’d get stuck at the airport when terrorists started a shoot-out.

An urban gunfight could hurt innocent bystanders. Sakata, a Yamagata Prefecture town that was another Keika stronghold, had been a secondary candidate for her evacuation destination. That would have required taking a plane from Shonai Airport and ending up at Narita anyway, though, so it was rejected. They didn’t take a helicopter to Narita because the Russian mafia had included Russian-made RPG-7s among the various weapons they’d prepared. Once that came to light, it seemed best to avoid helicopters to be safe.

“That’s what happened at Narita?”

“Right. We would’ve caught it if the terrorists had had ties to the Narita Airport opposition, but apparently their clients weren’t radical Islamists after all. It’s tricky to find evidence. At this point, to be blunt, you should have the young lady flee to the main Keikain estate. This is getting too big, and the situation’s growing unstable. The prime minister and American president are worried about her safety too.”

“Come on, Maefuji. I thought we were closer than this. Tell me what the Russians were plotting at Narita.” After some silence, Ono tried to force it out of him. Not having to ask him showed how long the two men had known each other.

“You’re gonna lose your shot at being chief of police, you know.”

“Even being in charge of this police box is too much for me. Besides, my detective instincts tell me to ask you.”

Ono was always on the scene of the crime. He’d made it this far thanks to those instincts, and he had no intention of betraying them now.

“It’s the official story for why that young lady left her house. The Russian mafia was hired to assassinate Angela Sullivan of Keika Securities when she landed at Narita. She’s a North American surveillance worker with access to the Moonlight Fund, the young lady’s piggy bank. Someone issued orders to take that woman out.”

Angela’s private jet had made an emergency landing at Haneda instead of Narita, allowing her to flee to the American embassy. As the North American department’s executive director, she’d returned to Japan to meet with her boss, the young lady, who had also been investigating money laundering in Karafuto. Keikain Runa was very much at the heart of this incident.

“One more thing. We know they were bringing in weapons, but who were they trying to sell them to?”

That wasn’t an open question; rather, he asked as confirmation. This was a normal crime, not terrorism. They had to look at it that way, or they’d be tripped up, since gunplay was involved. Still, the sheer size of the fireworks would make most people see it differently. To them, it *would* be terrorism, not any standard crime.

“Narita uses international air routes. They were there trading weapons for narcotics with the Chinese mafia, and those were the weapons being used in the shoot-out now. In other words, their warehouse was both an armory and a drug storehouse.”

East Asia’s Golden Triangle region was manufacturing the drugs. Afghanistan had managed a large share of their exports, only to lose them in the genocide and cause a supply shortage. Now they were a hot commodity, going out through Hokkaido and Karafuto and being brought into Europe via Siberian railways. Narita Airport was a place of business for the Chinese and Russian mafias, and they were likely after air routes to America too. Karafuto was handling the money laundering for all those business deals.

“Got it. I’ve asked you everything I need to. Next time we’re out drinking, you can complain to me all you want.”

“You better buy me some nice booze… Don’t do anything dangerous.” Inspector Ono hung up the phone.

Without another word, the two others who’d listened to everything on speakerphone nodded. They were Tachibana Ryuuji and Nakajima Atsushi, the man in charge of Kudanshita Keika Tower’s security.

“We’ll form units and head out to guard the main Keikain family residence.”

“I’ll send word to the main family. Inspector Ono, I’m sorry I asked something reckless of you. I’ll make sure to get you some expensive liquor.”

Director Maefuji had probably known that these two men would be listening to their conversation and said as much as he could. But he instinctively understood that it wouldn’t end this chaos. Even once the other two men left the room, Inspector Ono stayed inside. As someone who was always at the scene of a crime, his current job was to protect his police box and Kudanshita Keika Tower.

“This is going to be a long day…”

With that, Inspector Ono stuck a cigarette between his lips.

One hour later,
at the Narita Airport Station VIP platform

A shelter-in-place order was issued at Narita Airport. Sheltering in my train meant that I got to enjoy my luxury-class seat. Still, I was annoyed. Since it was related to terrorism, there was no knowing when this state of affairs might end.

Every channel on the car's TV monitors was reporting on this incident.

"Yes, I'm here at the scene. Gunfire is still breaking out sporadically, with police returning shots fired. We know that a few officers have already been injured, and now, as locals evacuate..."

"Reporting live from Narita Airport. Between the airport closure and reports of terrorism, airport-goers are nervously awaiting the facility's reopening. Buses are being taken out along safe routes, but Imperial Railway and private rail travel are suspended, given the proximity of the shoot-out..."

"The National Police Agency has decided to send out riot squads to cover a large area. The revised Security Industry Act has allowed security firms within the division to be dispatched under police control. The riot squads being deployed..."

"The prime minister is in charge of the headquarters being set up to tackle this incident, and the Chief Cabinet Secretary has stated that they'll do everything in their power to resolve the situation. The American embassy has also released a statement that they're prepared to assist their ally during this crisis. Unconfirmed reports say that U.S. military bases are forming anti-terrorist squadrons..."

"Reports are coming in that the Japan Defense Agency is calling in troops from Narashino for emergency duty..."

"Can the police really handle these terrorists with the weapons they have now? Some say that the terrorists are armed with automatic rifles and anti-tank rockets."

"Are you suggesting they act like the old imperial police used to? If things turn out like the Second February 26 Incident, international society will lose all faith in our country!"

"The issue right now is that the police can't suppress this terrorist organization! Unlike in the Nagano incident, the delays aren't even caused by hostages. They're because the terrorists are

armed with rifles! Now's the time when we must form a special unit to combat terrorism!"

"The police already have those! They're plenty prepared for terrorism on this level."

Tachibana had told me that this wasn't a terrorist attack, but that didn't change my mood as I watched the Russian-looking men on TV fire their automatic rifles. They'd taken no hostages, so the police probably intended to exhaust them before going in to mop up. In other words, I'd be stuck in my train for a while.

"This just in. We've confirmed that a radical Islamic group has taken responsibility for this terrorist attack. Their target is Lady Keikain Runa, the noblewoman who incited the war and holds a close relationship with the United States. At this moment, Lady Keikain Runa is stopped at Narita Airport, which she was visiting on business..."

"Who the hell leaked this?!" Inspector Natsume shouted out, unable to take it.

The awful leak turned the maids under Eva completely pale too. It gave the terrorists justification for their target. Now this really *had* been raised to the level of a terrorist attack.

"It came from European paparazzi who keep tabs on the royal family. They must've found out we were going to Narita by tracking our schedule. There was also a post in a train thread on an online board that named which train Her Ladyship would ride on and at what time. Train fanatics noticed the special personal train leaving Kudanshita and realized it could only belong to Lady Runa. The European media bought the information from the paparazzi and brought it to the news, who ignored the media agreement to keep this quiet, and every other station started reporting what they did... Could the Japanese media have used the paparazzi as a way to break the media blackout?"

Nozuki Misaki read the information she'd collected off her laptop, a look of total amazement on her face. The media saw a star like me getting wrapped up in a major incident as a massive news story, and that star's safety wasn't too important. At this point, it was easy to predict the next development.

"Close all entrances! Arrest anyone who tries to force their way in!"

“Reporters are rushing the doors! They’re asking to interview the young lady…”

“Airport-goers are trying to come inside! They want to evacuate to our train because they know it’s safe…”

This was horrible. The unease around the situation had found a direction to take. If it had only been reporters, we could’ve forced them away. But now there was a rush to get to this shelter—the VIP platform—because I’d become an icon who could lead those present to safe ground. But pushing back against civilians might injure them—in front of a group of reporters, at that. I’d be granting the coup the ultimate weapon to use against me.

My PHS rang. I looked down and saw that it was Eiichi-kun.

“Hello?”

“Runa, are you safe?”

“For now, yes. Thanks for worrying about me.”

Greeting Eiichi-kun was the only thing that calmed me, but that calm was about to be shattered.

“I’m at Narita too.”

“Huh?! Why?!”

“Staff from TIG Backup Systems’ East Coast office are flying in. I wanted to greet them and ask them some stuff too, but then all this happened. If you’re safe holed up in that train, then that’s all that matters. I booked a hotel room near Narita for you, though. If there’s any danger, get out of there and go to the hotel.”

“Hang on.” I put him on hold to tell the others about his plan. I also needed confirmation: “We really can’t leave on the train?”

“No! The route would take us down a line the terrorists can see from their building. If we go inside their range, and they have RPGs…”

That was when we heard a roar. As shock waves hit us, Tachibana Yuka pulled me to the ground protectively. Since even those of us inside the train could feel this explosion, it must have been huge.

“What was that?!”

“They’re saying there was a detonation in a coin locker! There’s panic at the scene, and they can’t maintain the perimeter!”

I got out from under Yuka and steeled my nerves. My body trembled, but I kept my voice strong, trusting that the mask of a noblewoman would allow me to maintain my facade.

“I don’t mind. Please allow any evacuees to enter. The rest of us will escape to a hotel in Narita.”



“My lady?!”

As I put more force into my voice to reject the opposition from Eva, Tachibana Yuka, and Kushunnai Nanami, I was reminded of a movie scene I’d filmed that was just like this.

“Tell the reporters we’ll have a press conference in half an hour. If there’s chaos out here, it’ll spread and cause chaos at the scene of the incident itself. Allowing that would be a fatal error.”

This incident was going to be treated as terrorism. I could already predict how the opposition would use it to attack the prime minister, criticizing the extent to which he’d participated in the Americans’ war. I needed to get public opinion on my side, or my actions could be used to justify forcing me out through the coup.

I turned to face Inspector Natsume and Eva, the highest-ranking members of my entourage. I kept my voice firm but dignified, as if this was unfolding on a TV show. As the person in charge, I was taking responsibility for logic and emotions.

“Inspector Natsume. Eva. I believe in all of you. So please allow me to do my job.”

Inspector Natsume was a career police officer. He understood our organization and the optics of exposing someone he was supposed to protect to danger. Standing close to me, he gave his permission.

“I understand. Lady Runa has given her permission! Let evacuees onto the platform! But keep them out of the train! And pat them all down thoroughly for weapons!”

“I’ll go through the press club to set up the press report. We’ll make a brief statement and allow three questions. We’ll address them at the ticket gate outside the VIP platform!”

“Begin evacuations. Have the evacuees come onto the platform first, then get the young lady out. What do we know about the explosion at this point? Set up the escape route, and be sure to sweep it well!”

The voices that spoke following Inspector Natsume’s orders belonged to Eva and Kitagumo Ryouko. *If this were a movie, the next scene would probably be the climax.* That very detached thought occurred to me before I got back on the phone with Eiichi-kun.

At the same time,
in the Cabinet Office's Crisis Management Center

In the Crisis Management Center, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was pressed for a response to the terrorism outside Narita Airport in his capacity as the minister in charge of crisis management. The situation was unraveling quickly.

"What do we know about the airport explosion?"

At his desk, Izumikawa crossed his arms, demanding a report. This meeting was a gathering of related ministers and bureaucrats from their ministries—a venue in which they would collate a report for the prime minister.

Before any of the bureaucrats could answer the deputy prime minister, Prime Minister Koizumi himself entered the room. Everyone, including Izumikawa, began standing up to bow.

Prime Minister Koizumi waved them off. "There's no time. I want firsthand information, so carry on with the meeting. I won't get in the way."

He headed to a corner of the room to take a seat, but his secretary couldn't let that slide, quickly preparing a chair next to Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. After that brief scene, the report could begin.

"The five terrorists hiding in the urban houseboat have been taken into custody uninjured. They're currently jailed under suicide watch in a police station. After an investigation, they'll be transferred to the main office, where a more proper investigation can be conducted."

"Regarding the Narita Airport explosion, a perimeter was put up around the airport after gunfire broke out. However, a coin locker within that perimeter exploded. There were no casualties or injuries, but the airport is in chaos. Evacuees are now swarming the VIP platform they view as a safe location."

"The airport fire brigade is en route now to handle the explosion and the resulting fire. However, police have run into trouble, given the lack of personnel to search the remaining coin lockers and garbage cans."

“We’ve withdrawn certain riot squad and air defense forces from the scene of the shooting to help investigate the explosion. The police are still putting up periodic resistance to the shooters, but we don’t believe they’ll break through to their base anytime soon. As initial estimates predicted, there have still been no developments in the clash as of 2 a.m.”

“The Narashino First Airborne Brigade and nearby military bases are on standby to deploy as soon as orders come in.”

Police and defense officials alike understood the urgency surrounding the situation, but the prime minister alone completely broke through the tense atmosphere.

“Sounds like you need more people, eh? I’ll give the orders, then.”

The defense official and police official cried out at roughly the same time:



“Understood!”

“Prime Minister!”

That was the moment the JSDF received orders to deploy on a public-security operation. That also meant that the political situation in Japan would accelerate rapidly, since such operations needed National Diet approval, yet Prime Minister Koizumi had given the orders nonchalantly. This was clear evidence that the airport incident was now viewed as terrorism.

“Got it? However things started, multiple countries see this as terrorism. Ours can’t fall behind in the war on terror. I’ll take responsibility for any fallout, so take whatever actions you believe best. That’s all.”

Orders from the highest authority were absolute, but Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa’s job was to look for points of compromise. He called his secretary and drafted a note with her, since he’d later have to summon the police and defense officials to adjust things so that directions on the scene didn’t get confused.

“So, can we get the young lady out of there?”

When Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa asked that later, the police official got a grim look on his face. There’d once been a movie about control of an airport being seized, but now that it was happening in real life, things were even more chaotic.

“Reports from the scene say that Lady Keikain Runa is taking a car from the VIP platform to a hotel outside the airport. She’s also announced that she’ll open the VIP platform as a place to take shelter. Her guards don’t want her to leave, but the young lady’s actions are indeed helping to calm the panic on-site. We believe she’ll be able to depart safely.”

This meant the state of the crime—no, the state of the terrorism—would become a problem. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa had called one of Keikain Runa’s maids, Anisha Egorova, to deliver a briefing. She was the contact of his who’d helped him form Keikain Runa’s escape plan after picking up on this terrorist plot. Dressed in a suit instead of her maid uniform, she truly looked like the former KGB agent she was.

“Allow me to repeat the facts we know about this case. Islamic extremists plotting the young lady’s assassination approached the Russian mafia to supply their weapons and help

them cross the border. The Russian mafia then sold out the terrorists as part of an eleventh hour plea bargain. Wanting revenge for that betrayal, the terrorists leaked the Russian mafia's plot to us. That was the start of it all."

After falling silent for a moment, Anisha looked around the room before continuing. At the end of the day, this terrorist attack was nothing more than a commonplace internal miscommunication at an organization.

"This deal was carried out among higher-ups, so the people at the bottom were out of the loop. The Russian mafia plot the terrorists leaked to us was the planned assassination of Angela Sullivan of Keika Securities. That's the background of the situation leading up to the gunfire outside Narita Airport and the explosion in the coin locker."

The prime minister interjected next, putting his hand to his brow. He sounded desperate for there to be some sort of misunderstanding. "So the Narita terrorist attack's real target was Angela Sullivan?"

"Correct. That's why the terrorism at Narita was going to be treated as a normal crime. The young lady was going to be sent from Kudanshita Tower to Hokkaido when reports of the terrorist plot came out. But gunfire broke out while she was at Narita, so she couldn't leave."

"Wait a minute. You said the people at the bottom of the organization weren't informed, right? Does that mean they're still in the airport right now?" Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa asked.

Anisha nodded in response. Her unofficial connections to the Russian government were the real reason she'd been brought there. Russia was deeply involved in this incident, so they needed someone to deliver this information to the prime minister's office.

"The radical Islamic terrorists are traveling via Siberian railroads. They used fake names, so we don't know their identities, but we *do* know how many there are. Six came here. How many people were caught in the houseboat?"

That was when the mood in the room hit rock bottom. Six terrorists total, and five men captured at the houseboat: That left one. Even an elementary schooler could do that math, which indicated that a terrorist might still be inside Narita Airport.

“The terrorists were planning to receive their weapons at Narita. The Russian mafia, carrying weapons with which they intended to assassinate Angela Sullivan, are currently surrounded. So who planted the bomb in the airport?”

Thirty minutes later,
at the Narita Airport Station VIP platform

The VIP platform had become crowded with evacuees. Some pushed up to the train, trying to get inside, but my guards and maids handled it.

“It sounds like the prime minister ordered the Japan Self-Defense Forces to undertake a public-security operation. Now the situation should be resolved before long.” Eva, who’d been gathering information, told me that detail to calm me.

I set down my cup of black tea and asked her a question. “Why will the JSDF deploying resolve it?”

“First of all, it’ll stop the chaos inside Narita Airport. The situation’s such a mess that security’s gotten lax. To fix that, they need to bring in manpower to guarantee everyone’s safety, but the police have their hands full keeping the terrorists surrounded. If the JSDF takes over for them, the police can move their people into Narita Airport to ensure order.”

I see. Currently, a search of all terminals for explosives was supposed to be going on. Once that finished, and safety inside the building could be assured, we could move the evacuees on the platform back inside.

“On a simpler level, they also have better equipment than the terrorists. The Russian mafia members who were going to sell weapons to the terrorists are holed up in that warehouse, but unlike radical Islamic terrorists, they won’t give their lives putting up this fight. Once the JSDF advances and launches an attack, they’ll quite likely surrender. And as a show of power, the JSDF is bringing in not just the First Airborne Brigade, but tanks from the military base in Tsuchiura as well.”

They’ve got tanks?

Eva explained that the Tsuchiura base owned Type 90 tanks for educational purposes. Seeing one of those come to blast you

away would make anyone throw in the towel. Of course, that was assuming the police didn't go on the offensive first and bomb the warehouse. The police and military seemingly didn't get along anywhere.

As I thought about that, my PHS rang again. It was Eiichi-kun.

"It's me, Runa. I'm outside the airport parking lot. Can you get the person in charge of security to let us in? We're in a bulletproof car."

"Give me a minute," I replied, then told Eva, "Eiichi-kun says he's here with a bulletproof car. He wants to bring it up to the platform entrance."

Eva nodded and started calling someone else, so I went back to my call with Eiichi-kun. "She's working on it now. Oh—she got the all-clear. Bring the car up to the entrance."

"Prepare to transport Lady Runa by car!" Tachibana Yuka ordered.

Kushunnai Nanami followed that up. "We'll open cars one and three. Let evacuees gather inside, putting women and children first, then open car two's doors so Lady Runa can exit! I'll stay and guard car two. Take control of Lady Runa's security, Enbuchi-san."

"Understood! Nozuki, Akibe, Irina, Yulia, come with me! Everyone else, stay and guard the train!"

"I'll lead the way. Please follow behind me, my lady."

I accepted Inspector Natsume's instructions. If something was going to happen, it would be now. A hunch that felt more like certainty was setting off my alarm bells. *If something goes wrong, do I just have to stand back and let everyone protect me?*

Or should I...

"Hey! Look! It's Lady Keikain Runa!"

"Damn, why does some kid get all those guards to herself?!"

"Why're terrorists trying to kill a child like her in the first place?"

"I hear she's the one who let us escape to this safe platform."

The moment I stepped onto the platform, I was overwhelmed by jealousy, envy, and the flashes of cameras.

Although my guards shouted at them, it seemed the media had managed to sneak in.

“Care to comment, my lady?”

“Reports say you were this terrorist attack’s target…”

“What can you tell us about your connections to the United States?”

They pushed recklessly through the evacuees as my guards tried to get rid of them. All I could do was smile uncomfortably. The evacuees and press started to shove each other, catching some of my guards in the chaos. Still, my maids and Inspector Natsume carried me frantically to the exit.

I ran up the stairs and spotted the car coming into view. The cry that greeted me was impossible to miss.

“Runa?!”

Eiichi-kun was there. I watched as he tried to force a girl who looked our age to the ground. What her hand clutched didn’t escape my eyes.

“Grenade!”

As I screamed that word, my body instinctively charged forward. I’d never been so grateful—not only for my physical edge but also that I’d once filmed a movie scene just like this.

“My lady!”

I slipped past Akibe Riko, jumped off the backs of some media representatives, and flew through the air.

Realizing why I’d do such a thing, Inspector Natsume let out a shout. “There’s a terrorist here! She has a grenade!”

Eiichi-kun and the terrorist tumbled to the ground. He held her down, but she was trying to remove the grenade’s pin.

Please, please let me reach them in time!

I grabbed the girl’s wrist and pinned it to the ground. She screamed something at us, but the pin stayed firmly inside the grenade. A few seconds later, police and maids swarmed around me.

“I’ve got her!”

“Are you all right, my lady?!”

“Eiichi-kun! Is Eiichi-kun okay?!”

“He’s trying to bite into his tongue! Don’t let him!”

“Hey! That’s the son from the Teia zaibatsu, Lady Runa’s good friend!”

It was only a second, but that single second lasted forever, like something right out of a movie. I was pulled away from the terrorist; then I could reunite with Eiichi-kun, who’d almost been mistaken for the culprit himself.

“Why do you have to do things right out of movies, Runa?”

“Why did you imitate me when you haven’t even starred in a movie, Eiichi-kun?”

Despite the mob around me, I couldn’t help smiling. I knew I’d be in for a lot of scoldings later, but I was still convinced that I’d made the right choice.

Eiichi-kun probably felt the same way. His smile was radiant. “I just wanted to try it. I looked cool, didn’t I?”

Ba-dump. My heart jumped in a different way this time.

But I didn’t want to admit that, so I insulted him as usual. “Dummy!”

We got into the car and evacuated to a hotel outside Narita. It went without saying that any number of people scolded the two of us thoroughly.



One hour later, at the American Embassy in Tokyo

At the American embassy, former CIA agent and current Keika Securities Executive Director Angela Sullivan was in the middle of spewing the most f-words she'd ever used in her life. The cause of that was, of course, the extremely cinematic scene of the young lady's crisis. It had now been played for every department to see.

"You've got some nerve endangering my lady like that. Do you think I'll let this slide…?!"

"I see you've become nothing more than one of her servants."

Those words came from Mark M. Barnes. Angela answered with a threat, her voice as cold as ice. The situation meant that neither side cared about hierarchy for the moment.

"Don't forget, you got saved by a plea deal. You don't want to go to prison, do you?"

"Oooh, how scary. Still, I don't think I've caused even a fraction of the damage your beloved young lady has. I'm sure you know that lots of people still want her dead, given the tens of billions of dollars she wiped out on Wall Street. If I hadn't slipped up in the speculative battle around that, I'd never have had to change my name and identity and approach your agency for protection."

Mark smiled nonchalantly. He'd survived because of his courage as well as the trump cards he held.

"So, did you manage to confirm what I told you?"

"Yes. You weren't lying. The Romanov family treasure really does exist."

"They call the secret bank account 'Anastasia.' The Northern Japanese government ordered Karafuto Bank to open the account at a private Swiss bank to store the Romanov family treasure… At least, that was what they labeled their money-laundering system. The Russian mafia almost murdered you for looking into it. I can't help laughing at their wonderful choice of a name."

"You got a good look into that secret account, then ran away. Are you really one to comment on it?"

Money laundering was the act of “cleaning” dirty money to make it look normal. In other words, it meant taking money gained through sex, drugs, or violence and legitimizing it by running it through a business. The Northern Japanese government had turned their eyes to the fictional Romanov family treasure just to get their hands on a means of laundering money.

“Right after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, they said the money poured into that account would be released when a legitimate heir to the Romanov family emerged. That was only a pretext, though, and the account ended up a piggy bank for the Russian mafia. Then, as collateral for that piggy bank’s funds, Karafuto Bank started lending its contents to legitimate businesses. These were Russian businesses belonging to oligarchs with mafia ties, of course. The oligarchs had weighed the possibility that they might be purged by the Russian president, so instead of working to replace him, they took up the cause of reviving the Romanovs instead. The survivors of the Northern Japanese government were worried about the prospect of Karafuto’s independence, so they jumped into this cause too. Politicians and officials from the Karafuto Reconstruction Agency and Karafuto prefectural government were made aware of this mess and turned a blind eye to it. It was a system that left everyone happy, at least in the beginning.”

“But the Russian financial crisis and the fall of the oligarchs led the system to destruction. That’s how the true treasure—the Moonlight Fund—started getting attention.”

Mark shrugged. He’d controlled this system from Wall Street as a trader for Karafuto Bank. That was how he’d managed to expose it all and flee before the system collapsed. Everything about him was fake—his history, name, and appearance, since he’d gone so far as altering his face with plastic surgery. That explained why Angela had been targeted for assassination when she started investigating the system herself.

“Your beloved young lady went too far, Angela. European profits from weapons sales, human trafficking, and drugs from South America all get laundered on Wall Street. That’s what keeps Anastasia going. Karafuto Bank is a player on Wall Street that’s been able to represent Japan since it was nationalized in the reunification, so this system was very convenient for them. They

could use tax money to cover deficits whenever they wanted and say they were disposing of bad debts. Of the tens of billions of dollars the young lady erased, about fifteen billion were debts related to Karafuto Bank."

"Be more specific, Mark. The oligarchs first lost power during the Russian financial crisis, and Karafuto Bank developed bad debts because oligarchs funded them. The Karafuto Reconstruction Agency and prefectural government disposed of these debts behind the scenes, leading to their Russian mafia connections. Then the IT bubble collapsed in America, causing you and your people huge losses. Karafuto Bank couldn't get rid of these losses behind the scenes, especially given the Koizumi administration's goal to dispose of all bad debts. But what if the Romanov family treasure actually existed? It'd give you everything you needed to clean up your mess. In fact, that treasure's owner would be the young lady with the Romanov family's blood in her veins."

Mark clapped his hands theatrically. He spoke like an actor starring in a play. "Ah, Angela. If only conspiracies were like dramas. Everything would be so much easier."

"Don't make light of this. Who got involved in this 'drama'?"

There would've been nothing left to worry about if it had ended there. But at the very least, only a few groups were determined and wealthy enough to send an assassin after someone in the CIA, even if Angela's ties *were* unofficial.

The current Russian president didn't have a very good relationship with his country's mafia, and he had agents like Angela stationed with the young lady as well. In other words, this terrible drama had another scriptwriter.

"You've made it so far, but you still don't see it? You know the young lady makes her moves with dollars and yen. So why don't you consider that *other* currency?"

Angela's face was growing pale. The dollar was currently used for oil deals. One could even say that trust in the dollar was backed by oil. But there was a country trying to change those payments made in dollars—Iraq, a nation currently in the midst of turmoil. The currency they were trying to use in their transactions was the euro.

"...So that's what it is."

“Exactly. These are European investment funds. In other words, the young lady’s games and the war in Iraq are entirely to decide what the hard currency of the twenty-first century will be. The witches in Europe have been writing this entire script.”

TV special news reports later that night

“Yes, I’m here at the scene of the siege, keeping a distance of one kilometer or so. The police perimeter is just ahead. Past the sandbags, we can see riot police, followed by police vehicles parked farther back. Terrorist gunfire has become intermittent, and now that the sun has set, riot police are setting up spotlights. That’s all we know at the moment, so I’ll send it back to the studio.”

“There you heard the report from the scene. We turn now to our commentator ○○-san. Looking at that footage, we can see some vehicles that don’t belong to the police. Can you tell us about them?”

“Those are BTR-70s. You can see the name of their organization written on the bodies of the vehicles. Those ones say Kitakaba Security, so they may belong to Lady Keikain Runa, who was targeted in this incident. This security company is a Keika Corp subsidiary under the Keika Group, and their stated goal is to employ former soldiers from the Northern Japanese army. You see them dispatched to defend facilities and people that are important to the Keika Group. This terrorist attack caused the revised Security Industry Act to go into effect, placing security companies from Tokyo and Chiba under police control. That should include Kitakaba Security.”

“Speaking of Lady Keikain Runa, can we hear from ××-san at the scene?”

“Yes. I’m here outside a hotel in the city of Narita. Lady Keikain Runa has been moved to a suite here, and she’s just announced plans for a press conference once the situation is under control. The hotel is already surrounded by cars belonging to police and security firms exercising extreme caution. The area around Narita Airport is occupied by fifteen hundred airport guards, riot squads being dispatched in sequence by the

Metropolitan Police Department, and airport security firms, as well as Kitakaba Security, bringing the total manpower into the thousands. Narita Airport will remain completely closed off until the incident is resolved. They're continuing to evacuate airport-goers outside the perimeter, but the scene at the airport itself is still chaotic. That's all I have for you at this time."

"Thank you for that update. We'll now replay footage of the -moment Lady Keikain Runa personally stopped a terrorist attack. △△-san, what she pulled off here is incredible."

"Indeed, she outmaneuvered the security forces themselves. Lady Keikain Runa has won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, and she's said to have performed all her own stunts, even in action films. Many noble lives were lost in the Second February 26 Incident when they were targeted by a rebel battalion, leading former daimyo families and other notable people to begin training in self-defense. If Lady Keikain Runa hadn't pinned down her wrist, the terrorist's grenade could very well have detonated. Likewise, if the boy who slammed his body into the terrorist hadn't spotted her, the situation would probably have taken a very tragic turn."

"By the way, the boy who body-slammed the terrorist is reportedly Teia Eiichi-san of the family behind the Teia Group—a school friend of Lady Keikain Runa's. Let's turn now to △△-san of the National Diet press club. Is it true that the government authorized JSDF deployment for a public-security operation?"

"Yes, that's correct. Not only has this incident provoked a JSDF public-security operation, people throughout Nagata-cho can't hide their unease now at the United States' close surveillance of this situation. Lady Keikain Runa is a celebrity, and at such a young age, she's both the face of the Keika Group and a personal friend of the current president. In Washington, D.C., the Japanese ambassador has been summoned to go over details of the situation. Furthermore, the White House press secretary issued a statement saying, 'The United States is prepared to support our ally through their predicament by any means necessary.' One government source reports that the JSDF's public-security strategy was partially determined by the degree of attention this situation is receiving from the United States. According to a source in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'As public order in Iraq becomes unsatisfactory to the U.S., losing the many Japanese troops

dispatched to the country would change the United States' fundamental strategy in the conflict.' That's leading to speculation that the United States has made some move behind the scenes."

"But aren't there Diet objections regarding the implementation of public-security operations?"

"That's right. The failed terrorist plot against the Shinjuku Geofront was resolved by the Metropolitan Police Department alone, and a top department member has now put his anger on full display, stating, 'The government interfered in something we could've handled ourselves.' The JSDF haven't been deployed for a public-security operation since the Second February 26 Incident, and since deployment is supposed to require National Diet approval, the opposition party has already declared that they'll launch a thorough investigation. The cabinet approval rating is maintaining a 40 percent base, but questions of accountability over Japan's participation in the Iraq War will cause turbulence in the Diet. Some leaders within the ruling party have been overheard commenting on the looming winds."

"And those 'winds' are the feeling that a dissolution of parliament is inevitable?"

"Correct. House of Representatives members who took office during the 2000 election have one year remaining in their terms, and reports from the prime minister's office say he's been looking into the possibility of dissolution. That's because the representatives finishing their terms, and a general election taking place, would make it look like the prime minister lost his chance at a dissolution and got backed into a corner. It's believed that, the ruling party having sought radical solutions to secure a victory in Iraq and end bad debt disposal in the current Diet session, they've been planning a scenario that will lead to dissolution either at the end of the current session or at the start of an extraordinary session in the fall. However, some now speculate that today's terrorist incident derailed that scenario. We're currently only being told that a few police officers were injured, but in the event of police deaths or another attempt on Lady Keikain Runa's life, it's all but guaranteed that people will start questioning the country's continued involvement in Iraq—"

"Ah, something seems to be happening at the airport. Let's go live to the scene."

“Yes, we’re here at Narita Airport, where we’re seeing the arrival of the JSDF! The First Airborne Brigade of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force and an instructional force from the Tsuchiura military base just arrived in Narita as part of the public-security operation. They’re now removing a Type 90 tank from the transport trailer. Word is coming from the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force that they’re considering deploying their Eastern Army should the situation deteriorate… Ah, take a look! A white flag has just emerged from the building the terrorists are in! The terrorists are waving the white flag!”

Glossary and Notes

RPG-7: An anti-tank rocket used to down Black Hawks in Somalia.

The “Nagano incident”: The Asama-Sanso incident.

Police anti-terrorist units: SAT and SIT.

Narashino: First Airborne Brigade of the JSDF.

“A public-security operation”: JSDF activity occurring on the prime minister’s orders or prefectural governor’s request when police forces alone aren’t adequate to maintain public safety.

The euro: Introduced in 1999.

Massive losses: The Daiwa Bank scandal. A trader at the bank lost $1.1 billion total. Afterward, Daiwa Bank paid a $340 million fine and was forced to exit North America.

Failed Terrorism Outside Narita Airport: The Aftermath

THE DAY AFTER the terrorist incident, many guards surrounded Lady Keikain Runa, escorting her safely to the main Keikain residence. She'd gone there instead of to her residence in Kudanshita in hopes that the "adults" of the Keikain Dukedom would handle the inevitable matters of responsibility.

That was why a certain scene played out the night she arrived.

"I'm very sorry for the disturbance I caused you."

Angela Sullivan bowed to Duke Keikain Kiyomaro, his relatives, and his aides. Her bow was so perfect that she almost looked like a Japanese person in that moment.

"Please raise your head. We can't speak properly unless you do." It was Tachibana Ryuuji, the butler and representative of the family, who'd spoken up.

Angela raised her head just as slowly and as gracefully as she'd bowed it. Everyone in the room sensed that it was very significant for an unofficial government employee of the mighty United States to bow to them. It was hard for the Keikain side to criticize her too harshly after that.

"The world sees yesterday's incident as terrorist retaliation against the war on terror. Unofficially, the American president is also worried about his role in involving the young lady, a child, in such dangerous turmoil."

The president wasn't someone who bowed easily either, which meant that "unofficial" concern was his form of an apology. Adults including himself had scolded Keikain Runa and taken away the groundwork she'd been laying for Iraq, only for her still to end up endangered when terrorists came after her.

"We only want Runa to be safe, of course. But we'd like to ask you about that subject."

Keikain Runa's adopted brother, Keikain Nakamaro, questioned Angela next. He'd already unleashed the full force of his anger on Maefuji Shouichi of the police, who'd done something like this once before.

“Do I need to be clearer? I don’t want Runa starring as the heroine of this war on terror!”

The people in the room stirred, but Nakamaro was saying exactly what the relatives and aides there were thinking. This was their chance. It was an opportunity to make Keikain Runa step back, since she was a child, and give the rights to her Keika Group fully to the Keikain Dukedom—in other words, to Keikain Kiyomaro and his heir, Nakamaro.

Angela made her case desperately, not as Keikain Runa’s aide but as someone concerned with benefiting the United States. “You’re entirely justified, Nakamaro-sama. However, I ask that you please retract your plan! If my lady steps back now, that will merely show the terrorists that she’s yielded to them. Amid the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq, and the war on terror after the Twin Towers fell, that’s the one message we can’t send!”

Keikain Runa had made many contributions to the war on terror and the war in Iraq that followed. Angela knew just what a terrible message it would send if the young lady stepped down after being targeted. The United States had investigated thoroughly, going as far as to look into Keikain Kiyomaro’s donations to the opposition party, as they predicted that Iraq would devolve even further if the Koizumi administration was defeated—taking JSDF troops out of Iraq with them. Angela’s apology was a behind-the-scenes Japanese-American diplomatic matter that would even cross the desk of the president, not just the American embassy.

“Nakamaro-sama.”

That was all Tachibana needed to say to silence Nakamaro. After all, only the duke himself, Keikain Kiyomaro, could make the final decision.

“The Keikain Dukedom isn’t struggling financially, nor do we have political ambitions. All we want is for our family to be safe. I’d like to ask how the United States plans to guarantee that safety.”

Angela didn’t answer his question. That was because Tachibana’s cell phone rang at that very moment. The phone would only ring in a situation like this if the call was about something that needed to be discussed in front of the head of the family. The handy thing about cell phones was that one could see

who was calling. Looking at his phone, Tachibana revealed the caller's name to Kiyomaro.

"It's Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa."

Politics was nothing more than a terrible play, and a politician could prove their caliber based on how seriously they performed their role in such a play.

Kiyomaro nodded, prompting Tachibana to answer. Of course, he put the phone on speaker so that everyone could hear.

"Hello?"

"It's Izumikawa. Sorry to call so late. Let me hand you over..."

Neither Tachibana nor Kiyomaro reacted to that, but everyone else in the room stirred, since the deputy prime minister could only be handing the phone to one person. Their suspicions were about to be proven right.

"This is Koizumi. Yesterday's incident was caused by a failure of the Japanese government. I, Koizumi Souichirou, would like to promise Lord Keikain that such a thing will never happen again."

Tachibana exchanged looks with Kiyomaro and handed over his cell phone.

"This is Keikain Kiyomaro. I appreciate hearing you say that, Prime Minister."

This terrible play, however, turned out to be no more than an abrupt farce between Tachibana, Angela, Kiyomaro, Nakamaro, and Izumikawa. The incident was a chance to drag Keikain Runa out of power, so they had to act quickly, involve the president and prime minister, and end the speculation once and for all. Keikain Runa's safety was important too, but she'd now become both a victim and a heroine of the war on terror, and she needed to be used politically to stop the Iraq situation from devolving. That was exactly what led to this farce, and the United States had no choice but to give it their full support, as was evidenced by the listening device Angela wore and the bug on Tachibana's phone.

"I'll place my trust in you, Prime Minister Koizumi. I can do that because of the way you once scolded her as an adult. I have faith that you'll take responsibility for her like an adult as well."

"Of course. I'll be discussing this officially in the National Diet."

Prime Minister Koizumi had made a statement of responsibility. It was being wiretapped, of course, and exposing it to the mass media would hand them a political bombshell. Keikain Kiyomaro had no intention of blowing things up, though.

“All right. I’ll leave the situation in your hands, Prime Minister.”

“Thank you. I’ll let Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa have the phone back.”

The relatives and aides couldn’t insist on their own selfish desires now that someone as important as the prime minister was involved. That would anger both Prime Minister Koizumi and the United States, and no one in the room was foolish enough to get on their bad sides.

“There you have it. Should I speak with Tachibana-san for the details?”

“Yes. As for the person in charge of the United States… Angela Sullivan will take over, so I hope nothing like this will ever happen again.”

The call ended, and Kiyomaro returned the phone to Tachibana. They’d silenced these people with their farce, but the supporting players wouldn’t be satisfied without a big, climactic scene. Kiyomaro hadn’t forgotten that.

“Still, there’s no mistaking that we’re in an unhealthy situation, so we’ll have to strengthen the Keika Group’s corporate governance. I’ll also increase the power of the Choufuu Council, the meeting of presidents. I want the rest of you to restructure things so that the company management runs properly. That’s all. You’re dismissed.”

Not a single soul spoke up to protest Kiyomaro’s declaration.

On the way to Narita, Tachibana and Angela stared out the window of their limousine, their faces full of exhaustion. Now that the threat of terror had risen, investigations were being carried out everywhere, so they didn’t know when they might arrive.

Nakamaro’s voice could be heard from Tachibana’s cell phone. “It was such an obvious act. But at least it seems as though the main family isn’t foolish enough to force Runa out of power. She feels badly that she had to drag the prime minister and president into it.”

He spoke of it casually, but Kiyomaro and Nakamaro had seriously thought about keeping Runa sheltered from there on out. They'd intended to drag her back to the main family and make her live like a normal student. Tachibana and Angela were the ones who'd pacified the two men, who were enraged and ready to ignore Runa's position in the world.

"This is all thanks to your efforts, Nakamaro-sama. We can't thank you enough."

Angela had learned from the American embassy that the failed attack at Narita Airport rattled the United States. She'd passed that news along to Tachibana, who went through Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa to bring Prime Minister Koizumi into the plan and confirmed the outline of their farce with a hotline to Japanese-American leaders to be safe. Even if an attack failed, terrorism shook governments to their very top.

"I played such a terrible role. I had to try to persuade Father and let my temper run wild to pacify the rest of the room, then let the prime minister and president take credit for resolving everything. On top of all that, now I have to scold Runa when she arrives tomorrow."

Nakamaro did have a duty to chastise her for charging a terrorist, even if it was a heroic act. He had to do that both as someone who outranked her and as a family member who loved her.

"I'll leave that in your hands. Please don't hold back."

"Hey now, Tachibana. Do I have to scold her enough for both of us?" Nakamaro's voice had changed from the casual tone he'd used before. This time, he spoke in the cold, deep manner of someone with authority. "There won't be a next time. If there is, I'll ignore whatever the world tries to say to me and drag her back to the main family myself."

"...I'll bear that in mind." Tachibana sat up straight.

Even Angela had broken out into a cold sweat as she listened.

After venting his residual anger over his family member being in danger, Nakamaro went back to his original tone. "I'll leave the rest to you. Take care of things."

With that, the call ended. Tachibana and Angela didn't speak for a while.

It was Sone Mitsukane, their driver, who broke the silence. "We're being followed by a motorcycle and a car."

"It's probably the media. They were stationed outside the Keikain manor."

In the passenger seat, Akanezawa Saburou confirmed something with Tachibana. He wanted to know whether they should dodge them and call one of the security firm's cars to come stop them, but Tachibana decided to ignore the media representatives tailing them.

"Can't we find a way to involve the young lady...?"

TV station employees uttered that question as often as greetings these days. They were referring to Lady Keikain Runa. No matter how powerful she was or how much money she had, all that mattered in their industry was what they could put in front of a camera. They never understood that this girl was untouchable.

"How could we use her, though? She refuses almost all the offers she gets."

"She just does commercials for shows sponsored by the Keika Group. To make matters worse, the main Keika commercials only play late at night."

The Keika Group aired commercials during prime-time slots too, of course. However, they went through an ad agency to hire actresses to star in those slots. Meanwhile, their commercials starring Keikain Runa only aired once per late-night slot to make them feel more exclusive. If you wanted to see Keikain Runa in the daytime, you had to watch a talk show that discussed her.

From winning the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, to her shark movie, to the failed terrorist attack at Narita Airport, she'd become the woman of the hour. That said, she wasn't guaranteed to be on TV forever if there weren't more ways to get her there. The station employees felt as though she was wasting her potential, and they wanted to come up with a way to keep her on TV screens. But the girl herself wanted no part in anything like that.

"Can we come up with the money to reel her in?"

“I doubt it. The Keika Group’s already got plenty.”

The political and economic reporters were apathetic as they watched the TV people discuss this. But the TV people didn’t notice their looks, and the reporters had no duty to share anything with them. Sympathy didn’t exist in this industry—only ratings.

“The producer was crying about how no amount of money could win her over.”

“Is that why he takes a camera to her official events? If he wants footage, he could leave that to someone else.”

Keikain Runa usually appeared at Keika Group events, so talk show people tried constantly to get invitations. Her school, meanwhile, had become more heavily protected after paparazzi trespassed on the property. After the events at Narita Airport, Kitakaba Security was hired to completely take over her school’s security, and now her associates followed her constantly; she was a heavily guarded individual. These TV men knew that was why paparazzi focused on European royalty had tried to get close to her as if they were suicide bombers, failed, and been deported from the country as a result.

“She acts like she’s so important. She’d make money wherever she appeared, so why the total lack of appearances?”

“A duke’s daughter would never understand the hearts of us lowly TV men.”

At this point, the things they showed on television could still be said to represent the will of the people. It was as if the state of their minds was the state of the Japanese public’s minds. The young lady was adorable, delicate, incredibly strong, unrivaled, and all-around lovely. The people wanted to see more of her—not to try to understand what might be going on in her own heart at present.

“It’s no use. Bring me something that’ll actually capture the young lady’s interest!”

On the other hand, anyone promoted to the level of producer could recognize just what incredible power she held. These producers felt a sense of crisis even more acutely than those under them. While it was impolite to call it “nepotism,” people could debut in the entertainment industry if their parents

were important figures in politics or business. If they went through their parents to get an offer, they'd very likely come back with something. The irritating thing about the young lady was that she didn't need to ride her parents' coattails. No one could deny that she was very capable of paving her own path.

When someone with connections and money showed no interest in television, little could be done, and that was unbearable to the TV men. But they also knew all about the attacks on Keikain Runa and her retaliation, so they didn't want to make the wrong move and bring about their own destruction.

Despite being pained by her lack of urgency and their higher-ups' unreasonable demands, the TV men were probably still happy—because the only thing they needed to worry about was their own TV programs.

"It was a good show. Still, the political situation's about to get a lot more interesting."

"The people who responded to the incident were the ones who put on the good show. Narita's going to turn into a sore point for the government, though."

The inner sanctum of Japanese public opinion, a community centered around newscasters and reporters, gave the following assessment of the failed terrorist attack at Narita Airport:

"As far as entertainment goes, it was about a seven out of ten."

The grade came from people who saw reality as something that only happened on TV screens.

"Will this drive a wedge between the young lady and the prime minister?"

"Definitely. Prime Minister Koizumi may have stopped the attack at Narita, but it was still a failure on his watch. We'll also have to watch the Izumikawa faction now that the National Diet has approved the use of a JSDF public-security operation. The young lady sponsors that faction, after all. Still, the prime minister won't give up his cause of reform, will he?"

The amusing thing was that, at this point, they really believed the prime minister and young lady were going to confront each other. Or, rather, they were trying to lead public

opinion to render such a thing inevitable. That would bring them higher ratings, after all.

"There's really no doubt about that, although it does depend on how the American embassy reacts."

"Are you talking about the rumor that it was the president who brokered the deal between the prime minister and young lady? That can't be possible."

"Things are just getting worse in Iraq, though. It's good that they have a governing council now, but they can't get the Turkish army to leave the north. The same goes for the Iranian army in the south, which is there to protect the Shia Muslims. The whole thing is probably a huge headache."

"Should we expect the next president to be a Democrat at this rate?"

They were speaking this way because they could tell the state of Iraq would be a major issue for the incumbent in the next year's presidential election. There was a strong liberal current in American mass media that had affected Japan too.

"Taking that into account, the prime minister and young lady will probably confront each other after winter next year, once there's a new president."

"That reminds me. I heard about something weird going on in Washington. Supposedly, the Keika Group hired a bunch of campaign managers and sent them to California."

"Didn't their liberal governor just get recalled? If that's happening in a liberal stronghold, the conservative president still has a shot. Maybe Keika's using their Hollywood connections to lay the groundwork to switch sides to the liberals. Let's look into this."

At this point in time, the TV men had no idea. Specifically, they didn't know that a movie actor was on the verge of becoming the conservative governor in what would be a crushing defeat for the liberals—nor did they understand how that would influence the following year's presidential election.

A formal write-up was easier when you did it for the second time. That said, Inspector Natsume Kentarou's higher-ups didn't *want* to go through such a process. Still, after a scolding, he had to

submit the written apology. He returned from the head office to the Kudanshita police box, where he was greeted by a chuckling Inspector Ono Kenichi in the back of the room.

"Hey there, two-timer. You're a real playboy, aren't you?"

"Please don't say that. This is actually really bothering me."

He'd never expected that the girl he was supposed to protect would try and stop a suicide bomber herself. Yet it was also true that if she hadn't acted, there probably would've been a number of victims. That made Inspector Natsume all the more depressed.

"Well, the Keikain family's already saying it wasn't your fault."

"Maybe nobles are nobles because they know when to cover for people."

Bureaucrats operated on a demerit-based system, and a written apology was a major demerit for any career bureaucrat. Having to write a letter of apology regarding the same person twice would make other career bureaucrats want to steer clear of that person. But the Keikain family had now stepped in to back Inspector Natsume. That could only be their way of saying, "This will probably hurt your résumé, but we'll support you if you retire and work for us someday, so let's continue our relationship."

"You never had any intention of aiming for the top of the organization, did you?"

"Well, I *am* a career policeman, so I do think about that sort of thing. But I guess it's just my disposition. Maefuji-senpai once lectured me because I wasn't eager enough to climb the career ladder. That's obvious after my latest failure, though."

"A kouhai should want to hear those words from his senpai. I gather that Japan, Russia, and the U.S. are launching a joint investigation into the terrorist attack. They'll want you involved in that."

"It's really gotten that big…?"

The failed Narita Airport attack was being explained to the public as the work of radical Islamic extremists. The truth being covered up was that their actual target was Angela Sullivan of Keika Securities, and that the Russian mafia had set up the plot itself, fearing the discovery of their money-laundering system. Those were the results of the investigation, and they'd leaked to

the authorities, making a certain person even angrier than the target, Keikain Runa, herself.

Inspector Ono poked fun at the building that person occupied. “Of course it’s getting big. Don’t you know little missy is friends with the man in the Oval Office? His pal was targeted because of the war on terror, and her old secretary—who also used to work for him—was next on the list. If he hadn’t gotten pissed off, he wouldn’t be fit to lead the United States.”

Inspector Ono wasn’t a career policeman, but he was friends with Director Maefuji, so he was by no means stupid. That was how the director had managed to appoint him the head of the Kudanshita police box, then brought in Inspector Natsume to be in charge of the young lady as well. He probably intended to push the inspector through to assistant chief of the Kojimachi police bureau, the domain of which included the Kudanshita police box.

While drinking, Inspector Ono had muttered that he was resisting the promotion because he liked his current spot. Since he and Inspector Natsume were in charge of the young lady’s affairs, though, they’d both be forced up the career ladder whether they liked it or not. Inspector Natsume sensed that, as a career policeman, he’d probably become chief of police for Kojimachi.

However, he kept that to himself as he answered Inspector Ono. “Wall Street’s in a big panic too. The war on terror is currently the United States’ highest priority, but now the young lady who supported that war on all fronts has become a target. They’re scared Japan will pull out of the war on terror over that. It seems the money funding the terrorism was laundered, and all that suspicious, dangerous cash came with better interest rates, so Wall Street was helping them out while they feigned ignorance. I bet they’re pretty upset right about now.”

The men were talking about the system Angela was investigating in total astonishment. That money laundering on Wall Street had been done with the most cutting-edge financial instruments. The launderers transferred underground money to shell companies, turned it into securities, mixed them with other securitized products so that they wouldn’t be discovered, and sold them off. Of course, some of the securities mixed in were Russian bonds, which complicated matters even more.

Russia was still recovering from their financial crisis, and ratings companies considered their bonds unfit for investment, but Keika Holdings and other Japanese financial institutions had taken them on in bulk anyway. Of course, they hedged that risk by buying options for oil and other natural resources, but that much risk would cause Russian bonds to plummet as soon as Japanese financial institutions decided to pull the plug.

Russia had also been searching for other places to sell their bonds with interest rates leading to a high premium, but the money raised to repay those premiums came from mafia-connected money laundering, and a portion of the profits went back to the mafia. The Russian government was shocked when it discovered that.

In a way, it was only natural that the investigation targeted Karafuto Bank—the site of this money laundering—and Wall Street investment banks that had knowledge of Karafuto Bank. As the finishing touch, it turned out that one source of Karafuto Bank's funds was money the United States had budgeted for undercover operations meant to sabotage the Eastern Bloc years earlier. Having looked into this, Angela had been targeted for assassination, and the neocons—struggling due to the situation in Iraq—launched a fierce attack on the CIA. The terrorist attack had caused that secret feud to spring up in Washington. Of course, the two policemen didn't know that that was going on behind the scenes.

"In other words, I'd be getting involved as someone who can contact the Keikain family?"

"How else would you explain it? You've got this, you two-timer, you."

Inspector Natsume knew Inspector Ono was alluding to the second written apology he'd now submitted, but all he could do was put a fake smile on his face.

A person couldn't guarantee a happy ending for themselves just because they'd managed to do well in society.

Even the young lady who'd prevented a terrorist attack had to bow to her head maid as she received a lecture. Meanwhile, Inspector Natsume, who was in charge of protecting her, was

forced to write a letter of apology. Not even the young lady's school friends, her associates, could escape the fallout.

"If anyone has any opinions about Lady Runa's protection from here on out, please don't hold back."

The request came from a tired-looking Kushunnai Nanami, the associates' leader. It was an open secret that she'd gone back to her room after the incident and hugged her bisque doll in sadness, but no one in the room at the moment was foolish enough to bring that up.

"Wouldn't it be more constructive to conclude that we're just not needed?"

With that, Nozuki Misaki—the associates' advisor—offhandedly summed up the conversation they'd been having. She'd said the words "Are you stupid?" to the young lady when they played online games together, but when she remembered that the young lady had mastered suicide attacks in the games too, a look of understanding crossed her face.

"If that was possible, there'd be no point going to all this trouble. We have nothing without Lady Runa!" Enbuchi Yuna scolded her somewhat forcefully.

The problem was that Misaki was correct. As the guards' team leader, she'd been determined never to let this happen again, but she had yet to realize that the young lady alone saw a bit of her anxiety shining through.

If someone looked solely at the airport incident's outcome without considering the lead-up, they'd see a terrible chain of events in which the young lady's guards had brought her in front of terrorists and exposed her to danger. That was why Inspector Natsume, the man in charge of security, had to write an apology that would harm his career.

Kitagumo Ryouko and former general Nakajima Atsushi had also given up a portion of their salaries to take responsibility for their failings. Meanwhile, Tachibana Yuka—who supervised the associates—had apologized to the young lady alongside Tachibana Ryuuji. But this wasn't the kind of thing that could be settled so easily.

The associates felt hurt that they'd received no criticism while their superiors took the blame. That said, everyone involved

was already adjusting their anti-terrorist plans, and the associates were also being given an opportunity to plan for the future. Yuka was absent so that she wouldn't make them feel worse.

"How were we supposed to predict what she'd do, though?"

Akibe Riko, who'd had the young lady slip past her, voiced that concern. She'd been close to the young lady like a protective shield, since she was a jack-of-all-trades. Still, she wasn't someone who could stop the young lady from using her physical edge. Although Riko had prepared and trained as a shield, the last thing she'd ever have predicted was the person she protected slipping past her to stop a terrorist attack on her own.

Maid and backup bodyguard Rudaka Miu was the next to speak. "I knew the young lady pulled off amazing feats in her TV shows and movies, but I never expected her to try it in real life too."

She'd been teamed up with Riko, but if *she* couldn't stop the young lady, Miu certainly wouldn't have been able to. Understanding that, Miu managed to retain her composure. In a way, she felt detached from this topic of conversation.

"The company had the footage analyzed. They said the grenade probably would've gone off if Lady Runa hadn't done anything."

"That's what I thought too. If she hadn't acted at the exact moment she did, Teia-sama would've been in danger. Instead of taking the time to have us step in, she thought it'd be less risky to do it herself, since she knows how much she can do."

Yulia Molotova, a girl with ties to the CIA, spoke casually about this. It was Irina Berosova, a girl with her own ties to the Russian government, who backed her up. Supposedly, both their backers had asked them, "What the hell are you doing over there?" only for the girls to retort, "Could *you* have protected her in those circumstances?" Both girls had forged documents listing their ages as slightly lower than they actually were. Since they knew the events at the airport could have indirect effects elsewhere, they weren't thrilled by the topic at hand.

A normal person under their protection would've run away or used their guards as shields. The girls weren't so foolish and useless as to overlook the unspoken desire in the young lady's actions, and the kindness that shone through, saying, "I don't

want to endanger any of my associates.” But that left them all the more pained now that they were forced to reconsider their justification for being there.

“What about the practical issue, though? We can only see what’s in front of us, but the young lady is behind us. We won’t be able to stop her like that.”

Glasya Marsheva shrugged as she raised the issue. Even during this meeting, she was studying so that she wouldn’t fall behind in her classes. It was impossible for someone like her to respond in time if the young lady was always behind her.

Ryuu Suzune, a backup guard protecting the young lady from behind like Miu, cracked a joke. “Should we put a leash on her?”

That would be the safest option, of course, but how could a group of guards ever put their client on a leash? Just as everyone sighed at Ryuu Suzune’s quip, third parties arrived.

“We have an idea for you guys!”

The girls were holding this meeting at a table in the back of the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy cafeteria, where they gave off a strong “don’t come near us” aura to the rest of the room. The reason? They didn’t want the young lady to figure out what they were up to. Gathering everyone for a formal meeting would’ve been too obvious, so they’d left Katsuki Shiori in charge of the young lady while the rest discussed the matter over lunch in their designated cafeteria.

Ignoring the table’s aura, Kasugano Asuka and Kaihouin Hotaru had strolled right up to them, dragging Tachibana Yuka by the hand. The reason? They were certain the young lady would be taking preventative measures, so they’d casually asked Yuka to join them. Hotaru had used her fantastic power of invisibility to eavesdrop on the conversation from start to finish. That led Yuka to realize this wasn’t a good thing to be laissez-faire about by any means, so they’d ended up deciding to reveal themselves to the associates. Naturally, their sudden appearance startled everyone at the table.

“Ka-Kasugano-sama and Kaihouin-sama? Wh-what idea would that be?”

As Nanami asked that hesitantly, Yuka got a disheartened look on her face. Misaki was the one who picked up on that expression. She raised her head to look at the ceiling. These were the young lady's friends. They weren't ordinary people, and this couldn't be any ordinary "idea."

Sadly, her theory proved correct. One of the girls put a favorite comic of the young lady's down on the table. To be specific, it was one she'd borrowed from the young lady and tried to return.

"What you're missing is an *adult*!" Asuka said.

The next step took place after school that day in a Kudanshita Keika Tower meeting room. The all-hands meeting, conducted on Asuka's advice, included both the associates and the security staff. Aside from those personnel, one more person knelt on the floor in the very middle of the room.

I ESCAPED MY GUARDS AND OVERPOWERED A TERRORIST.

The enshrined bearer of that sign was the young lady herself. Her legs trembled as she started to get sore in her position. "This is really embarrassing…"

"You reap what you sow."

Nod nod.

Asuka and Hotaru were mercilessly making Keikain Runa kneel until her legs were numb. When the associates saw them, with those smiles that didn't reach their eyes, they finally realized something: *Her friends were worried about her too.*

"How will you evacuate the ornament in front of you in a ladylike manner?"

"Hang on. Don't call me an 'ornament…' Fine. I was in the wrong, so please don't smile so threateningly at me, Asuka-chan, Hotaru-chan…"

Although she was a young lady who could stop a terrorist all on her own, not a single person in the room was taking her side. She knew right from wrong, and understood the implications of what she'd done, but whether she'd be forgiven was a different story.

"Shall we put a leash on her, like Ryuu-san suggested?"

"I'm in junior high! I'm an elegant young woman!"

“How could an elegant young woman overpower a terrorist?”

“……”

The young lady’s boomerang had been returned by Tokitou Aki, her secretary, and ended up coming back to strike her. She realized that silence was the best solution currently at her disposal.

“We have many things to reflect on ourselves, however. Our worst mistake was charging straight into Narita Airport. If we’d at least turned around at Narita Station, we could’ve avoided all that chaos.”

Captain Nakajima Atsushi of the security division pointed that out, and Eva and Anisha—who had intelligence connections—asked him to expand on it. The associates had yet to speak up. They merely watched the proceedings nervously as the young lady twitched.

“Fleeing wasn’t a mistake. The problem was that there was only one path of escape.”

“We evacuated due to the report that terrorists had infiltrated Tokyo and would attack Kudanshita Keika Tower. Evacuating wasn’t the wrong choice, but there were fewer escape paths out of Tokyo than we thought. The roads regularly get traffic jams, and we didn’t take a helicopter because we were told the terrorists possessed antiair rockets. I believe heading to Narita by train was the optimal choice.”

“The problem was that, as soon as we left on a special train, it was easy to tell who we were.”

“Perhaps we need to prepare multiple escape routes and acquire safe houses.”

At this point, the trembling young lady raised her hand. Even at times like these, she was the highest authority in the room and would speak when necessary.

“For now, I’m going to buy hotels next to Narita and Haneda, plus a building near Nishi-Funabashi Station to use as a safe house. Tachibana is searching for locations now, so I should be able to update you soon.”

Apparently, the young lady *was* concerned with suitable safety measures. Her influence wasn’t quite on the level of the

American president, but it might've been comparable to that of an oil baron—that itself meaning that a security upgrade was critical.

"So long as the adults do a good job guarding you, Runa-chan, you have to be sure to define their roles."

Why the hell is Kasugano Asuka in charge of the room? No one was brave enough to ask that aloud. She and the young lady had lived like sisters since kindergarten, and they were practically family now. Besides, not many people could get the audacious young lady to kneel with a smile as she had. At this point in time, the Keikain family—or, rather, everyone in Runa's life—considered Asuka, Hotaru, and the currently absent Amane Mio to rank as high as Tokitou Aki.

The conversation now came back to the associates.

"Do you not need us after all?" Misaki spoke teasingly for the rest of the associates.

The young lady denied that, though. Unable to kneel anymore, she got on her hands and knees, still trembling. "Of course I do! I'm so short on personnel! It's really bad! I'm training you guys for ten, maybe twenty years into the future! ...Please stop poking my calves, Hotaru-chan..."

Free-spirited Hotaru grinned as she poked the young lady's calves, causing her to speak weakly. Still, she was persuasive. After all, this was the young lady who'd built up a group with total assets worth over ten trillion yen.

She was too busy with constant issues of internal management and control to work on securing personnel for the next generation and the one after. Of course, the fact that she was already training people for the future proved she wasn't stuck in the present. The game's story dictated that the young lady would meet her downfall before the girls were even adults, but that was an issue for another time.

"Asuka-chan and Hotaru-chan have their own families, after all. I can't count them as my employees. But that just means the rest of you will be the first of my people to join the Keika Group. That's why I'll study together with you, play together with you, and when I'm in danger, you'll... Asuka-chan, don't poke my calves either!"

That was how the associates came to have their purpose clearly defined. They took care of things at school as Runa's aides, and they'd let the adults take charge outside of school. Now that their roles were defined, they could work on developing their organization.

"Putting this issue aside, we need you to show the world that you're reflecting on your actions, my lady!"

"Ah. Is that so…?"

Lady Keikain Runa puts on an angel-wing harness! The blushing, trembling young noblewoman is overwhelmed by cries of "So cute!"

The Keika Group's security firm, Kitakaba Security, has unveiled training exercises in the wake of the terrorist attack at Narita Airport. In a humorous clip released to the public, they place an angel-wing harness on their client Lady Keikain Runa as her secretary, Miss Tokitou Aki, drags her to safety. A Keika Group PR rep explained in an interview that this constitutes both a punishment for Lady Keikain Runa, since she escaped her bodyguards to overpower a terrorist, and a way to keep the public informed of the dangers of terrorism. New orders quickly flooded into Teisei Department Stores for the angel-wing harness worn by the young noblewoman, which is currently on back order…

[The young lady] Keikain Runa thread 198 [wearing angel-wing harness]

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C'mon, let's run away, my lady.

After the terrorist attack at Narita Airport, the adults raced not only to improve the security around me but to secure multiple escape routes as well. They also started focusing on the routes' redundancy.

"Redundancy?"

"As we found out firsthand last time, we can't use helicopters, cars get stuck in traffic, and trains are easy to identify. So we have to put new escape routes in place."

I cocked my head at Tachibana's explanation. Honestly, my first reaction was to wonder what else they could come up with, but soon the answer was right before my eyes.

"A boat... I didn't think of that."

I stared out from the pier built on the Nihonbashi River at a ship featuring bulletproof glass, which bobbed on the water. The route to get to the pier was convenient; it could mostly be traveled via subway lines.

"But you were the first one to use it, my lady."

"Huh? Me?"

Then it hit me. *Ah. He's right. I fled to Keika Bank headquarters in Kayabacho, then relocated to Takeshiba Pier.*

"The best thing about this route is that you can go upstream via the Kanda River and reach the ocean. Once you make it to Kayabacho, you can also get on the boat and go past Takeshiba Pier to Haneda Airport or Tokyo Heliport."

I'd go to Haneda or the heliport if Narita was too dangerous. These plans alone would make it hard for the terrorists to attack me. The problem was the houseboats in the bay…

"Ah. So that's why the city's trying to get rid of them."

The realization slipped out of my mouth. I clapped my hands, but Tachibana didn't laugh, which showed me I was right.

"But really, developing water routes so I alone can escape? Isn't that going too far?"

"We already received permission, since other mechanisms are at work too."

Tachibana showed me a map. Up ahead, past the spot where the Nihonbashi and Kanda Rivers met, was Ichigaya. Checking the subway routes, I saw Nagata-cho Station two stations over on the Hanzomon Line, which connected to Kudanshita Station.

"It's most important to have this option available, even if you don't use it. That alone is a way of preparing for the enemy. It also benefits your defenders."

Due to the failed terrorist attacks against the Shinjuku Geofront and at Narita Airport, security in our country and city was on the highest possible alert. Surveillance cameras placed throughout the area were one line of defense, as was the large-scale expansion of security personnel under police command, but the biggest defense measure of all was the Japan Self-Defense Forces—our plan's secret stars.

They'd shown up at Narita Airport as a political distraction while secretly looking for routes to get special forces into the city. Tachibana had taken the initiative to involve the Keika Group in that planning.

"Is my train becoming a decoy, then?"

"No. Not if you think of it as a part of the plan."

I cocked my head. Getting the train out of Kudanshita Station was already difficult.

But Tachibana had an explanation for this detail too. "Last time, you sent out your three-car train. If you add three more cars to the train, though, you can detach them partway through the trip, enabling *that* train set to become a decoy."

He explained more details, including the plan to separate the train at Nishi-Funabashi Station and use the additional time to reach Narita. We were currently negotiating to buy hotels near the Narita and Haneda airports. The Narita hotel would be near the station, while the Haneda one would probably be near the ocean, letting me arrive or leave by boat. I could also leave my train and flee to a safe-house building near Nishi-Funabashi Station. Tachibana told me they were even considering the option of directing my escape to the Etchujima Branch Line, separating my train cars, and then splitting them up on the Keiyo and Sobu Lines. He also shared the possibility of separating the train at Kudanshita Station, then sending one train set to Narita while the other went west to the Yokota military base, but he said that plan would be tough to execute.

"How come?"

"The railway timetables..."

"Ah. I get it."

The Tozai Line. Its west exit connected to the Chuo Line and Nakano Station. In other words, the line operators would die—or, maybe more accurately, they'd kill me.

Something struck me then. "I know I was targeted in an attack, but don't you think this level of security is a little extreme?"

Tachibana smiled at my question. Later, I'd learn that he was smiling about things I didn't know. "This country may seem superficially peaceful right now, but I believe things are very dangerous when you dig a little deeper. It resembles the time period when the government was overthrown."

Overthrown? I hated that I didn't know how to read the implications of matters like these, since this world's past was slightly different than my world's had been.

I cocked my head, so Tachibana began explaining this new history to me. "The people who wanted to disrupt things used legal measures at first, but once those proved fruitless, they resorted to criminal behavior. I believe the incident at Narita was enough to signal to those types that such disruption is possible."

Suddenly, I understood what he was talking about.

A *restoration*.

That word was like a curse. It had been brought up in the Showa and Heisei eras as if in an attempt to reproduce the success it had achieved in the Meiji era. Once Tachibana got that far, it was impossible not to see what he was talking about.

"Are you thinking of anyone in particular?"

"The powers with whom you've aligned yourself are still claiming victories and working on backing their opponents into a checkmate. At times like these, certain people who can't be controlled resort to terrorism. I fear that the Narita attack could become a beacon to those types."

I knew the economic situation in this country was better than that in my past life. What I wasn't sure of was the pressure on the twenty-four million people living in the lower classes, and what level of discontent they felt.

"This series of events also reminds me of the successful purge of the Northern Japanese government."

Ah. They were only dealing out just deserts, so they have no excuse? I guess that's one way to see it...

Glossary and Notes

The California governor: Arnold Schwarzenegger-shi. His victory was completely unexpected, but his wife's connections (to the Kennedy family) were a major factor. California holds fifty-five electoral votes in the presidential election and was a Democrat stronghold. It came as a huge shock to Democrat leaders that the state elected a Republican governor. Thus, the nervous Democratic Party had to pour money and manpower into the state that was supposed to be their stronghold during the presidential election. At the very end of the fight, the Democrats were left reeling when they lost closely contested battleground states.

The Young Lady's Harassment

IN THE TRADING ROOM of the main Keika Holdings office, employees bought and sold, keeping their eyes fixed on the room's few hundred monitors and charts. Their faces weren't a healthy color.

"The call money market isn't looking too good. It's hard to lend and borrow when everyone's so nervous. This is just like what happened in '98."

"The young lady pulled off a miracle for us back then. This scale is a lot different, though."

"Bad news! Fuchiku Textiles have filed under the Corporate Reorganization Act! They're reporting two hundred and forty billion yen in debt!"

"Get confirmation from the Nagoya branch! Aichi Prefecture will probably have a whole chain of bankruptcies now!"

"That's where Gowa Osan is based? This is all going to fall apart..."

Ichijou had called me to the main office's trading room during my break from school. His face was very stiff. He wanted to explain the situation to me, but it sounded like the situation had come to us first.

"In this industry, they always say that companies fail on Mondays. Do you know why?"

"Because financial institutions close on weekends? Those two days determine whether they'll be able to raise funds. Sounds like Gowa Osan is done for."

In short, this discussion was about what to do now that Gowa Osan Bank was on its deathbed. Due to the scale of things, Tachibana was with us, as was Angela—who'd come about another matter—and her subordinate Mark.

"Tsukihi Juken in Osaka Prefecture just filed under the Civil Rehabilitation Law. Their debts amount to three hundred ten billion yen. In the same prefecture, Imperial Golf is expected to file soon as well. Their debts will likely be over three hundred billion."

As Ichijou explained this, I practically wanted to cry. I'd worked so hard to get rid of bad debts, and now new ones were

popping up. The word “golf” in connection with such a massive failure would require more checking into. After all, during the bubble, golf memberships had become like financial products through their property and stocks.

They’d also lost a great amount of value when the bubble burst.

“A few other companies are in serious trouble, and the unique thing is that they’re all in real estate. In other words, the expensive land they bought during the bubble is depreciating, causing some companies to go under. I believe their total debt will come out at over two trillion yen.”

“I thought it’d be a little lower, considering their stock prices…”

“The ones who actually get the benefits of stock prices are financial institutions. They managed to dispose of bad debts because the stock prices were relatively stable. With land prices plummeting again, I wonder how far the losses will go now that current value accounting has been introduced? They really opened Pandora’s box.”

Gowa Osan Bank and Honami Bank—probably another target—were financial institutions now struggling to get funds from the call money market. That was because sellers knew that even if they lent them money at a high premium, the funds wouldn’t come back if the banks went bankrupt. Cash on hand was like a financial institution’s lifeblood, and they constantly borrowed and lent it to reap profits. Those two banks were experiencing a hardening of the arteries, however. Once it got bad enough, they’d be forced into bankruptcy, however much money they had.

The monitor switched to show news of Fuchiku Textiles’ bankruptcy. Looking at the information, I decided to ask Ichijou the question that came into my mind. “Wait. Isn’t Fuchiku Textiles in the manufacturing industry? They have ‘textiles’ in their name.”

“They couldn’t survive in the textile business alone, so they lent out their former factory sites and got into the real estate industry…”

“Yep. I get it now.”

I lowered my head to the table—but a little too fast, so I hurt my forehead. Then I covered my ears, like I couldn't bear to hear any more, but reality was a cruel thing.

"I'll repeat that these companies are largely victims of the current value accounting introduced this spring. Fuchiku Textiles, Tsukihi Juken, and Imperial Golf are all under Gowa Osan."

Money *could* be described as blood, and it flowed through companies and people as if they were organs, with banks serving as the hearts that kept it pumping. Interbank markets like the call money market were the aorta, and capillary vessels spread the blood where it needed to go. Banks that had taken root in land ownership could do their best to stop the bleeding when companies on that land collapsed, but they'd still suffer grave damage.

A more specific example was that credit crunches could make banks insist on repayment. In my past life, the events in Hokkaido when Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank collapsed rippled all the way out to Osaka. Those ripples hurt Gowa Osan, which was headquartered in Osaka.

Nationalization was inevitable for them at this rate, so they'd probably run to some other bank for help before that could happen. That was what we were now discussing in our meeting.

"Do you think they'll come to us?"

Ichijou answered Angela's question. "I can't say it's impossible. I doubt it, though, since the government is treating us as their model case."

I sat up at the desk and gave the bare minimum support that I could. "Continue making deals with Gowa Osan Bank. If you have to, you can give them a committed credit line of up to one trillion yen."

A committed credit line was a contract promising a set amount of credit over a specific period that a bank was obliged to give a lender, so long as conditions fell under stated criteria. Such contracts were often used to establish a stable source of working capital or come up with emergency measures in times of crisis. With the words I'd just spoken, Keika Holdings would now declare to the call money market that they were going to save Gowa Osan as a lender of last resort.

“They won’t decline that. But if we absorb them under the Keika Rules, won’t the government want to stick its nose in?”

“Stabilizing the market is more important. Don’t you remember? Keika Corp is in the middle of its business integration, but it has a lot of clients in Osaka. We’ll stabilize things at the top as we bring funds to the clients too. That’ll stop the chaos!” I declared.

When he heard me, Angela’s subordinate Mark asked Ichijou to confirm something. “Despite that, we have connections to Osaka through the former Kyomei Bank. Are we doing anything about that?”

“We’ve sent personnel to the Osaka head office, where they’ve already set up a task force. They’re trying to get a comprehensive view of the situation by expanding loans and personal service counters. A few more companies are in crisis in Osaka, however, so we don’t know how far the damage will spread. We have to be sure of what’s safe, or else we’ll go up in flames with them just from trying to provide support… Excuse me. Hello. This is Ichijou…”

Ichijou had taken a cell phone call in the middle of the meeting. That could only mean the call was incredibly urgent. I looked at him but also cast a glance at Mark. I was processing the information Angela had given me in our discussion beforehand.

“Don’t look into his identity?! What do you mean?!”

We were in the underground safe at Keika Holdings’ main office. Only Tachibana, Angela, and I were at this particular meeting. By keeping the safe door shut for a set period of time, we were guaranteed a closed, completely soundproof room.

My shout had echoed off the safe walls, but Angela kept a sad look on her face. “My lady, I’m going to reveal as much information as I can. The terrorist at Narita—the one who attempted the suicide bombing—was an underling who’d come to pick up weapons. The terrorists’ true goal was to attack you at Kudanshita Keika Tower.”

Ah. Now I suddenly understood why everything felt so strange. There was more to the story about why I was so heavily

protected. *Wait. If that's true, why were the terrorists outside Narita Airport? Did they predict I'd be there?*

No, something's not right.

Angela could tell that I was thinking about Narita. She wasted no time clearing things up. "The men in the gunfight outside Narita Airport had come to do more than just hand over weapons to the girl... They were there to assassinate me."

"Huh...?"

Hang on, hang on, hang on. Someone gave orders to assassinate Angela, who's still unofficially connected to the CIA?! That must mean they're from an organization that doesn't mind picking a fight with the CIA... When I got that far, a chill ran down my spine.

Tachibana placed his suit jacket over my shoulders, thinking I was cold.

An abyss was rapidly expanding before my eyes. *If I know about this...I don't think I can go back.* It was a truly bottomless pit of darkness. Memories of Eiichi-kun's, Yuujirou-kun's, and Mitsuya-kun's faces—fun memories of my school life—pulled me back from the edge of that abyss.

"Can I ask you something? Will I be safe if I don't know the details?"

"Yes. News of the failed assassination has already spread around the world, so if they try to attack you, they'll be on the receiving end of concentrated fire. The problem is that if you know these details, I'm sure you'll try to go on the counterattack. That will devolve into a merciless all-out war, and the United States doesn't currently have the mental capacity to allow such a conflict."

Angela glared. Perhaps she still carried a grudge over my secret plot with Okazaki, which had caused chaos on Wall Street. I felt like that would continue to come up for the rest of my life.

Still, I'd figured two things out from this conversation. If I ever *did* try to take on this group, the United States would back them, not me. Yet so long as I stood at center stage without knowing what was going on behind the scenes, the United States guaranteed I wouldn't be killed. They must've come to an agreement behind the scenes to reach that guarantee after the fight I'd put up at Narita Airport.

They were doing this so that I could be happy. I hadn't even known it was going on.

"...I'll pretend you didn't tell me anything. Whatever happens, I won't get involved."

"Then I speak for the United States, though unofficially, when I thank you for your thoughtfulness."

The happiness I'd had so far—and *their* emotions and desires—were holding me back. That was why I couldn't ignore everything and charge forward.

"Wait a moment. I'm going to put you on a speaker... Yes, please repeat what you just told me." Ichijou's voice brought me back to the present. He connected his cell phone to a speaker to make the person on the other end repeat the information audibly.

The voice belonged to a trading room executive. I'd gotten used to hearing big numbers, but I wished I could ignore these ones, which were in the trillions.

"...Honami Bank just held a meeting where they announced a 1.3-trillion-yen deficit... They're going to seek a one-trillion-yen loan, and an injection of public funds worth two trillion..."

I'd completely forgotten about such requests for public funds. They were a downside of conformity in Japan, and I wanted to yell at them for nearly causing a coup in my company, but I restrained myself.

"We'll take Honami Bank's approach too. How about we request five hundred billion yen in capital and an injection of another five hundred billion in public funds? We can just return it the day we get it."

"About that. One company *has* come to us for help."

What?! How could they do that when our company was being watched so closely?

Ichijou saw the look on my face and revealed their name. "It's Tsukihi Life Insurance. They'd formed a group with other surviving companies and were working on a merger, but after policy disputes and strife between factions, they decided to leave. Then the terrorism at Narita happened..."

"Ah..."

The terrorist attack wasn't just a topic for Japanese living rooms; it had also greatly disturbed the money markets. Things had quieted down, but once *that* scene of mine reached the Tokyo Foreign Exchange Market that day, the yen appreciated by three yen before returning to its normal price in a rather acrobatic move. Of course, the stock market didn't go in a good direction during that situation, and the Nikkei Stock Average did a record nosedive down a thousand yen or so. The introduction of current value accounting resulted in paper losses, so financial institutions sold off stock holdings to compensate for those losses, making stock prices plunge even lower. The market had been on the verge of a very troubling spiral.

Most importantly, the Koizumi administration had taken no steps to stop the chaos.

The markets took that as a declaration that the administration would still dispose of bad debts even if stock prices fell, and the credit uncertainty seemed to raise the prime minister's approval ratings, which I had no choice but to laugh at.

Tachibana had been silent all this time, but now he went out of his way to get confirmation from me. "What should we do, my lady? Absorb them?"

I drank some grape juice, put my hands on my hips, and stated, "Under the circumstances, they must be really determined if they're coming to *us*! What choice could we make but to help them?"

"That alone wouldn't be a problem, but have you forgotten the matter we talked about recently?"

That interjection came from Mark. He handed me a report on the matter in question.

"It's the Holland Town theme park in Nagasaki. In their efforts to make the town authentic, Honami Bank ended up with a two-hundred-billion-yen debt that they couldn't pay back. Now that there's uncertainty about their credit, they'll probably be abandoned. My lady, if you make a move, you could strike a hard bargain in a deal with Honami Bank, who're hardening their stance against us."

Mark's description brought me back. Keika Electronics Union had withdrawn from developing Honami Bank's banking system,

but as Honami Bank's stance hardened, we tried to reconcile by buying their theme park. Mark was telling me that I didn't need to take on two hundred billion yen in debt.

I rejected his idea, though. "The price is already down to a mere two hundred billion. That's nothing to me."

"Perhaps it won't affect you at all, but two hundred billion is too much for office management to take on."

At Mark's response, I fell silent. Everyone naturally turned and looked at Ichijou, who was office management himself.

"You're going to offer Gowa Osan one trillion in a committed credit line, bail out Tsukihi Life Insurance, and save Honami Bank's Holland Town? These would usually be matters for the board of directors." Ichijou spoke in his usual way.

Companies weren't dictatorships, and major matters like these needed board approval. I'd been able to operate however I liked because I was Keika Holdings' sole shareholder—or, rather, the Moonlight Fund was. But with rumors of a coup being plotted against me after I butted heads with the Koizumi administration, a board of directors meeting could be a very dangerous thing right now.

"Do you think they'd vote to dismiss Ichijou?"

"Probably. If I were the enemy, I wouldn't let this opportunity slide." Mark was blunt. I was about to ask why he'd brought up purchasing Holland Town in that case, but he predicted my confusion. "My job is to propose things that shareholders want. I don't understand why you wouldn't choose an option that maximizes profits, but I've simply come up with another choice you can make."

Damn it. This guy's so competent. The worst part was that I couldn't fully trust him, since I wasn't able to investigate his true identity.

Angela sighed. "The board may overlook the bailout of Tsukihi Life Insurance. Bailing out a life insurance company takes time, but you can save time by announcing it now and working on it only after we're listed on the stock market."

Life insurance companies were mutual companies rather than stock companies. That was why, in the event of a bailout, the company would need to change into one with stock. If we

announced that they'd join Keika Holdings, they could at least escape their current credit crunch. In other words, it was possible to make that promise without giving them any money. Of course, I wouldn't actually rely on that method.

Angela continued her explanation. "As for Holland Town, I think we'll just about be able to manage their bailout. If we go through the Moonlight Fund instead of Keika Holdings, no one should complain."

Saving Holland Town would signal that we were ready to reach an agreement with Honami Bank in response to the trouble we'd had with their banking system and indirect support. That would raise objections within Keika Holdings as well, but probably not full opposition. The Moonlight Fund would be our buffer to soften the impact.

As the next leader of Keika Holdings, Angela made one last point. "Your committed credit line to Gowa Osan… It's not going to fly. There's no other way to say it."

Keika Holdings was preparing to go public on the stock market. Such a massive committed credit line would deal a fatal blow to those preparations, destroy Minister Takenaga's reputation, and make enemies of the Koizumi administration.

That wasn't all, though. It would look like we were trying to steal Gowa Osan Bank out of the hands of Imperial Iwazaki Bank and Futaki-Yodoyabashi Bank, a very vulturelike move that would surely draw public criticism. If that happened, Ichijou would be forced to sacrifice himself in my place, and Angela's promotion to follow him as CEO would be set back.

"But giving away money won't solve anything. The problem is that they can't get anything from interbank markets. We'll have to use the Keika Holdings name no matter what."

What should we do? Should we push it through? I hesitated.

Ichijou responded with a display of what he could accomplish through his own power. "This is Ichijou. Please prepare for an emergency shareholder meeting. We'll discuss bailing out Tsukihi Life Insurance and withdrawing capital from the Moonlight Fund. Set up a meeting with the Honami Bank chairman or president as well."

It was a swift decision. He was going to carry out whatever he could.

Then he used a secret trick to address the committed credit line I was wavering on. “Instruct the trading room that, starting today, we’ll temporarily take any call Gowa Osan sells us with the premium of a 1.5 percent interest rate added.”

Ah. Ichijou has become such a wonderful banker. He was reaching out to Gowa Osan via one last method, showing them the high interest rate in a reversal of a common Japanese euphemism—“Unofficially, we refuse.”

“Honestly, 1.5 percent sounds like a rip-off to me…”

“Well, I don’t want to get fired either,” Ichijou joked at my listless remark, but he knew this was only a stopgap. “This next week will probably determine our victory or defeat. If Imperial Iwazaki or Futaki-Yodoyabashi steal Gowa Osan from us, that won’t be a problem. But if negotiations fall apart, we’ll step in. Does that sound acceptable?”

I nodded very seriously at Ichijou, picturing the worst-case scenario. Bad things always seemed to happen simultaneously, though.

“Hello, this is Tachibana… Please wait a moment.”

This time, Tachibana’s cell phone was ringing. I didn’t know what had happened, but I could tell I wouldn’t like it.



“My lady, President Toudou and Vice President Tenmabashi of Keika Corp are on their way over. They say they have an emergency to discuss.”

In other words, it was something so bad they couldn’t talk about it over the phone. I could already tell. I brought my hand to my brow and groaned.

I’d been able to bail out Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank so recklessly because I knew the future and had managed to hold on to leadership this entire time. I had no leadership rights this time, though, so I kept falling one step behind as I tried to resolve things.

“Very well. Stay here, everyone. This’ll probably be a headache that affects all of us.”

One hour later, President Toudou and Vice President Tenmabashi arrived, their faces incredibly pale. I didn’t want to hear what they had to say, but as the young lady, my job was to listen.

“I *really* wish I could avoid this. Okay, tell me what happened.”

It was Toudou who answered me. The first words out of his mouth were like a gut punch. “Today, I was quietly approached by a higher-up in the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. They told me privately, ‘We’re going to turn the Japan Petroleum Development Corporation into an independent administrative corporation, as we hope to centralize the current Japanese oil development companies. Our goal is to turn your resource division into an independent company and make it the core of our centralized organization. What do you say?’”

…*Well done.* I didn’t know who planned this, but they’d come right at my heart. How could they attack my Achilles’ heel so perfectly?

“This was only an informal discussion, and they’re not at the stage where they’re ready to act. But I must say, if it was meant as a threat, they did well.”

Strangely, I wanted to laugh. *Stand up, Keikain Runa. You still have your life. You haven’t been beaten yet.*

“And what do you have to say to me next, Vice President Tenmabashi?”

“It’s about that. You should say no to their offer. There’s a gag order out, but this is about Nichika Oil Development under the Japan Petroleum Development Corporation umbrella. They’re hidin’ a whole lot of paper losses over there. I’d bet it’s as much as two trillion yen.”

Everyone, including me, was speechless. But I didn’t miss how Mark mouthed something silently to himself: “Hunh. So that’s where they put those losses…”

“Come to think of it, Okazaki’s not here, is he? He usually comes to meetings like this.”

“Okazaki is in Hong Kong looking into Gekkou Investment Firm. It appears that they had a hand in this event, so he’s out investigatin’ on the scene.”

When the old man responded with that, I got a chill up my spine. *Gekkou finally made a move?* In that moment, I realized my decision would shape this country’s fate.

“Is it the Hong Kong markets?”

“They’re going through Hong Kong to reach Tokyo too. I believe they’re reaching out to the Singapore markets as well. The plans will probably be carried out in London.”

As a former British colony, Hong Kong held deep ties to the Singapore and London markets. Japanese, American, and British money used to go through Hong Kong markets into Shanghai. To look at it another way, Gekkou Investment Firm—a company that seemed to be from the Asian continent—would probably work from Hong Kong if they were up to something.

I asked Toudou the question on my mind. “So who’s behind this?”

“That would be the hedge funds.”

“Hedge funds?!”

Hedging was the act of taking the position opposite one’s holdings to avoid the risk of changes to those stocks or bonds. In other words, they were betting on both sides but coming up with zero profits. That could only mean…

“They think this’ll go on for a long time.”

“They probably plan to betray them at the last minute like Kobayakawa Hideaki at Sekigahara.”

This was what it meant to bet on a game as an outsider. They didn't want to show losses on the London and New York markets—not with the European and American funds watching them. But once the trend became clear, they'd bet everything they had on it.

"Their main bet is on oil."

Oil. That was something that modern society couldn't exist without. In the past, wars had broken out over it. This country generally relied on importing natural resources, especially oil from oil-producing countries, to use as an energy source for the processing trades. That was what let us become an economic superpower. The country naturally tried to manage such an important resource, and the red tape took too long for private companies.

Naturally, you couldn't measure permanent domestic policy over a four-quarter business year, and considering the way capitalists won the Cold War, it was inevitable that people with ideas like this would appear at some point.

"If there's a stable way to buy oil, wouldn't it be better to purchase it from the markets instead of putting so much money into drilling it?"

The important thing I needed to remember was that this world imported oil differently than in my past life. My actions behind the scenes were one reason for that, but it was also because Russia, not just the Middle East, produced a lot of our country's oil. The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry was one group that was secretly concerned about this.

Now the Japan Petroleum Development Corporation was going to be privatized, and if Vice President Tenmabashi was to be believed, Nichika Oil Development—under their umbrella—was hiding two trillion in losses. If that took the company down, Gekkou Investment Firm could sell the oil they were betting on at a high price regardless of currency fluctuations. They were excellent at finding what to focus on.

"But why did they think we'd go along with it in the first place?"

President Toudou smiled awkwardly at my question. Being a veteran in the industry, he was persuasive on this topic. "One of their wishes is to establish a major Japanese oil company. You're

the one capable of that at the company, my lady. Of course they'd plot around you."

I see. I had lots of profits from both Russia and the Middle East, so I'd created a fantasy that we could become a major Japanese oil company. I wished I didn't understand, but the logic was hard to miss.

"But this is *two trillion yen.* Even I would struggle to pay that price."

Toudou responded bluntly, in a way that revealed how people in the industry saw my position. "Indeed. Let me put it in a more accurate way: It's *only* two trillion yen."

I was dumbfounded. Toudou went on to explain what he meant, as well as the weight of that implication.

"This country, the world's second-greatest economic superpower, imports about 30 to 40 percent of total oil. Japan's crude-oil imports last year totaled roughly six trillion yen. Controlling a third of that would amount to two trillion yen. Furthermore, crude-oil prices are trending upward. Two trillion yen should be recoverable within ten years."

Now I knew just how much weight the title "oil baron" really carried. Few oil fields in Japan produced crude oil, so we always had to buy it at market price.

"You're saying I should take the offer?"

"I don't think you'll be able to, at this rate. I just wanted you to understand that this offer isn't without benefit to you."

It was only natural that I'd resist the prospect of having my belongings stolen. That was why this offer had come to me in a form that would be beneficial. The leaders of the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry were offering me the chance to become the oil queen of a major Japanese oil company.

"And what profit will they be walking away with?"

"Isn't it obvious? Once the organization grows to that extent, they'll need people on the inside. This is a takeover of the organization."

They would receive large dividends as shareholders, all while the people inside the company ran it as they pleased. Of course, as parasites, they couldn't kill off their host organism, so they'd pay me in dividends along the way.

It wasn't a bad offer. *Really*, it wasn't. But there was one problem. If I agreed to hand off the Moonlight Fund, thereby losing my ability to participate in politics and the economy...

"In other words, I'd become like the Keika Holdings of long ago?"

"That's probably the easiest way to describe it."

But I'd be able to participate even less than that old version of Keika Holdings had. A structural flaw in the Moonlight Fund was coming to light.

"Consolidated balance sheets are becoming very important as well, which will make it a problem to have something like the Moonlight Fund inside a corporate organization. In truth, Vice President Tenmabashi's request to move the Moonlight Fund under the main office's direct control was because of this trend."

"If you're going to reorganize the Moonlight Fund, why not create a major Japanese oil company while you're at it?" That was what the offer proposed. I felt like I'd been manipulated beautifully, but something struck me as strange.

"Hm? This plan compensates me for the power I'd lose, doesn't it?"

"Indeed. They need a very good reason to get you out of the picture, and since the adults would basically be taking your toy, they'd be paying you back an allowance as compensation."

"That's it!"

I slammed my hands on the table. I'd finally found the fault in their plan.

"I'm the face of the Narita Airport incident, so it would look like I'd struck some deal behind the scenes. Why is this plan still in motion despite that?"

It was obvious. Once the world's second-biggest economic superpower got into a large-scale speculative battle, it was impossible to put a stop to it. It was a massive system that involved laying groundwork with large sums and businesses, so the plan kept progressing even though they couldn't get rid of me like they wanted. The failed Shinjuku Shinkansen terrorist attack was supposed to be a trigger to oust Ichijou, and not only was Father unable to wave the flag of rebellion against Prime Minister

Koizumi, he couldn't end up estranged from Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa either.

"I'll have Vice President Tenmabashi look into it."

"Please do."

Toudou and Tenmabashi bowed and left the room to start their work. As I crossed my arms to process my thoughts about all this, someone set a cup of cold grape juice in front of me: Ichijou Erika. Before I could thank her, Tachibana's cell phone rang again.

"Hello...? Yes, thank you. My lady, it's Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa. He says that Prime Minister Koizumi has decided to reshuffle the cabinet, and Nagata-cho is buzzing like he poked a hornet's nest."

A cabinet reshuffle during the Diet session. There was only one reason he'd do such a thing while the opposition was attacking him over the Narita terrorism.

"It sounds like the prime minister is eager to put up a fight."

He would use the reshuffle to strengthen his inner circle and call for a dissolution at the end of the session. This was also a loyalty test for me.

"How stupid..."

I smiled, took a seat, and sipped my delicious grape juice as if everything had been resolved. Ichijou and Tachibana looked suspicious at my dramatic mood swing, but I was absolutely certain now.

They'd messed up big time. They made an enemy out of Prime Minister Koizumi, a force to be reckoned with in the political world. He was the prime minister who'd been blessed by demons. I'd been trying so hard to escape being his enemy, yet these people had walked right in and started a fight with him, believing they could win.

I didn't know what kind of subtle trap their plan might be, but this turn of good fortune was about to destroy it.

Ichijou, representing the rest of the room, questioned my words and sudden change of attitude. "My lady, don't tell me..."

"Of course not. Let's see what they'll bring to the table. Will these people lurking in the darkness, the ones who tried to corner

me, manage to defeat the prime minister? I'll be watching eagerly from the sidelines," I sang.

Then I cast a curse into the air—one they'd never hear. In an amused, joyful tone, I added…

"Go on. Antagonize that prime minister. The world and fate itself will attack you as the enemy."

"Keika Corp Holdings, scheduled to launch this fall, has announced its vice president, senior managing director, managing directors, and operating officers. Keika Corp, born from the merger of Akamatsu Corporation, Teisen Ishii, Teimen Corporation, and Kanegana Textiles, will create a holding company on the backs of those corporations while unifying their operations departments. The company's personnel include the already-announced President Toudou Nagayoshi and Vice President Tenmabashi Mitsuru. One vice president from each company remains to be named, but half of the executive directors have been promoted from Akamatsu Corporation, reflecting the current power balance within the company. Okazaki Yuuichi, a former Akamatsu Corporation executive, has been drawing considerable attention with this announcement. He is known throughout the industry as the on-site commanding officer for Akamatsu Corporation's resource management division, which brought in more than half of the company's total profits. He has also been promoted to managing director while serving as president of subsidiary company Gulf Oil Development. As for operating officers…"

You couldn't accomplish anything unless your organization was in order internally. Putting an organization in order was about finding roles for personnel, and companies whose leaders could do that were very powerful.

The old man—Vice President Tenmabashi—and the executives he selected for Keika Corp Holdings were an example of that.

"I'm surprised you managed to sort this out…"

I looked at his proposal, my smile faltering a little. The old man, who had the usual satisfied grin on his face, was irritating

me slightly. But I had no choice but to accept that this geezer would succeed Toudou as the next company president.

“Since Keika’s grown so quickly, we’re short on hands. It was easy to keep up with the game of musical chairs.”

The old man was brave enough to boast about that to me.

His explanation continued. “It mostly came through Akamatsu Corporation. I wanted filling the positions to go smoothly, so the executives below vice president are clearly more skewed toward Akamatsu. Toudou-han will use his position as president to become chairman someday, and I’ll gladly serve as president under him.”

That trick would work because Toudou would still have the right to represent the company, and the president title was somewhat ceremonial. Of course, the old man had no interest in a decorative title with no more significance—more importantly, though, he’d pave a path for Okazaki, who would one day become president under Toudou’s long-term reign.

“We’ll make the resource management division independent and combine them with Gulf Oil Development. Okazaki-han will go from operating officer to managing director, and then we’ll make him president of the new subsidiary company.”

Merging them with Gulf Oil Development would solve the problem of the Moonlight Fund not being connected to an organization.

We’d also signaled that we would consider a bailout for troubled Nichika Oil Development as a favor to the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. However, that consideration didn’t mean we’d reached a conclusion yet. We wouldn’t take on all the bad debt they were hiding unless they went public with it first.

It would probably take up to a decade for Okazaki to go from managing director to senior managing director to president. The organization would become more lax with Toudou in his position long-term, so toward the end of that period, Toudou would become chairman. Meanwhile, the old man would take over as president, then eventually pass the torch to Okazaki.

“I’m surprised the Akamatsu side agreed to this.”

“That’s a story for some other time. I had all sorts of methods.”

Akamatsu should've objected to the old man's plans to become the next president. But following the rapid expansion, the only person under Toudou was Okazaki, who was still young. That created the right timing for the old man to take his seat—an opportunity he refused to let slip out of his hands.

"Ichijou still has control of Keika Holdings, and it sounds like Karin now fully commands Keika Electronics Union. Keika Railway has its successor now too, so the centers of the companies will stabilize at this point, right?"

"For the time being, the companies shouldn't be an issue. The real problem is outside them."

"And that's why I'm here right now, isn't it?"

We took the elevator down to the venue. That day's party was meant to celebrate the Choufuu Council, the Keika Group's council of presidents, officially becoming an incorporated foundation. The objective was to create more cash flow by targeting donations to nobles that had come to our attention, as well as by unifying ventures into the patronage of arts and culture. To silence complaints from the Keikain family, we had my father—Duke Keikain Kiyomaro—take on the role of the council's board chairman.

Tachibana had suggested that the Choufuu Council become an incorporated foundation following the failed terrorist attack on Narita. Even *I* didn't think I could control a group of such large companies on my own, so his suggestion came as a lifeboat that I decided to use.

"Now that I think of it, I forgot to ask you something, little missy. What's your goal in ensurin' the company structures are so stable?"

In a moment, we would separate so that the old man could enter the venue first. As the guest of honor, I'd enter after him once I had everyone's attention. Before we did so, I decided to tell him my intentions in very simple terms.

"Good question. If I had to put it in one word, I suppose I'd call my goal 'harassment.'"

"A party held at the Keika Hotel in Kudanshita celebrated Duke Keikain Kiyomaro's appointment as board chairman of the

newly incorporated Choufuu Council. The Choufuu Council originated as a meeting of the Keika Group's presidents but has now become an incorporated foundation managing the Keika Group's corporate patronage of arts and culture. Each company within the Keika Group will now conduct such corporate patronage through the foundation. The Choufuu Council will also use 10 percent of its share in Keika Holdings and 20 percent of its share in Keika-Iwazaki-Hatabe Pharma to fund the incorporation, showing that the council is also used to manage Lord Keikain's assets. At the party, Lady Keikain Runa performed a rendition of 'Daichi Sanshou'…"

A family restaurant somewhere in the city had nearly filled as customers arrived during dinnertime.

"Over here, Keikain."

Tachibana Yuka and I followed Mitsuya-kun's voice and took a seat at his table. Across from us, next to Mitsuya-kun himself, was his father—Gotou Mitsutoshi, the vice director of the Ministry of Finance budget bureau. He'd apparently returned to the budget bureau, where he'd worked previously, at some point in the spring. I was glad to see his career progressing well.

"I'm Keikain Runa. I'm very sorry to summon you to speak about this."

"When my son said you wanted to meet, I was ready for whatever was going to happen. Should I assume this discussion will be about *that*?"

A person of his class could rip off my mask, so he wasted no time getting to the point. If that meant we could get down to business faster, I welcomed it.

"Yes, you have it right. How much does Kasumigaseki know about the political disturbance that will likely spur the coup being planned in the Keika Group?"

"H-hey…! Keikain, are you sure about this?!"

Mitsuya-kun was unusually disturbed by this conversation's gravity, which amused me a little.

I revealed a secret to him. "Mitsuya-kun, the guests seated at all four tables around us are my bodyguards. Even the waitress is a maid of mine who's been outsourced."

"...You had to go that far just to talk about this...?"

Mitsuya-kun seemed to understand. The waitress came and placed the steak meal he'd ordered on the table in front of him. His father, Mitsutoshi, had apparently ordered the same. *They're father and son, all right.*

"Ah, I'll have the same meal as them."

"My lady, if you wait until we get home, the chefs can prepare much finer meat..."

"You don't want me to eat until then, Yuka-san?"

Yuka tried to reply, but then her stomach growled. I knew she'd been dieting ever since the day we took body measurements at school.

"We'll take *two* of those steak meals, actually."

Yuka didn't respond.

After that little break, I began telling the Gotous everything about the situation. Mitsuya-kun wore an astonished look. In contrast, his father ate his steak without any change in his expression. It was a wonderful display of his resolve.

"Have you dealt with this stuff on a daily basis, Keikain...?"

"I'm someone who's been scolded by the prime minister and who chats with the president. Compared to that, this isn't much."

This is my life, Mitsuya-kun, so please don't make it sound so awful. We ate our steaks with expressions on our faces like nothing was out of the ordinary. Meanwhile, the colorfully dressed girls around us chatted about unimportant things to drown out our conversation.

"I know the international bureau is worried about money exchanges. They say the price fluctuations are obviously unusual. Now I see what's really going on, though."

The Ministry of Finance's international bureau had jurisdiction over Japanese foreign exchange intervention. Yen appreciation was still continuing, and market speculators believed it would reach the one-hundred-yen-per-dollar mark. If the government was in turmoil over political upheaval caused by the Keika Group coup, they'd be unable to defend the currency, and it could move to eighty or ninety yen per dollar. That would lead to the decline of Japanese industries.

“So, now that you’ve told me this, what is it you want from me?”

Gotou Mitsutoshi-shi’s question was shameless, so I decided on a shameless response. Farces like these made up the bulk of politics, and I made sure to show Mitsuya-kun what it meant to be an adult.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing… I see…”

I *wasn’t* seeking anything from him. If he ignored this issue, though, the Ministry of Finance would lose a lot of authority. A bureaucrat’s most important job was to defend their organization, so he couldn’t let this slide—nor could he become a bureaucrat important enough to overlook something like this. Right now, he was probably thinking about how to sell this story to the international bureau at the highest possible price.

“Come on, now. I’m a young maiden of marriageable age. At least introduce me to your parents first.”

“Ha ha ha! I bet having a woman like you marry my Mitsuya would be really stressful.”

“*Dad*.”

It was unusual to see Mitsuya-kun embarrassed. I’d unlocked a rare scene, so I stashed it away in the photo album of my heart.

“Let’s say what you’re telling me is true, Keikain-kun. The Minister of Finance is the one with the right to intervene in foreign exchange, and Nagata-cho’s already panicking over the sudden cabinet shake-up. There’s nothing that can be done anytime soon.”

“That’s all right. I’ll have my own fun until then.”

“Fun?” Mitsuya-kun questioned me suspiciously.

That made Mitsutoshi-san smile awkwardly. He knew I led the Keika Group, which contained Keika Holdings, and he understood what I was trying to say.

A gamble wasn’t a gamble without money riding on both sides—that of the winner and the loser. If the foreign hedge funds had bet on the yen, then I had to bet on the dollar to make this a real competition.

“As a humble maiden, I was thinking of buying some dollars, but not enough to make anyone mad at me.” I made it sound like I was merely buying the latest trendy product.

“Hang on, Keikain. Even *you* could get burned if you do that.”

At Mitsuya-kun’s retort, I casually revealed the truth, forcing him to surrender. “What do you mean? When Furukawa was in trouble, I moved four hundred billion dollars. This is nothing compared to that.”

“……”

“……”

“……”

I was *trying to silence you, but I can’t stand the horrified look on your face now. Please say something…*

“Welcome back, my lady. How did it go?”

Okazaki was waiting inside my car. The man never failed to get involved in a fun matter like this one, nor would he refuse to go along with a reckless plan of mine. Yulia Molotova, who’d been one of the girls seated around us, glared at him as she got into the car. Eva, sitting next to him, was doing the same. I wanted to laugh but had to hold it in.

“Pretty well, I’d say. I just need to collect a bit of money now… Should I try harassing those vultures all over the world?”

“You’re smiling, my lady.”

“Oops. I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t the star of the ordeal this time. That role went to the Japanese government—ultimately, to Prime Minister Koizumi himself. We were merely making a side bet on the outcome. That was the kind of game we were playing.

“If you’re having fun, that’s all that matters, my lady. How much do you need to gather?”

Okazaki had a big smile on his face when he asked me that question. This was a gamble over hard currencies—one I was going up against the world to take. It was only natural that a risk junkie like him would get a kick out of it.

“I suppose I’ll aim for a trillion.”

My face looked cheerful in the reflection in the window. *I actually didn't know I could smile so gleefully. This must be why people think Okazaki and I are birds of a feather.*

"A trillion yen?"

Yuka asked that as confirmation, but she didn't understand. However, I saw that the faces of Eva and Yulia, who very much understood, were now twitching. Pretending not to notice, I corrected the currency she'd named with my most amused smile yet.

"No. Dollars. I'm going to gather a trillion dollars."

A trillion dollars. Truthfully, gathering that amount wouldn't be too difficult. The trillion dollars could include leveraged money, and other financial backers would probably lend me money they'd leveraged too... That said, suffering massive losses on leveraged money and fatally wounding all the parties involved was basically what had caused the 2008 financial crisis...

Ahem. Back to the main topic. Assuming I could acquire 25× leverage, I just needed forty billion dollars.

Wait. I can use cash I already have for that. The Moonlight Fund's main sources of income were the American IT industry and Russian oil, so I happened to already have more dollars on hand than any other currency. The safest bet would be to spend fifty billion dollars with 20× leverage, so I decided to go with that.

The most important part of this plan was to borrow money from other sources. That was why, when the president called to check up on me after the Narita Airport incident, I told him the following:

"I understand exactly what kind of position you're in, Mr. President. I may be a child, but I hope to fight alongside you. At a time like this, I'd like to help you with what little power I have."

Eva had supposedly recoiled when she witnessed this.

Then I smiled and made my vengeful move, saying musically, "The United States plans to fund the war efforts by issuing bonds, right? Please allow me to take them all on."

Eva later told me that Angela, who'd been afraid of this outcome, put her hand to her forehead and stared at the ceiling.

“I told her not to do this,” she’d said. But as someone who’d also been targeted by the terrorists, she had no justification to complain. The groundwork for my plan had begun.

“I’m here to hang out!”

I was at the Fellowship of Constitutional Government headquarters. Now that I’d finished prepping for my harassment campaign, I was visiting the ruling party’s cafeteria. I was a Japanese citizen, so as long as I went through the proper formalities, I was allowed to enter. The press corps also used the cafeteria, so the sound of cameras snapping filled it, but I refused to let that get to me.

“I’ve been looking forward to this!” I sang.

This cafeteria was famous for its curry. People said that orders for katsu curry skyrocketed when elections rolled around. Of course, that was just a superstition that had developed from the Japanese word for “victory”—*katsu*.

“Oh my. What an unusual visitor. Is this seat taken?”

“It’s all yours, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa.”

Can’t you people at least turn the flash off on your cameras? We’re trying to eat! You’ll bother other customers… Actually, I guess everyone here is involved in one way or another.

“I’ll have the katsu curry,” the deputy prime minister said.

A wave of tension ran through the reporters at his words. Everyone in the ruling party’s press corps understood what it meant for Izumikawa to rely on superstition at a time like this. Politics ran on cheap performances like these.

However, politicians specialized in these performances, and there would only be more of them in the future. It was hard to criticize that; after all, all they did was optimize themselves based on the will of the people.

“Wow. This is really good!”

“It is, isn’t it? Many times now, I’ve come here to eat curry, talk about the state of the world, and strike a deal when someone’s in my way. I believe the Fellowship of Constitutional Government is still in charge today because of this headquarters.”

As we discussed those things, it came time to get to the climax of our performance. Our shoddy little play had all been for this purpose.

“It’s almost election time.”

“I hope you’ll see this as no more than a child’s joke, but I plan to support you as much as I can.”

Shady talks like these between businessmen and politicians used to happen at Japanese restaurants. What was the point of putting on a show at this cafeteria? Well, I wasn’t old enough to go to a restaurant that served alcohol.

I’d just promised Izumikawa ammunition in the form of money, and I’d done so openly in front of the mass media. They would take that to mean not only that a dissolution of the Diet was approaching, but that the Keika Group would support Izumikawa’s faction even if it was cut off from the party.

People were dashing in and out of the cafeteria now. They must’ve been calling this in to their editors at the newspapers, but Izumikawa and I ignored them and casually ate our curry. Not finishing something so tasty would’ve been a waste.

“That was delicious.”

“Come back again sometime. You’re always welcome.”

The point of this performance was to show that Izumikawa’s faction wouldn’t be short on cash in the lead-up to the election. In other words, it was a way to say that either party could win the upcoming snap election if they managed to lock down votes. Of course, I had no intention of provoking Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa and plotting a realignment of the political parties.

But I understood how important it was to show that I *could* do such a thing.

“Excuse me, Deputy Prime Minister…”

His secretary leaned down and whispered in his ear. I watched him squint as he processed her words.

“Can you stay a little longer?” he asked me. “The head of the party apparently wants to join us.”

The reporters stirred. Parliamentary secretaries and party staff reeled. I even spotted a few members of the Diet themselves.

This man really was *so* impressive. We were staging a crummy play in his own backyard, and he'd still jumped in to steal the leading role. Of course, that was exactly why I feared getting into a battle with him. I was also a little impressed that, at party headquarters, they referred to him as "the head of the party" and not "the prime minister."

Prime Minister Koizumi arrived about ten minutes after the secretary told us he'd be coming. He'd canceled most of what he had scheduled to be there, so I could only imagine the chaos among the Cabinet Secretariat at that moment.

Not knowing my thoughts, the prime minister bowed his head to me. He always knew what would look good on TV.

"Sorry for putting you in danger, Keikain-kun."

This was it. I knew he was probably apologizing for Narita.

The country's course had effectively made me a target of terrorism, though some people did know how deeply involved I'd been in the Iraq War. Still, Prime Minister Koizumi bowed his head to me in a room full of people who knew about the tensions between us.

TV cameras had, in fact, even slipped in now. Thus, he was bowing in front of the Japanese viewers and electorate. The natural intuition and theatrical brain that made him pull stunts like this were why the Japanese public had become so intoxicated by the wonderful political show he put on.

"Please lift your head, Prime Minister. I'm a citizen of this country, and I respect the will of the people."

I held my hand out to Prime Minister Koizumi. He took it, and enough camera flashes to blind us suddenly went off. Then he turned to Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa.

"As someone with strong connections to the United States, I want you to keep working for me as the fate of the nation is determined this fall, Izumikawa-san. Can I ask you to remain a pillar of my cabinet as my deputy prime minister?"

You're really asking that right now? I shuddered, probably hard enough for him to feel it through my hand.

If Izumikawa refused, his faction would definitely be cut loose, but it would also look like I was trying to overthrow the

prime minister. If he agreed, however, he'd still be stuck in the Koizumi administration.

The cleverest part of this was the way the prime minister had ensured that I couldn't speak. He wasn't interacting with me like a child, as he always had; instead, he was going straight after Izumikawa, the adult.

The deputy prime minister stuck his hand out to the prime minister as Izumikawa Tatsunosuke, the politician. "I'm someone who's already reached the place he wants to be. I prefer enjoying the katsu curry here over getting into boring topics like political realignments. If I left the party, I wouldn't even get to eat it anymore."

Still holding my hand, Prime Minister Koizumi took Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's hand as well. The camera flashes were dizzying and far too loud, but this moment would erase the Fellowship of Constitutional Government's biggest fears.

A few days later, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's name was added to the cabinet restructuring list.

The best part of harassment was that you didn't have to obsess over *winning*; harassment was all about tripping someone up. That was why I decided to carry out some harassment that would *really* get in my target's way.

"Ah. You're here too? Good day, Uncle."

"Hello. I'm here to see my grandson while I have a little time between work responsibilities."

My meeting with Iwazaki Yashirou, president of Imperial Iwazaki Bank, took place at the main Keikain family home.

Of course, our greeting was only an introduction before we dove into the main subject. We both wore serious looks on our faces.

"Would you care to buy Gowa Osan Bank?"

"...Ichijou-kun over at your company has been laying the groundwork, so I assumed *you'd* be taking them."

"We could. If I do that now, though, Prime Minister Koizumi and Minister Takenaga will get mad at me. So we're lying low until our public listing."

I made a show of slumping my shoulders, using a straw to take a drink of the grape juice Tachibana Yuka had prepared for me. President Iwazaki and I had matching lifeless looks in our eyes, but the Keikain manor was a very convenient place for us to discuss this matter. *Long live family clans.*

"In other words, you're going to sell the unsecured calls you bought from Gowa Osan Bank?"

"That was the plan in the first place."

At the moment, Gowa Osan couldn't pay the 1.5 percent interest rate on those calls. However, they would still have no choice but to leap into our arms when we offered to buy unlimited, unsecured calls, even with that premium attached. Call it bad luck or reaping what they sowed, but the Financial Services Agency had found out they were embellishing the state of their bad loans, leaving them with no choice but to search for a way to pay their debts. The total was about two hundred billion yen, and the heart of our conversation related to coming up with a loan for that sum.

"So, would you care to buy our unsecured calls for two hundred billion yen?"

"And have Imperial Iwazaki use that as our shield to press them for a merger...?"

"If you're worried about bad debt, I wouldn't mind resorting to a third-party allocation of shares."

Saying that made President Iwazaki—as a banker—glare at me. There was a saying: "Throw in a shrimp, and fish out a sea bream." The goal of this plot was to give the impression that we were trying to reel in Imperial Iwazaki, the sea bream, by luring them with Gowa Osan, the shrimp. But I was more concerned about harassing my opponent than coming out victorious, so I could abandon that "path to victory" as mercilessly as I wanted.

"Well, I'm not actually going to do that," I said melodically.

I shrugged my shoulders theatrically, but President Iwazaki didn't try to hide his wariness. In a deal like this, it was important to demand an unreasonable price first, then follow up with your real, lower offer.

I signaled Tachibana Yuka with a look, then showed President Iwazaki documents and secret account records

belonging to Nichika Oil Development. The Iwazaki zaibatsu was tied to politics, and the members of the two zaibatsu that knew the most about Karafuto's darkness were sitting there in this room.

"A higher-up in the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry came to us and asked if we'd buy Nichika Oil Development as part of the Japan Petroleum Development Corporation's privatization. When we looked into that, we found out that they have almost two trillion yen in paper losses. Isn't that right? If they want to force this thing into our hands, we'd rather have your side get the credit instead."

Nichika Oil Development's main bank was Karafuto Bank, but Imperial Iwazaki Bank had been involved with Karafuto's development and politics for years, carrying out loan guarantees for them behind the scenes. The problem was that Nichika Oil Development was hiding bad debts from Imperial Iwazaki as well, so if this blew up, Karafuto Bank and Imperial Iwazaki wouldn't walk away unscathed.

President Iwazaki finally understood my intentions. "I see. There won't be a problem if we use the Keika Rules."

Japan was a "company" that relied on precedent. Disposing of bad debts under the Keika Rules, a vague collaborative effort between the private and public sectors, was just vague enough that other banks could apply the rules as well. The Keika Rules' biggest benefit was that they offered the ability to send bad debts to the Resolution and Collection Corporation.

The Financial Services Agency was all but guaranteed to come down hard on Gowa Osan Bank for their hidden debts and essentially break up the bank altogether. That outcome would affect more than just their banking services, so they were frantically looking for a company to merge with.

Imperial Iwazaki would start a rescue merger with Gowa Osan as a way to send their Karafuto-related bad debts to the Resolution and Collection Corporation. If they didn't have enough money, I'd give them as much as they wanted through third-party share allocation. When he realized I was telling him that, President Iwazaki started wiping sweat from his brow.

"All right. I'll take the deal."

If the Karafuto-linked bad debts came to a head, the Iwazaki zaibatsu would suffer tremendous damage. By helping them avoid that, I'd earned favor with their zaibatsu. Of course, I intended to cash in on that favor with another matter. After Nichika Oil Development's bad debts were sent to the Resolution and Collection Corporation, their executives would be forced to resign, and relevant illegal acts would be prosecuted.

They would then undergo legal liquidation and all the liabilities that came with it. I was having a third party—one that couldn't escape that mess—open Pandora's box. This was the ultimate harassment in my power.

"I'll cooperate with you on Gowa Osan, but what are your plans for Honami Bank? This isn't the crisis that it used to be, but they're all that's left in the end, you should be able to drive a hard bargain."

"We're working on that too, so please don't worry. This is my second time in this situation, so I've learned some lessons."

I'd meant to give President Iwazaki an age-appropriate smile, but in the mirror, I spotted Yuka recoiling when she saw it.

Huh? That wasn't the smile I was going for at all...

"The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry is at a loss over the decision to privatize the Japan Petroleum Development Corporation. The privatization was arranged under the Koizumi administration's plan to encourage semigovernmental corporations as of December 2001, but management issues in Nichika Oil Development have stalled progress. According to some reports, Nichika is carrying up to two trillion yen in debt due to oil-development costs and is aiming for a relief merger with Akamatsu Corporation's Gulf Oil Development. Nichika is now stalling that relief merger due to its debt as it struggles to get on course. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, an official at the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry stated, 'The Gulf-Nichika merger will be the first step in creating a major Japanese oil company. If necessary, we'll go so far as to restructure the -organization and include the Japan Petroleum Development Corporation, which is planned for privatization...'"

“Breaking: Nichika Oil Development files under the Civil Rehabilitation Law. Total debt two trillion yen.”

“Breaking: Karafuto Bank records two trillion yen in extraordinary loss after Nichika Oil Development’s filing. Debt spirals to three trillion yen.”

As the public focused on the looming death of Gowa Osan Bank, those massive losses shook not just Japan but the world. Hit by something they didn’t predict, people became unexpectedly flustered.

Nichika Oil Development had filed under the Civil Rehabilitation Law. The news of the two trillion in total losses was reported first thing in the morning, which naturally made that afternoon’s news even more shocking.

“Breaking: Gowa Osan Bank announces relief merger with Imperial Iwazaki Bank.”

“Imperial Iwazaki Bank declares that they will apply the Keika Rules to clear Gowa Osan Bank’s bad debts.”

The Financial Services Agency didn’t block the Keika Rules’ use. The Iwazaki zaibatsu had the money to apply them, and since we’d already applied them so many times, there was no reason to stop another bank from using them now.

Most importantly, if this merger failed, concentrated fire from the markets would destroy Gowa Osan Bank.

Outside the nationalized Karafuto Bank, Imperial Iwazaki Bank held loan guarantees for significant sums in Nichika Oil Development. Despite their collapse and the prospect of special losses, the debt could still be sent to the Resolution and Collection Corporation as bad debt.

Thus, Pandora’s box opened as the eyes of the world watched the ensuing disaster. The news was revealed to the globe exactly as expected.

“Breaking: Police and prosecutors announce compulsory investigations into Karafuto Bank, the Karafuto Reconstruction

Agency, and the Karafuto prefectural government on suspicion of aggravated breach of trust related to Nichika Oil Development."

"The Russian mafia's main money-laundering system on Wall Street has been exposed! Payments to Karafuto Bank, the Karafuto Reconstruction Agency, the Karafuto prefectural government, and opposition party Diet members have come to light…"

"Can you help me? I don't get this part."

Eiichi-kun and I were the only students in the junior-high library. Of course, that was because my associates were stopping anyone else from entering.

"*You* don't get something, Runa? That's unusual…"

When he looked at my notebook, Eiichi-kun stiffened. I'd written the message *Would you guys give Honami Bank a trillion yen?*

Although he was just a junior high schooler, he was still a higher-up in the Teia Group. Maybe he went along with my little act because he'd experienced hardships in society already. We wrote our messages because we were wary of listening devices.

"What's confusing about it, Runa?" *Isn't that a small amount for you? Why aren't you guys doing it?*

"It's sad to admit, but I don't even know which part I don't understand." *We have our hands full with Karafuto stuff.*

Our pens scratched against the paper as we talked. Our faces looked like those of normal junior high schoolers. Eiichi-kun glanced at the newspaper box near the library entrance. The front of the economic section featured a massive article about this exact subject.

Breaking: Gulf Oil Development steps up for potential bailout of Nichika Oil Development, which filed under the Civil Rehabilitation Law.

"I see. Well, let's start with the basics and see where you get lost." *Ignoring Gowa Osan, we have no obligation to save Honami. So why ask?*

“Yeah, that sounds good. It helps to get another person’s perspective on stuff like this.” *I don’t care if we have to lend you our name. And we’ll pay the entire trillion if you want.*

“This isn’t the best strategy, but maybe you can skip what you don’t understand for now and move to the next question.” *You’ll get something out of it, even if you throw away a trillion yen?*

“Yeah, I guess so.” *Honami Bank has lots of zaibatsu connections, so they’re making a late decision, but they’ll owe the zaibatsu that does end up giving them money now. That should be a big help to the Teia zaibatsu, which is still developing.*

Both our pens stopped, and we looked each other in the eye. As close as we were, there was no romantic tension at a time like this.

“But I *want* to solve this problem. Please help me.”

“…I’m not gonna say no, obviously.” Eiichi-kun broke eye contact first.

I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. “Thanks, Eiichi-kun.”

“Thank me when you actually solve this problem.”

The problem would be solved when I watched the next morning’s news. The gamble wasn’t disadvantageous after all.

The Teia zaibatsu had recently left the Futaki zaibatsu to go independent but lacked a main bank. Within Honami Bank itself, manufacturing banks held the most power, which was a plus.

Even without learning from the United States’ example, the insurance and automobile industries could never be separated. The ability to take on their own independent insurance was a big deal for the Teia zaibatsu. Not only could they prepare a main bank for themselves, their credit and amassed funds could be used effectively in the industry’s reorganization, which would kick-start major growth for the zaibatsu.

Still, I had a separate thought of my own. *Eiichi-kun really worked hard, didn’t he?*

“Breaking: Teia Motor Co. agrees to third-party share allocation equal to one trillion yen for Honami Bank, which will join the Teia Group.”

“With dissolution on the horizon, the opposition party shows signs of distress, while the National Diet continues at the pace set by the ruling party. This is due to the discovery that money laundered by the Russian mafia was given to higher-ups in the Karafuto prefectural government as well as opposition party members. That information came to light during the investigation into a suspected aggravated breach of trust connected to Karafuto Bank’s large loans to Nichika Oil Development. Not only have the president of Karafuto Bank and the lieutenant governor of the Karafuto prefectural government been arrested, the head of the Karafuto Reconstruction Agency and the governor of Karafuto have taken responsibility by resigning. The opposition party has been ramping up criticism of the current administration, but their involvement in a political scandal of such an unusual degree has put them on the defensive. The critical issue of the Diet approval of the recent JSDF public-security operation at Narita Airport has now faded quietly into the background. The United States has launched their own investigation into the money laundering occurring on Wall Street, while Japan, Russia, and the United States have agreed to come together to discuss plans to expose the Russian mafia…”

The news from Tokyo was drawing the eyes of the world, and what seemed like tiny sparks had turned into a major fire on Wall Street. That proved how much profit the vulture funds there had been happily raking in all this time.

Those profits stemmed from their money-laundering system. Now that it had been uncovered, there was no telling where the fire might spread. Still, the major mechanisms needed for such a large speculative battle continued to function.

Their bases of operations were in chaos. Naturally, they couldn’t say that they were involved in a speculative war over the hard currencies of the dollar and yen. With no one able to control the dollar-yen rate, the yen continued to appreciate, causing market experts to wail, “This chart looks like an EKG during a heart attack.”

The New York stock market centered on Wall Street had been working to adopt computer trading as early as possible. Since

those machines didn't have emotions, they could mercilessly pull the trigger as soon as the right conditions were met.

Market experts predicted that the chaos in Japan would let them reap profits through Japanese money, so they gambled and purchased lots of yen. However, the people who were supposed to trigger stop-losses were in too much disarray to get those orders through. Instead, the computers continued to buy more yen, waiting for that next trigger.

Behind the scenes, the people pulling the strings had expected it to go that way. But they were on fire too, so when they failed to clear their accounts, they bought more yen to try and promote its appreciation. At the end of just a few days, the rate had gone down to 108 yen per dollar.

Despite all that, the world continued to change while we junior high schoolers focused on our classes.

"Hey, Eiichi-kun. When should we make the bank transfer?"

I asked him that before lunch. I'd gotten ready to make the transfer but never heard anything from his side.

Eiichi-kun had the usual look on his face as he replied firmly, "Don't bother. I got in a big fight with my grandpa and dad and decided to take care of the money myself. If I can't handle something like that, how am I ever supposed to surpass you?"

I secretly thought that Eiichi-kun sounded very cool at that moment. Well, I *would* have thought so if he hadn't followed up with this:

"Now I can say 'I'm the man who shouldered a trillion yen' when I propose to you someday."

"You say that, but I've shouldered *many* trillions of yen before..."

Eiichi-kun's face twitched at my joke. He must've realized the weight that kind of money carried—the heaviness of the lives and values attached to it. The strained smile on his face stung a little.

"Ah... Have you been carrying this burden around all this time, even while you've had a smile on your face?"

"...Dummy."

I pulled my lower eyelid down, sticking my tongue out at him, then got up and left. I wasn't in the mood to eat lunch with

him. Before I could go to the cafeteria, though, Tachibana Yuka handed me a single piece of paper. It was news that would make the world dance even more:

"Breaking: Prime Minister Koizumi announces a dissolution of the lower house of parliament. A general election will take place in July."

As soon as the news broke on that day, the conversion rate jumped to 110 yen per dollar.

"Prime Minister Koizumi began his cabinet reform today. His dissolution of the lower house was already predicted to come at the end of the Diet's session, and many members throughout Nagata-cho have now rushed back to their home districts. The main focus of the prime minister's reshuffled cabinet is Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa—whom some media outlets' reports predicted would leave the party. However, he will remain in the Koizumi administration in the highly respected roles of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Crisis Management. That contradicts opposition party plans to have Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa leave the party, run against Prime Minister Koizumi, and take the prime minister's seat in the next election. Following this news, leading opposition party the Democratic Allied Fellowship has been forced to rework their strategy. Ruling party leaders had looked ahead to this cabinet reshuffle and dissolution, remaining optimistic that they were positioned to secure a majority of votes. On the other hand, opposition leaders state with stern expressions, 'We have no choice but to make our manifesto known to all as we aim for a regime change…'"

Glossary and Notes

Call money market: A market where financial institutions lend and borrow money with each other.

Osaka: A true hotbed of land-related bad debt even worse than in Tokyo. The dreaded Kansai International Airport was just the start of the trouble.

Premiums: The Japan premium was a maximum of 1 percent.

The Japan National Oil Corporation: Became an independent administrative corporation in 2006.

Major oil: The most famous international oil companies were called the Seven Sisters.

Presidents, chairmen, and rights of representation: The common practice in the Japanese business world was to have a company president direct things in-house while the chairman worked in other business circles. The president would then slide into the chairman role while still holding the true power in the company and stay there for a long time. Furthermore, the specific differences between a president's and a chairman's responsibilities aren't clearly defined. A director with the right of representation sits at the very top of any company, so you can read between the lines based on whether the president or chairman is chosen as representative director... Though it's also not uncommon for Japanese companies to make *both* representative directors.

The Ministry of Finance's international bureau: The main players in foreign-exchange intervention.

The curry at the party headquarters: It's supposedly delicious. Hatoyama Kunio-san and Kaifu Toshiki-san, who left the party, spoke of it as if it was a fond memory. The cafeteria is open to the public during lunch hours.

The reshuffled cabinet: There are rules in Japan about what a cabinet reshuffle can be called. After mass cabinet resignations or general elections in the lower house, the Diet nominates a prime minister. When that happens, the cabinet's number changes from "first" to "second." If the Diet doesn't nominate the prime minister, the word "reshuffle" is added at the end alongside the number. The Koizumi administration had the First Koizumi Cabinet (Second Reshuffle). After the election, it became the Second Koizumi Cabinet.

[We, the opposition, will bring about regime change with our manifestos!]

1: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:01 ID: lunakeikain

Except they failed.

(σ゜∀゜)σ Excellent!!

2: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:02 ID: ???

Second. I'm late.

3: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:03 ID: ???

It's a ruling coalition victory. What a big win.

What was with all that drama in the Diet...?

4: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:04 ID: ???

The Koizumi excitement is amazing.

10: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:14 ID: ???

>>1

Karafuto, Hokkaido, Aichi, and urban areas were the opposition strongholds, and they totally collapsed.

The opposition was supposed to get really close, or maybe even win a majority. So how'd it turn out like this?

11: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:15 ID: ???

>>10

The opposition took more damage in the Nichika Oil Development financing controversy.

15: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:17 ID: ???

The head of the Karafuto Reconstruction Agency took responsibility and resigned, but just when the opposition tried to blame the prime minister because he made the agency appointment, they found donations to the Karafuto governor (opposition party member) and major opposition Diet members.

They were bonuses related to their laundering for the Russian mafia.

I really have no idea how far this investigation's gonna go.

23: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:34 ID: ???

Look how calm Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa is next to the chief secretary's expression of total relief. Word is that Izumikawa directed this election.

29: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:47 ID: ???

>>23

And then the vice president next to him looks totally worn out. It’s reassuring. The deputy prime minister and vice president are big names, so I bet the chief secretary’s surprise appointment was tough for him.

30: Anonymous: 03/07/29 20:50 ID: ???

>>29

I’m surprised the vice president made it out alive this time.

I thought things were bad for him because of that scandal with his mistress.

Ballot counting starts at 9 p.m., so if he’s the sure winner before that, it must mean he has a huge lead, right?

31: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:00 ID: lunakeikain

>>30

There were only two candidates to choose from, after all.

One candidate tried to win over independents with his clean image. Then it turned out he was involved in money laundering and lied about his academic career.

Then he took the prime minister’s advice, stopped running for multiple proportional representation seats, and cut off his path of retreat to launch a grassroots campaign. It was obvious he’d recover.

I don’t think he can ever disobey the prime minister now that he’s helped him so much.

32: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:01 ID: ???

The tally’s really starting now.

But the mass media’s going crazy calling races already.

Looks like the whole thing’s pretty much settled?

33: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:04 ID: lunakeikain

>>32

I thought it’d be over for the opposition, but they’re getting a lot of proportional representation seats.

You can’t make light of the independents’ power after all…

34: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:10 ID: ???

This thread is hilarious lol.

35: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:11 ID: ???

They won because they kept Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa on.

The media was saying that the prime minister was attacking his financial backer, the Keika Group. So how come he stayed?

Did the opposition promise to make him prime minister?

36: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:04 ID: lunakeikain

>>35

There's more than one way to double-cross someone.

He could also have left the party and joined the opposition before the Diet picked a prime minister.

But then the prime minister interrupted his curry lunch with Keikain Runa at the party headquarters and asked him to stay as deputy prime minister in front of all the cameras. That took away all his options.

Also, with these results, couldn't the Izumikawa faction break away and still get a majority?

The opposition's ultimate plan fell through.

40: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:10 ID: ???

The opposition headquarters is turning into an overnight vigil.

48: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:26 ID: ???

Both parties received donations of laundered money, so you'd think the damage would be the same. But the opposition ran out of steam in the end when people found out they used money from Karafuto Bank for campaign funds.

They needed one last boost they never got, and now they're falling apart.

68: Anonymous: 03/07/29 21:59 ID: ???

Still, we should take note of how hard the opposition is working.

Their chance of taking over in the next regime, and their manifesto, are having an effect on independents. It's helping them make a comeback in proportional representation elections.

69: Anonymous: 03/07/27 22:01 ID: ???

Then they should get rid of the Japan Workers' Party, since they're getting in the opposition's way!!! They split the vote, which helps the ruling party in the end!!!!!

70: Anonymous: 03/07/27 22:04 ID: lunakeikain

Have they got a choice?

After the Cold War ended and the Eastern Bloc collapsed, the left wing neglected to regroup, and cracks within the faction worsened.

The union for workers was the heart of left-wing political parties, yet it despised the Japan Workers' Party. Meanwhile, that party quietly aligned with the current administration in that it looked down on the left after being incorporated into the 1955 system.

Then the old workers' party in Karafuto joined them after the unification of Northern Japan, where they'd fight bitterly over hierarchy.

I bet they're having a lot of fun arguing over who's responsible for their losses right about now.

71: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:07 ID: ???

>>70

Is that why the opposition leaders haven't shown their faces yet?

It's cruel, almost heartless.

72: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:09 ID: ???

This is obviously a problem when you consider small electoral districts.

They're gonna join hands for real this time, aren't they?

86: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:33 ID: ???

>>72

That is, unless they're now at a point where that option isn't even on the table.

Breaking news from a local Karafuto station.

Investigators are now looking into violations of the Public Offices Election Act.

87: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:37 ID: ???

They just said the ruling coalition party won the majority!!

88: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:40 ID: ???

They'll be able to control the Diet without help from any other parties at this rate.

89: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:42 ID: ???

Is this gonna reach the two-thirds majority they've dreamed of?

90: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:46 ID: ???

I'm here from the stock market board.

I took positions thinking that Japan would be in trouble due to the political turbulence. Now I'm going to die, right?

93: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:50 ID: lunakeikain

Why would you take those positions…?

I'll say this as a joke to a fellow stock market board user: It's best not to go near the baldies.

Unless you want to end up skewered.

100: Anonymous: 03/07/29 22:56 ID: ???

>>93

(*lifeless voice*) You can meet all kinds of people on the internet.

[We, the opposition, have sent the dollar flying!!!]

1: Anonymous: 03/07/30 6:18 ID: lunakeikain

The ruling coalition party's landslide victory has sent the dollar flying as of this morning!!

Can you believe it lost two whole yen…?

(σ゜∀゜)σ Excellent!!

Glossary and Notes

Manifesto: A policy statement.

The recent election makeup: The proportions are 5:4:1 for the ruling party, opposition party, and Communist Party. That's

why opposition alliances have been a topic of discussion since the Hosokawa administration. However, the Communist Party and parent organizations backing the opposition have been too incompatible for alliances to survive.

“Violations of the Public Offices Election Act”: “Guilt by association” in politics has gained ground, and it’s now possible to be fired over this. Most resign before it comes to that.

“Baldies”: Slang for “vultures.”

The Young Lady's Wastefulness

WHEN PEOPLE MADE EASY MONEY, they liked to spend it quickly. I decided to do exactly that with mine.

"I'm going to buy the PC company IBeM."

"Can you at least tell me you're considering these things before you make up your mind…?"

I was at Keika Electronics Union's main headquarters. In the CEO's office, Karin was glaring at me. I paid her no attention, though; after all, I had the money.

"You were the one who said it, Karin. You stated that we're so small that we'd be defeated at this rate. So I want to make us bigger."

I already knew the company would be sold, so I figured I'd swoop in and snatch it.

"I'm actually already having Angela look into it stealthily. She said they'll sell for 1.3 billion."

"…Sounds like they've gotten carried away too. If you want to expand your scale, I guess it's not a bad purchase, but still…"

"What is it you're not saying?"

"My lady, haven't you purchased companies and then completely ignored them? Like that game company."

I actually had forgotten about that. The look on my face must've been very silly at that moment. *Pat.* Karin placed her hand on my head.

"That company was proclaiming, 'Hyah ha! Now we get to make hardware again!' which is why Angela and I went to give them a warning. If you intend to ignore them, please hand them over to me."

Huh? You want to manage them? I'd planned to bail them out and then simply keep them on the payroll, which wasn't the worst kind of wastefulness.

But Karin sighed. "Why do you think we reorganized in the first place? That company is the only one doing well. Their software funds and method of interacting with consumers through things like arcades are appealing, so I put together a

team, assuming you'd put me in charge of that game company. But you have yet to say anything to me about that. When you finally show up, it's to tell me you're buying someone else."

I couldn't tell her that I'd only bought them because of my gaming hobby.

Karin still had more complaints. "Also, it sounds like you teamed up with Mr. Okazaki to buy a Russian satellite company. If you're going to ignore *that* too, please hand it over to me."

"No, that was just a waste of money..."

"My lady, money wastage is the enemy of any manager! Whether you sell that company or find a way to use it, it's best to decide quickly!"

"...You're right."

I definitely couldn't tell her that I'd spent two hundred billion yen on that company because it reminded me of a video game villain... This was also a Russian political matter, so it really depended on the power dynamic between Moscow and Washington. But I couldn't say that either...

"...Pardon me... Yes, the young lady's here with me."

After she said that, Karin passed me her cell phone. The caller turned out to be Angela.

"Hello? We're talking about IBeM's computer business right now... What? They want me to buy others too?"

Angela's explanation went as follows: The American IT industry had suffered damage when the bubble collapsed. Therefore, they had to rely on Wall Street funds to secure capital to run their businesses. But the recent currency fluctuations skewered those funds, and they were now beginning to restructure over concerns about the cash they had on hand.

In the midst of all that, a sucker had come along ready to be parted from her money, and everyone was trying to jump at her with their full force.

"The company Karin used to work for? I've heard they're struggling, between the restructuring and the disorder that followed it. What do you think?"

"Their patents are very appealing. It sounds like the restructuring is still going on, and I used to work there, after all. I

can get them back on their feet."

"...That's what Karin says, Angela. You can start buyout negotiations... What? There's more?"

The next name, M-Rose, was a famous company in the United States. The founding family had stepped away from them after the failure of iridium cell phones, and now the company was desperately trying to rebuild.

"Antitrust laws will stop us from buying the whole company, but I think we can take their best parts."

Restructuring and advancing North American IT companies wasn't a bad idea, since it would earn the goodwill of the American government. It would probably also light a fire under what used to be Furukawa Telecoms, which was still unable to escape an ailment of large Japanese companies—taking too long to make decisions.

"All right, let's buy it. I made some easy money, after all, so I'll spend it without hesitation."

I ended the call and smiled at Karin.

"There you have it. I've made the company even bigger," I sang.

"You sure have. Let's get this done, shall we?"

Karin seemed like the type who came to life when circumstances were against her. As I was thinking that, Okazaki called me.

"My lady, didn't you say you were going to waste money by getting involved in a merger between two RPG software developers? They jumped at the idea, so I'd like to get back to them with a firm offer."

Ah...Karin's starting to glare at me. But I couldn't end the call there.

"R-right. Those companies were dealing with internal trouble in a software-publishing department, a convenience store software retailer that had trouble clearing debts, a failed movie adaptation, and even more. I was going to give them money so they could merge during their crises. Personally, I wouldn't mind ignoring them, as long as they kept publishing their games and comics..."

Pat. Karin put her hand on my head; she had a pretty firm grip. She snatched my cell phone away with a smile on her face and a cheerful tone to her voice. Being able to look at her up close, though, I could tell the truth. She was actually enraged.

"Hello, Mr. Okazaki! This is the first I'm hearing of this merger. Could you please explain the details to me?"

When she learned the total sum I had wasted, Karin ended up lecturing me late into the night. Keika Electronics Union would be charging headfirst into an utter mess of mergers and restructuring, but that's a story for a later time. Thanks to a certain young lady, Keika Electronics Union's wasteful ventures amounted to twenty billion dollars.

But when people made easy money, they liked to spend it quickly, and I'd decided to do exactly that with mine.

"I'm going to build a second Seikan Tunnel!"

"Is that so?"

...Keika Railway's new president Mikihara Kazuaki doesn't like to play around, does he? I'd hoped my little "heiress joke" would rile him up more.

"More importantly, I'd appreciate it if you could explain the plan for us to operate countrywide as a Type 2 railway."

"It's simple. It's the parallel conventional railway line problem."

"That's what you're addressing?"

That problem had really become clear when the Tohoku Shinkansen extended to Hachinohe. That had left part of the Tohoku Shinkansen separated into the semi-public sector, causing the operator to lose out on things they could have profited from, such as limited express trains.

"I have connections in Hokkaido, you know. We have an Ueno-Aomori night train, right? This is sure to become a problem all over Japan, and I want to be ready for it."

"And that's why you've been backing the semi-public sector in Nagano as well?"

"Rural areas can't support railroads on their own, after all. You have to take the money you earn in cities and send it back to

rural areas, or else they'll get desolate quick."

I also wanted to use the abandoned railway line between Yokokawa and Karuizawa for a sightseeing train. In the plan I was working on, skiers could take the night train to a ski resort in the morning, do their skiing, then head straight to our company. One of our strengths was that we had Dog Express, which delivered luggage.

"Also, remember how the government was signaling plans for a special deregulation zone? I used that as a pretense to require government approval of the rural division's passenger and freight integration. Imperial Freight Railway Company is going to join up with the semi-public sector, which lacks Type 3 railway operators, and show off how they're contributing to society for the sake of maintaining rural transportation."

I could do this because I controlled profitable city routes, which I'd purchased in the name of easy money. I'd also bought Imperial Gulf Railway's Rinkai Line and the semipublic sector subway that ran through Saitama. We would begin to share railroads with the Rinkai Line and East Japan Imperial Railway. We were also building an access route to Narita Airport.

"The costs of the Shinjuku Shinkansen and the Naniwasuji Line may be looking favorable, but as the person forced to take on these projects one after another, I have a few complaints."

"I won't tell you how to run the company, so do it however you want. I usually stay quiet as long as we don't go into the red. Also, this pertains to the future, but I'm going to give money for repairs to Aomori Station and Hakodate Station so that they're ready for a Shinkansen. I don't think the Shinkansen will have stops there, so it's just a little construction I'll pay for."

The final destination of the Shinkansen, which extended north, was Sapporo. Thus, it skipped those two stations to optimize speed. But that hurt the cities where the stations were located, so I wanted to fund that part with my own money.

"Were you actually serious about building a second Seikan Tunnel?"

I was surprised to hear President Mikihara sound so dumbfounded. I'd worked with this level of money for a long time. I wasn't going to let it get to me now.

“It’s only four hundred billion yen, right?”

Narita Airport. I’d come here to visit one of the hangars. In the aftermath of the global currency speculation battle, expensive items had taken a hit, so a lot of matters were left unsettled. I’d be able to strike a hard bargain on those items, though.

I was looking at my own personal private jet—not a rental. It was a moving sight, reminding me of how far I’d come.

“It’s huge...!”

“Of course it’s huge. It’s a 747, after all.”

Demand for aircraft had plummeted after 9/11, and the industry was still recovering. While new airplanes were being made, airline companies had little money in reserve to buy them. Okazaki had come and snatched up a plane that had nowhere to go.

“Wait. Didn’t we already have a private jet?”

“AIRHO is using it right now. It’s a 737-700, and they use it for rentals only. The Keika Group gets first dibs on using it, as the owners, but it’s not always available.”

“I see.”

Angela had coincidentally been using it during the Narita incident. It was probably considered a problem that I wasn’t able to get on the plane at a time like that.

“A BBJ 747. Since twin-engine aircraft are getting more popular and four-engine ones are being either retired or used to carry cargo, this leftover one seemed perfect. It’s a bonus that came with the four-engine aircraft you bought to improve cargo shipping to North America.”

AIRHO was a low-cost carrier servicing Tokyo, Hokkaido, and Karafuto. We’d purchased the other freight aircraft to expand the scope of Dog Express, the Keika Group’s logistics company. Planes needed four engines to ship cargo across the Pacific Ocean to North America, which was how the discussion about buying more planes came to me, but I’d never expected it to come with a freebie.

“A bonus?”

Okazaki grinned wickedly at my question. This *was* a form of poetic justice.

“They told me the previous owner went bankrupt during the currency speculation, and this is one thing they sold off,” he replied. “Isn’t it only fitting for it to end up in your hands?”

That was another coercive argument, but I secretly liked the idea that, so long as I had this plane, I wouldn’t have to flee to Kansai International Airport when my downfall came.

Entering the aircraft, we found an empty first floor but a luxurious second level. This was a 747, after all, so I could use the second floor as personal space and have more than enough room. The rest of the plane would be remodeled to make room for cargo, allowing it to be used as a freighter.

“You’re not so busy that you need to fly all over the globe, my lady, so we plan to loan this out as a rental as well. Most importantly, we’ll now have a spare plane in the metropolitan area.”

In other words, it could also have been part of my escape plans during the incident at Narita Airport. I learned later that Angela’s plane had originally been intended to take me to New Chitose Airport. But that plane never ended up coming, so I’d been left to wait in vain at the airport while chaos unfolded. Now they wanted me to be able to take off without delays as soon as the plane landed.

“We’ll leave it at Narita, right? But what if I have to flee to Haneda?”

“Taking it there is one option, but we don’t think you’ll end up in any situations as desperate as that. You’ve set up a safe house near Nishi-Funabashi Station now, right? If you go to Haneda, you can just guarantee your safety by taking a water route to the Yokosuka military base.”

“Guarantee my safety… How intense are you expecting my escape to be?”

I glared at him, but he answered with a teasing smile. At times like these, I couldn’t interpret such a smile without knowing all the history behind it.

“We’re basing our efforts off the worst case of all time, obviously: the Second February 26 Incident.”

Ah, I see. In other words, Okazaki was worried about something similar happening, and everyone else agreed that he was justified in that.

It was Obon, so I decided to visit my parents' graves for the first time in a while. I usually flew to Sakata, but unfortunately, I had to take the Shinkansen that day because the weather at the airport was bad. I'd take a car from Shinjo Station, then get on the Shinkansen at Ueno Station.

While Tachibana and I were together, I decided to ask him about the Shin-Jouban Railway Company.

"Weren't they going to extend the line to Ueno Station?"

"For their limited express, yes. Bay platforms like these have enough space for it, so they wanted a limited express to go from Tsukuba to Ueno."

East Japan Imperial Railway and the Shin-Jouban Railway Company connected at Tokyo Station's subway platform; they also adjoined at Kita-Senju Station. This was to send trains toward the Jouban Line through Tokyo Station's Yokosuka Line. East Japan Imperial Railway was also providing money and people to renovate the station. The special express to Ueno Station was to show gratitude for that gesture.

"Our special-express sleeper train runs through Ueno Station. Should we have taken that instead?"

"Unfortunately, no special-express sleeper trains go to Sakata. We're more focused on reducing travel time and prices. The high praise for low-cost airlines is a sign of the times."

"Hmm."

The spirit of adventure could never beat out reality, regardless of the historical era. That thought was on my mind as we boarded the Yamagata Shinkansen. It was difficult to find seats during Obon, but that was just part of the fun.

Tachibana and I sat in the green car, a few of my guards seated around us. The Shinkansen left Ueno Station at a leisurely pace. Actually, "leisurely" didn't feel like the right word for it, but the train was only going about as fast as a limited express.

"I hear that we can't go faster because the noise disturbs the surrounding area."

I see. We chatted about things like that until we passed through Akabane Station, which was the point where the Shinjuku Shinkansen would branch off.

"Tohoku, Joetsu, Akita, Yamagata, and Nagano's Shinkansen all aim to reach Tokyo. That's why those tickets don't sell well at Tokyo Station. The Shinjuku Shinkansen is trying to show that we have a different terminus, ours at Shinjuku Station, therefore splitting off from the other Shinkansen's destinations and easing crowding on the Tokyo Station platform."

Earning profits along the route—or, rather, at the platform—was Keika Railway's fundamental strategy when it came to the Shinjuku Shinkansen. In a way, that made it like a line extension too.

I asked Tachibana something else. "Couldn't we choose to use multiple lines between Akabane and Oomiya?"

"That relates to what I mentioned earlier. There's no point using multiple lines when you can't go fast. Shinjuku Station has four tracks and two sides, as does Ikebukuro Station, and Akabane Station is going to build a platform with two lines and two sides, so they could receive up to ten Shinkansen at the very worst. Besides..."

Tachibana paused. I cocked my head, and he chose his next words carefully.

"There's a spot up ahead that you'll want to waste your money on, my lady."

On the way home, at Fukushima Station, those words became a reality.

Why are we stopped here?!

I'd usually have screamed that, but Shinkansen were always completely full during Obon. We were sharing the green car with other passengers, some of whom naturally knew who I was. I kept my smile up, making sure they couldn't see my hands ripping apart napkins.

"Due to delays, the Tokyo, Akita, and Yamagata Shinkansen schedules are currently disrupted..."

We're not moving.

We're not moving.

We're. Not. Moving.

There was no stress like that of a fully packed train experiencing a delay. I thought we might leave Fukushima Station by car, if it came to that. Tachibana had said that this would be a place where I'd want to waste money, though, so I decided to sit and take in the experience this time.

"Fukushima Station is a junction for the Tohoku Shinkansen and Yamagata Shinkansen, but they couple and uncouple at the downbound platform. When the schedule is thrown off like this, the upbound Tohoku Shinkansen enters Fukushima Station's downbound platform for the Yamagata Shinkansen, but the downbound Tohoku Shinkansen has to be delayed even further to wait for them..."

"Okay, I get it."

In other words, an additional connecting line in the outbound direction would solve the problem. I recalled how people in local financial circles had greeted me with business proposals when I went to say hello after visiting my parents' graves. They'd mentioned a possible remodel of Fukushima Station, but you couldn't understand this sort of thing unless you experienced it yourself.

One of my guards whispered a report to me with a sad look on her face. "My lady! The vending machines and lunch box shops are all completely sold out! I'm going to leave the station to buy something!"

Snap.

With no hesitation, I made up my mind to fund the renovation of Fukushima Station. I signed the paperwork the next day. As for why it happened then, I ended up arriving home after midnight because of all the Shinkansen delays. Between Oomiya and Ueno, we'd barely moved at all... That was how badly the Shinkansen schedule was disrupted all day.

While I was at it, I poured some money into the Shin-Itaya Tunnel too.

For now, I needed to crush as many causes of delay as possible in Fukushima. Otherwise they'd delay the Aomori extension and the Hokkaido Shinkansen too.

Thanks to a certain young lady, Keika Railway's wasteful ventures amounted to 1.2 trillion yen.

The people of Sakata rarely took the Yamagata Shinkansen to Tokyo. It was faster to take the Uetsu Main Line to Niigata, then board the Joetsu Shinkansen from there. Additionally, the Joetsu Shinkansen had the wonderful benefit of hardly ever being stopped by snow. The problem was the connection to Niigata. The Uetsu Main Line had trains—just not many limited express ones.

"Okay. I think I'll buy a train."

I could say things like that very casually. I was just a *little* rich.

"What kind of train?"

I stared at a press release as I answered Tachibana. This just happened to be the time when trains were being replaced after the privatization of national railways.

"They're starting to replace the 485 series now, so wouldn't it be a good idea to keep one around Niigata for when I go to Sakata?"

I liked that they'd proven their ability to travel on most main lines by running throughout Japan already. I could buy a three-car 485 series and station it in Niigata for my convenience.

"I could rent it out to East Japan Imperial Railway's Niigata branch most of the time, and luckily, Sakata Station also has a detention line. Why don't I park it there if it gets in the way?"

As Tachibana and I spoke, I remembered a petition I'd received during my trip to visit my parents' graves. It involved a development outside Sakata Station.

The donut effect around train stations had greatly harmed rural areas, with things like new department stores around stations stealing customers from businesses in the suburbs. That was happening in the town of Sakata as well.

Tachibana was looking at the documents. "This property used to belong to Far Eastern Bank."

Because of that, I later called Ichijou to come discuss the matter.

When he saw the documents covering the redevelopment, he sighed. “In a way, Sakata was the current Keika empire’s birthplace. You must be irritated by how people call Hokkaido Keika’s fortress.”

Far Eastern Bank’s main office had moved to Tokyo, and even after it became the Keika Group’s main bank, the group’s scale had gotten so big that even the main family couldn’t control it these days. The fact that Former Secretary General Katou had made this place his base before resigning over his secretary’s tax-evasion scandal must’ve had a big influence. This all-or-nothing development resembled a demand that the public never forget that.

“They plan to acquire a 6,500-square-meter plot where a department store used to stand and construct a mixed-use twelve-floor building? They’ve made offers to a condo developer, and for a Sakata branch of Keika Bank, a Keika Hotel, and a Teisei Department Store… And we’d have to pay for all of it!”

There was no elegance to zaibatsu at times like these. They won you over only to shock you with more wide-scale development than you’d ever dream of.

Tachibana smiled awkwardly. “It’s not a bad plan. Most importantly, you could cover a sum this size entirely on your own.”

The total construction costs amounted to five billion yen. He was right—I *could* pay that much.

As I thought it over, Tachibana continued. “You could also stay there overnight once it’s finished. I don’t think it’d be a bad thing to have a rural area you can return to every now and then.”

With a complex look on his face, Ichijou backed Tachibana up. “We’ve gotten very big. Long ago, they’d say that let you ‘return home in triumph.’ Since I’m from Far Eastern Bank, Sakata is that home to me. But I’m only thinking of returning there because this is a good opportunity.”

This whole conversation sprang from the topic of travel between Sakata and Niigata. When I thought of it, conversations shifted this way rather often. But I had no reason not to go along with their suggestion, so I decided to approve this development project.

“If I’m going to do this, though, I need to make sure to take initiative.”

I’d give them my opinions, not just my money. I wanted a covered footbridge to connect the building to the train station and a Teisei Supermarket rather than a department store. The main part of the building would be a Keika Hotel, with a floor to build offices for the Keika Group. My last demand was a free underground parking lot. People from rural areas couldn’t go anywhere that didn’t have parking, after all. I also bought the 485-series train that had started this entire conversation; I’d go see it at Niigata Station during the groundbreaking ceremony at the Sakata redevelopment.

“They aren’t remodeling this train, huh?”

“It wasn’t used very often, so it isn’t worth taking out a loan to remodel.”

Tachibana readily explained the reasoning behind my observation. Still, I was impressed that he’d managed to acquire what was practically a brand-new train using every means at his disposal.

I planned to use the remodeled green car right in the middle. There was a green car, and there were sections of reserved seats, with open seating in the other two cars. That made ticket inspections easier, but it was also the preference of the person paying for the car—me. The green car wouldn’t be used when the train was lent out; instead, an extra middle car would be added so that the order of the cars went “reserved seats, green car, open seats, open seats.” Secretly, I thought that was a great use of four cars.

“Who are they?”

“Your fans, I’d imagine.”

This purchase wasn’t kept secret at all, so fans came to snap photos of “the young lady’s train.” I had to laugh, seeing them ignore me to focus entirely on photographing it. Many fans brought their cameras to Sakata to capture photos of the train that day. Pictures were even published in a railroad magazine later, making Eva and the others cradle their heads and ask how such a thing could happen.

Thanks to a certain young lady, the wasteful venture amounted to 5.2 billion yen.

Now that Keika would lead the redevelopment around Sakata Station, I was attending a prayer ceremony for the building's safe construction. Tachibana was with me, of course, while Ichijou also tagged along so he could "return home in triumph." Keika Corp also ran an industrial combine in Sakata, so Toudou came with us too. That meant that the four of us who'd grown the Keika Group into its current form were all going on a trip together. The city of Sakata was supposedly very excited to welcome us.

The name of the redeveloped building was set to be "Keika Central Sakata." I wasn't sure it was the best thing we could've come up with, but the bureaucrats probably had something to do with it, so I decided to keep my criticism to myself.

"I warned you that you four shouldn't take the same train..."

We pretended not to hear Eva's complaint. It was easier this way, even if it was far from optimal from a safety perspective.

"You even rented out the Shinkansen's green car because you're traveling so early in the morning...?" Tokitou Aki-san—who was still very much an ordinary person—murmured to herself.

Eva glared at her, responding firmly, "I wanted to reserve the entire train!"

Comparing their two voices, I could hear how alert America was staying, while the Japanese side of things remained carefree.

We and the guards were the only passengers on the Joetsu Shinkansen this early, so we ate breakfast from bento boxes on the train. Personally, I'd wanted to eat at a stand-up soba restaurant, but the idea was rejected—soba would upset Eva's stomach. Watsuji Takamichi, my head chef, had prepared sandwiches for us. We discussed work as we ate, so the trip wasn't particularly leisurely.

"They're building a pipeline from Sakata to Niigata?"

"Once it reaches Niigata, it'll connect via existing pipelines to the Greater Tokyo Metropolitan Area and even Sendai. They say it's a necessary investment to use energy resources efficiently."

“It’ll cost a lot in construction fees. Based on my simple math, they should have tens of billions of yen set aside for this project.”

Tachibana, Toudou, and Ichijou discussed this while I ate my yogurt for dessert. I had black tea waiting for me after that, just like any fine young lady should, but it wasn’t as if I was ignoring the documents before me.

“The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry says this all comes down to Karafuto. They’re building a giant pipeline to bring gas down from Karafuto into the Greater Tokyo Metropolitan Area. Of course, connecting to Karafuto means connecting to Russia too.”

This planned gas pipeline would start in Karafuto and travel into Hokkaido, then pass through Aomori, Akita, and Yamagata to connect to Niigata, where it would link with existing pipelines. The pipelines already being constructed in Akita Prefecture, as well as the combine in Sakata, were important factors in the project.

By going through Sakata and Niigata with the pipeline, then connecting to the ones in Akita, the government wanted to cut expenses.

“Wouldn’t this be both a diplomatic matter and a resource security issue?”

“That’s exactly why they’re shutting out the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”

We could only smile awkwardly at Toudou’s brisk retort.

“Let’s ask people at the prayer ceremony, then. If we bow our heads to them, maybe they’ll tell us what we want to know.”

The redevelopment near the station was for a single municipality. But given the background circumstances, the mayor of Sakata would naturally attend, and the governor of Yamagata Prefecture and local Diet members would make appearances as well. That included Representative Katou, the man who’d once lost his position.

“All right. We’ve made it to Niigata Station. Our train is… Wait, did it get an extra car?”

My personal train from Niigata Station had 683-series posters hanging inside it. *Are they telling me to buy one of these?!*

By the time our trip ended, it had taken four hours to reach Sakata by train. We arrived before lunchtime. The prayer ceremony was about to begin…but then a commotion broke out. The number of important figures attending had complicated the seating order. I'd hired local designers and construction workers for the project, but the problem was the guests at this event—the governor, Representative Katou, and me. Keika Bank's Sakata branch manager was supposed to attend as well, but Ichijou outranked him, so the seating order had to be changed again. It was a fun flurry of activity, even if I really shouldn't have been enjoying it.

We decided to have Tachibana sit in the center of the front row while I sat behind him, since I was a minor. Representative Katou and the governor sat on either side of Tachibana. It was quite an impressive image. Toudou's official reason for coming to Sakata was to inspect the combine, and when they had no seat prepared for him at the ceremony, it turned into a bit of a tiff. While the seating arrangement was sorted out, Representative Katou and I got a chance to converse.

"Ah. I knew about the pipeline, but I didn't know the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry was working on it. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs doesn't have the power to take on something like that right now."

Representative Katou seemed to have lost some of the life in his eyes since the first time I met him. Of course, he also couldn't conceal his lust for power due to this opportunity to meet with me, so it was a reminder of his true motives. He'd already rejoined the Fellowship of Constitutional Government after being elected as an independent, so he was actually in the middle of a sort of apology tour.

"The people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are still fighting each other over the secret-funds scandal. The ambassador and those involved avoided arrest, since they were nobles, but that just led to them being stripped of their actual power. The prime minister's office handles most diplomatic matters now."

Only three years had passed since the birth of the Koizumi administration, yet reverberations were still felt all over. The Japanese people supported this wholeheartedly, allowing that man to retain his seat as prime minister to this day.

“Keikain-kun, do you know what I did wrong?” the representative asked me suddenly.

I smiled a bit sadly. “You weren’t wrong. You were just ahead of your time.”

“Thank you, Keikain-kun.”

Representative Katou bowed his head to me. The bow looked much weaker and lonelier than the one he’d given me when we first met. The prayer ceremony came to a close, and we all filed out of the red-and-white tent. Seeing so many bodyguards gathered around the tent, passersby were discussing the development.

“What’re they building here?”

“Don’t you know? I think it’s called Keika Palace.”

Come on, bureaucrats! People are already calling it by a nickname…

I was at Kudanshita Keika Tower, the former heart of the Moonlight Fund. Now that the fund had been given an official structure, its name would change to “Keika Resource Development” after its merger with the troubled Nichika Oil Development—a new subsidiary company of Keika Corp. The massive job of cleaning up the place was now underway.

“We didn’t even get to keep half of them…”

When I murmured those words, Okazaki got in his retort: “You should be happy that we held on to as much as a third.”

I watched the Moonlight Fund’s office being cleaned. This was the cost of the huge speculative battle that had all started with the plan to force me out of the company.

“The recruiters must’ve showered them with money, huh?”

“That’s true, but it sounds like a lot of their families and relatives were targeted too. In Japanese recruiting, you should target the families, who are the outer moats. That approach is famous.”

The Moonlight Fund had played defense in this speculative battle, making themselves famous among market investors, and the result was the large-scale recruiting of fund personnel. Even the lowest-level employees were poached with offers of a hundred

million yen. A third of our personnel left to take such offers, while another third went back to their old jobs at Keika Holdings or Keika Corp now that the Keika Group was reorganizing.

"Well, since they failed to recruit you—the one they really wanted—this was nothing more than harassment, my lady."

The Moonlight Fund had been a shapeless organization, but once consolidation accounting was introduced, it was finally given a proper form. I knew everyone would still call it the Moonlight Fund, though. It was becoming a Keika Corp subsidiary, but it still controlled 49.9 percent of their shares, after all. The remaining employees would be tasked with using the money I provided them in my name. Okazaki had been frantically investigating our compliance with the law to ensure that the company wouldn't cause me trouble or take away my power. I was so grateful for his efforts.

Not that I felt like admitting that to myself.

"Actually, how come *you* didn't go with the recruiters, Okazaki? They gave you a good offer, didn't they?"

Okazaki smiled at the obvious implication of my question, holding an unlit cigarette between his lips. He answered me boldly, clearly posturing.

"Absolutely not. I was shocked at how badly they lowballed me. My only offer was a measly hundred million dollars per year. But since you casually placed a hundred billion yen in my hands, maybe nothing will compare to your offers, my lady."

Ah, that's right. I gave him a hundred-billion-yen bonus for putting him in danger. This world was one where you could raise a hundred million dollars through a little modest work. But I'd come to hear the outcome of our large-scale speculative battle.

"So, can you give me the results?"

"Since you just viewed this as a game, the returns aren't that great. We've walked away with fifty billion yen at best."

We were following a script. As the exchange rate hung around 120 yen per dollar, we focused on purchasing yen to bring it to 110 yen per dollar. We'd spent about twenty billion dollars on those yen purchases. We were buying it gradually, so the average price was about 113 yen per dollar. Then we sold at 110 yen after news of the snap election, walking away with 500 million dollars in

profit. That amounted to fifty billion yen after subtracting things like commission fees. The situation was only just gearing up, though.

“But you did something incredible, my lady. You slowly forged a strong yen to lure in vultures, and now they’re already liquidating as we speak.”

“Don’t you think those gluttons who eat every last bit of an animal from head to tail deserve a little pain?”

I’d made sure to leak to the markets that Keika was behind this speculative battle. When market participants saw that, they all thought the same thing: *Keika is pissed with the government over its response to the terrorism, and now they’re coming for revenge.*

When the confrontation between Keika and the government that the hedge funds so longed for seemed to be flaring up, the yen only appreciated further. Then Prime Minister Koizumi had bowed his head to me on TV. Somewhere along the way, Keika had pulled the ladder up with them and fled, and when domestic investors saw that the Fellowship of Constitutional Government wouldn’t split apart, they cleared their accounts, ready to cut their losses. The foreign hedge funds couldn’t escape, so their only move was to accelerate appreciation of the yen.

As a country of commerce, Japan was constantly purchasing yen so that the mainland could cover the costs of exporting goods. Everyone who’d ever set foot in Nagata-cho also knew that there was discord between Prime Minister Koizumi and me. The sequence of making the yen appreciate, then seeing it speed up as funds closed their positions to cut losses, was nothing short of a miracle. That was one reason they failed to escape in time, even when they had an exit available.

Preelection polls showed that the Fellowship of Constitutional Government was in the lead, yet the hedge funds still planned for a scenario in which the Izumikawa faction left the party after the election. When later polls showed the opposition’s decline and big wins for the ruling party, they realized that scenario wasn’t coming to fruition. Of course, it was already too late by that point.

The yen rose to 108 per dollar, but it depreciated by two the morning after election results came in. That was the moment the hedge funds’ plot to bet on the yen’s appreciation completely

crumbled, and the depreciation began to undo all their efforts. It had been nothing more than speculation on the markets' part until that point. That was the moment for me to begin the *real* harassment.

"You really purchased one trillion yen's worth of dollars in a single day, huh? And it was all in the name of funding the United States' war efforts, so they couldn't even complain to you."

"You say that, but you're the reason people are saying that I spent a trillion dollars, right? The yen depreciated even more when rumors that Japan bought a trillion dollars in American bonds started up."

"All I did was make less work for both you and the Bank of Japan, my lady."

Two days after the election, the yen depreciated by three, and in the finishing move, on the third day after the election, it depreciated by five. There was nowhere left to run for the vultures who'd bet on its appreciation. On top of that, the Ministry of Finance and Bank of Japan had been preparing to catch them off guard. They didn't miss the opportunity presented to them.

Okazaki and I looked at the dollar-yen chart that revealed those vultures' dying screams. They desperately tried to buy more yen and drive the price up, but the Bank of Japan was still buying more dollars than they could keep up with.

The vultures had tried to appreciate the yen through short selling—the act of borrowing an asset, selling it, and buying it back once the price dropped to return to the lender. The price difference was the amount of profit you'd come out with.

That process required closing out your position in the end; in this case, that position was closed by buying dollars. If the vultures closed those positions now, they'd take a massive loss. After all, assets required rental fees to be paid over the entire lending period.

This was a very large bet they'd made, so those commission fees were no joke. If they bought and returned the assets now that they were priced higher than they had been at the time of purchase, the price difference would turn into losses. That was the Bank of Japan's goal and the essence of the harassment I'd brought upon them.

“I heard the Bank of Japan wants to put in a trillion yen per day.”

“They’re not like the Bank of England after all. They must be ready to fry all those vultures. Even if you broke the Bank of Japan, my lady, you’d still have your troops waiting for you.”

“I hope it gets that far,” I sang.

The election results coming in on July 29 had been inconvenient to the hedge funds because the dollar had surged on the 30th and 31st, turning their monthly positions into a net loss. Then came August 1, the start of a new month. The hedge funds tried to make up that net loss, only for the Bank of Japan to enter the market.

Their announcement called their actions a “market stabilization method,” but they’d actually purchased American bonds to support their war funds and as a form of revenge against the vultures.

Backed by investment banks, the hedge funds tried to request political maneuvers from higher-ups on Wall Street, but Wall Street was already tied up with the Karafuto Bank money-laundering scandal.

The American president kept his mouth shut about my funding the war when he saw me working so hard to support the U.S., even after I was targeted in a terrorist attack.

As for this one-trillion-dollar bond purchase, I ended up skipping the necessary Congressional approval, purchasing them through bond options that had contracts allowing selling. The rate at that time was 110 yen per dollar. Angela Sullivan, the commander at the front lines who purchased the American bonds for me, cleverly sold all those options to Japanese financial institutions, excluding Keika ones.

The American bonds wouldn’t lose any more money, and they’d become easy cash and a golden goose for the Bank of Japan, which was currently in the middle of its market intervention. Japanese financial institutions were eagerly gathering in hopes of joining in on this lucrative opportunity.

Hm? My share? I’d only intended to harass, so I walked away with a meager 5 percent commission fee for the trade. What about it? The total came out to fifty billion dollars. Or, in yen...I

think it's up to 120 now. That makes six trillion yen. That sum more than covered any of my wasteful ventures.

Keika Holdings' next CEO was now returning home triumphantly with her six-trillion-yen profits.

"It's so easy to make moves when Angela-san is involved. Why did we suffer so much during the speculative battle with Furukawa…?"

"That was really just the two of us, wasn't it? We had the New York branch of Keika Securities to back us up this time, so in a way, this is the natural conclusion."

Even with a former CIA agent on Wall Street who dealt in information, how could it have been so easy? Angela had handled information control on Wall Street while also negotiating with Washington—so unlike what had happened with the Furukawa gamble, I wouldn't have to apologize, and Okazaki wouldn't have to take a hit.

Angela also told me that she'd decided to suggest the vultures look into subprime loans while they were still trying to stop the bleeding. All the preparations for the next collapse were in order.

"That reminds me. What happened with Gekkou Investment Firm?"

"They turned out to be making side bets. They liquidated their positions over the cabinet reshuffle stunt and went all in on you, my lady. That's how I got to the bottom of it all. They're backed by an SWF in communist China."

SWF—that stood for "sovereign wealth fund."

"But why'd they go all in on me?"

"I haven't gotten that far yet, but I would guess it involves Karafuto. The old Northern Japanese government connected with China through the Hong Kong markets. Even once Northern Japan fell and Karafuto Bank was nationalized, their secret funds probably lingered in Hong Kong, and those were what turned into an SWF. I assume they were a big spender within the money-laundering system that got exposed."

I thought back to the failed terrorist attack at Narita Airport. The Chinese mafia brought drugs, while the Russian mafia brought weapons. Those mafias had government connections,

and if they were backed by a nation too, that would make responding a little harder.

I decided to forget Gekkou Investment Firm for the time being.

“So, is that where the people who made a bundle and ran away ended up?”

“Yes. They’re European and American SWFs. They’re doing a lesser form of what you did. Or, rather, you’re the one who copied them.”

Backing from sovereign wealth funds enabled hedge funds to act in extreme and intense ways. They invested huge amounts of money in such hedge funds, and when those funds sought extreme returns on that money…

“…What awaited them…was a big crash?” I asked, saying aloud what I was thinking. I felt like Scipio watching Carthage burn.

Okazaki whistled, trying to cheer me up. “Big crashes are inevitable with the markets. It’s a repechage, in a way. Like in the tides of history, the winners may fall, and the losers may rise. First there was the Great Depression, then Black Monday. You’re the winner right now, my lady.”

“That’s right. I won. I’m still winning.”

I put a smile on my face, swallowing the words I wanted to say next. If it was fate, I’d accept it. But I wouldn’t stay quiet about it either.

I’m going to lose someday… God, if you exist, I only ask that you help me through the battle of 2008…

The so-called “cannons” of the Bank of Japan would continue to intervene in the market on and off over the next two years, and a total of four thousand funds would leave the market over their involvement with money laundering.

The groups that would lift those hedge funds up, bring them back into the game with large amounts of money, and spur them on with state-backed assets would be sovereign wealth funds.

A new war fought with money, not with blood, was on the verge of breaking out.

Glossary and Notes

Japanese recruiting: While it's fiction, I found *Magma* (Mayama Jin, Kadokawa Bunko) to be an interesting example of this. To set the standard in geothermal electric power generation, a hedge fund splits up a rural hot-spring union that opposes geothermal electric power by having the bank purchase their bad debts and put pressure on the union.

American bond options: These can't be issued immediately, because they require congressional deliberation, but all countries need money. One benefit is that you can "sell" the bonds before they're issued by writing contracts and receiving cash for them.

The Bank of Japan's "cannons": These cannons are so deadly because they have even more stamina than firepower. In real life, they shot down two thousand vultures over a yearlong period by maintaining a relatively stable level of firepower.

Scipio watching Carthage burn: "Assyria has already fallen, as have Persia and Macedonia, and now Carthage is burning too. Will Rome be next?"

Black Monday: The crash of October 19, 1987.



Somewhere in Europe

WHERE EXACTLY WAS the heart of the European economy? Many modern people would've said that it was in Frankfurt, since Germany had started to increase their presence after their reunification and the formation of the EU. But when it came to finances, it was impossible to ignore the ever-looming London in the background. That was why a certain telephone call was made between Frankfurt and London.

"So? Can we use any of the people we took?"

"Of course not. They're from the Far East and don't know anything about the latest methods of financial engineering. Well, I guess they can tell us what's happening on the inside, but that's all they're good for. Still, we pay them more than their severance payments would amount to, so we can just keep them on the payroll until we abandon them. They shouldn't complain."

The European Central Bank was located in Frankfurt, where everything regarding the new "euro" currency was handled. That was why the person who instigated this affair was sitting in their office with a view of the European Central Bank, speaking into the phone in an irritated tone.

"We knew how things in Iraq would turn out, to some extent, but it's just the first game that will determine hegemony in this century. We're not just going to let those in the New World act all cocky forever."

"Yes, the euro will finally let our economic strength rival that of the United States now. That only leaves military power, but the U.S. is very strong, you know."

Canary Wharf was an area in London's waterfront district that had been redeveloped into a financial sector. Major European and American financial institutions had set up bases there after the City of London financial district started to get too cramped. Another important factor was that these major institutions, which were leaders in IT, had reached a point where their entire buildings needed to be repurposed for IT work.

Europe was taking pride in the establishment of the EU, but they couldn't just ignore the United States because of it. At this point, the United Kingdom was following the United States' lead in

the Iraq War while also serving as an intermediary for Europe. They'd essentially been walking a tightrope in the public eye all this time.

The irritated voice from Frankfurt was soothed by the broker on the other end of the line, who stared out at London's typical cloudy sky from their viewpoint in Canary Wharf.

However, the other party still had more to complain about. "That's why we need to get Russia on our side. Once they're part of Europe, we'll be able to rival the United States on equal terms. Europe lost the most in both World Wars, so this time, we *have* to be the winners of the Great Game."

"And this young lady, Keikain Runa, is the secret weapon that'll bring Russia in?"

The voice from London was polite, but it conveyed a discourteous feeling. The tone was unable to hide the speaker's disdain. Talent and moneymaking were everything in the finance industry, so things like bloodlines and traditions provided little value.

But the instigator in Frankfurt wasn't the kind of person to miss the London broker's tone. "She probably won't ever *rule* Russia, but if she goes back there as empress consort, this dream of ours will come to fruition. Of course, her husband will be chosen from blue bloods like us."

"Are you sure we can pull this off? The United Kingdom turned down our proposal and decided to follow the United States instead, right?"

"Well, they've operated independently of Europe since the Hundred Years' War. This was to be expected. But they don't have the power left to get in our way, and there are still people like *you* in the British government."

After a pause, the London broker responded, still sounding as if they were speaking to a client or guest of honor who might provide a lucrative job. "I hope that's true. There's evidence that the United Kingdom wants to secure the girl for themselves through royal diplomacy too."

"They must've joined up with the United States, since they can offer up their blue bloods, which they don't have over in the New World. Whichever country the girl marries into, it'll probably

change this century's world map. Aristocrats from various nations are after her."

After this discussion, it was time to finally shift to the main topic. Those people from Tokyo who'd transferred overseas after being essentially showered with money didn't realize they were merely the starting act for the present phone discussion.

"I was surprised by her plans for Iraq and her exposure of that money-laundering system, though. It sounds like Prime Minister Koizumi took over the Iraq plans, but if he hadn't, it wouldn't have been impossible for her to establish an independent country as a tax haven on the Gulf."

"All we could do was admire that from the sidelines, impressed that we'd never thought of it ourselves. When Turkey stepped in to stop the Kurds from gaining independence in Northern Iraq, the whole situation turned into a mess. It's going to bring about a mandate system of government. I'll bet southern Iraq, which is at odds with the Iranian army, and central Iraq, where the Ba'ath Party went underground, will clean things up with that mandate system. More accurately, they *have* to clean things up if they want U.S. troops to withdraw."

"Of course, you're going to drag them down to weaken the American hegemony. You'll be weakening their influence in the Gulf and Central Asia at the same time. We shouldn't forget that."

There was a simple reason to have this discussion in a financial district of Britain—a country siding with the United States. It was money. Once this plan succeeded, they could obtain a convenient tax haven at the very least. Brokers were extremely capable of amassing tremendous wealth, and that rampant mammonism was how the instigator in Frankfurt could employ the broker in London. They'd never betray each other so long as there was money to be made.

"That way, the girl will turn her back on the United States. History wants her to go back to Russia. We should be paving a path for her, not having her stay in a new country in the Gulf."

"You mean we'll pave that path with gold bars and shower her with flower petals in the form of paper bills?"

"Of course. Money dirtied by blood and greed is made clean through the blue bloods. Her talent, and her own blue blood, may

mean she'll have to choose herself as that cleaning mechanism someday."

The EU's expansion was essentially a way to force newly joined countries to clean up issues for the rest of Europe. When Eastern Europe tried to join, Russia and the other former Soviet countries that had been left out started to behave in troubling ways.

The girl definitely had the blood and money to achieve those countries' aims. There was no way they wouldn't target her for it.

"'Whether it's a black cat or a white cat, it's a good cat as long as it catches mice.' That's a saying in China."

"That's how they took Hong Kong. Aren't we also trying to create a new Hong Kong when we obtain the girl?"

"It's all about making money, in the end. I won't say you're wrong, but we're certainly being very greedy."

"You can't run a government on nice words alone. Money is still money, even if it's stained with blood."

Despite the conversation they were having, neither side forgot to protect themselves. The instigator had used their blue blood to lay the groundwork already, and the broker was reporting these actions to the British intelligence agencies to gain their favor.

Half a century ago, there had been a mass resignation of the Japanese cabinet, with one minister issuing a final statement that "the state of Europe is complicated and mysterious." Even as borders changed, Europe itself never did.

"Lord, forgive us for our sins. I promise I'll buy as many indulgences as you ask."

"Are you sure you should say that? Indulgences started a war, so I suppose we're no different."

Glossary and Notes

Broker: An intermediary. Its usage here refers to an intermediary handling things like stocks and bonds. They work to set up deals between buyers and sellers that bring in commission fees.

The Great Game: This started as a chess metaphor to describe the United Kingdom and Russia's dispute for hegemony over Central Asia, but it also refers to the actions of other great nations in the quest for global hegemony.

"The state of Europe is complicated and mysterious": Said by Minister Hiranuma Kiichirou. The Empire of Japan had been negotiating an alliance with Germany, but when news broke of the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union, Minister Hiranuma said this before he resigned from the cabinet.

Indulgences: Possessing these was a way to have your sins forgiven. The sale of indulgences led to the Protestant Reformation.

Afterword

THANK YOU VERY MUCH for purchasing this book. I'm Tofuro Futsukaichi, the author.

This volume takes place between spring and summer 2003.

I was writing this part of the story when I first received the offer to publish my work as a novel, so rereading these sections felt very nostalgic. All my readers' support is what lets me continue to bring these books to you as a writer.

Alternate military history stories always change history, but that merely allows new, impossible things to be born. That's only natural for the course of such stories, but I wonder: Don't many readers get a strange feeling when they read about a reality so close to ours?

This is called a time paradox and is a common theme in sci-fi works. It's an interesting thing to read about, and personally, I've been writing my story with the mindset that history is like a large river and always heads in the same direction.

However, dramatic historic events can still change its flow. My goal is to weave those events into my story.

In the story of Keikain Runa, those events are the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq War, and the 2008 financial crisis. As you can tell, if you read the start of the first volume, this series depicts Keikain Runa spending years laying the groundwork to prepare for the global financial crisis in order to change history. It's meant to show just what a difficult process changing the flow of history can be. Then the story started dealing with the disposal of bad debts after the collapse of the bubble, and even I, the author, could just smile and wonder how things might break down.

I'm writing this afterword in spring 2024, when the Nikkei Stock Average has broken through to its highest price since the bubble. This country was always said to have lost ten, twenty, even thirty years after the bubble, but maybe we've finally regained the things we lost now. By the way, back in 2003—when this book takes place—the Nikkei Stock Average was at an all-time low of 8,000 yen. I heard that that was when people first started using the phrase "the ten lost years." I was a novice worker at that time, and if I had a time machine, I know what I'd say:

“Buy stocks right now, and hold them forever.”

At this point, I’d have been rich, although that would also mean I might not be an author now. I’m not sure I could’ve withstood seeing those paper losses during the 2008 financial crisis either.

Finally, I’d like to thank some people.

Thanks to “Let’s Be Novelists”-sama, where I’ve been telling the tale of Keikain Runa. I really *did* become a novelist.

I also want to mention my editor from Overlap Novels and to thank Jaian-san for drawing such wonderful illustrations. I truly can’t thank you enough.

To everyone who assisted me in this volume of the novel series, you have my sincerest gratitude.

Finally, thank you from the bottom of my heart to every reader who purchased this book. I’m so very grateful.

With that, I pray we meet again in the next volume.

NEXT TIME...

"Hey, do you know about this school's seven wonders?"

I assumed that this was nothing more than a normal discussion about the occult.

"Please convince Kaihouin-san to return to being a zashiki-warashi *and guide this country toward happiness."* Something like that.

Not until later would I learn that this involved my very, very dear friend.

"Time to challenge the young lady! Start with a racing game, please!"

"Ah. This is so nostalgic..."

Despite life's normalcy, the world never stopped for a moment.

"They're going to feast on the vultures' bodies?"

"Applying that metaphor, they'd be *scavengers*, not vultures."

The scavengers impeding her didn't appeal to her out of hostility but out of good intentions and a desire for profit.









"After their massive victory in the last election, the Koizumi administration plan to finally privatize the postal service by getting rid of inconvenient policies. The cornerstone of the administration is their proposed law eliminating diplomatic immunity, but their true goal is to make Karafuto a special economic zone and revise laws affecting the temporary-worker industry."

Keikain Runa had neither the power nor the time to intervene in everything; she had to make a choice.

"Let me ask you this. Are you really willing to use this country's 140 million people as chips to gamble against a hegemonic state, just so that you can push forward with your own intentions?"

I had to answer Professor Kanbe's question not as a young villainess, but as Keikain Runa.





MODERN *Villainess*

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