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Illustration Yuugen
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
1



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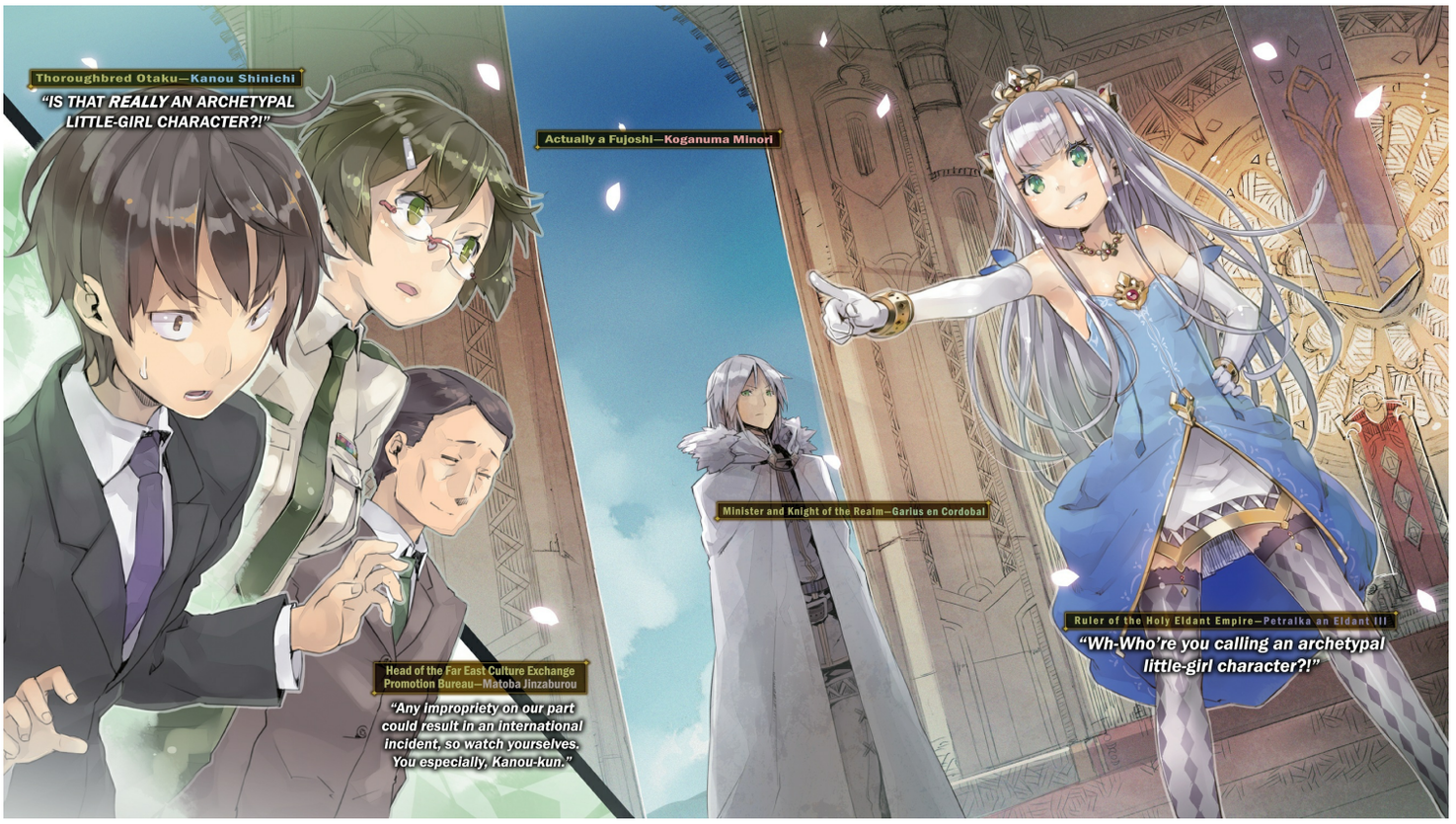
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Prologue: Breakthrough

Deep in the forest primeval walked a company of men.

It was just past noon, yet the place was dim. Not dark, exactly, but like a thin film had been laid over everything. The bright sunshine that might otherwise have washed over everything was blocked out by the layers of gnarled tree branches. Only a dappled haze found its way past the leaves.

It was trees, trees, trees, as far as the eye could see in every direction. The stripes of light in all their different sizes acted like an optical illusion, distorting the sense of distance. If you turned around, you would be hard-pressed to tell which direction you had come from just seconds before. The steel spikes pounded here and there and the rope running between them were the only signs of human hands in this forest, and the men clung to them like a lifeline.

Aokigahara Forest. A dense wood located at the foot of Mount Fuji, popularly known as the “Sea of Trees.” From time immemorial it had been a favorite place for suicides, and it was sometimes said to be haunted: once you went in, people claimed, you never came out. In reality, though, it was a tourist spot, with a walking path and everything. There were parks and campsites nearby, and plenty of people came for a simple stroll in the woods.

Because of the amount of iron ore in the area, people claimed that magnetic compasses didn’t work, or that electronic devices would go haywire. But the truth was that compasses would just be slightly off, not unusable, while modern electronics were too advanced to be affected by the relatively weak magnetism in Aokigahara. These details had been used for dramatic effect in books and movies so often that the notion of a “haunted forest” had taken on a life of its own.

“Jeez,” Fujita Keisuke muttered in exasperation, “today’s tourists aren’t afraid of anything.”

There was something white at his feet. A used contraceptive device—a rubber condom.

“Who comes all the way out here just to do... *that*?” Someone, obviously. They were well off the walking path, but here was the evidence.

“Some kids, probably,” one of the guys walking beside him said easily.

Work was work, but this was one depressing job. Keisuke tossed the condom into the trash bag he was holding and heaved a sigh.

Keisuke and the others had removed their familiar navy-blue uniforms, instead donning vests and gray work suits. Each wore a hat on his head. They had thick gloves, of course, and climbing boots. Each also carried a lamp, a sturdy nylon rope, a canteen, and other supplies on the belt at their waists. They had a pouch made of synthetic fiber in which resided a compass, a map, and a portable radio.

The words “Yamanashi Prefectural Police,” the organization to which Keisuke belonged, were embroidered on his vest. Only Keisuke and the guy beside him were wearing vests; everyone else was wearing a neon armband instead.

They were a patrol unit. The Sea of Trees being famous as a place to commit suicide, people came from all over Japan in order to kill themselves there. After all, while Aokigahara might be a perfectly civilized tourist location, it was also a vast forest of ancient pedigree. If you left the path with no equipment, no knowledge, and no experience, there was a good chance you really wouldn’t come back.

Hence patrol units were formed, comprising both members of the local Yamanashi police force and volunteers from all over the country. They conducted regular sweeps of the woods hoping to find and prevent potential suicides, or at least discover the remains of those who had gone through with the act.

The job as such had existed for a long time now. But recently, the work of the patrols had come to include picking up garbage.

Inevitably, when people are told something is dangerous, it will make some of them even more eager to see it. Some people deliberately left the main path as a perverse test of courage, so the patrols would find empty cans or cigarette butts strewn here and there in the woods. As if that weren’t enough, there were even some people who came to dump industrial waste away from prying

eyes. Aokigahara Forest got filthier every year.

“This place would stay cleaner if it really were haunted,” Keisuke groused.

His colleague nodded. “No kidding.”

That was when they heard the scream. Keisuke and the others spun around.

“What was that?!”

Civilians participated in these patrols on the understanding that they were responsible for themselves, and in general most of them were used to mountaineering or foresting. But still, if anything happened to one of them, people would no doubt hold the police accountable. Keisuke and the others hurried in the direction of the sound.

“It’s Kawamura-san! He—”

“He fell! He fell!”

The other volunteers were clustered around where the person who had screamed—a man named Kawamura, apparently—had fallen. Some of the people were pointing their portable lanterns at the ground, while somebody else was quickly lowering a rope.

“Took a slip, did he?” Keisuke pushed through the crowd of civilians to get a look at the scene.

“What the hell...?” one of the other police officers muttered in his ear.

A fissure yawned in front of their eyes. Twenty meters long, it was almost three meters across at its widest point. The conical shape and the leaf mold along the edge gave it the impression less of a trench than of a hole.

How deep was it? They couldn’t tell. The crack didn’t go straight down, but appeared to slope, so the light from their lanterns didn’t reach the bottom. It was impossible to say just by looking how deep it might be. Neither, of course, could they confirm the safety of whoever this Kawamura was who had fallen in.

Most likely, this cave had already been present in the bedrock. Something had caused the ceiling to collapse, taking the former surface—leaf mold and all—with it. In effect, a booby-trap, though one planted by Mother Nature and without malice aforethought.

“Heeeey!” Keisuke called. “Are you okay?”

There was no answer. Was it so deep that Kawamura couldn’t hear him? Or...

Despair quickly settled over the volunteers. “At that depth, he must have...”

But Keisuke shook his head, lowering a rope. “It’s too soon to give up hope. I’m going to have a look.”

He fastened the lifeline to himself, tying the other end to a sturdy-looking tree root. He had been in the mountaineering club in college and was still something of an outdoorsman, so this was all familiar to him. Once he was confident the rope was securely attached to the root, he nodded to his colleagues and began to move gradually over the cliff and into the crevice.

“Hmm.”

The gradient of the wall was gentler than he had thought. Supported by the rope, Keisuke walked backward, heading downward at a tilt. The easy angle meant there was a good chance Kawamura was still alive.

Keisuke worked his way down, periodically calling, “Heeey! Are you all right?” But there was still no reply.

At length, he estimated he had descended nearly twenty meters. This hole was deeper than he had expected. He was just starting to think maybe he should report back when a strange feeling overtook him.

It was as if he were floating underwater. His feet slipped. This was because the rock face, which his boots had bitten into with such assurance just a moment before, was suddenly floating. He didn’t know why. The rope was slack. Suddenly, Keisuke felt as if he had no body weight—no, that wasn’t it. It was as if the world had been turned upside down...

“Whoa!” he shouted, confused. His hands clawed at empty air. His body spun. He was falling... *up*?

“Ahhhh!”

He had completely lost any sense of direction. But then he felt himself being spit out of something. Something soft caught him. He rolled two or three times, then registered that the ground was completely covered in grass.

He lay there, blinking. A wide, grassy field spread out around him. It was green off into the horizon—and for all he knew, it was green to the horizon after that, too. The whole place was awash in brilliant sunlight, and a gentle breeze was eddying past. It practically begged him to settle in and relax.

"...Wait," Keisuke said dumbly. Hadn't he been headed for the bottom of a hole just a moment ago?

He sat up frantically to find a middle-aged man sitting right nearby in the grass, just like he was. Judging by his outfit, it was the Kawamura who had fallen earlier. He was looking at the scenery with the same dumbfounded expression as Keisuke.

This wasn't possible. A place so vast and open couldn't exist underneath the Sea of Trees.

"It's inconceivable," Keisuke said under his breath. Where in the world were they?

Unconsciously, he began looking around for the familiar peak—the top of Mount Fuji. But no matter how he searched, that most famous of Japanese mountains was nowhere to be found. Flummoxed, he turned around.

And then he froze, speechless.

For a second, he didn't understand what it was. Or rather, he knew, but some kind of deeply ingrained common sense refused to let him believe it was real. Because it couldn't be. The only place it existed, he thought numbly, was in myths and legends and stories. And yet...

"A d—" he groaned. Beside him, Kawamura noticed his strange expression and turned as well—and then he froze, too.

"A d—"

The thing that had pinned the two men in place was a gigantic blue creature. Even with its wings folded and its limbs beneath it, it was as big as a house. It was breathing gently, producing a fetid wind that rustled the grass. Did we mention it was massive?

"*Dragon?!*"

As if in affirmation, the impossible creature opened its mouth wide, its jaws full of fangs.

Chapter One: Well, Whaddya Know—It's Another World!

Everything in sight was drenched in the color of the setting sun.

The twilight scene looked like a faded photograph, filling me with a strange melancholy. A kind of sadness welled up in my heart, like love for something already gone, never to be regained. In contrast to the inexplicable impatience I felt, everything around me seemed sluggish, as if this moment might drag on for eternity...

What a ridiculous thought. But there it was, in the corner of my mind.

"I really... like you."

It was a textbook confession scene.

We stood facing each other in the schoolyard, the place crimson in the light. No one else was around, just our shadows stretching out along the ground. The voices of the baseball team practicing on the school field seemed somehow far away. Nothing felt real, as though it were all happening according to a script, as if she and I were the only ones left in this unending twilight world. I struggled a little for breath.

"Would you go out with me?"

I dived right in: the words that begged for love. The sign of my commitment.

If I didn't tell her about the feelings swelling in my heart, we would just go on as we always had, a familiar, comfortable, yet ambiguous distance between us. It would have been easy enough just to go along with it.

But that would condemn me to endless waiting.

Feelings are living things. If you keep them shut up for too long, eventually they die.

I had mustered all my willpower in order to say the words, and now they

faded into the silence.

She blinked twice, three times. And then she said...

“No way!”

.....Huh?

“I’m sorry... What did you say...?” I asked tremblingly.

“I said no way,” she said indifferently. And then, as if to really drive the stake through my heart, she went on, “I have zero plans of going out with you, Shin-chan.”

There was a long pause. I grunted as if all the blood in my body had suddenly reversed direction.

I couldn’t believe she’d rejected me. I couldn’t believe I’d failed.

I had been so sure she would say yes to me. The two of us were friends growing up: our houses were close by, and we were practically a part of each other’s families. I’m not the type to make risky gambles. I’d told her how I felt because I thought I knew how she’d respond.

Then, pathetically, I pressed the issue.

“What? But—”

Even as I was saying it, part of me knew how bad it was. *There’s still time*, it told me. I could still laugh it off, say, “Of course you don’t! I was just kidding!” I didn’t have to make the wound any deeper. Maybe I could at least end the conversation gracefully. Then I could still look my old friend in the eye when I saw her the next day.

But the refusal to leave well enough alone gave me a shove, and I went tumbling toward a far more tragic outcome.

“Why...?”

Was it because I wasn’t handsome?

Were my grades not good enough?

Was I not a talented enough athlete?

Was I—

The possibilities rolled through my mind, not helping anything.

“Well, Shin-chan—” She batted her big eyes at me.

She seemed to be genuinely puzzled, as if she wanted to ask why I didn’t know the answer to such an obvious question. And even *that* expression looked adorable on her face. I really was hopeless.

Finally, the reason came out:

“—you’re an otaku, right?”



My normal life ended when I opened my eyes. It happened entirely without my consent—in two or three senses.

“What’s wrong with being an otakuuuuuuuuuuuu?!”

I woke to my own scream.

I blinked a few times, the tension leaving my body. It was hardly the first time I’d had a bad dream, but today... Today, my head hurt for some reason. Maybe it was from yelling at the top of my lungs. It felt like I had a giant spitball buried in the middle of my noggin.

“...Just a dream.”

It had happened more than a year ago, yet in my dream, the memory was as clear as if it were yesterday. On the other hand, though, I couldn’t quite think straight, as if the dream were still clinging to me. Thinking of anything at all felt like a tremendous effort.

I was lying on my back. I slowly opened my eyes and looked up.

“An unfamiliar... ceiling...”

Immediately I quoted from an anime that shall remain nameless (note: it’s from episode two of the TV series). Okay, so even I had to admit it showed what a lost-cause otaku I am. But never mind that. There *was* an unfamiliar ceiling above me, for no apparent reason at all.

Wait. Doesn't it seem kind of... close? Like, pretty low?

"Where... am I...?"

The ceiling I was looking at was definitely not the ceiling of my own room, which I'd spent an awful lot of time staring at. If it were, it would have had a life-size poster of Madoka, the heroine of the masterpiece magical-girl anime I so loved, *Rental☆Madoka*. But the ceiling I was looking at now showed no sign of that magical (in every sense) girl, whose invigorating smile would be enough to keep your spirits up even if you worked at the blackest, most awful temp agency.

What I saw instead was an oddly rigid pattern carved into the ceiling.

Wait a second... It wasn't the ceiling of a room at all.

The surface wasn't flat, but gently curved; in other words, it formed a half-sphere. The four pillars supporting it were attached to the edges of the bed I was sleeping in. I was in a canopy bed.

Yes, a canopy bed, the very symbol for "rich guy" in anime, manga, games, and light novels. A commoner like me could barely hope to lay eyes on such a thing unless I was transported into the middle of one of those stories.

And here I was, sleeping on just such an expensive piece of furniture.

I sat up with one question in my mind: *Why?*

A look around revealed a startlingly large Western-style room. I would say it was at least three times the size of my room at home, nearly twenty tatami mats. But I hardly saw any furniture; the bed was sitting smack in the middle of the room, as if to boast that the owner of the house could afford to waste all this space. The room was dim, most likely on account of the heavy curtains drawn over the windows. Bright light leaked in between the curtains, probably on purpose to prevent the room from being completely dark.

"Okay, seriously—*where* am I?!" I practically groaned.

For a place with so few furnishings, the wallpaper bore an elaborate pattern, the curtains were embroidered, and there were decorations all over the window frames and the pillars that stuck out slightly from the walls. The walls

also bore lamps that had another detailed pattern on them.

I had never seen anything like it except in anime, manga, games, and light novels. It sort of looked like a traditional European mansion. If anything, it seemed like the sort of place that might show up in one of those stories where the house is as much the star as the characters.

Maybe that was why I didn't notice her at first. She seemed like such a natural part of the room that she almost faded into the scenery.

I looked right past her once, then jumped a little and looked again. Someone was standing against the wall.

"A m-m-m..."

As soon as the realization hit, it ran like fireworks along my gray matter. The black dress. The white, frilly apron. The similarly frilly headdress. The dark-red ribbon with its jade-green clasp at her neck.

Could it be? It *was*! One of the stalwarts of the adorableness that was moe, with admirers aplenty whether she appeared in anime, manga, games, or light novels! And that costume! Practically an aphrodisiac, despite how little skin it shows. How many pop-culture addicts has it sent into a moe-addled lather?

"IS THAT ***REALLY*** A MAID?!"

The maid standing against the wall jumped in surprise when I pumped my fist and shouted. In fact... it almost looked like she was against the wall because she had been trying to keep her distance from me. Well, I guess anyone would stand back if they saw a guy jump out of bed and start shouting.

But to think! To imagine the day would come when I would see a maid! In real life! In 3D! In the flesh!

"Ohhh..." I was overcome with emotion.

Some might say: "Hey, we've got maid cafés, don't we?" Amateurs! Maid cafés are ultimately just a form of cosplay. They're fake, a performance—they lack the gravitas of true maids. Those ersatz au pairs are really just high school or college girls. That is to say, they lack the heart, the spirit, the ineffable quality one only achieves through absolute devotion to the Way of the Maid!

But this maid, right here in front of me, she had it. I could tell. My eyes could not be deceived...!

I mean, there's a difference between someone who wears a maid costume for fun and someone who wears it every day of her life. She just seemed more comfortable in it.

A second look revealed something else: she wasn't Japanese. I couldn't quite tell what color her hair was in the darkness, but I could at least make out that it wasn't black.

Her long hair was tied in twintails, one falling to the left and one to the right, tied high on her head. She was blinking her large eyes in confusion—indeed, fear. I could tell even in the dim room that her skin was as pale and smooth as porcelain, her features finely formed but not ostentatious—the very picture of refined beauty. She was the perfect example of how an air of purity could turn plain looks into a virtue.

She seemed to be about my age; i.e., in her late teens. That maid outfit embraced a willowy body. We often describe such people by saying that they look like they might break in half if you gave them a strong hug—but she looked almost like glass, as if she might be damaged if handled carelessly.

It was practically perfect. If I were a judge for a Maid Achievement Test, I could comfortably give her a 90. Where did those other ten points go, you ask? She could earn them if she were holding a broom. A broom is fundamental for a maid. Otherwise it's like drawing an *oni* without his club, or—

Well, never mind.



Still clinging to the wall, the maid hesitantly began to speak.

“*Re... Retosamu?*”

What was that? What had she said?

“*E... Efasu uoi er, Retosamu?*”

I stared blankly at her, so the maid repeated herself... I think. If a rising intonation at the end of the sentence indicated a question, then she was asking again.

It wasn’t Japanese; that was for sure. The pronunciation suggested it wasn’t English, either, but what, then? It didn’t seem to be German or French or Chinese. It didn’t really matter, because I didn’t have the foggiest idea what she was saying, in any case.

“Well, this is trouble,” I muttered. I finally had a chance to meet a real-life, in-the-flesh maid, and I couldn’t even make small talk.

I know, I know. Some people might say, “Whatever! First worry about the important stuff, like asking where you are!” Do these people have no dreams? How boorish would you have to be to focus on any of that? I was meeting an honest-to-God, three-dimensional moe character. Before this miracle, every other concern was like a molehill before a mountain!

“*Retosamu*,” the maid said, sounding at a loss. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one frustrated by the inability to communicate.

Suddenly, she nodded as if remembering something and began hurriedly patting her uniform. For a second I wondered what she was doing, but then I realized she was looking for something somewhere in her clothes.

“*Sou tei!*”

A smile crossed her face, and she pulled some kind of box out of her pocket.

She began walking toward me hesitantly and showed me what was in the box, which opened from the middle, like a clam.

It was a small silver ring.

“Huh? What’s this?”

The ring looked a little too big, like maybe it wasn't made very well—but the surface was covered with tiny carved letters.

Just like the kind of magic ring that so often appears in anime, manga, and games.

I wondered what kind of letters these were. It wasn't the Roman alphabet, and of course, it wasn't Japanese writing, either. I'd seen the Hebrew alphabet, too—*aleph* and *zayin* and such; it shows up pretty regularly in fantasy manga and anime. But it wasn't that, either.

"*Retosamu, regunifu ruoi shisu ete tsupu.*"

The maid held the ring out, then looked at me expectantly. Was she telling me to put it on?

I hesitated somewhat to just equip an unfamiliar item. It didn't feel right. How often has someone put on a magic ring just to be immediately under its control? I mean... I know that hasn't *literally* happened, but still.

But then—

"*Retosamu.*"

The maid pointed to her own hand. On her left ring finger, she had a ring that looked a lot like the one she was holding out to me. She took it off, handed it to me, and instead put the ring she had offered me on her own hand.

What was going on here?

It seemed like she was trying to show me the ring was safe to put on, sort of like how someone might eat a bite of food to prove it isn't poisoned.

But it was also kind of like the way a couple exchanges rings when they get married, and that left me a little embarrassed. Now I was reluctant for a whole new reason...

"*Retosamu...?*"

She spoke again, a look of anxiety on her pale face. *Holy crap, is she cute!*

But that very cuteness made me feel guilty. The maid didn't seem sure what to do if I wouldn't put on the ring.

“Aw, fer... Okay, I get it.”

I’m a man. And an otaku, too. To have an ideal woman like this maid turn such pleading eyes on me couldn’t fail to move me. My heart burned with the moe-ness of it all, urging me to hurry up and put on the ring.

“All right, here goes...”

With much fear and trembling, I put the ring on my finger. There was no flash of light or explosion, nor did it suddenly start burying itself in my flesh. It just slipped on.

“Like this?” I asked.

“Yes! Can you understand me now, Master?” (*Sei shisu moufu donatosuredonu uoi naku, Retosamu?*)

“Hwah?!”

I let out a whoop of surprise. All of a sudden I could understand what she was saying.

And it wasn’t like she had spoken Japanese. She was still speaking that weird language, but I heard the Japanese meaning in my head, almost overlaid with hers, like a simultaneous interpreter.

How the heck does this work?

Okay, wait. Never mind that for now. What had she just said?

Master? Who was that? Did she mean me?

“Yesss!”

In a fit of emotion, I looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

Master! *Master!* MASTERRRRRR! Listen to the sweet sound of it! Normally a maid calls her employer “sir”—but to be called “Master”! What a feeling!

Thank God I’m alive! If I’d had a time machine, I would have gone back to myself a year ago and told him, “Be glad you’re alive! Just hang in there, one day a maid is going to call you ‘Master’!”

This and other sundry joyous thoughts went through my head, but after a while I could no longer ignore the unresolved situation in front of me.

I.e., *What was going on here?*

Where was I, who was this girl, and how did I end up like this?

“Hrmm...”

Wracking my brain cells, which didn’t really want to work that hard because of a dull ache, I went back through my memories.

I recalled that I had been looking for a job in Akiba, the otaku haven in central Tokyo. I was there for an interview. I was pretty sure there was a break, during which time I got an oolong tea from a drink machine.

I remember drinking it, and then... nothing.

Huh? That didn’t explain what I was doing here at all.

“Master...?”

When I stood frozen for too long, the maid spoke again, sounding worried. I still didn’t know the details of her language, but apparently the word *Retosamu*, which she’d used several times, meant *Master*.

“Oh, um.” I looked at her. “Sorry, can I ask you something?”

“Certainly. Anything at all.” She nodded, seeming relieved—even happy—to finally have a conversation going.

“For starters, who are you? What’s your name?”

“I’m Myusel—Myusel Fourant.” She gave me an adorable little bow.

“Myusel...” What a sweet name. It fit her. I was just trying the name out, but she seemed to think I was calling her, because she said, “Yes?”

“Um... What’s your social status, exactly?”

Notwithstanding the wave of ecstasy that transfixed me the first time she called me Master, I was hardly enough of a hopeless jerk to be all, Yes, I am your master!! Like a maid would just pop out of thin air and serve me? Come on.

“I will be seeing to all your needs from today forward, Master.”

“Okay, but... Who’s this ‘Master’? Who are you talking about?”

“...I’m sorry?” Myusel blinked. Then she said apologetically, “Oh... Would you rather I called you something else?” She ducked her head slightly. “Kanou... Shinichi-sama.”

Kanou Shinichi.

That was my name, all right. In other words, the “master” this girl kept referring to was... me!

“*I’m* your... master?”

“Yes, sir.” Myusel looked perplexed, as if wondering how I could find this so difficult.

This made no sense! What the heck was going on here?!

“Okay, so... So...”

Let’s forget *why* I’m her master for now. I decided to try to find out where I was instead. I tried again to remember, but once more I found my memories stopped cold in the otaku mecca, Akihabara. Wherever I was, assuming I didn’t have a second personality or some kind of amnesia, I hadn’t come here of my own free will.

“Where... are we?”

“In the Latatos Forest on the edge of Marinos, capital of the Holy Eldant Empire.”

The answer came—well, not from Myusel. I looked around in surprise to see who had spoken, and found a woman standing there.

She was young, wearing a dark green outfit—a military uniform. But it wasn’t a combat uniform, just the sort of thing you would wear around the office. What the armed forces might call a work uniform. Jacket above, tight skirt below. Special job and rank insignia on the collar, even a necktie.

What really caught my eye, though, wasn’t the uniform, but the person wearing it.

Specifically, her chest.

It... It’s huge!

That was the first thing I noticed. Not the necktie, not the job insignia or the badge of rank—it was all about those two towering hills...! She was an F cup for sure, maybe even a G. Incredible. When I thought of the juicy white peaches concealed under the highly regulated costume called a uniform...! She couldn't have hidden the plumpness of them if she'd tried, and I was instantly lost in them. Who knew such massive breasts actually existed! Did this mean not all of those photos of pop idols were photoshopped?! Amazing! La**ta really does exist...! (I was starting to grow incoherent from sheer excitement.)

"Are you all right...?" the woman asked dubiously, as I stood there with my eyes frozen on her chest. "Can you hear me, Kanou Shinichi-kun?"

"Huh? Oh... Yeah."

Hearing my name snapped me back to reality. With tremendous effort and no small regret, I was able to stop my leering and look my conversation partner in the face.

Her chest might have been the first thing I noticed, but her face was lovely, too. I suspected she was in her early twenties. Her hair was short. Or—judging by the fact that I couldn't see any hair near her collar, I guessed it just looked short from the front. Most likely, she had it done up in a bun or something in the back.

Her features were well-formed, but had just a hint of vulnerability, a feminine softness to them. She was wearing glasses, which took the edge off of everything, giving the impression of a sweet, round face. I guess you could say she was one of those archetypal characters who made you feel warm and fuzzy inside.

She was, though, still wearing a military uniform. Unlike Myusel, she was also obviously speaking actual Japanese, and her features were unmistakably Asian. So I assumed she was a member of the Japan Self-Defense Force—what you might call a WAC. (It stood for "Women's Army Corp," but basically meant a lady soldier.)

"Your surprise is understandable," she said with a smile. "But you'd better calm down. Otherwise, this won't last."

"Is... Is that right?" I found my expression frozen from shock. "I see... So it

won’t last... I’d heard how easily they sagged, but... I understand. I’ll calm down. I will absolutely calm down. If by calming down I can preserve humanity’s most precious treasure, I will calm down as much as it takes! You can count on me!” I clenched both my hands into fists as I made this emphatic declaration.



Still, I wasn't sure how my calming down could keep her boobs from sagging. Was that my secret power? My superhero name could be "The Buster," lifesaver in boob emergencies! I just needed to stay calm and focus on my powers in order to prevent women's chests from sagging.

"Erm... Kanou Shinichi-kun?" The WAC was looking at me with a perplexed smile. "It looks like what we have here is a failure to communicate... What's this about 'sagging'? What in the world are you talking about?"

"Huh? Aren't we talking about boobs...?"

The WAC was still smiling, but she was completely silent. That smile just sat there, as though someone had hit the pause button on her, until—

"How about we start with introductions?" The smile became a little more real again as she forcefully changed the subject.

Apparently, she intended to pretend like the whole discussion about boobs hadn't happened. That's a public servant for you. They know how to ignore things.

"I'm Koganuma Minori." She placed her white-gloved hand on her chest as she spoke. Even that was enough to subtly change the shape of her bust. *Whoa. Must be soft.* "I'm a Private First Class with the Eastern Army of the Ground Self-Defense Force, First Division. My assigned duty is your protection."

Thus the lady from the SDF—or I should say, Koganuma Minori—identified herself. I could have called her "Koganuma-san," but that sounded so stiff and formal. So in my mind, at least, I decided to call her "Minori-san."
.....Wait a second.

"Protection?!"

But that implied danger! *Protection* meant I had to be protected *from* something. Which meant I was in a position where something might threaten me.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why?!"

I wasn't aware of anyone who was out for my life. But then again, you never know who's going to turn out to have it in for you. Maybe that guy I beat in that

Yahoo auction for that bishoujo figure got so ticked that now he wanted to kill me!

“But that’s ridiculous! I mean, yes, I kept putting in crazy-high bids right at the end, but I would’ve sold my soul for that Kuuko figure! She’s super rare and you can take her clothes off and they got her breasts *perfect* and I would’ve died if I didn’t get her and—”

“Again, please calm down, and— What are you talking about, anyway?” Minori-san asked, furrowing her brow.

“You mean the guy who lost that auction isn’t out to kill me?”

“I really don’t think that’s the kind of situation the JSDF would get involved in.”

“How can you sound so dismissive?! This is a limited-edition Kuuko figure we’re talking about! I grant she’s not the main heroine, and her breasts aren’t as big as yours, Minori-san, but she’s wonderful in her own way!”

“...Pretty sure my breasts have nothing to do with this.” She crossed her arms over her chest as if trying to hide them. It only made them look even bigger. She didn’t seem very savvy about them.

“In any event,” she said. “If a criminal were after you, it would be the police’s job to protect you.”

“I... I guess you’re right. But why are you here, then?”

Who would the JSDF fight? They only came out for foreign armies and natural disasters and Godzilla and stuff. I couldn’t picture a situation that would get them to protect a lone regular guy.

“Your protection is incidental to my main duty. If there were really a clear and present danger, do you think they’d send a WAC like me? No, you’d have a fully equipped squadron waiting for you.”

“I guess that makes sense.” It’s just pretty surprising when an SDF officer appears out of thin air with no explanation whatsoever.

“I’m sorry we dragged you here so suddenly and with no explanation whatsoever, but we had to maintain secrecy and such. That’s why we had to

resort to strong-arm tactics. Sorry again.”

“Maintain secrecy?!”

Another phrase that fails to inspire confidence. *Maintain secrecy* is a profoundly dangerous phrase, one that could easily cause someone’s death, and (I assumed) frequently did. And of course, if the SDF was involved, that was as good as saying it was a state secret. That’s an order of magnitude more dangerous than a corporate secret.

Wait, hang on. Didn’t she say I was “dragged” here? So I’d basically been kidnapped and taken to a strange place *by the JSDF*?

“No way...” I began to tremble at the situation I was in. “So a developmental bioweapon got out and infected me, and as a result I’ve got incredible new powers?! So I’m a mutant soldier, a living military secret, and that’s why they’re after me?!”

“...Again: What?”

“Or is it that a spaceship with hyper-advanced technology came crashing down from overhead, and the control mechanism, manifesting itself as a beautiful girl, has chosen to request a pact with me out of all earthlings?!”

No response.

“Or is it that a 3,000-year-old seal has been broken, freeing the Demon King, and the kingdom has mustered all its might to keep him at bay, but the one clan that could seal him away again is already extinct, and I’m the last descendent of that clan’s bloodline?!”

Minori-san still didn’t say anything, just stood there with that smile on her face, her eyes growing colder and colder. In light of her expression, I decided this would be a good place to stop my *chuunibyou* rant.

“Are you quite done?”

“For now.”

“Obviously, everything will be explained to you in due course,” Minori-san said, walking over to the window. “I don’t think it would ever make sense to you, no matter how much I talked. And even if it did, I bet you wouldn’t believe

it. I sure didn't, at first."

I gave her a puzzled look at what seemed like an oddly roundabout way of talking. What was she trying to say?

"So you should see it with your own eyes first. Then we'll explain."

Minori-san drew back the curtain. Suddenly, the room was awash in bright light. It must have been morning; the light was cold and clear. I squinted against the sudden brightness and waited for my eyes to adjust. And then—

"Whoa..."

A vast green spread out before me. Trees bursting with leaves stood like a wall as far as the eye could see. I wasn't sure, but I thought they couldn't be more than a hundred meters away. It looked like our room was on the second floor—we were looking down from up high, but our view was mostly blocked by the trees.

Some of the things Minori-san had said earlier came back to me: *Marinos. Latatos Forest.*

And *Holy Eldant Empire*.

I'd never heard any of those names before. I mean... I hadn't been paying a lot of attention earlier, but this was obviously a foreign country, right? I was supposed to be looking for a job in Akiba. When did I end up in another country?!

I was definitely starting to panic a little. But then...

"Wha...?"

Being in a foreign country all of a sudden wasn't the most unbelievable thing about this.

"That thing just now, was that—?"

Something had passed by the window. Something impossibly big. It wasn't a bird; it was too large for that. I only saw it for an instant, but it filled up my vision. In other words, it was bigger than the window I was standing in front of. And it had wings like a bat. And a very long tail. And to top it all off, instead of feathers, it was covered in blue scales.

“A... dragon...?!”

The flying object made a lazy circle in the sky, coming back into my field of view. An incredible creature floating elegantly in the blue sky above the wall of green. Its wingspan had to be at least ten meters. As I recalled, Quetzalcoatlus, the largest flying lizard discovered by archaeologists, had a wingspan of around twelve meters. This thing had to be at least as large as that. I’d seen a model of Quetzalcoatlus once at a dinosaur exhibit in middle school.

“A dragon... That *is* a dragon, isn’t it?!”

“That’s right,” Minori-san said, nodding at me.

I was on the edge of freaking out. “Wh-What the heck is this place?!”

“I told you, it’s Latatos Forest, on the edge of Marinos, capital of the Holy Eldant Empire.” She had a bit of a grin on her face as she spoke. And then, as if to confirm my suspicions, she added, “In simple terms, you’re in another world.”

I, Kanou Shinichi, was what you might call a home security guard.

Maybe you’re not sure what that means. In that case, you could say I was a NEET, or a shut-in. Or, in extreme terms, a good-for-nothing parasite. All of those words more or less describe how I was living. Or, because I apparently had a school register sitting around somewhere, maybe the most precise term for me would be a “school non-attender.”

And speaking of precision, I guess I should say I *had been* a home security guard. Because after living my cloistered life for a whole year, my parents put a forcible end to it.

I lived shut up in my room for more than a year, during which time my parents were occupied with my younger sister’s high school entrance exams (she was a far better person than me), and, for better or for worse, left me alone.

But once my sister was safely accepted by her chosen school, my parents, perhaps understandably, started to be bothered by the fact that their oldest son was busy idling his life away. To be fair, it probably doesn’t look very good when your daughter has just gotten into the best high school in the area, but

your son is perpetually engaged as a home security guard.

Unfortunately for me, my parents were people of extremes. They were normally pretty easy-going, but once they started something, they saw it through to the bitter end. They believed there was no time like the present—which is maybe just another way of saying they were impatient. If they started a war, the first thing they would have done would be to launch a nuclear missile. They weren't the type to take stock of a situation or start small and build up; the last resort seemed to be the only resort they had. What a pair.

Specifically, one day I suddenly found my door split in two.

That door had faithfully protected me from any contact with the outside world—I mean, of course I opened it when I went to the toilet or took a bath or whatever—and then there was a chainsaw eating through it.

I want you to try to picture this.

There I am, absorbed in leveling up my character in some MMO, when with absolutely no warning, I hear a chainsaw starting up, and suddenly my door is being split open. And for some reason my parents, who tended to get hung up on the strangest things, are wearing hockey masks, like they thought that was the uniform when you're wielding a chainsaw. I don't mind saying I gave myself a pat on the back for not wetting my pants.

Then...

"All right, Shinichi. Pop quiz. What are you going to do now? You have three choices: 1. Go back to school. 2. Get a job. 3. Get the hell out of our house."

"What? That's an impossible choice!"

"Impossible nothing! It shocked us to realize our own son could have shut-in genes in him, but we decided to give it time and see what would happen. But when we went easy on you, you made a beeline for NEET-itude! And then you started ordering all this crap cash-on-delivery! Manga! Games! On and on! Who do you think made that money, you good-for-nothing parasite?"

"Adults always wound us children with their heartless words."

"This isn't about genes at all—you're just a loser, aren't you?"

“You too, Mom? ...Hey, could you take off those hockey masks? You’re freaking me out.”

“The point is, your father and I have had it. You either need to go back to school, or get a job. Immediately. Otherwise, I’m going to erase all your files, starting with that folder of ‘landscape photos’ you love so much!”

“Wha—?! Hey, I gave that thing an innocuous name and buried it all those layers down so that—when did you touch my computer, anyway?!”

“You underestimate me. I’m a former ero-game triple threat! At small regional publishers, it’s not so unusual for the same person to be the writer, programmer, and graphic designer.”

“Are you saying you hacked me?!”

“Just how much porn can you stash on a terabyte drive, anyway? I thought I was going to faint clean away by the fourth thing I looked at!”

“Yaaaaaahh! You *looked* at it?!”

“You see how it is, Shinichi,” my dad said. “If you don’t want the terabyte of precious images you’ve accumulated in your wanderings on the net, and your seven online game accounts, and everything else on your hard drive to be erased, you either work or you go to school. And you do it like the devil himself was chasing you.”

.....Aaaand that was our conversation.

Three hundred sixty-eight days after it had begun, my life as a home security guard came to this ignominious end.

“Ah. And that’s why you’re looking for a job.”

The words came from a middle-aged man on the other side of a folding conference table. It was the day after my parents had chainsawed their way into my room, and I was in Akiba.

The natural light I had avoided for so long pounded mercilessly down on me; I felt my skin and eyes burning, like I was some kind of vampire. I came out to this otaku mecca for the first time in almost a year. In other words, I had taken choice number two.

I was going to get a job.

Honestly, I just couldn't get excited about going back to school at this point. Not that I had ever been that excited about school; otherwise, maybe I wouldn't have stopped attending and become a shut-in. An otaku like me was already an easy target for bullies, and if I went back after taking off school for a year, I was sure to be a laughingstock. I decided it would be better to try to make my way in the world. Or so I thought.

It turned out not to be so easy, as obvious as that may seem. It turned out no one was eager to hire a high school dropout former home security guard. Maybe if I'd had something to set me apart, it would have been different, but I didn't have what you could call skills. The only thing I could boast about to other people was my vast store of otaku knowledge. Actually, come to think of it, I didn't really want to boast about that.

And anyway, the number of jobs that call for geek cred are limited. You pretty much either have to become a creator, like my parents, or work at a shop that hawks merchandise to nerds. At least, that was about all I could think of.

There were a lot of hurdles to becoming a creator, by which I mean you couldn't just show up at a company's front door and say, "Please let me make manga/anime/video games." I could tell that much by looking at my parents.

That being the case, there was only one road open to me: get hired by a bookstore, DVD shop, computer place, game store, model seller, toy emporium, or some other otaku-centric business establishment.

There are plenty of job-search sites on the web these days, and a lot of the stores had their own employment opportunities pages, too, so I just searched for "jobs" plus whatever otaku words came to mind, and I found all sorts of places.

It was during one of these searches that I found it. At the very top of the page, they'd written *OTAKU WANTED!* in huge letters. In fact... that seemed to be the only requirement for applicants. Normally there's all kinds of stuff, like they want you to have experience, or a driver's license, or a high school diploma, or to be older than eighteen and younger than thirty. But this place just seemed to want people with plenty of otaku knowledge.

And what they were offering looked surprisingly attractive. The pay was 300,000 yen a month, awfully good for a recession. They said there was even the possibility of a raise for good workers. On top of that, they said housing was available, like you could live there. This obviously wasn't some part-time gig. They were looking for real employees.

The company name at the bottom of the page was Amutech Co., General Entertainment Provider. Of course, it was possible this was some evil corporation looking to turn innocent, unworldly sheep (like me) into corporate slaves. But what the hey? I could worry about that after the interview.

I clicked on the "Apply" button at the bottom of the page.

When I did, a new window opened, with the title "How Much of an Otaku are You?" To my chagrin, I realized I was going to take an employment test right there on the web.

I vaguely recalled a national "Otaku Test" being held once. Were they going to have me take that...? While I was busy wondering this, a timer appeared in the corner of the screen. Apparently, this was a timed test.

I guessed that made sense enough. With the internet, you could look up all the otaku facts you wanted. Without a time limit, anybody could have gotten a perfect score. In other words, they weren't going to give you long enough to look everything up—or perhaps they would give you enough time to look things up if you already had the base knowledge to know what to look for.

Honestly, I was kind of fired up about this. Maybe I could find out where I ranked in the annals of otakudom.

But no sooner had I started than I found myself disappointed. Too easy. These questions were too easy by half! Anime. Manga. Games. Novels. Figures. Doujinshi. And on and on. They pretty much just listed some of the most famous works of each type, then asked a bunch of questions that tested how much you knew about the content, what the draw was, why that particular work had become a hit.

And to top it all off, it was a multiple-choice test!

During my time as a home security guard, I had encountered each and every

one of the things they asked about and had gotten into furious arguments online about everything from what made them great to the pros and cons of how they'd been marketed.

I might not have been able to come up with an essay answer to every question, but filling in bubbles, I could do. In the process of taking the test, I started to get the feeling that the person who had written it wasn't actually an otaku themselves.

How do I put this? It was just sort of... off, like a reporter who wrote about something without actually going to the scene. There were no major mistakes, but it just seemed to miss the point, like they didn't quite understand any of it. Like maybe some cultural critic or economist had just read some outlines of a bunch of manga and such, never the books themselves, then gotten publication numbers and photos of the lines from when these things came out, and he'd written the test with that objective data. It was an outsider's perspective. That was the sense I got.

Who had created this test, and why? It puzzled me, but I filled in the answers easily enough, finishing the last question with almost half the time still left.

When I submitted my responses, the words *Congratulations, you've passed!* appeared on the screen, along with an interview time for the next day and a map of the interview location. It was somewhere in Akiba—in a building right by the Manseibashi police station, no less. This whole job offer smelled fishy, but if they were swindling applicants or kidnapping them to join their cult or whatever, they wouldn't set up shop right next to a police station, would they?

I convinced myself that they wouldn't, and so I found myself interviewing at Amutech, General Entertainment Provider.

"I see." The middle-aged man, very much the "interviewer" type, nodded his head. The business card he gave me at the beginning of our interview said his name was Matoba Jinzaburou. For such an oddly antique-sounding name, the guy himself seemed pretty ordinary. He looked like your garden-variety salaryman, a little white in his neatly parted hair, a business suit the color of dead leaves ensconcing his medium build. His eyes were as narrow as threads, giving the impression that he was always smiling—in fact, that smile looked so

comfortable there that I really couldn't imagine him having any other expression. At any rate, he looked like a people person.

Then again, they say swindlers all look nice at first glance. If this "Amutech" really was some awful, evil corporation, it would be dangerous to judge them by first impressions.

"Out of curiosity, what do your parents do for a living?" Matoba-san asked.

This was after I had explained the broad contours of the position I was in. How I had been a home security guard, how my parents had threatened me—I didn't try to hide the fact that I was getting this job under duress. I didn't figure the first place I went to was going to hire me, anyway. This was just kind of a warm-up—or maybe I just felt that what was hopeless was hopeless.

"My parents? My dad writes light novels, and my mom's a housewife. Although she used to be involved in ero games."

"Light novels?"

"Yeah... They're these novels that are kind of like manga."

"Oh-ho." Matoba-san nodded and wrote something down.

I didn't know what my parents' jobs had to do with my job. Isn't that, like... job discrimination or something? Maybe it's not. I don't know.

"And... 'ero games,' those are...?"

"Like 'erotic games'? She was a visual designer."

"...*Ero games. Visual designer.*" He frowned and muttered the words to himself, as if he were repeating new vocabulary in a foreign language. They specifically said they were looking for otaku, so I thought maybe the company was sort of in that area, but it didn't look like it. Maybe they'd put out the call exactly because they didn't have anyone who fit the description?

"Um... In other words, she was an illustrator for adult games. You know, uh, ones you can't play unless you're eighteen or older."

"Ah! Ah, yes, I see." Matoba-san gave an enthusiastic nod. "Yes, that makes sense! So that makes you a thoroughbred otaku, yes?"

“Thoroughbred?” I frowned. “I mean, I *guess* you could say that...”

It was true that there had been manga and anime and computer disks piled around my house practically for as long as I could remember, and that that was what had inspired me to become an otaku. But since my younger sister showed none of those tendencies, I found it oddly disquieting to have all my nerdliness attributed to the one word, *bloodline*.

“You aced the test on our website.”

“Pretty much anyone with a bit of pop-culture knowledge could have done that,” I said. “There were a lot of questions, but that’s all.” I was being somewhat humble, but the questions really weren’t that hard.

“Hmm...” Matoba-san flipped through his papers, looking at them. “Excellent. Honestly, I had nearly given up hope. I never thought someone so perfectly suited would come along...”

“I’m sorry...?” I had begun to doubt my own ears. What had this old man just said?

“Knowledge, completely satisfactory. Former shut-in, seeking to strike out on his own... Absolutely ideal.”

“Huh...? But—”

True, I’d had no trouble with their test. But I really didn’t think a high school dropout former home security guard was the kind of candidate most employers would consider “absolutely ideal” or “excellent.” Or were they really and truly just looking for otaku ability?

What exactly did Amutech do, anyway? Matoba-san described them as a “general entertainment provider,” but that didn’t explain anything. “General” could mean anything or everything.

And this interview room. It practically screamed, *We’re just borrowing a random room in a random building*. There was nothing at all that seemed to belong to Amutech or even give the place a corporate feel. The room had a desk and a chair and a drink machine, and that was literally it. Not even a poster or anything.

That seemed to imply the company's real work was carried out elsewhere...

"Very good. I'm going to go in the back and check some things on your resume, so please wait here. Oh, and you can help yourself to something from the drink machine." Then Matoba-san took his papers and left the room.

"I don't get it," I muttered, but just the same I gratefully did as Matoba-san said and went over to the drink machine. I set a paper cup in the machine and picked oolong tea. It dispensed the drink in the blink of an eye, and as I sipped my tea, I looked around again.

There really wasn't anything there. It was almost as if they wanted to be sure they could get out of there at any time.

"This isn't anything, like... shady, is it?"

Just outside the window, I could see the Manseibashi police office. I still didn't believe criminals would operate this close to the long arm of the law.

I drained the rest of my tea as if to chase away my fears, then sat back down. When was Matoba-san going to come back? He'd said he was going to check a few things, so maybe he was trying to verify things I'd said in the interview or written on my resume? Were employers normally that thorough with entry-level applicants? I knew they sometimes did background checks if you wanted to become a civil servant or something, but...

Maybe this *was* a civil service job? I vaguely remembered a few prime ministers back, someone had suggested an anime museum in Akiba. It was supposed to be part of a national policy promoting anime, this jewel of global entertainment. But it was another one of those plans that kind of missed the point because the guy who suggested it was just an administrator with no real interest in anime. But maybe some vestige of that idea had survived, and now they needed people who actually knew something about the medium to make it work.

"Yeah, right." If that were the case, I was sure they would have found a better way to advertise. Smiling at my own silly fantasy, I gave a big yawn—

And that's where my memory blacked out.



Okay, flashback over. We're back to the present now. Where I—

"Whoaaa!"

—was exclaiming in amazement. I stepped out the door and looked back at the building. It was a huge brick construct that filled my vision in every direction. In essence, a Western-style mansion.

But it didn't have the old-fashioned look so common in games and manga. Instead, it seemed oddly new. Of course, it wasn't like a piece of set design—like you would see the seams if you looked too closely. It was there, all right, every inch of it, and it loomed over me with an overwhelming power.

In other words, it was an honest-to-God mansion, and newly built to boot. I had gotten a pretty good sense of how big this building must be from the bedroom, and now that I was seeing it up close, I could tell how right I'd been. It was all too obvious that we weren't in Akiba anymore, or even Japan.

But honestly, it wasn't the house that really surprised me.

It was what was behind it.

"It's huge...!"

It was an intimidating building so large that it was unmistakable even though it was obviously far away, less like a man-made object than like a feature of the terrain, like a mountain.

"That's the Holy Eldant castle," Minori-san, standing next to me, said.

Much like the house I'd woken up in, it had a strong flavor of Middle Ages Europe. There was a gate that looked wide enough for a whole herd of elephants to pass through, sturdy-looking ramparts, and plenty of what appeared to be observation and guard towers... In other words, pretty typical.

But...

"The castle has the same name as the empire. In other words, it's where the Emperor lives. Allegedly, they excavated a mountain or something to build it—but I don't know the details."

The castle was bigger than any piece of architecture I had ever seen in my life. Even the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, a template for a Demon King's castle if there ever was one, looked puny compared to this. It was nothing beside this Eldant castle; even ignoring the height, it was wider and deeper than you could imagine. It wasn't just that the castle was really tall or covered a lot of ground. It was straight-up *big*.

Of course, you might see bigger structures in anime, manga, games, and light novels—you know, fiction—where they might be space fortresses the size of small moons or something. But I was seeing this with my own eyes, and it gave me goosebumps.

At the "foot" of this mountain of a castle was a collection of other buildings of various sizes. They all looked like they were from medieval Europe, too, and several cobblestone streets ran among them like arteries. The mansion was well removed from them—in other words, on the outskirts of the castle town. The ground sloped gently in the direction of the castle, giving the feeling that I was looking down on the town.

"It really looks just like a fantasy setting," I breathed.

"Doesn't it, though?" Minori-san grinned.

"Can I go explore the town?"

"No fear, huh?" she said with a hint of admiration. "I was worried you might just shut yourself up in this house and never come out. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that this isn't your run-of-the-mill foreign country. It's another world. An alternate universe. You understand that?"

"Look, not to brag," I said, a smile tugging on my lips, "but this is meat and drink to me."

I was one serious otaku. Fantasy worlds? I'd seen 'em in everything from games to anime and manga, even light novels. The only difference was that now it was in three dimensions instead of two. The realism had leveled up, you might say. I practically felt like I already knew the place, like I was finally coming home.

Stay shut up in that house? Hardly.

“Well, I admit I panicked a little when I saw that dragon earlier.”

“That’s understandable,” Minori-san said.

If I looked really hard, I could see two or three dragon-like shapes in the sky above the castle. Apparently in this world, you could ride dragons like horses. The one I’d seen earlier had had some kind of saddle on its neck, too.

“Strictly speaking, what you saw earlier was a wyvern,” Minori-san said. “Actual live dragons are a lot bigger and a lot more violent.”

“Fantasy down to the bones.”

Dragons and wyverns. At this rate, I wouldn’t have been surprised if a sea serpent turned up, or a cho**bo you could ride like a horse.

“In any case, maybe you could put off going to town for a while,” Minori-san said, squinting her eyes. “Our official explainer is here.”

Puzzled, I followed her gaze toward the town, looking down the road that led away from the mansion. And there I saw something that looked altogether out of place.

An automobile. Dark green, or in other words, the same color as Minori-san’s skirt. The squarish body made it obvious that this was a military vehicle—and I thought I recognized it. It was a light armored vehicle used by the self-defense forces—sometimes called “light armor” or an LAV. It had been used on some overseas deployments, and was pretty common in fiction featuring the SDF.

And there it was, an SDF military vehicle rolling right past the medieval European fantasy scenery. It definitely did not look like it belonged there—that was some serious anachronism.

Before long, the LAV trundled up to us and stopped. The back door opened and someone climbed out—and I recognized him, too. Neatly parted hair and a suit the color of dead leaves, as if he were trying to look as ordinary as possible.

“I-Interview Guy?!”

Matoba Jinzaburou, I think his name was. I had expected some SDF soldier in field camo, or maybe someone in fantasy attire, but this was the polar opposite. His *Hello, my name is Average Salaryman* outfit looked as weird here as that

armored vehicle. Not that Minori-san or I fit in any better.

“Kanou Shinichi-kun, hello.” Matoba-san had a calm smile on his face. “Welcome to the Holy Eldant Empire—or should I say, to another world entirely.”



He sounded like he was greeting a visitor from abroad. I mean, I guess if I hadn't seen a dragon, I might have believed this was some tourist trap in western Europe.

"What... exactly is going on here?" I asked, frowning. "How did I get from an interview room in Akihabara to this place?"

"Yes, I intend to explain everything. I ended talks at the castle early so I could come back here," Matoba-san said.

"Talks at the castle?"

"Well, that's part of 'everything.' Anyway, come inside."

And with that, Matoba-san started walking toward the house.



"Now, then." Matoba-san had a cup of tea in his hand. We were in the mansion's reception room. It was big enough to feel like a party hall, boasting a table that must have been about three meters long. Matoba-san and I sat in a couple of chairs around it.

Minori-san had set a chair in the corner of the room and was sitting there. Apparently, she didn't intend to participate in our conversation. Myusel stood beside her, attending to a cart with a teapot on it. She had poured the tea Matoba-san was drinking, as well as the cup that sat steaming in front of me.

"Before I explain things," Matoba-san said with a glance at Myusel, "Kanou-kun. Could you remove your ring?"

"Huh...?"

Did he mean the magic one on my finger? I looked at it. It was the one Myusel had given me. Apparently, it worked like a translator; as long as we were wearing them, we could understand each other, even if we were speaking our own languages.

"I wouldn't want there to be any... misunderstandings. And there are a few things I wouldn't want the people here to hear."

Matoba-san, I noticed, wasn't wearing a ring. I glanced over at Minori-san and

saw she didn't have one, either. I was pretty sure she'd been wearing one earlier, though.

"Right... This good?"

I took off the ring.

"Perfect." Matoba-san nodded, then leaned his elbows on the table and interlaced his fingers. "This all started a year ago, when a strange 'hole' was found in Fuji's Sea of Trees."

"A hole...?"

He said it all so nonchalantly. The Sea of Trees—that was the famous Aokigahara Forest, right? Notorious for suicides and messing up compasses. Supposedly haunted.

"Strictly speaking, it's more of a fissure. But everyone simply calls it 'the hole.' The researchers say it's a hyperspace portal."

A *hyperspace portal*? He was suddenly trotting out these unbelievable words.

"Close investigation of the hole revealed something interesting. Specifically, that it pierces three-dimensional space and leads to a different world."

I didn't respond.

"You don't seem very surprised," Matoba-san smiled.

"Well, obviously. What could be more cliché than that?"

Wormholes. Warp gates. Shift portals. Passages leading through space and time to other worlds had been a standard plot device from the oldest legends to the most modern SF and fantasy stories.

"Anyway. When we sent someone through the hole, they discovered an unknown land. Further, they found that creatures normally considered to be the stuff of myths and children's stories really existed there, as did a developed human civilization much like our own. But not entirely like."

"Not entirely? You mean... magic?"

"...Indeed."

I had said it jokingly, half-expecting him to deny it—but Matoba-san nodded

vehemently.

Silent, I looked at the ring on the table. So the whole simultaneous interpreting thing must have been because of the ring's magic.

"That's one of the objects created by magic," Matoba-san said, as if he had read my thoughts. "And so, Japan finds itself adjacent to this unreal land."

"Adjacent." Somehow that didn't seem like quite the right word—but since you got to this other world through a hole in Japan, it wasn't exactly wrong, either.

"The Japanese government organized an investigative expedition. In so doing, they made contact with the group that controls the area including the hole. A state, if you will. That's the Holy Eldant Empire, where we are now. The hole falls within their territory."

"We're lucky there wasn't a war."

If manga and novels had taught me anything, it was that when two different worlds, two different cultures, suddenly collide, there's a pretty good chance of conflict. You don't have to turn to fiction; human history has more than a few similar examples.

"We're no fools. And our advance party included some wise heads." Matoba-san shrugged. "After we had carefully sized each other up, we were soon working out a way to cooperate that would be to our mutual benefit."

Of course: someone who already knew what was likely to happen (i.e., war) could approach the situation delicately, so as not to do anything careless that might ignite the situation. So in a sense, manga and novels' endlessly recycling this plot point had actually been helpful.

"Following me so far?"

"I... I guess so."

Frankly, it was still hard to believe, but it looked like the only person who could explain any of this—the castle, the dragon, the whole bizarre world I'd been sucked into—was Matoba-san.

"The one thing I don't get is, what does any of this discovery-of-another-

world stuff have to do with me?”

Assuming anything he was saying was true, how did it relate to a former home security guard like myself? This was an earth-shaking discovery, and I would fully expect representatives of Japan and maybe foreign governments to get together and do something about it, but what was the point of dragging a private citizen here, even giving them JSDF protection?

“Don’t tell me—I’m actually a prince of this world, sent to the human world when I was just a child, but now destiny has brought me back to defeat the Demon King?”

“Relax. We’re not indulging in such tired, old plot lines here,” Matoba-san said with a smile. “I’m the chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau, which reports directly to the cabinet.”

“C-Come again?” That name seemed surprisingly difficult to parse.

“Well, that name is just for public purposes. The Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau is an organization dedicated to cultivating the relationship between Japan and this other world. And General Entertainment Provider Amutech is a half-public, half-private company operating under the umbrella of the Bureau. Japan and the Holy Eldant Empire are both invested in it—a parallel-world first!”

“Uh...huh.”

“And you,” he said, “have been hired as Amutech’s general manager.”

“Its *what*?”

A first-of-its-kind cross-world entertainment company?!

General manager?! *Me?!*

But... why?!

“Not as, like, gofer or new guy or anything?”

“Is that what surprises you most?” Matoba-san grinned. “We could just as well call you the president or CEO, or anything you like. Whatever title you choose, you’re at the top, you’re the person in charge.” He sounded so calm. “Your job as Amutech’s general manager is to import Japanese anime, manga,

games, and so forth to this country.”

Anime, manga, games, and so forth were an export Japan took great pride in, as any otaku would know. But again... why?

“Leisure culture seems to be rather underdeveloped in this world, so we thought we would begin by exporting it to them. As a way of bringing our two nations closer.”

“Huuuuuh?!”

They were going to foster international relations by exporting anime and manga and games?!

I may not have been the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I knew that when a government official starts talking about getting “close” to another nation, you can’t take them at face value. It’s a question of diplomacy. And this wasn’t some other Earth nation we were dealing with. To be perfectly honest, I didn’t think there had ever been such an outrageously delicate situation.

And in light of all that, their first move was to introduce otaku industry?

“Ah. I understand what you’re getting at,” Matoba-san said, still smiling. “Of course, we first thought of pottery, textiles—traditional cultural items. We tried those for the first several months, but they just didn’t seem to take.”

Apparently, they hadn’t been enough to interest the people of the Holy Eldant Empire. This was a difference of culture, which is closely related to history and style, so it was hard to say anything one way or the other. Some things about Japanese culture struck me as potentially difficult for foreigners to grasp, such as *wabi-sabi*, the “perfection of imperfection” the Japanese so cherish. Maybe the Holy Eldant Empire didn’t get it, either.

“So we mentioned to them that Japan has another worldwide export we’re quite proud of, called Japanimation, along with video games and the like. We mentioned the huge lines of people waiting to buy new games, and the blackmail cases that occur around limited editions.”

“I don’t think—”

“They want hot new culture, the kind that can inspire social phenomena like

that. When we actually showed them some anime, the reaction was favorable.”

“Yes, I understand, but—”

A good deal of anime these days got exported overseas; in fact, it was often made with the assumption that it would be seen internationally. In other words, you ended up with a sort of basic quality to the entertainment; it didn’t put too much emphasis on culture or anything. It didn’t demand the amount of knowledge going in that a Noh or kabuki play might. In comparison, anime and so on had a simple-to-understand amusement that could engage boys and girls all over the world.

“But some felt that art like this... well, maybe it would be best if it weren’t handled by government officials. They feared bureaucrats would lack a certain finesse, that the bureaucracy might skew the project in strange or unexpected ways. Just look at what happens when the government builds public buildings. They get mismanaged and shut down, again and again. Make sense?”

“...Huh.”

I thought back to what had been on the test. How everything had been technically correct, but somehow off, as though an outsider had written it without seeing any of the material for himself.

“Hence, we hit upon the idea of having Amutech managed by someone with firsthand experience, someone who knew the trends. This is all unprecedented, which makes it awfully difficult for public servants to handle.” A note of self-deprecation entered his voice. “We much prefer rules and manuals, as I’m sure you know.”

“Okay, sure,” I said. “But why me?”

I had already admitted to myself that I was a lost cause of an otaku. But you could find people like me in every nook and cranny of Japan. Why go out of your way to hire someone who had, until just recently, been a home security guard?

Matoba-san didn’t say anything. Concerned, I looked over at Minori-san, but she was watching me with an ambiguous expression. Half smile, half pity.

.....Pity?

“Well, it’s... You know.” Matoba-san didn’t seem quite able to bring himself to say it. “The existence of the hole, and our interaction with the Eldant Empire, could have a major impact on the future of our country. It’s very much a secret.”

“Yeah, I got that...”

“We needed someone with whom the secret would be easy to keep,” he said.

“And you picked me because I’m so good at zipping my lips?”

I tried to remember if they had asked me anything at the interview that might have told them one way or the other.

“No. I don’t think how tight your lips may or may not be is likely to pose much of a problem.” He still wasn’t getting to the point. “After all, you’ll be living here from now on, so who would you tell?”

“...Huh?”

Living? Here? Like, *here*-here. In this mansion in the Holy Eldant Empire? In this other world?

But that meant...

“H-Hang on a second...”

“It’s just... Well. Having someone whose disappearance wouldn’t cause too much of a stir... Well, it was quite convenient for us.”

“Whaaaaaaat?!” I bellowed.

So this was all because if a home security guard like me went missing, everybody would just be like, “Yeah, we figured that was gonna happen,” and go on with their lives?

I felt an unpleasant sweat trickling down my back. *State secrets.* With an excuse like that, they could do pretty much anything they wanted. I mean, people were routinely killed for state secrets, right? And with something as crazy as actual contact with an actual other world, foreign governments were sure to be interested, so—

“Um... Can I go home now?”

With a dry grin, Matoba-san replied, “How?”

I was lost for words.

He was right: I had no idea where this “hole,” this passage through hyperspace, even was. If they left me alone in this world—and I’m not trying to brag here, but I’m 100% completely certain that I wouldn’t last three days.

Wait. It was worse than that. I’d been told state secrets. There was no way they were just going to be like, “Well, it’s a shame you’re not on board,” and send me back. At worst, if I tried to run, they might even chase me down and... *erase* me!

“It’s all right. We wouldn’t do anything so ridiculous,” Matoba-san said, as if he had read my terrified thoughts. He probably hadn’t needed to. I suspected it was obvious from my face.

“Once we’ve achieved certain goals and Amutech is firmly on the right path, we’ll be able to release you. Of course, you’ll be paid a salary from the national treasury—that is, from the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau’s budget. The Eldant Empire is similarly prepared to grant you treatment befitting a guest of state, so I promise you won’t go wanting.”

“Uh... Okay, but...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of all of the paperwork,” Matoba-san said, tapping his own chest gently.

Never mind the fact that he didn’t exactly inspire much confidence. The bureau chief himself was going to handle my paperwork? Was it possible the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau... didn’t have any other members at all?

“All you need to do is relax and help popularize otaku culture in its various forms here in the Eldant Empire. You know, the—what do you call it? ‘Akiba-type’ things? Magical girls and tsunderes and moes and what have you. That sort of thing.”

Reeling, I thought, *This is impossible*.

This had already been settled by all kinds of official bodies. It wouldn’t do any

good for me to object now. I was being pressed into service by a *fait accompli*.

“Now... Is there anything else you’d like to ask me?” Matoba-san said. He didn’t sound concerned at all.



Several hours later. I was fiddling with my smartphone.

“Hmm...”

You’re probably wondering, *why would a home security guard have something like that?* But I had actually owned this phone since before I became a shut-in. It was one of my principles that any self-respecting otaku should be an early adopter with gadgets like this.

But anyway.

A series of sentences I had written showed on the liquid crystal display. I had decided to jot a few notes about today as a way of understanding what was going on and organizing my feelings about it. In a word, I was keeping a diary.

Honestly, I felt a little funny using an electronic device like this in a world that didn’t seem likely to have electricity, but Minori-san told me I could bum a little juice off the LAV’s battery or something, so for the time being, I was using my phone as a notepad.

At the moment, I was in the room assigned as my office. This mansion had an almost wasteful number of rooms, but the ones I would be using for the most part were this office in the middle of the second floor and the bedroom right next to it. In addition, there were several other bedrooms and guestrooms, one of which my bodyguard Minori-san would be sleeping in.

“Master?”

There was a knock at the door, accompanied by a voice as lovely as a tinkling bell. It was Myusel, the maid girl.

“I... ahem... I brought you tea.”

“Oh, thanks.” I stood up, still holding my phone, and went over and opened the door. But when I did—

“Wha—?” There was Myusel in the hallway, standing next to a tea tray on a cart, looking startled.

“What?” I said.

“Oh... No, thank you very much.”

I gave her a puzzled look. “Don’t mention it...” I didn’t know why she was thanking me, but I stood aside so Myusel and the cart could enter the room. “Come on in.”

“Eh? Oh... Y-Yes, of course.” She bowed her head, almost like she was frightened, then wheeled the cart into the room. Something seemed to be confusing her; she kept glancing at me, then looking down at the floor as if she was upset about something.

Oh... Right.

I finally got it. I was her “master,” so I didn’t have to come open the door as if I were welcoming a guest. It was the same reason the tea was on a tray and not a dish. She had assumed she would open the door herself, so when it was suddenly opened for her, it threw off her rhythm.

She pointed to a spot on the desk. “Shall I set it here?”

“Oh, sure.” I nodded. Then I stood kind of dumbly for a moment, watching her prepare the tea.

“Er... Is... Is there anything...?” She finished making the tea and was looking at me again. She was definitely concerned.

“Is there anything what?”

“Oh, no, it’s... Since you’ve been staring...” Myusel said with a look of confusion.

“Oh. Sorry, it’s just— This is all kind of new to me.”

Not counting earlier that afternoon, and ignoring video games, this was the first time in my life that a maid had come to make tea for me. I was pretty much straight out of my comfort zone, and it left me unsure of what to do.

“New, sir...?” Was I imagining things, or did Myusel look even more worried

than before?

Afraid that this would turn into some kind of misunderstanding, I hurriedly added, “I’ve just never been served tea by a maid before, so I kind of...”

“Oh. Is that so?” She smiled, looking somehow relieved. Gah! She was really, really cute...

She usually looked so vulnerable that a genuine smile like this really stood out. I felt my heart beating faster as I said, “Um... So you’re Myusel Fourant-san, right...?”

“Yes! I’m Myusel Fourant...!”

The maid, Myusel, smiled happily. She just looked so innocent. It was super moe.

“All right,” I said, straightening up and giving a small bow of my head. “Let me introduce myself right. I’m Kanou Shinichi. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Y-Yes, sir, the p-pleasure’s all mine...!” Myusel bowed deeply and practically shouted her greeting. She seemed kind of... anxious. Almost like she was afraid of me. I was happy that I’d been able to get a little closer to this adorable maid, but having her be this nervous around me all the time was going to wear on me. I mean, I guess Matoba-san had said that I was like a state guest here in the Holy Eldant Empire—a real VIP. So it was understandable.

“...Huh?” Suddenly I noticed something, and blinked. I hadn’t paid it any mind earlier in the day—or rather, most of the time, her hair draped over the sides of her head and hid them. But...

“Myusel. Your ears...”

“...Oh!” Myusel hurriedly pressed her hands to her head, looking upset.

Huh?

“I’m—I’m so sorry...!” Her voice was practically a sob.

“Huh?”

I had no idea what she was apologizing for. She, however, looked like this was a tragedy, and she kept sputtering: “But I—I promise you, Master, I wasn’t

trying to—to deceive you, I mean, I was hiding them, but—”

“Okay, hang on, calm down. I don’t know what you’re so afraid of, but Myusel... Are you an elf, or some wild race like that?”

That’s right. When she had bowed deeply to me, I was able to see her ears. They poked out from the sides of her head, ever so slightly pointy at the tips.

After a long moment, Myusel said, “Yes.” She nodded, seeming a little calmer now. “I’m a halfbreed, elf and human.”

“I knew it!” A half-elf! Another well-trod, and very moe, fantasy character. The beauty of an elf and the familiarity of a human—a character with the best of both worlds. But wait, so Myusel here was both a maid *and* a half-elf? Talk about your overachievers! I thought I was going to die from the sheer moe-ness of it.

“But I... I swear I wasn’t trying to hide it from you, Master...”

“Absolutely perfect!” I howled, clenching my fist.

“It—It is?!” Myusel froze in place, shocked.



I drew closer to her, saying, “A maid *and* a half-elf! Fantastic! I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say my entire life has been leading up to this moment!”

“.....Huh? Huh?”

“Myusel! Myusel, show me your ears again!”

“What? Er—y-yes, sir...”

Unable to resist my insistence, she took one hand away from her head, revealing her ear. It was the quintessential fantasy-elf ear.

“Whoa...! A real elf ear...!”

It was something to admire. Myusel, however, didn’t seem to understand why I was so happy.

“M-Master...” she said, turning red.

“Oh, sorry about that. Thanks.” I took a step back. Now that I thought about it, I realized any girl would be embarrassed to have someone checking her out at close range like that, whether it was her ears or whatever.

“Still, that’s incredible,” I said. “I’ve seen something truly amazing today.”

Myusel only looked more confused as she said, “You—You aren’t angry?”

“Huh? Why would I be?”

“I mean... because I hid the fact that I’m a half-elf...”

“Why would that make me angry?”

Myusel seemed lost for words.

In the back of my mind, something clicked. “I don’t know much about this place, but is it that half-elves aren’t very well-liked? By humans, or elves, or both?” That’s a familiar enough trope in fantasy.

“...Yes, sir.” Myusel gave a small nod.

Even saying “aren’t very well-liked” was putting it gently, an expression I used to spare her feelings. Most likely, there was outright discrimination. So much that being born with mixed elf blood would be reason enough to be persecuted.

Myusel’s discomfort only confirmed my hypothesis. She was used to being

abused and hated.

“Um... Myusel-san?”

“...Wha? Oh.” She looked zoned out for a second, but then hurriedly said, “Master, please, don’t add an honorific to my name!”

“Huh? But... Hey, Myusel-san, how old are you? Aren’t you older than me?”

In fantasy stories, elves always live a long time. So even if Myusel looked like she was just in her late teens, it was entirely possible she was much older than me.

“How old am I? I’m six—sixteen, sir...” She sounded downright nervous.

“Oh. Younger than me, huh? Well, okay, then. I’ll just call you Myusel.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But Myusel. Let me be clear about one thing.”

“Y-Yes, sir?”

“I’m very happy that you’re a half-elf. Frankly, I wonder what I did to deserve it!”

“Huh? Huh...”

“So I promise I won’t get angry about you being a half-elf, or upset, or anything. Okay?”

For an instant, Myusel looked at me silently. Then she said, “Thank you very much, sir,” and bowed deeply again. When she did, her pointy ears peeked out once more.

I crossed my arms and muttered, “It looks like I’ve got a lot to learn around here.”

If I were surrounded by silicon-based life forms, or octo-astronauts or something, like in an SF story, where it was hard to find commonalities with humanity, it would put me on notice that what was normal or valuable to them might not be what was normal or valuable to me. But with people who looked like regular humans and lived in a familiar medieval European-type fantasy setting, it was easy to be misled.

“I only just got here, and I only learned what’s going on even more recently than that. Myusel, what did they tell you about me?”

“They said you were a very, very important visitor to the Empire, and that you were going to live here for a while, and that Brooke-san and I were to look after you.”

“Brooke-san?”

I blinked. This was new.

“I’ll introduce you later. Right now, I need to check the grounds and do some cleaning...”

So apparently, I had another servant assigned to me. That meant there were four people living in this mansion. Me (the master), my bodyguard Minori-san, the maid Myusel, and Brooke-san. (Having no idea what kind of person this was, I thought of them with *-san* for the time being.)

The house seemed too big for four people, but Minori-san claimed it was small by the standards of Eldant nobles. Yes: nobles. As a guest of state, I was considered on par with nobility.

“Do you know what I’m here to do?”

“You’re here to ‘promote commerce’ between the Empire and ‘Japan,’ so that both of our nations can ‘mutually flourish.’” She sounded like she was reading off a cue card. I suspected she was just parroting what she’d been taught, without any real idea of what most of the words meant.

“Yeah,” I nodded with a dry grin. “Commerce. Right.”

“You came from a far-off country, didn’t you, Master?”

“Yeah, I did.” Well, I didn’t know how far it was, but she was right that it was another country. “A far-off world, actually.”

“World...?” Myusel cocked her head. The gesture had the innocence of a little bird, and I had to struggle to suppress the flood of moe feeling that welled up in my heart.

“Not another country?” she asked.

“Yes, another country. In another world.”

She seemed to be giving this serious consideration.

Ahh. Now I understood. Minori-san and Matoba-san had both told me that there was effectively no leisure industry in this country. Magic aside, in a world with medieval technology, where the printing press didn’t exist, books would be a valuable commodity. Nobles might have them, but they would be unobtainable for the common people. The way commoners enjoyed stories would be by telling them to each other—like parents telling fairytales to children, or a poet or bard to his apprentices. Everything would be subject to the imperfections and limitations of the oral tradition.

For that matter, what was the literacy rate around here? In any event, under the circumstances, they might not have even had a concept of ‘other worlds.’ This was a tried-and-true plot device to an otaku like me, but it might have been totally unfamiliar territory for Myusel. It was much like how medieval and modern peoples didn’t know that there was such a thing as “space” once you got past the sky.

“I’m very sorry,” Myusel said with a disappointed—almost fearful—expression. “I’m a fool with no real education...”

“No. It’s totally natural not to understand. I’m sorry.”

“You mustn’t be!” Myusel said, shaking her head furiously. I could see her pointy ears as she did so, shaking along with her head—the whole impression was like that of a cat or dog flicking its ears. *Gaaah, this girl is sooo cute!*

“If only I had some kind of picture that could explain it...” I played around with the smartphone in my hand, looking for something appropriate. And then I noticed it.

Network unavailable.

I was only just realizing, but it probably should have been obvious. This was another world. There wouldn’t be any cell phone carriers anywhere. Although if the passageway really was connected to Aokigahara Forest, maybe I could connect if I got close enough to it.

“Aww, dangit! I have to go without internet, too?!”

This meant I couldn't go to the news sites I always checked, or the forums I always lurked on, to say nothing of all the online games where I had accounts. This was a problem. I had to get them to set up an antenna or do something, or I was going to suffocate from lack of information.

As I was thinking all this, Myusel was looking at my hand in befuddlement.

"Master... What's that?"

"Huh? Oh, this? It's my... Well, it's a magic item from my country." I smiled and showed her the memo pad screen I'd been writing on earlier.

"Are those... letters?"

"Yep. My country's language."

Myusel stared at my smartphone, eyes wide. She looked so earnest...

"What is it?"

"Oh, no, forgive me." She quickly bowed her head. "I was just amazed that you use such complicated letters, Master...!"

"Huh? Oh, uh, I guess."

She had been looking at the Japanese sentences. In other words, lines with complicated kanji characters in them. Having been born and raised with this system of writing, I'd never thought too much about it, but cultures that used this many types of letters at once were pretty unusual on Earth. The English alphabet only has twenty-six letters. Japanese is said to have "fifty sounds," but there are twice that many characters in kana syllables alone. Add in kanji and you have many, many times that number of characters.

How many? Suddenly curious, I checked my phone's dictionary. It said the basic number of kanji for literacy was around three thousand. But the most accomplished readers might know in excess of ten thousand characters. As far as I could tell, only the "kanji countries" used this many characters to write. And it seemed like only Japan and Korea made things even more complicated by adding syllabic characters.

...I could see why foreigners might think we were crazy.

"I guess you guys don't use too many letters around here?"

“Oh... I’m sorry.” Myusel looked down. “I can’t... read or write...”

“...Oh.”

Come to think of it, another distinctive quality of Japan is its unusually high literacy rate. Visiting foreigners are sometimes surprised to see homeless people reading the newspaper. Or anyway, that’s what I heard on the net someplace.

Now I got it. From the perspective of someone who can’t read or write at all, a guy reading and writing using complicated combinations of characters might look a lot smarter than he was. Maybe the way someone who spoke five different languages would look to me.

“Hmm, paper, paper...”

I went back to my desk and opened the drawer. There were several sheets of somewhat rough paper inside. Maybe paper production technology wasn’t as advanced here, either, because it looked pretty crude compared to what I was used to. But of course I could still write on it.

I took out a ballpoint pen, which, like my smartphone, I’d had on me when I got here, and began to write at the top of the paper.

A-i-u-e-o. Ka-ki-ku-ke-ko. Sa-shi-su-se-so. Ta-chi-tsu-te-to. Basically, the hiragana syllabary. I wrote the characters as neatly as I could at the top of the page, then handed it to Myusel.

“Here.”

“...Eh?”

“Call it a symbol of our friendship. Er... Maybe it’s a little cheap for that, but...”

“Wha? Y-You’re... giving it to me...?!” Her eyes were wide.

“It’s a chart of ‘hiragana.’ It’s the most basic way of writing in my country; it’s simple, but everything starts here. I’ll teach you the sounds they make later.”

Then I had a thought. I grabbed the paper back and wrote *Myusel* on it in hiragana.

“This is how you write your name in my language. You can find the characters on the chart later.”

“...Master...!” she whispered, sounding overwhelmed. She held my hiragana chart as if it were some kind of priceless award, the first one she’d ever won in her life.

At first I thought it was a little silly, but I soon thought better of that. If printing technology wasn’t very developed, then books and the like must largely have been hand-copied manuscripts. So, naturally, they would be valuable artifacts that only nobles and some rich people were able to get a hold of. And a chart of characters from an entirely different world? All the more so.

It might just be a sheet of paper, but Myusel must have felt she’d received something wonderful.

For a while, she simply stared at the chart—but gradually, a happy smile began to spread across her face. Her happiness seemed to come less from the fact that she’d been given something valuable, and more from the simple fact that she’d been given a gift. She held the paper to her chest as if clasping a treasure. And then she said, in a voice so quiet it was barely audible:

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Her cheeks were rose-red, perhaps from the excitement, and her smile was shy.

Whoa. Hold on now, I could get seriously moe for this. I never thought I would feel so moe for a three-dimensional girl. She’s so dang cute, I think I feel a tightness in my chest...!

As I stood there, getting swept up in a rising tide of moe-ness, Myusel said, “Oh!” as though something had just occurred to her.

“It looks like Brooke-san is home.”

“It does?”

Apparently, those large ears weren’t just for show. I hadn’t heard anything at all, but she had picked up the sound of someone getting back.

“I’ll bring Brooke-san in.”

“Oh, uh, sure, please do.” I nodded. Myusel went scurrying out of the room and—

“Oh.”

Fell flat on her face.

“Yikes!” She had taken a serious tumble, but before I could so much as ask if she was okay, she had jumped up, given me a panicked bow, and set off again.

Hmm. She was awfully clumsy. And it wasn’t calculated; it was completely natural. She was the maid who was going to be looking after me, which meant that at least as long as I lived in this house, we were going to be seeing a lot of each other. Plus, I was her “master,” which meant that unlike my classmates or my old friend, at least she wouldn’t mock me as an otaku, look down on me, or respond to my heartfelt confession of love with a flat “No way.”

“Heh heh heh heh heh!”

I knew it wasn’t exactly right, yet a happy grin spread over my face. This meant...

“Master?” A knock came at the door. “I’ve brought Brooke-san.”

“Sure, please come in,” I said, trying to sound as easygoing as I could.

I wondered what kind of person Brooke would turn out to be. Another elf? Was the Holy Eldant Empire a country of elves?

Wait, hang on. This was a different world. I couldn’t assume that what seemed obvious to me would be obvious to the people here. Meaning “Brooke” might be a beautiful woman! After all, it sort of sounded like a man’s name, but this was another world, and maybe they named their gorgeous women Brooke here. And if it turned out “Brooke” was a last name, then who knew? All these thoughts were running through my head as the door opened.

“’Scuse me,” a voice said. “I’m Brooke Darwin, your manservant. I’m a gardener, for the most part, but you can count on me for any sort of manual labor.” This deferential self-introduction came from a huge humanoid figure. Wait... Human*oid*?

I felt the blood leave my face, the way it would have if I’d gotten too close to

a wolf or tiger at the zoo. I thought all the cartoons and illustrations had desensitized me, so this shouldn't have frightened me, but seeing the real thing up close—how huge it actually was, the way everything about it screamed *carnivore*...

Standing beside Myusel was a creature at least two meters tall. He wore a tunic, dirty and torn in places, and pants that were in no better condition.

That would have been enough to freeze me in place. The real issue was that although this creature was humanoid, he wasn't human. His face, neck, arms, and all the skin that I could see, right down to the feet poking out of his trousers, was covered in blue scales, and he had a missile-shaped head. In other words, just like a snake.

In front of me, so close he could practically breathe on me, was a creature of the type popularly known as a lizardman.

You didn't have to look to "giant monsters" like Godzilla or Gamera: a two-meter-tall snake-thing was more than big enough to look like he could pick me up and eat me. Frankly, I was surprised my pants were still dry. I'm not ashamed to admit I wanted to run away as fast as I could, but the lizardman was standing between me and the only exit.

"Master?"



Myusel was looking at me strangely. She didn't seem at all unsettled by the thing standing next to her.

"...I forgot." This was another world. Things that were obvious to them might not be obvious to me, so I shouldn't have been surprised, no matter what happened. A lizardman gardener? Not surprising. Totally normal. Maybe?

"My greetings t' you, Master." The lizardman—Brooke—bent down to look me in the eye. A forked red tongue darted in and out of his mouth, another little detail to give me the willies.

Yes, he was scary, but...

"P-Pleased to meet you," I said, somehow managing a smile.

Chapter Two: The Royal Punch

I finished reading the manga and shoved it back into the blue backpack at my feet. The name tag on the backpack read, in an awkward hand:

Kanou Shinichi Yr 2 Rm 3

The sky was dazzlingly clear. I was in one corner of a nature park. A very large one. For a tiny grade-schooler, it might as well have gone on forever. The green stretched as far as I could see.

In one corner of the park, in the shade of a huge tree with spreading leaves, was a cement bench that looked as if it had been hewn out of a piece of actual rock. That's where I was sitting. None of my classmates were around. They were all off playing baseball or dodgeball or whatever, but I—I alone kept my distance and read comic books I'd brought from home.

Okay, so maybe I looked a bit aloof to other people. But even early in my grade school career, I was already an otaku.

"Hey, Kanou!"

I looked up at the voice. In front of me, a woman in a white tracksuit was looking at me in exasperation. She was our teacher. She must have been a stunner earlier in her life, but now she was in her late forties and bags had formed under her eyes. She was more mannish than most men; if she saw you running down the hallway at school, she'd give you a piece of her mind—she was famous for her fearsomeness.

Now I'm in for it, I thought. I quickly tried to hide the manga behind my back, but of course I was too late.

The teacher sort of sighed and said, "...I thought I'd lost you. You've just been here, reading a book?"

I hung my head, a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I didn't know exactly what she would say next, but I knew what the gist would be: "We come all the way out here and you read comic books?" or, "This is why the other kids

make fun of you," or, "Go play with your friends." I'd already heard it from every other teacher. Why should this one be any different?

I bit my lip and stayed quiet. With a touch of frustration, the teacher said, "If you're too far away, we'll be late going home. If you're going to read, do it closer to the meet-up point."

"Huh?" I blinked and looked at her. "You aren't... going to take it away or something?"

The teacher raised an eyebrow (surprisingly bushy for a woman) and gave a sort-of smile. "Maybe if this were math or Japanese class. But we've come all this way for a little free time."

I was silent.

"Kanou. Why do you think we take field trips like this?"

"So we can all learn to work together and develop our ability to cooperate," I responded immediately. That was what they'd beaten into us on previous outings.

But the teacher said, "Yes, that's part of it. It's a way to learn things you can't learn in the classroom."

"What do you mean...?"

"Addition and multiplication, how to read kanji... All that isn't enough to make your life rich."

I found this hard to follow and cocked my head in confusion. I hadn't even been alive for ten years yet—for a kid who barely understood the workings of society, the richness of life was a tough thing to grasp. On some level, I figured that living comfortably under your parents' wings was a rich life, and to be honest, I couldn't imagine what else might qualify.

"Hmm." The teacher thought for a moment, then asked, "What do you like about manga, Kanou?"

"Um... How the hero faces the bad guys and wins."

"Do you think it's easy for them?"

I shook my head. Sometimes heroes had to struggle to learn a powerful finishing move to defeat the villain, or they had to keep fighting even though they'd been beaten to a pulp and didn't seem to have any hope of victory.

"I think you're right," the teacher nodded. "Manga are books, too. If you read them carefully, you can learn from them."

"Manga are books, too..."

Come to think of it, mom and dad had said the same thing. Their bookshelves were crammed with comics and light novels, many of which I had taken out and read. My parents claimed that they needed all those books "for work," so I came to think of them as things adults used for their jobs, not things a kid might learn from.

"This..." I breathed, looking at the cover of my manga and seeing it in an entirely new light. "This is like my... textbook?"

"It can be," the teacher said. "That depends on you."

The smile she gave me then, I remember to this day.



I felt consciousness slowly returning. I gave an owlish blink and found slats of bright light pouring over everything. I could hear birds singing somewhere—my whole room pretty much screamed, *It's morning!* Fade in, change scene, it's a whole new day.

I made an inarticulate noise and blinked a couple more times. That helped chase the sleepiness from my eyes, so I sat up.

It felt surprisingly good to wake up. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but it was like, back when I had been a home security guard, I didn't exactly keep a normal schedule. Even the border between waking and sleeping was kind of fuzzy; I would get out of bed, but I wasn't always quite all there. But this morning—maybe because I'd been tired out by all the surprises yesterday—I found I had actually slept really soundly. A good, deep sleep.

As these thoughts were running through my mind, a voice like a tinkling bell came from the other side of the door. "Good morning, Master. May I come in?"

“Oh—hang on a second.” I quickly patted my hair to make sure I didn’t have bed head or anything. Looked like I was doing all right. I had my pajamas on, too. As for the biological phenomenon men often experience in the morning—well, I could keep my bedsheets where it wouldn’t be obvious.

“Okay, come in.”

“Pardon me,” Myusel said, and came through the door.

An elf-eared maid girl. One with a clumsy streak, no less. Plus, she was so beautiful that I wanted to ask how she had gotten every great character trait at once. I had seen plenty of characters like her in games, fantasized about them again and again, but to see one up close, in the flesh, left me breathless from her elegance.

You know what? Even ignoring all those endearing clichés, she was just plain adorable. Her flaxen hair was parted down the middle. Skin smooth and white as porcelain, irises a translucent indigo that made her eyes look like jewels. Her full lips were a pale pink. She was perfect.

The balance of her features was just right, not ostentatious. Yet just looking at that modest, innocent face seemed like it would be enough to heal the wounds in one’s heart. And then—well, I hadn’t really noticed it in all the excitement yesterday, but while the body clad in that maid uniform was willowy, it was also curvy in all the right places and slim in all the right places, too. Even with her clothes on, you could tell. It wasn’t like she was irresistibly erotic—more like you just kind of found yourself wanting her.

Gaaah! SO CUTE!!

I was so moe for Myusel that I just wanted to hug my pillow and squeal for joy. Whether she realized what I was thinking or not—I mean, she probably had no idea—Myusel said with a gentle smile, “Breakfast is ready, sir.”

Ahh! “Breakfast is ready, sir”! A maid said *Breakfast is ready, sir*—to me! I very nearly let out a whoop of happiness. This was the most standard of standard lines for maid characters. All my life I’d been jealous of characters in this situation—yet now that I found myself in the midst of it, I felt surprisingly shy.

“Thanks for always being such a help,” I said, feeling a little panicked.

Of course, there was no chance that Myusel, being from another world as she was, would go on to reply, “Aw, Da~ddy, don’t say that!” Instead she just looked at me in puzzlement.

“Always?”

“Er, well, it’s... just a formality.”

“What do you mean...?”

“It’s... I’m not talking to myself, exactly, it’s just sort of something we say to each other in my country.” I tried to explain it in a way that would make sense, but it wasn’t easy.

Apparently, Myusel still didn’t follow me. As she opened the curtains to let the light in, she glanced back at me and asked, “Will you eat here? Or in the dining room?”

“What, here? You mean as in, right *here*?”

“I can bring breakfast to you here, if you want...”

“Hmm... Nah. I’ll go to the dining room.”

I was done being a home security guard, and I felt that meant I ought to be done eating meals in bed, too. Or maybe I just wanted to eat breakfast with Myusel. Obviously, I couldn’t invite her to just eat in my bedroom.

I climbed out of bed and began undoing the buttons on my pajamas...

...and froze.

Myusel had come up beside me with a shirt in one hand, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Ahem...”

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

“Huh...?” She blinked her big eyes at me and cocked her head. “What am I...? H-Have I done something to offend you?” Suddenly, she looked fearful.

“No, you haven’t. I’m just going to change now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m going to *change*.”

“Yes, sir...?”

She looked at me, evidently confused. Normally, this was the part where she would leave the room...

“*I’m* going to change my clothes. What are *you* going to do?”

“Help you change your clothes...?”

“No, you’re not!” I said, suddenly shouting. My lower body was only covered by a single pair of pants. Not to mention, my morning glory hadn’t yet faded. If I took off my pajama bottoms now—well, it would be very, very embarrassing.

“I—I’m sorry, sir!” Myusel was quivering with shock. Apparently thrown completely off by this turn of events, she fell right over. “Eeyipe!”

“Are you okay?” I hurried over and offered her my hand, helping her up.

“I’m fine, and—I—I’m sorry.” She pulled her hand back, looking mortified.

Erk. That hurt a little—the way she jerked her hand away, like she had touched something dirty.

“I really am very sorry, I just forgot myself and—for a creature like me to touch your body, Master...”

“Guh...?” I was caught off guard by her completely unexpected reaction. What in the world was she talking about? “Hey, I don’t mind if you touch me—I mean, the way our fingers brushed just kind of set my heart racing. It could be a flag for something more... I mean, wait a second.”

Suddenly I realized. Basically, Myusel thought I had shouted at her because she was about to touch me—she thought I didn’t want to be touched by her. So when I helped her up, she thought she’d upset me by making physical contact.

This was awful. I was already an unfamiliar foreigner to Myusel. She had no idea what Japan’s values were; how could she know what position I occupied in my native society? So she wanted to help me change clothes, but when I

refused, she must have thought I was such an august person that even touching me wasn't allowed.

It was ridiculous. And so, with a sigh, I set out to clear up this misunderstanding.

"Erm, Myusel..."

"Yes, Master?" She was looking at the ground and seemed to be summoning her strength. Maybe she expected me to yell at her.

"I don't know what's normal in your country. But in mine, nobody would get angry at anybody else just for touching them, no matter who they were."

Well, granted, there were some girls who would be pretty upset if an otaku like me got into their personal bubble in any way. But bringing that up would only confuse the issue, so I kept to myself. The point was, I said, that even if we were maid and master, there wasn't such a great difference between us that I would be angry to be touched.

"Is... Is that really true...?"

"It is. So don't sweat it, okay?"

"But..."

"Listen," I said with a frown. "The reason I told you not to help me change—it's just, where I come from, I don't normally have a woman help me with that sort of thing. I was just embarrassed."

"Oh..." Myusel's eyes were wide. It didn't look like she followed me exactly, but...

"All right. Just out of curiosity, if I said I would help you change, what would you think?"

"Y-You would d-demean yourself like that—?!" Myusel shook her head furiously.

"No, no. I mean, if I were in the same position and social status as you. If a man offered to help you change, you wouldn't be embarrassed? Even if he saw you in your underwear?"

“I guess...” She nodded, not quite looking at me, her cheeks flushing. Ahhhh, why did every single thing she did have to be so cute?!

“It’s the same thing. Anyway, I can change on my own, so why don’t you go ahead and go to the dining room?”

“Yes, sir. I understand.” Relieved, she was finally smiling again. She nodded and left the room.

“...This could be tougher than I expected.” I thought about all the miscommunications and misunderstandings that were no doubt waiting in my future and let out a long sigh.



Done changing, I walked through the halls of the mansion, heading for the dining room. I may have been in another world, but the people living here were basically human like me, so the construction of their houses was similar. From a utility perspective, it made good sense. It was like parallel evolution—if the starting conditions were the same, then the outcome was likely to be similar.

The hallway looked pretty much like you’d think the hallway of a Western-style mansion would, or like you might imagine from seeing the outside of the house. It was so wide that two adults could walk side by side with their arms outstretched. Windows were placed at even intervals, and the floor was covered in wooden tiles that made complicated geometrical patterns.

Incidentally, I was dressed in what was allegedly traditional Eldant attire. Perhaps in another display of parallel evolution, it was just a shirt and a pair of pants. Nice and familiar. But maybe because I was being treated as a noble, the sleeves and collar of my shirt were covered in fancy embroidery.

“*Man* is she cute, though.”

I was talking about Myusel, of course.

For better or for worse, I was a man of well-rounded tastes. I could dig anything from loli characters to big-breasted, bespectacled older-sister types like Minori-san (obviously). Shrine maidens? Sure. Nurses? Totally. The only thing I wasn’t into was little-sister types. Otherwise, I could get moe for just

about anything.

But despite all that—or maybe exactly because of it, because I had no blind spots—ultimately, I was especially weak to well-balanced types, maids like Myusel. The purity and sweetness just grabbed me by the heart and wouldn't let go.

She was a maid and an elf and clumsy to boot. And she was throwing herself into taking care of me. What can I say? I was so thrilled I thought I might never come down from the high.

Lost in rapture, I soon found myself lost in the house, too. I'd wandered into some strange place. It looked like a store room; the whole place was dim even though it was morning. Near the ceiling, there were a few windows meant for ventilation, but there was nowhere else for sunlight to get in. It's normal in food storage to try to keep sunlight out, so that products aren't affected by ultraviolet rays or changes in temperature, but even so, it was like it was still night in there. It was a little creepy.

I thought I felt something cold on my back, and turned around. But at just that moment, I stopped: I was sure I'd heard something wriggling in the storeroom. Then came an intermittent sound like a wet slap. Like something was sticking to the ground and then being removed again. It was this close to sounding like someone walking on bare feet—but then, what was that scraping sound, like claws dragging along the floor?

I remembered a horror game from years ago where there was this evil that was resident in this house—this sounded a lot like what you heard just before zombie dogs attacked. *Scrrtch. Scrrtch.* You'd hear the sound getting closer, growing louder—it was the most terrifying thing in the world.

To think sound alone could be so evocative. All the more so when it was dim and hard to see.

"Where am I...?"

And when you were in another world. A world where dragons and elves just wandered around like it was no big deal. I wouldn't have been at all surprised to find out there were zombies, too. I was just starting to tremble at the thought when—

“Oh!”

A strangely shaped face emerged from the shadows. Long and sort of rough. A jagged curve of a mouth large enough to eat a small child in a single gulp. The body, covered in scales, didn’t seem to emit any heat, and the pupils, straight as if they’d been carved with a knife, turned to look at me almost mechanically.

“Eeeeyyaaaaahhhhh!!”

In a fit of terror, I screamed and waved my arms. One of my clenched fists landed on the side of the creature’s face—its cheek, I guess—with a dull impact. A couple of seconds later, the fist that had struck the scaly visage began to grow hot and then burn with pain. *Hang on a second. What’s wrong with me, taking on a monster like this with my bare hands?!*

I’d read on the internet somewhere about a haunted house where a visitor got so surprised that he reflexively punched out one of the employees. But I had never imagined I might have it in me to instinctively hit someone. I guess you never know what a human will do when he feels cornered.

They say your instincts choose between fight and flight, and I obviously hadn’t chosen flight. It was too late to regret it now. If I turned my back on my opponent, it looked like he might just take a big bite out of me. There was no running. In an RPG, when you choose the “Run” command, sometimes you get a message like “You started to run away but were blocked in front.” It was just like that.

That meant I had no choice left but to fight.

“Yaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!”

Pretty much just confused and panicked at this point, I launched another haymaker at my opponent’s face.

It hurt. It *really* hurt. I don’t exactly have beefy hands, and on top of that my opponent was covered in rough scales like a reptile, so of course I would hurt myself by hitting him. If I could startle him enough, though, maybe I could make an opening for myself to flee..... Wait.

Reptile?

Just as I was letting my enthusiasm carry me into a third punch, it registered. I wasn't exactly the quickest guy on the draw, yet I had thrown three punches... and my opponent hadn't moved. Hadn't counterattacked, hadn't run away. He was just standing there.

"...Huh?" I cocked my head, confused.

In response, the strange creature cocked its own head and said with a concerned look, "Are you all right?"

"...Huh??"

"If you wish to strike me, this may be better."

He handed me a stick-like object (his hands were, of course, also covered in scales). It was a lot like the "wooden club" that you get at the start of so many RPGs. There was cloth wrapped around the handle.

"I used this end t' dig a hole for some flower bulbs in the garden earlier, so you might dirty your honorable hands if you hold it there. Take this end."

"Oh, thanks. I mean—wait a minute!" No sooner had I taken the club that was so politely offered to me than I shook my head. The other person wasn't an evil beast—he wasn't even a monster. He was the mansion's manservant. The lizardman, Brooke. I'd been introduced to him the day before, but in the dark he really spooked me and I made a bit of a rash mistake.

"S-Sorry about that!" I apologized quickly. "You scared the heck out of me, so I popped you one—you're not hurt, are you?!"

"I'm quite well. As you can see, I'm covered in scales." He sounded completely nonchalant. At the very least, he didn't seem to be bleeding anywhere, and nothing was swollen. I guess I couldn't tell from here whether there might have been internal injuries, but...

"More importantly, Master, your hand..."

"Huh? Whoa!" His words caused me to look at my own hand—where I found a bunch of small cuts welling up with blood.

I didn't have any fighting experience; I had just struck him as hard as I could, and as a result, I had done more harm to myself than to him. The cuts must

have come from his scales. Come to think of it, I had read that if you didn't close your fist the right way when you punched someone, you could break your own fingers. I figured I should be glad that my injuries weren't any worse.

Brooke's reaction, however, made no sense to me. What was going through his head? Sure, I was his employer, but to just stand there and let me hit him? Even offer me something "better" to do it with? It defied all logic.

"Master?!" I spun around at the shout. Myusel stood there with her hands over her mouth, her face pale.

She was looking at my hand. I scrunched up my face. I knew I was still standing in front of Brooke and holding the club, as if to say *Look at my blunt weapon! I beaned him with this!* What must this have seemed like to her?

"Th-This isn't what it looks like!" I threw the wooden club aside as quickly as I could. "Myusel... This is just a misunderstanding!"

Misunderstanding or no, it was true that I'd hit him. But it was self-defense, right? The heat of the moment. At least there hadn't been any malice in it. Whatever excuses I might offer, ten out of ten people seeing what Myusel was seeing right at that minute would have concluded that I had struck Brooke.

"Master! Your hand is bleeding!"

"...Huh?"

Myusel came rushing up to me and touched my hand gingerly. She took a white handkerchief from the pocket of her skirt and began bandaging my wound. She was completely flustered, looking left and right as if for help. Finally she said, "I need the first-aid kit—no, get the doctor from the clinic!"



“Er, I don’t think you need to do all that...” She seemed so upset that I was starting to feel sorry for her. “Wait a second, calm down, Myusel. It’s not that serious a wound.”

“B-But...”

“Anyway, are both of you crazy?!” I took a step back so I could see both Brooke and Myusel.

“Crazy?” Brooke looked at me quizzically. “How so?”

“I—I’m very sorry! I d-don’t really know why, but I am!” Myusel was once again terrified to think she had angered me.

“No—listen. I’m the one who just up and punched you. I know you say it didn’t hurt, but how can you just stand there and take it? And Myusel, shouldn’t you be more worried about Brooke than me?”

No matter how you sliced it, I was the one who deserved to be chewed out here. And yet both of them were staring at me with blank looks on their faces, as if they had no idea what I was talking about. What was with these two?

“I mean... Brooke didn’t do anything to deserve it, right? And I still hit him! You should be mad at me! If I got a little hurt, it’s my own fault.”

“But Master,” Brooke said with a dubious expression—actually, him being a reptile and all, I guess I had no idea what his expressions meant—“It’s quite normal for a noble to beat his demi-human servants.”

“...Come again?”

Now I was the one with the blank look on my face. True, Matoba-san had told me I was like a guest of state in the Eldant Empire, and that I would be treated like nobility. But still...

“Normal? Even for no reason?”

“Their nobility is reason enough,” Brooke said.

I wasn’t completely sure I followed. But basically, it sounded like class differences were absolute in the Eldant Empire, so nobles held the power of life and death over their servants. They were slaves—hell, practically livestock.

That was why a noble might beat a demi-human servant for no reason as a matter of course. And the servant would no more be upset about it than any person would be angry at a typhoon, or an earthquake, or a flood, or any other force of nature.

...Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!

“So you’re not angry...?”

“Angry?” Brooke asked.

“I mean... You’re not going to hit me back or something?” I said hesitantly. I was worried he might say, *Oh! Yeah!* and clock me.

It was Myusel who answered, “Demi-humans can never go against full-blooded humans...”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

She was quiet for a moment, thinking about something, and then she said, “I don’t know how it was in the country you came from, Master, but here, there’s contempt for demi-humans.”

“What do you mean, contempt?” I asked dumbly.

The story I got out of Myusel and Brooke after that was a bit shocking to me. Apparently, there was a sort of pyramid structure in this world, with humans at the top and demi-humans below them. On an individual level, humans didn’t have much to distinguish them—no unique physical capabilities, no magic, no nothing.

But the elves, although strong in magic, didn’t reproduce very quickly. The lizardmen had powerful bodies but next to no magic, and because they were basically reptiles, they were at the mercy of the ambient temperature.

There were other kinds of demi-humans in this world, too, yet the most numerous race was humans, who might not have had any special abilities but also didn’t have any specific weaknesses. It was humans who had developed technology and culture, formed large-scale groups and nation-states. There were so many of them that they didn’t have to adapt themselves to the environment; they could change the environment to fit them.

With the advent of agriculture, the humans' income grew. With more resources, the number of people society could support increased. That encouraged development across all fields, not just farming. Professional soldiers and scholars, among others, emerged. That led to even more advances in farming and the discovery of animal husbandry and construction, while the humans' military power to protect themselves from outside threats also expanded. The greater the shared wealth, the more abundant each individual person's life became, and more resources meant more of everything to go around.

In contrast, the demi-humans, who had a strong tendency to simply live in accordance with nature, had only ever formed small groups; they were at risk from disasters and famine and were easy targets for more powerful enemies.

"That's just how exalted humans are," Myusel concluded.

"No... Wait..." I could see the logic. And yet... This slap in the face by reality left me lost for words. Obviously, discrimination against demi-humans was a common plot point in games and manga. But to be confronted with a real society in which the victims of discrimination had completely assimilated that same bias... It left me with a cold feeling.

I thought of Brooke, who had let me hit him without saying anything. Of Myusel, who was less worried about her beaten colleague than about her "master's" hand. Their behavior wasn't at all their fault, yet I couldn't shake an inexplicably strange feeling. I sighed.

"What are you doing?" an annoyed voice asked. We all turned to see Minori-san. "I was looking for you. I couldn't find you anywhere."

"Oh. Um..."

I couldn't even begin to explain, but Minori-san said, "Eat your breakfast and then let's get to work. Matoba-san is waiting at the castle."



The castle town, like so much else here, had a sort of medieval-fantasy vibe to it. There were cobblestone streets lined with brick buildings. Each house must have had a fireplace or a hearth or something, because I could see rows of little

chimneys, with columns of smoke rising from some of them. Obviously, there were no automobiles on the streets; instead, there were carts pulled by people, along with horse-drawn carriages.

Actually... They resembled horse-drawn carriages, but they weren't quite. Take the vehicle Minori-san and I were riding in, for example: in this world, apparently it wasn't horses, but ostrich-like, flightless birds who had been put to the task. But they didn't have long necks like ostriches; instead, they were pretty stout, like a two-meter-tall sparrow. Basically, uh, cho**bos.

If I'd seen a picture of one, I might have thought it was pretty cute—kind of lovable, even. But to actually see a bird taller than me at close range was, frankly, frightening. I always felt like its beak was about to go for my neck. Even if they did assure me these creatures were herbivores.

"We're not going to use the car—the light armor?"

"Look at you, knowing the nickname for an LAV." Minori-san smiled. "The hyperspace portal is a weird thing. We can't make it any bigger."

According to her, after the discovery of the portal, some excavation had been attempted in the immediate vicinity, but no matter how much they dug, they only found earth and rocks—no alternate world in sight.

"Anyway, we wouldn't want to overdo the expansion effort and end up collapsing the hyperspace passageway or anything. So other than reinforcing it with a little concrete and some tree resin, we haven't touched it. That means there's a limit to what we can bring over here, about one truck's worth. Even the LAV, we disassembled it on the other side, brought it through, and put it back together over here. That means consumables like gasoline are at a premium."

"Ah. That makes sense."

Apparently, this was also behind the idea of exporting "otaku industry." Since bringing large amounts of physical goods over was a no-go, they naturally hit on the concept of bringing in something that was principally data—information. Get one good photocopier through the portal and they could make all the manga and novels they wanted, for the modest price of a little imported paper. As for anime, a projector and a screen was all they really needed to open a

theater and start attracting customers. Set up a few video game consoles too, and you would have yourself a regular amusement park. Charge admission, and watch the cash roll in.

“More importantly.” Minori-san was looking at me seriously. “Let me remind you again: don’t do or say anything untoward.”

“I know, I know.”

The two of us were heading for Eldant Castle. As Minori-san had said the day before, it was where the ruler of this country lived. In Japan, we might have called it the Imperial Palace or the Prime Minister’s residence; in America, it would be like going to the White House. Super-VIP stuff, in other words. And today, we were going to be granted an audience with the empress herself—definitely not a situation where you would want to do anything careless.

“Matoba-san was really hoping we could do this trip after you’d gotten a little more used to this world, learned some basic etiquette—but the Eldant side insisted they wanted to meet you right away.”

“They did?”

“I suspect it was the empress’s own will,” Minori-san said. “Relations between the Eldant Empire and its immediate neighbors are still tense—border skirmishes are an everyday occurrence. They’re in a perpetual state of war.”

“Huh...” I nodded, looking out the window. Truth be told, the town looked pretty happy, not like a place that was at war. Or was it just because this was the capital? Or did I just not know where to look?

“So a strict system of control has been built up with the empress at the center. Wartime provides a great excuse—‘We have to muster the country’s strength’ and all that. It makes it that much easier for the empress and those around her to give orders they couldn’t get away with in peacetime.”

It was the way of the world: with no one to say, “Stop, you shouldn’t do that,” those in power tended to run amok. In medieval-ish worlds like this one, as Myusel showed, the literacy rate among the populace usually wasn’t very high, which made it hard for people to gain more than a passing knowledge of politics and the military. They might have an inarticulate grievance against or objection

to the state, but the number of people in a position to complain was limited—and most of them were on the side of the ruling powers.

And that led to dictatorship...

“Hmmm...”

The word *dictatorship* made me think of—well, a few countries that shall not be named. Some filthy-looking old man dressed in an outfit that looked like work clothes, gesturing at his subjects from on high. Or, you know. A certain mustachioed figure of the Second World War giving one of his hysterical orations.

“We’ll be there soon,” Minori-san said, and straightened her necktie.



The castle was so stunning I could hardly describe it. Even from a distance, the size of it had been enough to overwhelm me; from up close, it was all the more staggering. It stretched up almost farther than the eye could see, and the sheer presence of it set me back on my heels. This was one of those moments where, if this were a manga, there would be a *goooong* sound effect, even though nothing was actually making any noise.

The cobblestone street continued through the open castle gate, which was attended by a crowd of armored knights and the *birds* they rode on. Some of them were even perched on *dragons* that sat there with their wings folded. Come to think of it, since Matoba-san and I were guests of state, it made sense that they would greet us like this.

Just seeing a well-ordered line of people or objects conveys a certain gravitas, but when all of them are wearing full armor, it’s pretty intimidating. Minori-san and I were quaking just a little as our bird-drawn carriage pulled up at what appeared to be the castle’s entryway.

“Sir and Madam, we have arrived,” said the carriage’s driver, opening the door for us in an elaborate show of respect.

Still feeling a bit anxious, we entered the castle, only to hear the huge door close behind us with a *thud*, as if to say there was no turning back now.

“In a video game, this is where you would fight a mini-boss,” I mused.

“How do you have the space in your brain to think about that right now?” Minori-san asked with an exasperated smile.

“If I’m not saying something stupid, I can’t calm down,” I sighed.

We found Matoba-san waiting in the castle. “Hullo. Glad you made it.” Beside him were—yup—two soldiers or knights or something; anyway, they were carrying swords. “You’re wearing your magic rings?”

“Of course,” I said, holding up my left hand and giving a little wave.

Matoba-san and Minori-san also had rings like the one I was wearing. It wasn’t just a translator device; it also served to show our status in the Eldant Empire. Myusel had been given one because she was serving me, but normally commoners would never be granted such a thing.

In other words, if I lost it, not only would I be unable to tell anyone, but no one would be interested in listening to me even if I were. It was a lifeline, and I had to hang onto it.

“Time to go see Her Imperial Majesty, then,” Matoba-san said, and set off walking. Minori-san and I silently followed him through the gigantic castle. A castle is a building, so we were technically inside, but the roof was so high above our heads and the hallways were so wide that you could practically have played indoor baseball in any given part of it. Or tennis or volleyball, for that matter. Even just getting from one side of the hallway to the other looked like it would take a certain amount of time. Without a guide, I figured the sun would have set before I found where I was going.

At length, Matoba-san stopped and turned to us. “Well, then. Here we are.”

The hallway ended at a pair of doors that seemed too large to have any business being inside a building.

“We are now going to have an audience with the leader of the Holy Eldant Empire,” Matoba-san said. “Any impropriety on our part could result in an international incident, so watch yourselves. You especially, Kanou-kun.”

The soldiers accompanying Matoba-san bellowed, “The three emissaries from

the nation of Japan have arrived!”

The huge doors began to rumble open of what seemed like their own accord, although I’m sure there was some kind of trick to it, and then we were ushered into the audience chamber.

“Whoa...” I couldn’t help murmuring. It was one heck of an audience chamber. In fact, the word *chamber*, which implies some kind of room, seemed much too small for this place. The closest thing to this that I could think of was an enclosed sports stadium. But it looked like you could fit four tennis courts in here. Stone pillars stood around the room, every bit as large as you would expect to support the roof of a space this size.

Judging by the medieval European look of the castle, I assumed everything here had been built by human hands, or at the very least without construction equipment. The thought of the sheer effort it must have taken was enough to make me dizzy. Or maybe they had used magic to do the work?

Then there was the actual interior of the audience chamber. A red carpet had been rolled out, and at the far end there was a spot set up higher than everything else. No doubt it was the throne of whoever led this Eldant Empire. Along both sides of the carpeted pathway up to the throne stood knights with swords at their hips. They were attired differently from those who had stood at the castle gate as well as those who had been our guides; it probably indicated that they were a royal guard, charged with protecting the imperial person.

“For the moment, Kanou-kun,” Minori-san said from beside me, “just stay quiet and do what I do. For the most part, look at the floor. Don’t say anything inappropriate. When we see the empress, bow just like Matoba-san and I do, on one knee. You’ll at least avoid being rude that way. Anyway, we may be in another world, but none of their customs are that shocking.”

“Uh...huh.” I nodded, intensely aware of the royal guard sizing me up.

Under the circumstances, I didn’t think I could have done or said anything inappropriate even if I’d wanted to. It was obvious that if I did anything really stupid, the guards would rush over and chop off my head. I felt a fresh wave of anxiety.

“Announcing!” a guard near the throne proclaimed.

As if in concert, Matoba-san knelt on the carpet, Minori-san and I following him. I kept my eyes down, as I'd been told, so I had no idea whether the empress might or might not have been sitting on the throne at that moment, might or might not have been looking down at me.

"The three emissaries from the nation of Japan!"

"The three emissaries from Japan!" the knights chorused.

Matoba-san said: "Matoba Jinzaburou of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau, accompanied by Koganuma Minori, WAC Private First Class, and Kanou Shinichi, Amutech General Manager. The afore-named have appeared by order of Empress Eldant III of the Holy Eldant Empire. We beg an audience."

Then a voice came from the direction of the throne. "So you're the newcomer from the far country?"

Thoroughly surprised, I accidentally looked up—and thankfully, Minori-san's hand quietly snuck in from the side and pushed my head back down. She must have known I would look up in surprise. But then, she could have at least warned me.

The voice I'd heard was nothing like I'd imagined. It was high-pitched and reedy. Very young.

"Show me your face," the child's voice ordered imperiously.

I tried to see what Minori-san was doing out of my peripheral vision. She gave a little nod, so with fear and trembling, I raised my head.

Up on that raised platform was a throne so big it could have seated a bear with room left over. The back and arms were covered with satin. The seat had gold and silver everywhere, and every part that wasn't covered with a runner had complex, intertwined carvings like tangled vines. The chair couldn't speak, but it unmistakably announced what a rare and fine object it was.

Now, that's *a throne.*

And sitting on that throne...

"IS THAT ***REALLY*** AN ARCHETYPAL LITTLE-GIRL CHARACTER?!" I shouted,

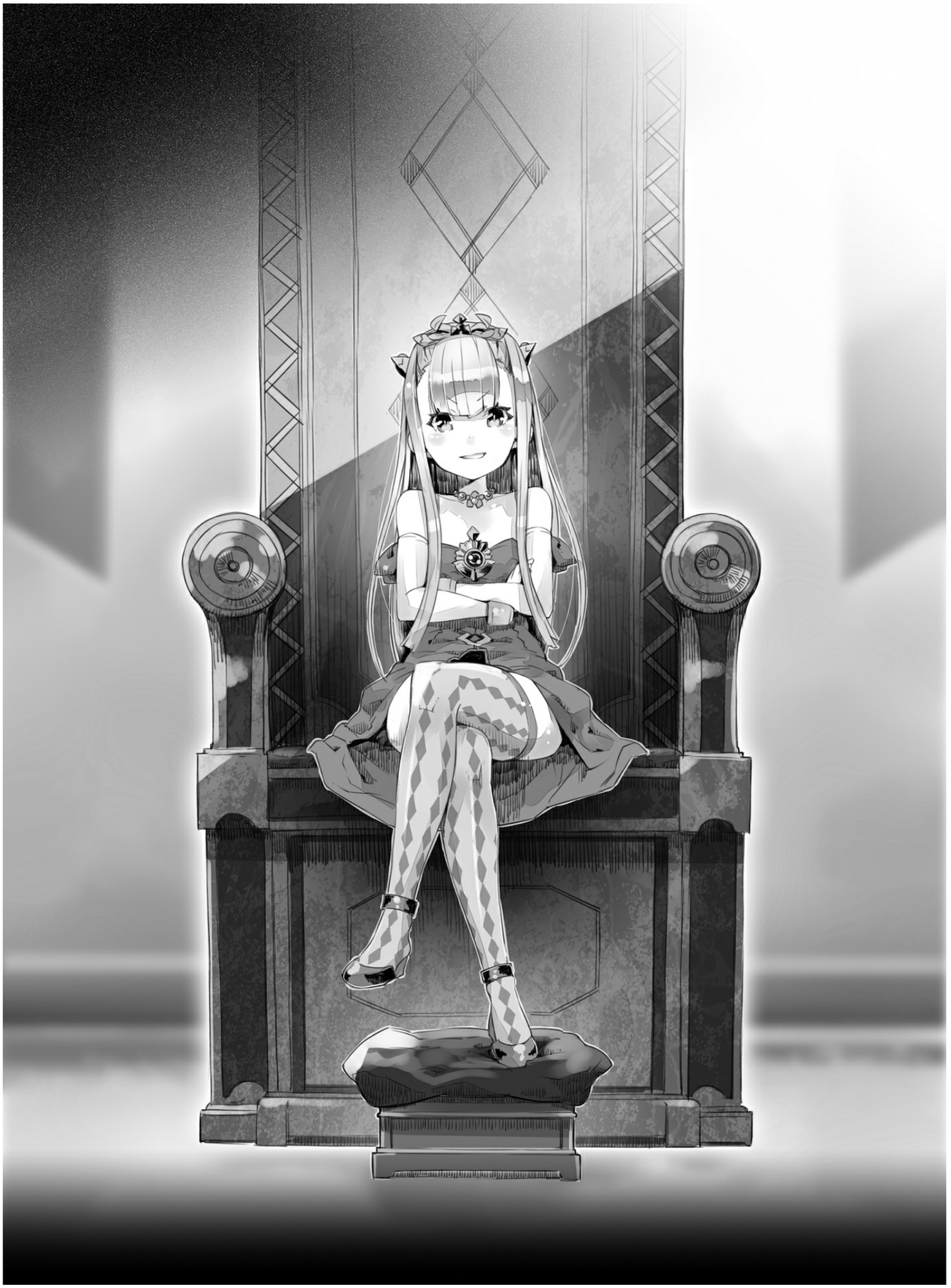
jumping up and clenching both my fists.

Yes: seated on the throne was a girl who couldn't have been more than ten years old. She was wearing a blue dress, her flawless golden hair framing a white face. She had thin pink lips and a sharp nose that turned up ever so slightly. Her huge blue eyes sparkled, darting this way and that like a cat's. She looked saucy... yet sweet.

Let's put this bluntly: Her Majesty the Empress was an absolutely adorable little girl.

We sometimes say people "give a doll-like impression." Well, this was it. Honestly, I could hardly believe she was human. She didn't give any sense of being made of real flesh and blood. The tiny golden tiara on her head made her seem very, very much like a doll of a princess.

I could hardly stand it. If this were a manga or anime, I would pillory the creator for obviously trying way too hard to get a laugh—but here we were, and it was all real.



But then, the white face flushed red and the loli empress exclaimed, “Wh-Who’re you calling an archetypal little-girl character?!”

“Guh?!” I came back to myself in a flash. I glanced from side to side. Minori-san had a hand to her forehead as if to say, *Now you’ve done it*. I thought the knights were about to execute me—but maybe they were just as surprised by the outburst as I was, because they seemed frozen in place.

“We are no longer a child!” the empress shouted angrily, jumping up. Then, with a *thump-thump-thump-thump-thump*, she came dashing down from the dais. Before anyone could stop her, Her Majesty the Empress was standing in front of me.

Okay. Deep breath.

“You cur!” Very suddenly, I found this kid girl landing an explosive punch right to my face.

“Yikes!” For such a small person, she had a hell of a straight; I found myself tumbling backward.

Looming over me—even though she would barely have come up to my chest standing—Her Majesty announced, “We turned sixteen just yesterday! We are a full and proper adult!”

“Huh?! You’re kidding!” No matter how you looked at her, there was no way she was anywhere near the second half of her teens. In fact, she wouldn’t have looked out of place heading off to school with a cute little backpack. I was about to point out that she had a little kid’s face and an even littler kid’s body, but luckily I bit my tongue at the last minute. Almost literally, because her second punch caught me on the chin.

Hrrgh... I’ve never met a child with an uppercut like that...!

“Who’s kidding?!” the tiny, 100%-from-every-angle-loli Empress demanded, tears beading in her eyes.

Wait a second... Is she bothered *about this?*

...is what I was thinking as I lay there on my back.

That was when an old man rushed up, pale in the face. “Your Majesty!” he

exclaimed. “What are you doing to the honored emissary?!”

He was wearing a robe with long sleeves. His face was wrinkled, and his beard and eyebrows, long enough to hide his facial features, were completely white. I couldn’t help thinking of him as one of the “immortals” of Japanese legend. Or, under the circumstances, maybe “sorcerer” was more appropriate.

“He insulted us!” Her Loli Majesty said, pointedly refusing to look at the old man. “Just remembering it makes us angry! You there, get up! We’ll chop your head clean off! Somebody! Somebody, bring us a sword!”

“Your Majesty!” the old man cried, grabbing the ruler from behind in a bear hug. “Please, think about what you’re doing!”

The Empress struggled mightily. “Let us go, you old fart! We cannot abide his mockery!”

“Please, bear in mind that they are from another land—the way they think may be different from us! I’m sure he had no intention of insulting Your Majesty!”

“Exactly so,” Matoba-san chipped in, still on one knee. “In our country, twenty is the age of adulthood. Until that point, all are equally considered children. Hence, my companion meant no disrespect; indeed, his words were no doubt intended as a show of reverence for the beauty of Her Majesty’s honored countenance. I beg you to have mercy on him.”

That’s a bureaucrat for you: perfectly fluent, and almost complete BS. I figured he could do it so easily because his entire job involved deploying linguistic smokescreens, but I kept that to myself.

“H—Hrm.” Her Majesty raised an eyebrow and looked at me. “Is that so?”

Getting up off the floor, I nodded eagerly. “Huh? O-Of course it certainly is, but... It’s very true, but...” If I wasn’t careful, I really could get myself beheaded here.

“Hrm. Hrm. Hrm.” She grunted a few times, but she must have finally been placated, because she let out a small sigh and said, “V-Very well!” The loli leader crossed her arms and said, “It does not become a ruler to be perturbed about trivial matters.”

The old man took a step back and said, “A most wise sentiment, Your Majesty.”

The Empress stomped back up the steps in a way that suggested she was still a little angry, and threw herself back onto her throne. Minori-san and the old man helped me up, after which I resumed kneeling on the carpet. Time to take a mulligan. The old man took a few steps back from us, then gave a big nod and a smile.

“You have traveled far to come to this land, Kanou Shinichi-dono,” the old man said. “The Eldant Empire and all its servants welcome you.”

“Thank you very much for your kind words.”

He had been speaking to me, but it was Matoba-san who answered. I guess he was basically telling me to keep my mouth shut for the duration. Sorry, sir.

Minori-san whispered in my ear. “The girl is the Empress, Her Imperial Majesty Petralka an Eldant III. The old guy is Prime Minister Zahar.” She pointed to one side of the dais. “And then there’s...”

I saw a young man, a knight, standing there. He somehow seemed different from the other knights in the room. Partly because he was wearing unique clothes, but what got me more than anything was that he was standing on the same level as the throne. That must have meant he had the status of a royal...

“Garius en Cordobal. A noble who’s both a knight of the realm and a distant relation of Empress Petralka. He’s an important counselor, with almost complete control over diplomatic relations. It’s thanks to him that we were issued our magic rings.”

In other words, he was one big fish, and someone we were closely connected to. I stole another peek at Garius Whoever-Whoever. He was as handsome as a picture. Probably in his late twenties. He had silver hair that went all the way down to his waist. Thin lips. His narrow eyes hinted at a great depth of knowledge; they gave ample evidence that he was more than just a brute-strength fighter.

His outfit was awfully impressive, too: his slim frame, which didn’t seem to have an ounce of unnecessary weight on it, was clad chiefly in white, along with

gauntlets fringed in gold and a pair of greaves. It was probably more about appearance than practical defense.

He had two belts wrapped around his waist and a sword with a design worked on the hilt, currently latched into its scabbard. A cape hung from his shoulders all the way down to the floor. Unlike the other royal guards, he wore no armor, but just the way he held himself was enough to make him seem like he'd stepped out of some heroic saga.

"Um, Minori-san..."

"Hush."

"That Garius guy? I swear he's looking at me. Like, *really* looking."

His gaze was as piercing as a spear, and he had fixed it not on Matoba-san or Minori-san, but on me. I could feel it prickling my skin—it was a little intimidating. I guess it shouldn't have surprised me; I was the one who had ticked off the empress the minute I'd gotten within earshot of her.

"Never mind that. Just be quiet. You screw up again, he might just bum-rush you himself."

"Got it," I squeaked.

"Now, then," said a still somewhat disgruntled-sounding voice from above us. "When they told us an evangelist was coming, we wondered who might appear before us—and now we find ourselves presented with a child!"

You took the words right out of my mouth, I thought, but even I had enough presence of mind to force that back down before it got out. Partly this was because I was dealing with an empress, and a careless word could cost me my life. But it was also simply because I didn't want to say something that would hurt someone. Her Majesty appeared to be sensitive about the fact that she looked younger than her age. I certainly knew from experience what it felt like when someone said something thoughtless and hurtful.

"As you can see," Matoba-san was saying, "his actions may be somewhat uncouth. But he has a deep familiarity with the 'otaku culture' in which Your Majesty has shown such interest. I goggled at his knowledge myself. I'm confident that what he brings will soothe Your Majesty's ennui."

“Will it, now?” Petralka said from her throne. She sounded pretty intrigued.

“There are many rather unusual people among those who are accomplished in scholarship and the arts,” Prime Minister Zahar said, as if to back Matoba-san up. “In this, I think our countries are the same.”

Presentation is everything: this was an extremely generous interpretation. Maybe the old guy was keen to get an exchange going with his Japanese visitors. I was as grateful to him as I was to Matoba-san for keeping a nice flow going.

“I wonder about that.” The young knight Garius, who had kept his peace until that moment, spoke up in a stern tone. “Elder Zahar seems to be taking quite a favorable view of the situation, but I don’t yet trust you. I have yet to understand what this ‘otaku culture’ of yours is, but if it has as much power over young people as you claim, then I’m not convinced it will be a good thing for Eldant in the long term.”

He sounded awfully prickly. It was clear he didn’t think much of the Japanese delegation.

A tone of warning entered his voice as he went on. “If we accept this thing carelessly, only to find that it poisons us... By the time we realize our mistake, it may be too late.”

He had the same blue eyes as Petralka, and at the moment they were looking straight at me. I felt myself sweating all over.

“A poison,” I muttered almost reflexively. “A poison, right.”

This was bad, and I knew it was bad, but I couldn’t stop. Garius wasn’t wrong. He was right! We were Greeks bearing gifts, and he didn’t know whether it was going to be good for his country or not. And this “otaku culture” everyone kept talking about—there were plenty of people in our own world who thought it was poisonous. The gainfully employed, university professors and politicians, cultural critics, human rights groups, and on and on.

“Even medicine can be poisonous if you take too much of it,” I said. I could tell Minori-san was staring at me slack-jawed, but once I’d opened my mouth, I couldn’t stop. “And some poisons can have medicinal effects, if you only take a

little. There isn't some bright line, like, 'This much is okay, but this much is poisonous.' Someone who takes responsibility for their own decisions in cases like that is an adult. No matter how old they are or what they look like."

I recognized that I was young and foolish. But when I heard someone talk about my beloved manga and anime and video games and light novels like they were poisonous, or evil, or reprobate, without even knowing what was in them, I flew off the handle a little bit. This may have been another world, and I may have been talking to somebody with a lot of power, but I was 100% an otaku, and for me, this was a line in the sand.

Garius raised a surprised eyebrow, and tension immediately filled the room. A heavy feeling flooded the audience chamber.

I could tell Matoba-san was looking at me, equally surprised. If I had to guess, I would say Garius was even more powerful around here than I'd suspected. So powerful that no one ever dared to contradict him. The only reason I had been able to talk back like this was probably because I was blissfully ignorant of the entire situation. If I had understood the powers at play, I would probably have been way too scared to voice so much as a quibble.

But it was a little late for all that now.

"Heh..." What broke the icy silence was the laugh of a young girl. "Bwa ha... bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Her Majesty Petralka roared with laughter as though she could no longer hold it in, her hilarity echoing around the chamber.

"Wonderful! We find this 'Shinichi' most amusing!"

"...Huh?" I certainly hadn't expected Petralka to say that, so I just stared at her blankly. She was slapping her knees as if this was all too much for her. With a helpless smile on her face, she said, "To think he would go against Garius!"

"Your Majesty..." Prime Minister Zahar and Counselor Garius sounded troubled, but Petralka ignored them.

"Very well," she said. "We, Petralka an Eldant III, hereby and forthwith permit your 'Amutech' or whatever it is to carry out any and all activities it sees fit. Do as you please!"

"Ah..." I looked up at the child empress stupidly for second. Then it sank in

that I'd pulled off a coup, and I gave a theatrical bow. "Our most humble thanks," I said with more than a bit of self-satisfaction.



If I had to sum up my current condition in one word, it would be: tired. The meeting with Petralka, leader of the Holy Eldant Empire, and her group—which, admittedly, had been just a simple meet-and-greet—was over, and Minori-san, Matoba-san, and I were heading back to my residence the same way we'd come, in a winged carriage.

In other words, we were going back to where Myusel and the others were waiting.

"You gave me a shock," Minori-san said from beside me, a grin on her face. "The way you talked back to Sir Cordobal like that."

"Please, don't remind me. I really regret it, believe me," I said, feeling exhausted.

I had said what I'd said in the heat of the moment, but he could easily have had me executed then and there. Given that Petralka was a child, it was obviously Garius and Zahar, the adults around her, who really ran the Empire. But exactly what they could get away with because of that power, I didn't yet know. Yes, I was a respected emissary from another country, but so long as I was in the Eldant Empire, they could come up with any number of reasons to have me killed if they really wanted. At the thought, an unpleasant sweat began trickling down my back again.

"And he never took his eyes off me again after that," I groaned.

Garius had stared straight at me until the very moment we left the audience chamber. He didn't have any particular expression on his face, but his look was so piercing I felt lucky to have survived.

"True," Minori-san said. "But I think he likes you."

"Huh?" I said. "What makes you think that? I figured he hated me, or, you know, wanted to kill me or something."

"Yeah, but... You don't think there was a certain warmth there?"

“Kind of...” I figured it had come from the flames of his rage.

“I bet he doesn’t have anyone like you around him,” Minori-san said. “He probably found you refreshing.”

“Oh, is that it?” *So what?* I wanted to ask, but then I realized. Even though I did not in the least want to realize this. “Oh, no...”

In manga and anime and games and light novels, saying someone “doesn’t have a type like that around” is a flag for romance—a simple pretext for there to be a spark between two characters. I mean, true, a new person is inherently interesting, so it didn’t *have* to mean there was love in the air, but still...

“Minori-san...” I looked at her suspiciously. Under the circumstances, I wanted to keep her around—she was really the only person I could count on for anything. But all of a sudden, I’d begun to have doubts. “Minori-san... Is it possible you’re a fuj—”

“I’m sorry, what do you mean...?”

I cut myself off, leaving the WAC confused. It was no good. She was rotten. It was too early...

Er, or rather, as I’d expected, Minori-san was showing every sign of being a fujoshi through and through.

Works whose plot lines center around two beautiful guys in a homoerotic romance are broadly known as yaoi, and the women who love those stories are called “rotten girls,” or fujoshi. (It’s a dumb pun on the word for “housewife.”)

Everything I had heard suggested fujoshi had formidable powers of imagination. Their fantasies weren’t limited to human men; they would personify countries or buildings or trains and argue about which one was the top (the guy) and which one the bottom (the girl), debates that got them all hot and bothered in a hurry. From the perspective of one of these women, an attractive young knight staring at a guy like me out of intense hatred could, in the mind’s eye, quickly become intense physical love.

“Please don’t include me in your perverted fantasies.”

“I wasn’t fantasizing,” she said defensively. “Rumor has it that Garius started

serving at Her Majesty's side partly because he was... *that way*."

"Huh? Wait a second..."

A young lady and the man who attends her... When people are close in both their public and private lives, it's only natural for a spark to develop. But when one or both of them are in positions of power, it can turn into risky business pretty quick. Plenty of examples of that in Earth's own history.

That's why Petralka was attended by Zahar, who was obviously done sowing his wild oats, and Garius, who allegedly had no interest in women. It made perfect sense.

"Anyway, homosexual love has been pretty much normal throughout world history," Minori-san said. Behind her glasses I could see a strange, eager sparkle in her eyes, and I smelled trouble.

"I'm aware of that," I said, "but just for your information, I don't swing that way!"

Honestly, I was a pretty conservative otaku: even cross-dressing guys didn't really do anything for me.

Just for a second, I allowed myself to imagine myself and Garius in *that* kind of relationship, rose petals blowing by dramatically in the foreground. Then I let out a sigh. I think a bit of bile came with it.

"So..." I decided the subject needed to be changed, forcefully. "I guess we've had our audience now. What exactly is it that you guys want me to do?"

Spread otaku culture in another world? What a vague directive. What were the goals? What was I aiming for?

"Hmm..." The thoughtful sound came not from me or Minori-san, but from Matoba-san, who was sitting with his back to us in the driver's seat. He had been waiting for us at Eldant Castle when we arrived, apparently as a way of helping to ensure that I would be allowed at the audience. Where he actually lived, however, was in Amutech's company dorm-*cum*-company headquarters —in other words, the same mansion as the rest of us. So we were all going home together.

“Koganuma-kun.”

“Yes, sir?”

Matoba-san and Minori-san looked at each other. Both removed their magic rings, making sure I could see them do so. Then they both looked at me expectantly. I guessed they wanted me to take my ring off, too.

The three of us didn’t need those rings to communicate anyway, so there was no problem with taking it off. In fact, if I didn’t, I suppose there could have been trouble...

Ah. The driver.

Whichever servant of the Empire was driving the carriage right now, they didn’t want him to hear what they had to say. The thought made everything seem a little more tense than usual. But fretting about that right now wouldn’t solve anything. I took off the ring and put it in my pocket.

“Thank you,” Matoba-san said. “We certainly don’t, you see, wish for the Eldant side to hear what we are about to say. The Japanese side has no cards in its hand.”

Wait. Hold on a second. I think he just said something very, very hard to ignore.

“Quite frankly,” he went on, “we don’t know what we’re doing here ourselves.”

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

They dragged me here when they “didn’t know what they’re doing”?!

Matoba-san frowned apologetically and said, “The desired end goal is clear. It’s simply that there is no established methodology for how to get there. This is all rather unprecedented, you understand.”

And there it was. The civil servant’s predilection for manuals and instructions.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t sympathize. But since he’d decided to throw me into the middle of all this, now it was my problem, too.

“As I said before,” Matoba-san continued. “We prefer to begin with the

outward form—you know, make sure there are laws and rules, set up organizations. Then we procure some land and a budget, and then we form a committee about what we should actually do. That's the 'building bureaucracy' for you."

"Why does it kind of sound like you're bragging...?"

"Far from it. I'm being self-deprecating. In any event, because we knew how these things so often go, we decided not to overdetermine the parameters of our initial concept. It turned out the Eldant Empire wasn't much for traditional Japanese arts, anyway." He shrugged.

Afterward, according to what he told me, the government sort of lost interest in trying to crack the "other world" nut and instead created the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau and stuck him with it.

It wasn't hard to believe. I mean, if this were a serious national project, there was no way they would ever have hired someone like me.

Conducting relations with another world? This was something Japan had never had to do before. For that matter, it was something no one in human history had ever had to do before. Maybe we should have announced it and worked with an international coalition to make first contact. But it looked like the Japanese government wanted to corner the market on interdimensional trade.

If these trade relations went well, the Japanese national debt that had been piling up for so long might even be able to get back to the black in one fell swoop. After all, commerce has always been an ace in the hole for countries looking to enrich themselves. Take Dubai, for example, a place justly famous for its rapid economic expansion. Apparently, they owe it to a man-made harbor they created specifically for trade.

If the government were to let news about this new world slip, every country on Earth would probably be trying to horn in on their racket. Japan would get only a fraction, a tenth, a hundredth, of what it might have made otherwise. Whatever the case, the decision had been made that money like that would *not* be left on the table, and that if at all possible, Japan would establish itself here without letting other countries know what it was up to.

On top of all that, up until last year, the administration had been run by a certain opposition party. It was the first time they had ever had control of the government, and they didn't seem quite sure what to do with it. Bureaucracy followed bureaucracy with ridiculous systemic reforms and budget reallocations. It was chaos. And then you throw another world into the mix? They simply didn't have the wherewithal to cope.

Ultimately, the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau was charged with finding a way to conduct trade with the Eldant Empire despite limited authority, a scant budget, and basically one employee. It wasn't a pretty story.

"Your job, in a word, is to promote cultural exchange in this world while running a general entertainment business. Having said that, I'll be handling menial matters for you—red tape and accounting, negotiations with the Eldant Empire and the like. What we want from you is to find works of entertainment that the people of this world—the Eldant Empire, and other countries if possible—will be passionate about. Then, we will sell them here."

I understood all that already. But it was just too broad a mandate. It left me with no real idea of what to do.

"Look," I said, "sure, I'm an otaku, but I'm a consumer. A connoisseur. I'm not from the selling side or even the production side."

"Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained," Matoba-san said. He further offered that although the project was somewhat risky, it was also top secret, so none of my countrymen would be upset if I failed. That at least (he speculated) should help put my mind at ease.

"You needn't think too hard about it. Import what you like, what you find interesting."

"Hmmm..."

Even at that, where was I supposed to start? Then I thought of something.

"About this ring," I said, pulling mine out of my pocket. "Wearing one doesn't let you read Japanese, does it?"

"It doesn't seem so," Matoba-san said. "It actually works via a kind of telepathy."

“Ah ha. I see.”

So the rings didn’t actually make you able to understand another language. Matoba-san and Minori-san and I were speaking Japanese, and Myusel and the others were speaking their own language, and we were able to communicate because we could intuit each other’s thoughts before they actually became words.

“But that means games and anime and whatever are hopeless, right?”

Telepathy was all well and good, but machines didn’t have thoughts to read. The DVD player you used to show someone an anime DVD wasn’t thinking anything. People like Myusel would never be able to understand what was being said.

“I see. Yes, that is a problem.”

“But wait. Didn’t you say they liked that stuff?” According to what he’d said earlier, out of all the Japanese cultural artifacts the government had tried, it was otaku stuff that had gotten the best response.

“Indeed they did. But you don’t really have to speak Japanese to enjoy anime, do you?”

“It’s not all kids’ stuff, you know. What about, like, war dramas where the characters are constantly flinging Zen-like dilemmas at each other?”

Y’know. *G**dam* and whatever.

“Well, in any event, it is the case that out of the various things we showed them, anime was the best received.”

Come to think of it, they probably didn’t have motion pictures in this world. Something where images appeared to move would naturally draw interest. And it was true that there were plenty of anime where even if you couldn’t follow the story, you could enjoy the beauty of the art or the adorableness of the characters.

“We’re not going to do any better with manga or novels, either. It doesn’t look like the literacy rate is very high around here. And we’re going to ask them to read something from a foreign country? Are we able to translate anything for

them?”

“That’s rather difficult,” Matoba-san said, shaking his head sadly. “Since we had these rings to enable communication, translation and interpretation went on the back burner. And can you imagine how much trouble it would be to bring a famous linguist over here?”

I didn’t speak for a moment. Sure! Abducting a famous linguist wasn’t like disappearing some loser former home security guard, was it?!

“But... Look, I really think any effort here is going to have to start with procuring a competent translator.”

“Hmmm...” Matoba-san answered me with a noncommittal noise. It seemed to say, *We’re really at the end of our budgetary and personnel ropes*.

I couldn’t see how any of this was going to work, and it left me very, very uncomfortable.



I opened my eyes and sat up in bed. The room was full of an inky darkness; the sun had set long before. I just couldn’t sleep. The audience that afternoon had been pretty agitating—just thinking back on it gave me cold sweats, and I couldn’t calm down.

“Maybe I’ll go have a drink of water.”

I reached out for the chest beside my ridiculously large bed, looking for a certain small object atop it. It was a copper antique shaped like a bellflower. I took hold of it and gently flicked the top. At once, there was a pleasant sound and the darkness receded from a pale light.

This was a magical item that generated light for a brief period when a small physical shock was administered to it. Apparently, it was the standard light source in the Eldant Empire. They said it was full of “light sprites” or something. I guess it wasn’t that different from what we do on Earth when we put “sea fireflies” in a jar. You give it a gentle shake to startle them, and they light up. The only real difference is whether you’re using magical spirits or plankton.

“Sorry,” I said to the sprites in my lamp, then dangled my legs over the edge

of the bed, put on my shoes and, with the light shining on the ground in front of me, left the room.

I went out into the hallway, down the stairs, then through the dining hall. I was aiming for the kitchen, which was just past the dining area. This world didn't have water purification technology or even sewer systems, and Minori-san had taught me that just to drink a glass of water, you had to boil it to make sure there were no dangerous bacteria. But she also mentioned that water starts to go bad if you leave it sitting for a couple or three days...

Suddenly I stopped, surprised. The door was ajar, light leaking out into the dining hall. I wondered who could be up at this hour. Well, staring at the door wouldn't answer my question, so I took the metal doorknob and pushed it open.

The kitchen area was made almost entirely of brick. It was a narrow, long room, the floor covered in ceramic tiles. The wall at the far end boasted a counter to work on. Obviously, they didn't have gas heating here; there was a hearth with a big kettle hanging in it.

There was a wood table in the middle of the room. Knives and cutting boards were lined up alongside it; it must have been used for chopping things. But there was also...

"Master?!"

...Myusel sitting there.

"It's so late," she said. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nah, I just wanted a drink of water."

"You could have called me, sir, and I would have brought it to you. Let me get some ready for you."

"Oh, no—" I raised a hand to stop her as she clambered up from her chair. "I'm not dying of thirst or anything. And anyway, I thought you'd already be asleep. What are you doing up?"

I thought maybe she'd been getting ready for the next day's breakfast, but when I looked at the table, all the cooking implements were neatly put away.

Instead, she had a pen and a familiar piece of paper.

It was the hiragana chart I had given her.

“Wait. Are you... studying?”

I seemed to have guessed right. Myusel went a little red, as if I’d caught her at something embarrassing.

“Since you did go to all the trouble of giving me this page, Master...”

Everything about the way she acted was so innocent—my heart was pounding! But never mind that. I looked at the paper beside her to find it full of hiragana characters. Way more than you would expect. This girl had literally been burning the midnight oil trying to learn hiragana.

“You know, it’s bad for you to stay up too late. Why not do this tomorrow?”

“Most of my time during the day is devoted to my work,” she said. “And also... It’s something you went out of your way to give to me, Master, so I wanted to learn it.”

Yikes! The way she looked sweetly up at me when she said that... It was so moe I could die.

When I stopped to think about it, I realized that whenever I was awake, Myusel was pretty much always right nearby, taking care of this and that. Cooking and cleaning and doing the washing and other chores. I hadn’t thought too much about it—I mean, what else are maids supposed to do, right?—but on reflection, I realized that taking care of an entire mansion was a pretty major job for one person. Sure, we had Brooke, but it seemed like he mostly worked outside.

Myusel obviously didn’t have a lot of time to herself, and here she was spending those precious moments studying. I thought I felt a tug on my heartstrings.

“Well, let me keep you company, then.” I pulled out a chair next to Myusel and sat down.

Myusel shook her head emphatically. “S-Sir, you mustn’t! With all due respect, you can’t deprive yourself of sleep just to indulge my studying...”

I, however, tapped the chair she'd been in a moment before, urging her to sit back down.

"I'm wide awake anyway. C'mon, sit."

"It—It's really all right, sir! Perhaps sometime when you happen to have a free moment..."

"Aw, if I let you hold out on me now, I'll be really disappointed," I said, giving her my brightest smile. Myusel blinked several times, not appearing to understand what was going on. Was what I had said really that strange?

"Master..." A smile spread slowly across Myusel's pale face. I know that to say a smile is "like a flower blooming" is a badly overused cliché, but for once I saw what it was really supposed to mean. The hesitant, uncertain Myusel I'd known up till now was charming in her own way, but she was a mere sprout; she didn't represent everything there was to this girl.

Gaaaaaaah thisgirlissocute!!

"...You're a little strange, aren't you?"

She said it! She really said it!

This would be a flag in any and every game! *What's that? I'm just this close to the "good ending" with this girl? But my choices! Where are my other choices?!*

"Y-You think so?"

"Yes. Eccentric."

Aaarrrgh, I just love those words! Myusel sat down next to me, her smile a bit shy.



“If it’s all right, perhaps I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“If you don’t mind having me for a teacher,” I said. Yeah, it was a bit theatrical. But then, so was the moment.

Wait—damn! Was I playing it a little *too* cool? I wasn’t used to these things. Anxious, I glanced at Myusel. But the half-elf girl was looking down intently at the hiragana chart, an expression of happiness on her face.

Chapter Three: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*

My name is Kanou Shinichi, and I'm the general manager of Amutech, the first general entertainment company in this alternate world.

Yeah, that sounds cool, I guess, but it didn't change the reality. The fact is, I was thrown headfirst into a situation where even the bureaucrats immediately admitted they had no idea what would sell here, and now I was supposed to sell things here.

Anyway, never mind the details. Basically, my job was to bring things in that I thought might possibly be interesting to the people of this other world, or at least the Holy Eldant Empire. I didn't expect to hit it out of the park the first time. I was just trying to lay the groundwork to have a hit later.

And that required research.

"Might as well start with what's right here."

I looked around my first-floor office. "Library" might have been a better word. I had made a long list of "otaku goods" for Matoba-san; now the shelves were overflowing with manga, anime DVDs and Blu-rays, game discs, and more. Of course, manga and novels weren't the only paper goods I'd requested; there were also plenty of design books and posters.

The result was that my office looked like some otaku-centric bookstore or DVD shop in Akiba. All this stuff wasn't going to be gold, but just seeing it there was impressive.

"It's sort of a dream come true," I murmured, slightly overwhelmed.

Each thing I'd gotten was a necessary expense. Forget sales tax; the Bureau was footing the entire bill. Matoba-san had obviously gotten a bit of sticker shock, but getting everything over here was actually a bigger problem than money.

Just as a note, there seemed to be some weird magnetism or something in the hyperspace tunnel, because wireless communication devices wouldn't work

through it at all, and even wired lines were subject to large amounts of noise. So unfortunately, *internet connection* had to be scratched off my wish list.

That being the case, I created a separate list of sites that needed regular checking. People on the other side would have a look periodically, download any important articles, and put them on physical media that could be brought to me. We would lose the immediacy, but I was just going to have to roll with it.

“Is this y’r ‘otaku culture,’ Master?” The lizardman Brooke was standing beside me, looking around the room in amazement. At least, I thought it was amazement. His scaly face made his expression difficult to read as always, but his tone and gestures gave me just about enough to go on.

At the moment, Brooke was helping me bring box after box of merchandise from the containers outside into this room. Now that things had quieted down a little, he had a chance to see what was in all those boxes he had been carrying.

Myusel and I had carried out the work of taking the books and DVDs and such out of the boxes and lining them up on the shelves. We had started early and spent the entire day on it, yet we were still only about sixty percent done.

“Yeah, this is it. But hey, just staring at it won’t get us anywhere. Brooke, if you see anything that looks interesting to you, feel free to grab it.”

“May I really? A servant like me, touch your honored possessions?”

“It’s fine,” I said with a smile. “I don’t care if you’re a servant or a king, the point is to get as many people reading this stuff as possible. But I need feedback, so if you check any of this stuff out, let me know what you think.”

Brooke looked at me. His eyes never blinked; they looked like glass. I think he was a little surprised...

“Still not sure? What if I said... Pick anything you like. That’s an order.”

“Hmmm...”

Brooke hunched his shoulders and scratched what I assumed was the back of his head, then walked over to the shelf. As a matter of fact, Myusel, with whom I had had virtually the same conversation earlier, had already taken an armful of

manga with great interest.

It was ten days or so since I'd given her the hiragana chart. She had already memorized all the hiragana, and could read katakana, too. Because I was helping her study every night, she could even recognize a couple hundred everyday Japanese words. It turned out she was actually a pretty smart cookie. Not to mention she was apparently thrilled to be learning to read and write, even if it was in the language of a completely different world, and she was picking up Japanese awfully fast.

Maybe part of it was that she was living with me. Like I said before, the magic rings we wore acted almost like simultaneous interpreters; Myusel could still hear the actual words I was saying. And sort of like watching a subtitled movie, when she heard the same words over and over again, she started to learn some Japanese in spite of herself.

Naturally, she couldn't yet read kanji to speak of, but a lot of manga include pronunciations in hiragana next to the kanji, and the pictures themselves are a form of communication in graphic novels, so she could actually work out what was going on in some relatively simple series.

I had ordered Brooke to pick up a book for much the same reason. He and Myusel would be valuable research subjects.

Just as I was thinking about all this, I heard an indistinct voice. It sounded like somebody was fighting, maybe out in the hallway, but I couldn't quite make out what was being said. Although, if they were speaking Eldant, I wouldn't be able to understand them anyway. The ring's powers weren't absolute. If you couldn't see the other person or if you were too far away, it wouldn't always work. But then, suddenly—

"KANOU SHINICHI!!"

The door burst open. When I saw who had come storming into my office, my jaw dropped.

"Empress Eldant?!"

"Indeed!" her Not-Actually-an-Archetypal-Little-Girl-Character Majesty replied. "So this is where you've been hiding, Kanou Shinichi. We've come to

observe your evangelism firsthand and as soon as possible!” Petralka *harrumph*ed, seeming to think I should be grateful for this.

Apparently, she had gotten word that large amounts of otaku merchandise had been brought in and had come to see for herself. I knew we were in the castle town, but was it really safe for the empress to come out without so much as a bodyguard? Wait... Just how fast could she travel, anyway?

I was busy keeping these interjections bottled up when:

“Y-Your M-Majesty...!” Several steps behind her came a frail old man, his shoulders heaving painfully—Zahar, the prime minister. “Y-Your Majesty... an empress must not run... down a hallway,” he wheezed. “A-And slamming a door is most unfitting...!”

In games, manga, anime, and light novels, prime ministers always seem to fall into one of a few categories. You’ve got the pathetic guys who are just puffing themselves up in the ruler’s reflected glory, the evil guys who are controlling the ruler like a puppet, and the last-boss types who pretend to be faithful subjects but are secretly plotting rebellion. But this old guy just seemed to really want to bring the empress up right, even if he was a little indulgent. A genuinely good servant.

Petralka, however, didn’t quite seem to be picking up on his particular expression of loyalty.

“Quit your blabbering, old man. We did not run, we merely walked quickly.”

“Ohh, Your Majesty, not more of your royal pedantry...” Zahar let out a groan and put his hands to his face. Evidently this wasn’t the first time they’d been through something like this. I felt bad for him. Surely, he had prime ministerial duties to attend to.

“Hmm!” Petralka looked around my office, which, on its own small scale, had been Akiba-fied, and made an impressed noise. “Most arresting! Is this the ‘otaku culture’ of which you spoke to us?” Her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

Mm-hmm. That’s the perfect expression for a loli girl.

Wait... Myusel was sixteen too, right? I might have been conservative, but I prided myself on having a wide range of expertise when it came to moe

characters. And Petralka was moe in a slightly different way than Myusel.

“How very different these are from your extravagantly colored wall hangings!”

Unlike Brooke, Petralka hadn’t even thought of asking permission; she’d dragged Zahar over to the bookshelves with her and was now paging through one manga after another with exclamations of “Ooh!” or “Hmm!” As far as I knew, she couldn’t read a word of Japanese—but that didn’t seem to stop her from enjoying the books.

Phew. The sight of her getting up on her little tippy-toes to reach the higher shelves was so cute, it should have been illegal.

“...Hmm?” Petralka made a mystified sound as she flipped through the pages of one book. “We don’t understand!”

“Well, er, you wouldn’t,” I grinned.

She was different from Myusel in every conceivable way. Brooke, too, although he looked interested, probably didn’t have the slightest idea what was going on in any of the books. In any event, he and Myusel had both frozen against the wall the instant Petralka came in.

I guess it was a natural reaction. Anyone would be surprised to have an empress show up out of the blue. And in a medieval-ish world like this one, she was basically an absolute ruler. If either of them said or did anything careless in front of her, their lives could be over before they knew it. Telling them to calm down would probably have been pointless.

“Sigh. And here the pictures look so interesting,” Petralka said disappointedly.

I’m sorry—I knew how sensitive she was about her young looks—but she was just so freakin’ adorable with that expression on her face that I simply couldn’t think of her as the ruler of an entire nation. I desperately wanted to do something for her.

“...You. Kanou Shinichi.”

“What is it, Your Majesty? Um, you can call me Shinichi, by the way. Saying ‘Kanou Shinichi’ all the time is like if I were to address you as ‘Your Imperial

Majesty Petralka an Eldant the Third' every single time we talked."

"Mm. You say we should call you Shinichi, then?" She looked confused for just a second.

"Yes, Your Majesty," I said, giving a little, almost butler-esque, bow.

"Mm. We do have a proverb: 'When in Kamara, eat what the Kamarans eat.' In order to enjoy otaku culture, we shall accede to your ways." She smiled benignly and nodded.

I wasn't quite clear on what "Kamara" was, but the sentiment was familiar enough. Maybe it was something all humans shared.

"Shinichi," she said, giving a very loli smile.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"We give you special dispensation to address us as Petralka."

"Your Majesty," Zahar protested, "that's altogether—"

"Was it not you who taught us that each land has its own people and each people their own values? And that to ignore those values only breeds resentment? And that for that reason, a leader must sometimes bow to conventions not her own?"

"Erm... I... I did indeed teach you that..."

"Then do not worry. It will be only within this mansion. This house is, if you will, the fief we have given to Shinichi. You see, Shinichi? Outside these walls, continue to call us Your Majesty. It is true that any who overheard you calling us by our first name might well misunderstand."

"Misunderstand?"

"Normally," Prime Minister Zahar said, taking a handkerchief out of a bag and wiping the sweat from his brow, "only members of the royal family may use each other's given names. Besides those related by blood and marriage, only one other person may use the Imperial name—and that is her fiancé."

".....Erm." Now I was the one who was starting to sweat. "Are you sure about this?"

“Sure about what?” Petralka said with a look of perplexity.

“Er, well... Never mind.”

If it didn’t bother her, it didn’t make sense for me to act all fussy about it, you know? If only members of her family could call her Petralka, then I just needed to think of this as though we were family. As if she were my little sister, say...

I didn’t speak for a moment.

“What is wrong, Shinichi?” Petralka asked.

“Oh, uh, nothing.”

I was definitely not trying to keep myself from having a huge nosebleed over the image of Petralka calling me “Big Bro ♪.”

I actually had a little sister back in Japan, so the whole idea of “little-sister moe” never really clicked with me. But if it was someone like Petralka—basically a two-dimensional character come to life, literally the image of the sweet but slightly sassy little sister—well, maybe I could sort of see it.

“More importantly, what’s on your mind, Your Majesty—I mean, Petralka?”

“Hm? Ah, yes, Shinichi, that’s right. As things stand, we cannot enjoy otaku culture. These rings only work with someone else who is wearing one; we cannot read these letters.”

“That’s true.”

“And therefore,” Petralka said with a smirk...

The expression was very cute, no question. But for some reason, I had a bad feeling about this.



How did this happen...?

I really didn’t know how.

To my right sat Myusel, looking slightly terrified. To my left sat Petralka, the picture of seriousness.

And I sat in between the two girls, my teeth all but chattering from

nervousness. After all, we were practically shoulder to shoulder. I could have smelled their body odor, if you want to be blunt. And almost as if that weren't enough for them, they both kept creeping closer to me.

Trapped between two young women, I was only just holding on to my emotional equilibrium. I felt like if I made so much as a weird noise, there might be a critical rupture.

Sweat slid down my cheek. My whole body stiff, I whispered in a trembling voice: "P-Please don't kill me..."

Neither Myusel nor Petralka said anything. I thought I would scream from the weight of the silence.

But just then, Petralka whispered to me, "Hey!"

She whispered. Right in my ear. Her breath... The breath of the loli empress was right in my ear...

But as these moe-crazed thoughts were running through my head, she went on, "Hurry and turn the page! We are eager to know what happens next!"

We were still in my office, sitting together on a sofa in my impromptu slice of Akiba.

A manga was open on my knees. It was a fantasy-adventure drama, something I'd chosen because I thought it might be easy for Petralka and Myusel to connect with. I didn't think SF or hard-boiled action would necessarily make any sense to them at the moment, and a four-panel gag strip about everyday life, even less so.

On top of that, I was reading the comic book aloud for the benefit of these two girls who couldn't understand Japanese. As a note, it was only Petralka and Myusel in the room with me. Brooke had excused himself on the grounds that he had work to do in the garden, while Zahar and Minori-san were waiting outside. Petralka had chased them out, judging them a distraction to reading manga.

Then why was Myusel with us, you ask? Because I had asked Petralka to let her stay. After all that stuff about calling her by her first name, I had the sense it would be a pretty bad idea to be alone in a room with her—and anyway, I

wanted Myusel to learn some more Japanese, so I asked that she be allowed to stay while I read.

Normally, I'd be really thankful for a situation like this, but...

Feeling the warmth of a girl to each side of me, I pushed down the groan that threatened to escape.

Scene description in comics is obviously mostly visual; it relies on pictures. Which means that three people trying to read a comic book together naturally get very close to each other as they all lean in to look at the same thing. As result, although the girls didn't seem to notice it, they were cozying up to me in a way that would never normally have happened.

Every time I made to turn the page, my elbow would brush the swell of Myusel's... well, *you* know. And my other arm was basically pressed permanently against Petralka's modest endowment. Not only that, but the sweet, flowery scent that drifted from their hair enveloped me from both sides. For a healthy teenage guy, it was sort of like an endurance race.

Is this how all those guys in those ero games feel?

I was desperately regretting my choice of a manga. If I had picked a light novel, something where the story is told primarily through prose, I might have been able to avoid this situation... But it was too late for should-haves. Both of my companions were absorbed in the first story they'd ever seen from another world, and if I tried to say "Let's read something else" now, even Myusel might kill me, let alone Petralka.

And then...

"Oh...!" When I turned the page, Myusel made a happy noise from beside me. "This is about you, isn't it, Master? I recognize this word."

She was pointing to the kanji 可能, glossed with the hiragana reading *kanou*. The word meant "able," "capable," or "possible," and was written with different characters than my name, for which the kanji were 加納. But she was right that they sounded the same.

"Oh," I said. "You're right, the readings are the same. But it isn't actually my name—it means something else."

“It does?”

“Kanji characters each have their own meaning. Sometimes you get words that sound the same but mean different things.”

“You do?”

Myusel blinked, at once confused and impressed.

“Wow, you’re really a quick learner, Myusel,” I said.

Yes, it was just hiragana and katakana, barely a hundred characters in total, but trying to pick up things like that when the only time you could study was late at night after a full day of work was no mean feat. I knew she was smart.

“Oh, no, Master. It’s all because you stay up so late helping me study. I never imagined the day might come when I would be able to read any type of writing,” she murmured.

She had discovered the joy of being able to read and write, even if she was learning the language of another world, and it had motivated her to soak up Japanese like a sponge. As for me, seeing this lovely young woman so happy made me realize all the time I’d spent teaching her had been worth it.

“What are these characters here?” she asked.

“Those are called onomatopoeia. They’re sort of tricky...”

However, all this joy had caused me to completely forget the girl sitting on the other side of me. Just for a moment, mind you, but I totally missed the glare Petralka had fixed on me.

“Shinichi!” Petralka exclaimed. She jumped up from the sofa, the spell broken.

“Huh? Oh! Right, right. Sorry, Your Majesty.”

“I thought I told you to call me Petralka!”

“Oh, sorry about that, Petralka,” I said hastily, but it was too little, too late. Without a word, Petralka grabbed my arm and pulled straight up—and then, to my disbelief, she plopped herself down right where the manga had been a second ago.

I.e., right on my knees.



Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!

“P-Petralka?!”

She grabbed my flailing hand and brought it, comic book at all, down on her own knees. So I ended up with her sitting on my lap and me basically hugging her from behind. And yes, she was small, but to read manga like this, I would basically have to rest my chin on her shoulder...!

We were definitely a bit *too* close now.

I was embarrassed and also kind of happy to have this loli-ish girl on my lap, but I didn’t even want to think about the misunderstandings that would ensue if anyone caught us like this.

“Th-Th-Th-This is definitely not okay!”

“Silence! Our neck gets tired when we have to look from the side!”

“I’m not arguing that point, but—”

“Do not concern yourself—read! And you, maid,” she said, fixing her eyes on Myusel. “Go make us tea! Our cup has gotten cold; boil us a new one!”

“Wha? Oh! Y-Yes, right away!” Myusel was up quick as a shot.

“Servants ought to serve,” Petralka said with a triumphant look.

The words were victorious and hurtful. Myusel, a terrified expression on her face, bowed again and left the room almost at a run.

“Erm, Your Majesty?”

“Petralka.”

“Sorry. Petralka. Are you... angry?”

“No, we are not!” she bellowed.

Y’know, in Japanese, the word for “bellow” is literally written with the characters “to shout angrily.” But, sure. You’re not upset.

Not that I could say that to Her Imperial Majesty. Anyway, I felt bad for having ignored her, even if it was just for a moment, so I didn’t press the point.

“You animal. Getting all excited the moment you see a woman.”

“Guh...?!”

Excited? What does she mean, *excited*? To hear a girl talk like that was enough to bring a tear to Big Bro’s eye.

Anyway, was I getting the “animal” treatment? I mean, I guess it was because she wasn’t looking at me as human that she was comfortable sitting on my lap with my arms around her. A nice hug, as if from a pet.

I admit, when Petralka first tossed herself down on my lap, I felt my heart rate spike... but now I saw the reality of it all too clearly.

I sighed inwardly and resumed reading.



It was several days after Petralka’s sudden visit. I had managed to clean up my office a little bit, so one morning I decided to go to town.

I felt I needed to get a grasp of the cultural level of the Eldant Empire. Of course, I could ask Matoba-san for copies of the report from the initial survey team, but then I would have to slog through a dense bureaucratic white paper, and anyway, I wanted to see for myself what my future customers looked like.

If we really wanted to get otaku culture to “stick” in the Empire, we couldn’t just deal with nobles and royals forever. Nerd culture is a real melting pot; anything goes so long as it’s interesting. You could even say otaku culture stands on the shoulders of countless works where sheer interest was counted as righteousness, even if those works have been largely forgotten.

That means that for otaku culture, those who actually pony up the cash and buy the works—the customers whose purchases support the creators and distributors—dictate what’s right; an anime could have the biggest budget in the world, but if it fails to take the otaku into account, it’s going to bomb. This all led to one conclusion—if I was going to spread otaku-ism around here, I would have to get buy-in from the biggest demographic around: the commoners.

We couldn’t just bring in a bunch of random geeky stuff and hope for the best. An electrical grid would be necessary at some point, and if we couldn’t

teach people to read, this would all be for nothing. Never mind books; even to get anime and games out there, we would need theaters and stuff.

Forget SimCity: this was SimAkiba.

And so it was that I was walking to town, accompanied by Minori-san, who was acting as my bodyguard, and Brooke, who was acting as my guide and baggage carrier. This was the first time I'd seen the town up close, not counting when I had glimpsed it out the window of our horse-drawn—or rather, bird-drawn—carriage.

"Huh..."

It looked more or less like it had passing by, but actually getting out and walking around revealed details I hadn't noticed until then.

The smell, for instance. There was a burned odor, enough to be noticeable but not enough to be really off-putting, along with the smell of something rotten. The burning was probably from hearths or cook fires; the reek was probably trash or toilets. In fact, I recalled hearing that the palace at Versailles didn't have any toilets. What a crappy bit of trivia.

Without a sewage system, or even businesses that specialized in taking the stuff away, having a toilet inside would only have resulted in trapping the smell in your house. It seemed there were only a few options, and most people picked one of them: throw it in a river, use it as fertilizer, or just leave it in a field someplace. I'd heard that in Europe, they used to just dump it out the back of the building or even feed it to the pigs as slop. Maybe they did similar things here.

Incidentally, at our mansion, Brooke took the stuff away, allegedly to use as compost in an outbuilding, so we were able to use the toilet without worrying too much—but that probably wasn't practical among the commoners.

"I guess you don't think about two-dimensional characters having to do that sort of thing."

This was basically a straight-up fantasy world, but these were living people, with all the biological functions that entailed.

Another thing I noticed was that most signs had pictures on them. Presumably

this was because so few people could read. Obviously, drawing lifelike images takes a lot of skill, and most of the pictures on these signs were more symbolic than anything. The upshot was that even though I couldn't read the local alphabet, I knew that this place was a tavern, that one was a blacksmith, over here was a bakery, and so on and so forth.

But the number-one thing that struck me as I walked around town was...

"Does something amuse y', Master?" Brooke, walking just ahead of me, turned and asked. At first I'd been a little intimidated to have him so close, but as I got used to him I found his wide, round eyes and his huge mouth, which looked like he was forever smiling, surprisingly lovable. Lots of people keep snakes as pets. I thought maybe I was beginning to see the attraction.

"Everything. There's a lot of food for thought here."

"Is that so? I'm sure I see only the same things I do every day." His face didn't change, but from the lilt of his voice and the way his tongue flicked in and out of his mouth, I guessed he was being a little sardonic.

"Well, we didn't have lizardmen or elves where I come from, for one thing."

We'd had enough "races," black and white and Asian and whatever, to drive us crazy. Here, though, everyone seemed to have some unique trait—there were humans everywhere, but about one out of every ten people was an elf or a lizardman or something else. Brooke didn't draw any special attention.

"If y' want to see demi-humans," Brooke said, "I suggest you try th' training grounds just outside town."

"Training grounds?"

"Sort of a military base," Minori-san broke in. "It's got dormitories for the rank-and-file, along with some training facilities. A platoon from the JSDF is actually borrowing some space there. Apparently, the military is the easiest place for demi-humans to get work in this country."

"Huh..."

You know, I had been wondering where the other soldiers stayed who had been riding in the LAV. I guess it was these training grounds.

I decided to go have a look.



The training grounds turned out to look like a gigantic schoolyard. In one corner, I could see the dormitories and what looked like a storehouse, but other than that it was just a big, flat space. It definitely seemed like the sort of place soldiers would use to train. Incidentally, it looked like the JSDF was holed up in tents around the storehouse and the dorms. The words “Japan Self-Defense Force” printed across the dark-green tents were unmistakably out of place in this fantasy world.

But whatever.

“Are those—” My eyes went wide as I observed what I thought—what I was pretty sure—were soldiers training. Ten humans. Ten elves. Ten lizardmen. “—children?!”

“Well, yes,” Brooke said, with a tone of *What is this guy so surprised about?*

“But... But...”

Under the laws of Japan, I was still a minor myself, and the soldiers (?) on that field definitely included some kids who looked like they were in their mid-teens, or maybe even younger. About half of them were practicing with wooden swords, but the other half were making complicated gestures. Then they thrust out their right hands, and—

“Yikes!”

Popopopop! There was a series of small explosions, and a row of sparks showered the ground in front of them. Just for a second, I thought I’d seen balls of light come out of their outstretched palms.

“Is that...”

“Magic practice,” Minori-san confirmed. “Although they aren’t strong enough to really hurt anyone yet.”

“...Are they practicing *Fireball*?”

“Probably.”

No way. Before this display of genuine offensive magic I could only stand open-mouthed.

I was pretty sure I had heard that lizardmen lacked magical power, so it was impossible for them to really use magic, and indeed, it was all humans and elves standing there making sparks.

Even so, though...

“This is a training ground, after all,” Minori-san said with a bit of a frown. It was weird. She didn’t seem very happy about what she was seeing. “They’re mostly focused on those kids, who are going to be soldiers. Like we said, around here, the quickest way for a demi-human to find gainful employment is to join the army.”

According to Minori-san, demi-humans normally didn’t even have what we would think of as citizenship. But they could gain it if they joined the military and spent a certain amount of time as a soldier. Whether they stayed in the military after that or went and got a civilian job, service in the armed forces was the quickest way for demi-humans to make their way in the human world.

“I m’self was in the military once,” Brooke said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Of course. Otherwise, I surely wouldn’t have been allowed to work in a noble’s house.”

As a manservant, Brooke had to do a lot of physical labor; it was actually probably a pretty good job for a lizardman. A stint in the military would, I guessed, acted as proof that he was a halfway decent person and improved his chances of getting hired. Although Brooke had a magic ring just like the rest of us, it apparently wasn’t given to him because he worked with me, but rather had been granted when he joined the army.

“I presume Myusel was also in the armed forces at some point,” he said.

“No. Seriously?” I asked.

I didn’t doubt him; I just couldn’t imagine the willowy, vulnerable Myusel in the army. I guess there are a lot of different kinds of jobs in the military, so she

wouldn't necessarily have been on the front lines or anything.

"I know what you're thinking," Minori-san said, "but I wouldn't press anyone about it if I were you. There are class divisions in our own world, too, and societies that accept them. Think about India, where there's still effectively a caste system, even if it's been officially outlawed."

"...Yeah," I said. "And I hear you can get citizenship through military service in the US, too."

The point was, in a multiracial—practically multi-species—environment like this one, it wasn't easy to just demand peace or equality. This went beyond skin color; lizardmen, for example, were clearly a different form of life. It was sort of like saying cats or dogs should be treated equally.

But still...

I heard some kind of bell ring.

"Oh," Brooke said. "They're on break."

Apparently so: the kids scattered in small groups around the training grounds. A group of three elvish children headed straight for us.

"What're you doing?" they asked, their eyes shining with curiosity. This sort of thing made it obvious that they really were still children—they couldn't restrain their interest in something new.

"You seem different from the 'sehlf dee-fens fource' people. What are you here for?"

"Hmm..." I pondered how to explain, then beckoned Brooke over. I pulled out one of the manga I'd brought from the carrier on his back and showed it to the elf kids.

"I want to tell everyone about these things."

"What's that?"

The cover of this particular manga boasted a young man holding a sword. Maybe everyone here was already used to simplified or symbolic language because of all the signs around town; the people in the Eldant Empire didn't seem to show any aversion to manga images like this. If anything, they really

seemed to like them.

One of the kids took the manga from me and began turning the pages with obvious eagerness. But then...

“Hey, what’s it say?” he asked, upset.

He could get a sort of general sense that something interesting was going on, but being unable to read the thing sucked the fun out of it. We were definitely going to need to get our hands on a translator as quickly as possible.

Wait a second. Remember Myusel. Even if we translated these books, these kids probably couldn’t read their own language.

What was the educational system like here, anyway?

“What do you guys normally do for fun?” I asked.

“Fun? We don’t get to have any,” the elf children responded, puffing out their cheeks. “When there’s no training, we have to help cut the grass on the training field. Plus, there’s livestock to look after and fields to plant.” The boys were speaking quickly. They seemed to think I was making fun of them.

“H-Hold on. You mean...”

They didn’t have any time set aside just to play? Back in Japan, young children had all sorts of free time, and plenty of ways to enjoy it. Some kids might be inspired by the patrol cars on children’s TV programming to become detectives; others might find they enjoy collecting bugs so much that they decide to become a scholar.

But kids in this world didn’t have that kind of time. Adults around here just quietly did their jobs, and they would naturally expect kids to help. There was no way and no time to disseminate media. And anyway, they would subconsciously believe, based on experience, that that was simply the way the world was. It was practically brainwashing.

I pictured Myusel, studying hiragana late at night. How surprised she had been when I offered to help her learn to read and write, even though there was no practical benefit to me.

It struck me once again how much I—and all Japanese kids—had been

brought up under a thick protective blanket. It wasn't just a question of an educational system. It was a fundamental difference in national systems, in economic power, in the very construction of society. My happiness was a miraculous gift provided by the fortuitous alignment of a very, very specific set of circumstances.

Otaku are all about Japanese pop culture. Maybe that's just a way of saying otaku couldn't exist except in Japan or somewhere like it.

"You don't read books or anything?"

"How could we? They're super expensive, and only nobles and scholars can read and write, anyway," the kids answered, pursing their lips.

"Nobody teaches you? I mean, how to read and write?"

"What noble would teach a commoner how to do that?" the elves answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"...Hm."

The most interesting manga. The most heart-pounding novels. The most exciting anime and games. These kids didn't know about any of it; they didn't even have the ability to understand it.

I just—

I patted one of the elf kids on the head. He gave me a mystified look. Suddenly, I found a wish forming in my heart. A wish to give kids like this something they could enjoy, even if only for a short while. To give them entertainment.

I was in a fantasy world, for crying out loud. At the very least, we could all enjoy ourselves by pretending to go on a little adventure.



We took a quick tour of town and got back to the mansion around three in the afternoon. That was the number on my watch, anyway; obviously, it wasn't specifically a way of telling time used in this world. Matoba-san had told me that the length of a day and even a week here were about the same as in our world, so there was no need for me to reset my watch.

There was, of course, a reason we'd come back so early. There was a guest we had to entertain, one who visited nearly every day.

"Hmm!" Her Imperial Majesty, Empress Petralka of the Holy Eldant Empire, peered at a manga from where she was perched on my knees, which were now where she always sat. "To think that a bard would confront a crimson dragon, a designated dangerous species! Surely he stands no chance, armed only with his bow and his songs. What could he be thinking? Shinichi, will you not read the next page posthaste?!"

Petralka was in high spirits. Ever since her visit a few days ago, she had shown up every day at about this time and ordered me to read comic books to her. The way her voice rose as she demanded that I continue showed how earnestly the young ruler was enjoying the manga.

But what was the story here? Was it really all right for the ruler of the whole empire to take daily jaunts out of the castle like this? Yes, Zahar and several bodyguards waited just outside the room, but she still seemed just a little too cavalier. Even if, as I guessed, that knight Garius and Prime Minister Zahar were taking care of the real administrative work.

So here I was, all but wrapping my arms around a beautiful young woman sitting on my lap—if anyone had seen it, they might have wondered what I'd done to deserve such a reward. Yet from my perspective, it was surprisingly problematic.

Think of it this way: if I let even a remotely dirty thought enter my head, and if that should cause any *biological* change in me, Petralka would know immediately, and would probably have me beheaded for *lèse-majesté*.

It's possible I might get away with a very profuse apology. Either way, these were not favorable working conditions. However light a girl might be, having her sitting on your lap for an hour or more will make your legs go numb. Reading all the dialogue and sound effects made my throat dry, so my voice started to crack. I really hoped she would let me go soon.

Just about at the time when, on a normal day, I figured we would soon be taking a break—

"Your Majesty. Master." A knock and Myusel's voice came from the other side

of the door. “If you’ll pardon me.”

The door opened, and Myusel entered the office wheeling a silver cart. A sweet scent reached my nose. I looked at the cart and saw a silver platter piled with pastries that looked an awful lot like cream puffs. My eyes went wide; Myusel, with a shy smile, said, “Here’s tea, and cream *runto* to go with it.”

I found myself looking intently at her. “I didn’t ask for tea.”

“No, sir,” she said. “But I thought both of you might be getting tired about now...”

That was a maid for you! Very considerate. She’d brought us some sweets to revive our flagging energy.

“Thanks, that’s a help,” I said. “How about we take a little break, then?”

“What are you talking about?!” Petralka demanded angrily. “We’re just getting to a good part!”

“My throat’s bone-dry, I can hardly read. Come on, let’s have tea.” I smiled and adopted a tone like I was talking to a small child. But that had the opposite of the effect I wanted.

In retrospect, I realized how much it bothered Petralka that she looked so young, and how much she hated to be treated like a child. I knew she was sixteen, but not only did she not look like it, her constant, self-centered demands made her seem younger than she was and led me to speak the way I had.

Her displeasure was obvious. Slowly, the child empress got off my lap. I felt a momentary relief—until she spun and glared at Myusel. Then she began to upbraid her: “Who do you think you are, anyway! Base woman, always... always interfering!”

Perhaps she had been, in her own way, quietly putting up with Myusel’s behavior until now. Finally, all her annoyance came pouring out.

“Like just now! It’s as though you *knew* we were at a good part of the story!”

“I— I—!” Myusel had turned completely white under this withering assault. And no wonder. Childish or no, she was dealing with the empress of the entire

nation here. “I just thought the master might be tired...”

That made perfect sense, but to the enraged absolute monarch, her words were like throwing gas on a fire.

“Do you dare speak back to us?!” Petralka’s voice was shaking; her face was as red as if she had been insulted. “You— You vile half-breed!”

“I’m v-very sorry...!” Myusel said, throwing herself prostrate on the ground.

Petralka almost made it sound like being a half-elf was a crime, and Myusel didn’t seem to know how to defend herself. She could only beg for forgiveness. I just stood there, agog at the textbook example of discrimination playing out before my eyes.

I have to do something. I don’t know what, but I have to stop this.

Despite the thought running through my head, anything I could say only seemed likely to fan the flames of Petralka’s rage. So I stood there, working my mouth open and closed.

Then, someone jumped straight into the middle of this hideous battle.

An exasperated voice came from the direction of the still-open door. “What’s all this commotion?”

“Oh...!”

I stiffened involuntarily. It was the silver-haired hunk, the knight Garius. He didn’t inspire a lot of confidence in me, partly because I had flat-out contradicted him the very first time we’d met, and partly because of Minori-san’s fujoshi fantasies about us. There was also his serious, unbending demeanor, the fact that he was both a scholar and a warrior, and just his overall air of total competence—it was all a bit much for me to handle.

“I heard you were here, Your Majesty, and when I come to check on you, what do I find?” He was looking into the office with a frown.

Garius’s appearance practically screamed *goody two-shoes royal knight!!*, so maybe he would take Petralka to task for abusing Myusel. I mean, knights were supposed to defend the defenseless, right?

“Petralka... Ahem, Your Majesty.”

“Hm?”

He glanced at Petralka, as well as the long-suffering Myusel, who was still on the ground, and heaved a sigh. Then he began walking toward the ruler...

“Er... Garius...-san...?”

...and then right past her. He calmly sat down on the sofa on the far side of the desk from me. He made no sign of trying to intervene with Petralka—in fact, it was almost as if he didn’t see either her or Myusel.

“Aren’t you going to stop her?”

“Once Her Majesty’s ire is aroused, it doesn’t easily subside,” he said bluntly. “Just bear with her until she tires herself out.”

He sounded like an older brother who had resigned himself to his little sister’s temper tantrums. Actually, come to think of it, I guess the two of them were technically related.

“No, wait, hang on, we have to stop this!”

“Stop it? Why?” Garius asked, genuinely mystified. “If she’s too loud for you, just plug your ears.”

Is this guy for real?

“That’s not the problem! Myusel is—”

“Hm?” Garius blinked and took another look at Petralka and Myusel, as if noticing the maid’s existence for the first time. “Myusel? Is she that half-elf servant? What about her?”

“The empress is shouting her lungs out at her, even though she didn’t do anything wrong.”

“If the servant has done something to displease Her Majesty, what else would you expect?” He really didn’t seem to understand what I was getting at. “It’s not likely she’ll be killed, anyway. The occasional beating is an occupational hazard. Anyway, as a half-elf, she wouldn’t normally have been able to become a servant in a noble household. All the more reason she can consider this part of the job. I’m sure she knew this might happen. And if she didn’t, it only shows she’s not qualified to be a maid.”

“What the—?!” I stared at him, all but lost for words.

Right in front of my eyes, Myusel was being attacked for something she bore no responsibility for—a mere accident of birth—and there was nothing she could say to defend herself; she could only huddle in fear.

“If you want to hit me, try this.”

Those were the words with which Brooke had handed me a stick. I remembered how Myusel had been more worried about my injured hand than about Brooke, who had been beaten through no fault of his own.

Apparently, it was only natural. Here in the Eldant Empire, it was considered normal.

“Hrrgh...”

I felt an uncharacteristic anger simmering deep in my guts.

“Whatever happened to the knightly virtues?” I growled.

“Knightly virtues?” Garius raised a bemused eyebrow.

Even this simple gesture managed to ooze refinement. Outwardly, he really was the picture of the perfect knight. But everything he said was full of casual discrimination and bias. And I couldn’t stand it anymore.

“What have the knightly virtues to do with this situation?” Garius drawled.

He doesn’t know. He really doesn’t know.

“The nobles who stake their names as knights for the glory of the Holy Eldant Empire are thoroughly schooled in etiquette and their own military duties. That is a knight’s virtue.”

So apparently, humbling the strong and protecting the weak didn’t enter into it around here.

Now that I thought about it, bushido, “the way of the warrior”—a system of ethics often compared with the ways of knights—was said by some to have been developed in the Edo era, starting in the seventeenth century. Some people claim it didn’t exist during the time when the samurai were actually fighting. Supposedly it wasn’t a practical battlefield philosophy, but a sort of

armchair samurai-ism developed by warriors trying to feed themselves in a time when the fighting arts were in decline.

From that perspective, given that the Eldant Empire was currently facing border skirmishes with its neighbors, it might simply be that hard-eyed realism was the order of the day; there was no room for ideals of defending the defenseless.

“It looks to me like you’ve misunderstood what it means to be a knight,” Garius said. “Listen to me. A knight protects this state, the Holy Eldant Empire; he is the embodiment of its laws and principles. If something threatens those principles, he will of course give himself in the fight against it, but he has no right to intervene when things are as they should be.”

“As they should be?!”

“She isn’t even an elf—she’s a half-blood, a mixed-breed, and Petralka is the empress of the Holy Eldant Empire. Her Majesty holds the power of life and death.”

I didn’t say anything immediately, but boy was I pissed. The people here swallowed that kind of thinking hook, line, and sinker, without sparing so much as a thought for how much the objects of their indifference would be hurt.

Ah. Now I see it. I got a bit dizzy as the thought hit me.

It was all about the labels we gave things.

That’s just the way it is.

He’s just that kind of guy.

Labels cause us to see something, or someone, from only one angle.

He’s just an otaku. He’s just an off-worlder. She’s only a half-breed.

Simple, symbolic words like that pigeonhole a person; make us feel as if we understand them. And I hated that. There are all kinds of different otaku, for example. Good guys and bad. Even the “lolicon” crowd, who are often broadbrushed as practically criminals, isn’t a group you can boil down to a single word or idea. Yes, there are those nut jobs who kidnap children in order to sexually torment them. But there are also loli fans who would give their lives

to keep children from getting hurt.

And yet people find the lowest common denominator and then stop trying to learn anything else.

It's okay to make fun of him because he's an otaku.

It's okay to discriminate against her because she has mixed blood.

It's okay—

Petralka was still shouting. "How can you expect us to drink tea made by a half-elf, anyway?! We heard even the elves wouldn't take the likes of you! We heard you had to crawl off and live in a swamp! Stay back—We don't want the stink of mud to get on us!"

There was no way any of that could be true. Myusel must have been paralyzed by fear and despair; I could see her jaw hanging open as she lay on the ground.

I saw... myself.

I thought back to the time I had tried to confess my love to my old friend and she had shot me down, saying, "You're an otaku, right?" Her judgment had been based on what the world thought about otaku; she hadn't considered me for me.

And what about me? At the time, I told myself something like, *Girls these days just don't care*. I'd put my friend in a box just like she'd done to me. It was how I tried to cope.

She hadn't had any real rationale for the way she'd insulted me, yet I couldn't answer back. I simply told myself that that's how the world works and gave up. It left me to dream of that moment again and again, pathetically howling the words I hadn't been able to say.

I wanted to become one of those admirable main characters of a manga or anime or game or light novel. Let them say I was hung up on the weirdest things—I wanted to be one of those awesome people who would dropkick injustice wherever he found it, boldly proclaim what he believed, even if it made enemies of everyone around him.

My textbooks. Manga and anime and games and novels. This was what they'd taught me.

"Petralka!"

Before I knew what I was doing, I had grabbed her wrist. It was an impulsive action. Garius jumped up from the sofa in shock.

Everything froze, the atmosphere in the room practically icing over.

I had meant to yell at Petralka. To make her understand the pain of being shouted at like she was doing to Myusel. I suspected no one had ever yelled at her before. Yeah, yeah, not very mature. I didn't care!

That was my plan..... But.

"...Shinichi...?"

Petralka looked back at me, her arm still raised to throw one of the cream puffs—or cream *runto* or whatever—at the cowering Myusel. She didn't look angry, just completely baffled. I took the expression for surprise. Maybe even a bit of fear.

She looked so young, like a scolded child. I felt the anger drain out of me like the air from a popped balloon. I gently took the pastry from the wide-eyed child and tried to smile.

"Ahem. Well, er... How do I put this...?"

Crap. I needed some really cool line, and I wasn't getting anything.

What would a main character say at a time like this? I did a high-speed search through my mental library, but came up empty.

As I stood there dumbly, Petralka's expression began to change. She frowned, then glared at me.

"Shinichi, you cur! What do you mean by trying to take the part of such a base creature?!"

At a loss for anything better, I spoke from the heart. "What do you mean, what do I mean?! It was too painful to watch anymore! I know what it's like to be taunted just because of some dumb label."

“Label? What are you talking—”

“Petralka, listen,” I said quietly. I wasn’t lecturing. I was practically pleading. “In my culture, we don’t have social differences like this, okay?”

“Hrm?”

She looked at me, puzzled. She really didn’t know what I was talking about. Honestly, I could feel myself turning hot with embarrassment—but I told myself to just deal with it and kept talking. “Our culture is built on, you know... Liberty and equality and fellowship.”

You know, I’d heard Japanese otaku culture had made particular headway in France. Maybe it was because those were precisely the principles that country was built on? What a random thought. Never mind.

“If you’re going to enjoy the culture I’m bringing here, you have to learn from it, too... Er, I think. Maybe you don’t. But anyway, you have to at least understand it.”

Petralka was looking at me as though I had broken into an even foreign-er language than the one I had already been speaking. I glanced around the room to find Garius and even the much-abused Myusel staring at me wide-eyed.

The room was full of silence. Whether it was a heavy silence or light one, I couldn’t tell. But then...

“Shinichi...” Petralka was the first to open her mouth. “What is this ‘equality’ you speak of? Is it the name of a philosopher?”

I didn’t say anything, but just stood there, one hundred percent flummoxed.

I guess sometimes there are words even a magic ring of telepathy can’t help the other person understand. Sometimes translation fails when two languages simply don’t share a particular concept. But... Wait. Did Petralka really not know what equality was? Or had she just never been taught, having been brought up as the empress?

I felt an odd shudder go through me. Garius was giving me an incredulous look.

“Freedom means to be unbound or without limits—Do you, Kanou Shinichi,

speak of being not held accountable to the law for your actions?”

Wait, wait, wait, where’d he get that idea?!

“Um...” Myusel spoke up hesitantly. “Is ‘fellowship’... Is it some kind of romantic feeling...?”

“That’s what you’re worried about?!” I said desperately, and more loudly than I meant to.

My initial angry outburst had been because of the bald discrimination I’d witnessed, but this went beyond a question of who was right or wrong about what. Myusel was one thing, but even the authorities here, Petralka and Garius, were completely trapped by their fixed views of the world and made no effort to see any other possibility. Their consciousness was pervaded by the notion of class structure—in fact, their own self-concept was built on it, so that they couldn’t so much as question it. It’s like how a frog in a well can’t imagine the ocean.

“Aw, for cryin’ out loud,” I groaned, holding my head. I had expected we would need to establish an infrastructure before bringing in otaku stuff—electricity, literacy, that sort of thing. But now I was finding I would have to teach them the simplest philosophical concepts, too?!

Really, though, otaku stories were products of modern Japan, meaning things like individuality and equality were fundamental to them. A lot of them were hostile to things like totalitarianism and discrimination. But as a result, if the reader had no understanding of individuality or equality, they were likely to find it hard to sympathize with a lot of main characters.

I was just starting to give in to despair when Garius spoke up.

“Most interesting.”

Interesting? Did he just say *interesting*?

“I believe you were about to let your anger lead you to criticize Her Majesty,” he said. “Was that also a product of your so-called liberty, equality, and fellowship? Whatever the case, it is most intriguing to see Her Majesty’s anger abate on account of a few words.”

This reaction from Garius was completely unexpected.

“Truth be told, the culture here in our Holy Eldant Empire has been stagnant for nearly half a century. Some even claim we’ve reached a cultural nadir. As the war drags on, it leaves us with scant opportunity to enjoy new culture or gain anything from beyond our borders.”

I didn’t speak, but I thought that that made sense. Culture, especially a robust and diverse one, is only possible if you have the spare resources for it. Culture does develop during wartime, of course, and it can even become quite mature, but it will always be more limited than in peacetime—only certain things will be permitted. That’s obvious enough from looking at the likes of Japan during World War II, or China during the Cultural Revolution.

“For some time now, the literati have conjectured that this impedes the ability of the common people to live full lives. But because the problem is effectively an invisible one, we’ve put off dealing with it time and again.”

“Yeah, I guess I could see that.”

I knew this knight was a sharp one. In a really broad sense, he was practically talking sociology. He had a bird’s-eye view of the world, and yes, it might be a borrowed way of thinking, but for a basically medieval place like this, I couldn’t blame him.

“It’s precisely the reason Prime Minister Zahar and his cohort encouraged trade with your delegation. I was skeptical of his thinking—but I may have to reconsider.”

The handsome knight stood and walked toward me. He stopped almost nose-to-nose with me. If I’d been a woman, I probably would have just swooned.

He’s close! He’s way too close! What’s the deal with standing right there?!

And he had this little smile on his face. Garius took my hand, like a valiant knight taking a maiden’s—guuuhh?!

“You seemed an effete and untrustworthy boy to me, but then you risk your own reputation in order to intercede for a worthless servant girl. I must say, I’m rather interested in your culture.”

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Is he saying he's interested in me?!

"I shall cooperate with you. You may yet break through the barrier that lies between us." He was whispering. Somehow, it was almost sensual. A chill passed through me and all the hair on my body stood up, but then—

"Garius!" Petralka's voice scattered the rose petals. "You shouldn't be so forward!"

"...Ah." Garius dropped my hand and bowed. "My apologies, Your Majesty."

"Such things are not for you alone to decide," Petralka said, angry once again. "You should go through us, as is proper." Then she looked at me and said, "Shinichi. As Garius said, today you risked your own dishonor to remonstrate with us. In deference to your boldness, we forgive both you and that servant."

"Th... Thanks."

"However, we have another order for you." She narrowed her eyes. "Teach me your so-called 'Japanese' as well. We find it unbearable that a serving girl should possess knowledge the empress does not. We shall become the most adept at your Japanese, and then we shall judge whether or not the culture you bring shall save the culture of our own nation!"

...In other words, she was trying to dress it up, but she pretty much just wanted to hurry up and read some manga, right? Not that I was about to voice a thought that could lead to my immediate and gruesome demise; I only nodded.

"Garius," Petralka said, "we're going back to the castle. Call Zahar. Inform him that we will henceforth be visiting this mansion every day as part of our duties of office!"

...So she *was* sneaking out of the castle all this time.

"Starting tomorrow, Shinichi, make sure you have time in your schedule for us!"

"Erm, about as much as today...?"

"Starting tomorrow"? You've been coming here every day!

"That will suffice!" Petralka nodded in satisfaction, then eyed Myusel. The

maid shrunk away from her. “In addition. Myusel, was it? We shall not permit any laxity from you,” the empress said haughtily.

“Eh? O-Of course, Your Majesty.” Myusel nodded so quickly that I couldn’t imagine she’d even had time to really absorb what Petralka had said.

“And you and Shinichi shall not take it upon yourselves to study Japanese together.”

“...O-Of course not, Your Majesty.” Still nodding emphatically.

It looked like Petralka had given up insulting Myusel—but instead, she’d developed a strange hostility toward her. I had a very bad feeling about this, but I was terrified that if I tried to clarify the situation here and now, the conversation would spiral off to places I really didn’t want it to go.

“We shall see you tomorrow, then. Garius, let’s go!”

“Your Majesty. I wait upon you.”

And then the Empress and her knight whirled out of the room like a departing tornado.

They left an uncomfortable silence behind them.

“Ahem...” Myusel and I looked at each other. I scratched my cheek in embarrassment. “Myusel. I’m really sorry, but could you make some more tea? This stuff must be cold by now. You went to all the trouble of making these snacks, so I’d like to enjoy them with proper hot tea.”

“Oh, yes, sir.” Myusel stood up, smiling happily. “I’ll bring it right away, Master.”

I watched her push the cart out of the room, and let out a sigh of relief.

But at the moment, there was something I still didn’t know—what did the Holy Eldant Empire make of what I was doing there?

Chapter Four: Thy Name Is Invader

I was on a hill not far from the mansion, basking in the warmth of the setting sun. Across from the hill was pasture land, and sheep that looked like big balls of wool were munching contentedly on the grass. I could just look out and enjoy the sight. It was completely idyllic. I wouldn't have been surprised to hear someone yodeling in the background.

All I had to do was look up a little, though, and all that changed. Why? Because a school of fish was flying overhead.

"What's the deal with that?"

Fish! I mean... I think. They definitely didn't look like any birds I knew, at least. These creatures looked more or less like cutlassfish. They were covered in silver scales that glinted in the sunlight, their bodies roughly the shape of swords. Slithering among the clouds, it was impossible to take them for any kind of earthly avian. They did have a gossamer membrane that hung elegantly down from their backs and tails; it was the one thing that looked remotely like something you might find on a normal flying animal.

"Those are called *heshifu ikusu*, or skyfish," Myusel said from beside me. "They're a kind of wind sprite. They always travel exactly the same path. The wind always blows wherever they pass, so we plant windeater grass along their routes. That's why we're able to use this area to raise sheep."

"Hmm..."

Wind sprites and windeater grass, huh? That's a fantasy world for you, I guess. The things Myusel was telling me were probably blindingly obvious to people from this world, but to me it all sounded as believable as an ancient legend.

"Where I come from, grass takes sunlight and water to grow, and nutrients from the soil."

"Do you not have windeater grass in your home country, Master?"

“I sure don’t think so...”

“Windeater grass feeds on the sprite power released by the wind sprites. If you go to the desert, you can even see it floating on the wind.”

“.....Desert.”

Did that mean the desert had turned green? But these weren’t dandelion puffs we were talking about. Grass floating on the wind...? I couldn’t imagine it from anything in my experience. I guessed that made sense. I mean, we didn’t have “sprite power” or whatever on earth. Another way of looking at it would be to say that the presence of sprite power was precisely what led organisms in this world to evolve this way.

Come to think of it... I vaguely remembered reading somewhere that if the color of the sun were slightly different, plants wouldn’t be green, but more like red. Something to do with the color of the chloroplasts. Maybe this was similar.

“I mean... Almost.” I smiled a little sadly and began to walk.

Yes: this was another world. When the wind caught the hair of the maid beside me, it briefly revealed those pointy ears, a reminder that she had elf blood running in her veins.

“It means I’m not quite sure if things will go the way I expect them to...”

We were heading for a building just nearby. In a word, it was a massive windmill. The building was about five stories high. It was basically a cylinder with a cone on top, like a huge red pencil, and there was a gigantic green windmill attached. The walls were made of brick, and a number of black marks the shape of stretched-out raindrops made it clear the place was pretty old.

Still, there were a lot of people hard at work all around the structure. Many of them had spades in their hands, filling cracks in the walls with mortar or concrete or something. With larger cracks, they would first fill it with a big stone or reinforce it with wood before plastering it over.

In other words, this thing was under repair.

This windmill had never been used much, so the Eldant Empire had given it to me—or rather, to Alternate World General Entertainment Provider Amutech.

Currently it was being renovated by laborers from the same Empire—humans of course, but also elves and lizardmen and red-faced, stout people who seemed to be this world's equivalent of dwarves.

This group was actually the Eldant Empire's Army Corps of Engineers. They might or might not have been suited to doing the interior design on some noble's mansion or something, but they were used to working on the battlefield—rush jobs were their bread and butter. They could toss up a fortress or two in a few days. Seriously reliable help. I basically told them, "The details don't matter, just make this building usable"—and that was all they needed to hear.

I peeked inside and found work proceeding apace. The workers in here, however, were not with the Eldant army, but the JSDF.

The former insides of the windmill—where wind power had driven gears that worked a machine to crush grain—had been largely removed, replaced with electrical wires and a small converter stuck to the wall, among other things. We were going to turn this unused windmill into a wind-powered electric generator.

One major issue with a wind generator is that, because (as you might imagine) it relies on the wind, its output is inherently unstable. Or anyway, so I assumed. In a world where there were wind sprites in the air all the time, who knew?

In addition to this wind-powered generator, the JSDF had also brought in solar battery panels. The point, of course, was for Amutech to have some electricity to work with.

"Myusel, c'mere." I went partway up a spiral staircase that followed the wall and looked out a window. From the windmill's spot on top of the hill, you could see our mansion clearly. Just a little ways away from it stood a former grain storehouse, which the Eldant army and the JSDF were also busily renovating.

"That's where you're going to open your school, isn't it?" Myusel said with admiration.

It sure was. The storehouse would soon be reborn as an educational institution that would lay the groundwork for the arrival of otaku culture. This generator and the solar batteries would both help power the school—an "otaku

training center," if you will.

It had been a month since I'd come to the Eldant Empire. After I had reached the conclusion that basic education would be indispensable to spreading otaku culture, I had leaned on Matoba-san and Petralka to help me obtain these facilities. I figured there would be some resistance, so I was surprised how readily both of them acquiesced, and my "otaku training center" idea got rolling smoothly.

So smoothly it was a little scary, in fact.

I know I joked about this being "SimAkiba," but let's remember, I was a home security guard until not that long ago. For something I had dreamed up to have this many people working on it was kind of intimidating.

"Shinichi!"

As I stood lost in thought, someone called my name. It was a sweet voice that I already knew very well...

"Oh, Petralka."

I suddenly realized that an elegant bird-drawn carriage had stopped beside the windmill—it was mainly white, even the bird that was pulling it. Her Diminutive Majesty was standing beside the carriage, waving at me. The gesture, combined with her silver hair fluttering in the wind, looked awfully adorable. Although if I mentioned it, she would probably just get upset and say I was treating her like a child again.

Myusel and I hurried back down the stairs.

"So this is where you've been," Petralka said as we approached. "We've been looking for you. You weren't at the mansion."

"Huh? I thought we were taking a break from our study sessions today."

"Should the Royal Person refrain from visiting simply because there is no study session?" she said with puppy-dog eyes and just a hint of resentment.

Huh?! Puppy-dog eyes?! *That's not fair, Your Majesty!* ...was, of course, not something I could say, so I just smiled and tried to suppress the moe-ness that welled up within me.

“Well, of course not—”

“Then all is well.” She nodded. Oddly, she seemed almost relieved.

Gah! This empress is so dang cute! She’s like a little kid who tries to make every gesture look as adult as possible.

“There is something we wish to show you today.” Petralka held a hand out at her side, and the knight who appeared to be attending her produced a notebook and handed it to her.

Kanji Study Book was printed across the front of the notebook.

She held it out to me. I took it and opened it. The pages were crammed with characters that looked like worms crawling across the blank space. They were all simple kanji, the sort of thing a Japanese kid would learn early in elementary school. The handwriting wasn’t exactly exemplary, either, but there sure were a lot of characters there.

“This is... really impressive,” I said earnestly. That got a smile from Petralka, who puffed out her (very small) chest proudly.

“You may stand in awe of our intellect.”

“I’m serious. Color me surprised.” I wasn’t trying to flatter her or anything; I really meant it.

This kanji study book was among the things I had asked Matoba-san to bring for me. One of the learning aids for my otaku training center, of course. And I had one for both Petralka and Myusel...

“We had our heraldic scholars analyze the form of your ‘Japanese,’ and we reviewed their report ourself.”

That’s an empress for you, I guess. A whole lot of fuss just to learn a little Japanese. Wait... Wasn’t that kind of unfair?

In any event, Petralka turned to Myusel, standing beside me, and said challengingly, “You see, we could not be bested by a maid.”

“Wha? Er, no, I—”

This left Myusel flustered, of course. Well, I guess anyone would be a bit

thrown off if the absolute ruler of their nation suddenly saw them as a personal rival in learning Japanese.

“This is a fine opportunity,” Petralka said. “How interesting it would be to see which of us has done better at learning Japanese.”

“I— I couldn’t—”

“We begin now!”

Petralka assumed a stance as if she were getting ready for a fistfight. *I guess empresses don’t take no for an answer.* Myusel was at a complete loss to be challenged so suddenly—but of course, Petralka wasn’t going to wait for her. She launched right in:

“*Nama-mugi nama-gome nama-tamago*!” It meant “raw barley, uncooked rice, raw egg,” but that wasn’t the point. It was a tongue-twister.

I cocked my head. I mean, it was impressive that she’d picked that up on her own, but why here? Why now?

In a tizzy, Myusel tried to recite:

“Oh... um... Oh! *Na... Nama... Namamoge, tamagomoge...*?”

She could hardly get her tongue around the words.

Yes! Good! Very good! Myusel was a maid, and a half-elf, and clumsy to boot, and her performance here was completely innocent. I couldn’t help a shiver. Behold, the great and terrible Myusel...!

“What’s wrong?” Petralka gloated. “Can’t you even manage a few simple words? I guess we know what a servant girl’s studying is worth.”

Given that she had specifically forbade Myusel from outdoing her and even had help from scholars whom she had set to studying Japanese—well, all things being equal, it wasn’t surprising that Petralka had emerged triumphant.

Suddenly, a new voice joined the conversation.

“Shinichi-kun? And Your Majesty, too? What are you doing here? Sightseeing?”

It was Minori-san. She must have been assigned to the JSDF unit working on

the windmill. I'd wondered why I hadn't seen her all day, even though she was supposed to be my bodyguard...

"I could ask you the same question, Minori-san. What's with that outfit?"

"What's with what outfit? These are my normal work clothes," she said. But she wasn't wearing her usual tight uniform. She was in dark-colored pants that used plenty of cloth and sturdy-looking, high-laced black boots. But her top half was covered only by a tank top that left her shoulders and more than a little of her cleavage visible. On her head she wore a helmet printed with the letters *JSDF*.

Minori-san always seemed pretty easy-going, but this get-up made her look very much the part of the "construction lady," and made it obvious just how well-endowed she really was. It made me realize what an effect clothing could have on the impression you made on other people.

Still, there were some things that didn't change no matter what you were wearing. The less Minori-san had covering her, the more clearly her figure stood out. The cloth mountains ensconcing her generous chest were especially noticeable. I could just catch a glimpse of the blessed valley at her neckline. I struggled to keep my eyes where they belonged.

"Careful where you're looking," Minori-san said, slouching somewhat to keep her chest out of my line of sight.

"Shinichi," Petralka said. "So you prefer women with large breasts?"

"Eh, I mean, one of the appealing things about Minori-san as a character is that no one's got bigger boobs."

"Don't call me a character," she said, shooting me a dirty glance.

"Hmph. Everyone and their brother is just after all the flesh they can find."

At first, I wasn't sure who had made the annoyed remark. I was too distracted by Minori-san's figure. But finally, it sunk in.

It was Petralka.

"Huh?" I backpedaled strenuously. "Oh, uh, but it's not like I'm saying that all you need is a big rack. Small chests definitely have their own charm." Nothing

good would come of upsetting Her Imperial Majesty. I clenched my fist to emphasize how persuasive I was being. “Think about the *really* young ones! Small chests, budding breasts, flat as a dinner plate—they all focus on the purity of a restrained womanhood, you know? ‘The hidden flower is the most beautiful’? The proverbial purity of a bud before it blooms? The perverse erotic appeal exuded by a girl who still trembles at being exposed?! And above all, the *really* young ones are the very embodiment of nervousness because they haven’t yet been touched—their chests have a quality of new-fallen snow that you just can’t get anywhere else...”

That was as far as I got before I realized the three women around me were giving me very strange looks. In fact, they seemed to have taken a couple steps back. Even Myusel. *Et tu, Myusel?!*

“No! You’ve got it all wrong! I was just trying to explain—”

“Erotic appeal? Perverse?” Minori-san said. “If we weren’t in Eldant, Shinichi-kun, you would definitely be brought up on charges of sexual harassment.”

“No! I’m not trying to—”

“You are indeed a lech, aren’t you, Shinichi?” Petralka said, arms crossed. “And I see you’re willing to accept a great many things. From large breasts to small ones.”

“I’m telling you, I was just answering the question I was asked!”

“We must keep an eye on you, or there’s no telling when you may pounce upon your servant and make her the vessel for your seed.”

“M-Make me—?” Myusel gasped, her face turning red.

“I’m not gonna pounce on anybody! And how can you use language like that about a sweet young girl anyway?!”

“All right, that’s enough out of you.” Minori-san wrapped her arm around my neck and dragged me away from Petralka and Myusel.

When we were at a safe distance, she said in a different tone, “Listen, Shinichi-kun. Do you understand what you’re doing?”

“I swear, sexual harassment was the last thing I—”

“Not that.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Minori-san slip off her ring. “This is a busy construction site, get it? Not a place for people who are going to buy into freedom and equality or whatever.”

She stole a glance at Myusel and Petralka. Petralka appeared to be saying something to the maid, but Myusel didn’t look terrified, so it was probably something less nasty than before.

Minori-san went on. “There are a lot of things here that are very different from our world. The Eldant Empire finds us novel, and they don’t necessarily understand everything about us yet, so they’re letting us do what we want. But do you realize that you’re trying to establish an educational facility that could undermine the whole imperial system?”

“...Let me guess. Matoba-san’s been complaining to you?”

I hadn’t seen much of Matoba-san the past couple of weeks. Once plans to build the school had been settled, he had been going to and fro taking care of finances, red tape, and other details, just like he’d said he would. He’d even been back and forth to Japan several times—he was keeping very busy.

“Not specifically. But...” Minori-san’s expression darkened. She gave a humorless, resigned laugh.

“Shinichi!” I turned when Petralka called my name. She was pointing at Myusel and shouting, “What in the world are you feeding this girl?!”

“Huh? Feeding her? Pretty much the same things I eat,” I answered.

Incidentally, Myusel, Minori-san, and Brooke all ate together. That was obviously the easiest on Myusel, and I figured that since they were all living in the same house together anyway, it might be nice if they could share their meals. Myusel and Brooke were hesitant at first, but they seemed to have taken my “order” to heart, and now everyone generally ate the same thing in the same place.

“The same things?” Petralka asked.

“Uh-huh. The very same,” I said.

“Not some kind of staff meal?”

“Why have her make something separate for herself when she’s already made something for us? It would just be a lot of trouble.”

“That’s not the point. Hrm... Well, that explains it, anyway.”

“Explains what?”

“This servant has a bigger chest than I realized. Although the ribbon at her collar usually hides it.”

“Y-Your Majesty?!” Myusel exclaimed.

“Huh,” I said. “So you think so too, huh?”

“Master?!” Myusel yelped.

Oh, crap! I didn’t give my brain time to catch up with my mouth...

“We see your plan, Shinichi. You’re feeding her nutritious food to enhance her bust size!”

Wait a second. This isn’t like growing vegetables or fattening a pig or something.

Hold on... Wasn’t it?

I gathered that until I had told her to start eating what I was eating, Myusel was subsisting on pretty poor fare. Brooke, too. Their color had visibly improved with the changes in their diets—well, Brooke just seemed to have shed his skin. But he said it was a little earlier than he usually shed, so it probably meant his metabolism had improved. I guess it wouldn’t be that surprising, then, if Myusel, who was young enough that she could still be growing, should find her chest expanding.

Then again, Petralka had probably been better nourished at the same age, but she hadn’t grown up very much. Maybe it was just a difference of dormant potential.

“Curse you, Shinichi... To think you were so obsessed with breasts! You, half-elf! Keep a record of everything you eat! We shall investigate what sort of diet leads to a larger chest and—”

“I’m not obsessed, I swear I’m not!” I protested. “Well, maybe a little

obsessed, but not that much!”

I didn’t have the patience for some kind of *Tale of Genji*-style womanizing.

But then...

“U-Um, Master,” Myusel said. “If... If you prefer them to be larger, I’ll certainly try my best to—”

“Why must you all take everything in the most perverse possible way?!” I cried. They thought I was some pervert who was raising Myusel like an animal to have big breasts!

.....I also decided that starting today, *maybe* I would request stuff made with a lot of milk and cream. But that’s a secret.



And so but anyway.

My work as Amutech’s general manager proceeded bit by bit. But maybe I should have thought a little harder about exactly what that work was.

The entertainment business is essentially a form of gambling. There’s no direct correspondence, like, “If we do this, we’ll make this much profit.” You can take the staff of some hit show, have them make another series using the same methodology, and it can be a huge flop. It isn’t uncommon. I had seen all kinds of examples of it myself.

Obviously, the opposite is also true. The staff or the execs think, *People aren’t going to like this*, or *Let’s just play it by ear*, but then the thing takes off and becomes so big they hardly know what to do.

If you must know, my foray into the entertainment business was not going so well. Why, exactly?

“Come now, Shinichi, be quick about it!” Petralka urged me.

Today was another day of “classes” at the mansion. Just like every day for the last two months. The only thing that had changed was who was participating. The number of my students had increased dramatically.

Lined up in the living room as usual, almost twenty young—mostly teenaged

—nobles sat watching me from closely packed desks.

All of a sudden the room felt awfully small. And this was after I had made them go through an admissions process to narrow down the number of students! If I had accepted everyone who wanted in, I would probably have more than a hundred people in here. Include all their attendants, bodyguards, and entourages, and it would probably have been three times that many.

Apparently the “private academy in foreign culture where the empress herself goes”—in other words, my mansion—had become the talk of the nobility. Although she had originally come to see me in secret, Petralka started coming here publicly, and that meant all the empire’s other nobles now knew about me. They decided that it would be to the nation’s (and their) advantage to proactively learn about this advanced foreign culture that would soon be finding its way into the empire, and they lost no time sending their children to this “academy.”

What was more, the national apparatus of this Holy Eldant Empire was broken into “haves” and “have-nots” based largely on how close you were to Her Majesty the Empress. Hence plenty of people wanted their kids in this “foreign-culture academy” just so they could get close to Petralka.

All this explained why I was in such a hurry to build the school. Obviously, I had no desire to make otaku culture something for the nobility alone. I wanted it to be popular with everyone in the Holy Eldant Empire and, if possible, maybe even some of the neighboring states.

But the reality was, commoners had no way into my “academy.” The difference in education between the children of the nobility and of the lower classes was just too great. Commoners generally couldn’t read and write—as in, they didn’t even necessarily know how to use paper and writing utensils. In contrast, the nobility and those around them were privy to high culture and advanced magical skills; they had a very different way of thinking from the commoners.

There wouldn’t be much I could do about that so long as the “academy” was run solely by the team of me, myself, and I. It was one thing to build a school building, but it was just a vessel; I would still have to create the school as an

institution.

And so there we were.

“Right, right. Ahem. For today—” Urged on by Petralka, I opened a new book.

The number of manga Matoba-san had brought me was now close to a thousand. I could read a series every single day and still not run out for a while. So far I had been sticking to fantasy stories that I thought Petralka could easily sympathize with, but later, as she got more and more familiar with Japanese culture, I figured I could introduce school dramas and maybe some horror stuff.

Even as these thoughts ran through my mind, I couldn’t suppress a yawn. I had been awfully busy recently, seeking opinions on the building of my school (both physical and organizational), trying to get approval for all sorts of things, and on and on. The fatigue was building up, and I wasn’t getting quite as much sleep as I was used to, either.

“Shinichi.” Petralka was looking straight up at me.

Incidentally, ever since that first time I had read manga to her, Petralka had decided that my lap was her spot. This was more than embarrassing in front of the other students; I had begged her to find another place, but she stubbornly refused to bend. Instead she continued to perch on my knees, as if showing off in front of the other students and Myusel.

Thus, she was currently pressing her head against my shoulder as she looked up at me. It was an awfully cute and—although she would hate to hear it—childlike gesture.

“Do you find us so boring?” She was almost whispering. Most likely, the students against the wall couldn’t hear her.

“No, not—not at all, uh-uh.” I shook my head. “But Your Highness—erm, Petralka—it’s just... The tiredness...”

“Hrm?”

“Hey, if you just want someone to read to you, Minori-san or Matoba-san could—”

“Certainly not,” Petralka said. “We prefer your tutelage, Shinichi. We prefer to

listen to you read as we are doing now.” She wiggled her butt against my knees, adjusting her position.

Erm, excuse me, Your Highness, but maybe you could not... do that? There’s a part of me that might stand up even with both of us sitting down, and I’d really rather it not...

“Do you truly enjoy this manga?” Petralka asked.

“Huh? Well, sure I do.”

That’s why I was doing this work. Obviously.

“We have met those who called themselves evangelists or missionaries several times before,” Petralka said earnestly. “The ulterior motives of most of them were perfectly transparent to us. They sought entry to our country because they thought they could gain fame or fortune here. How very few have come simply to bring us amusement...”

I was lost for words. Yes, it was true I was trying to bring otaku culture to the Eldant Empire in order to entertain them. But as for the Japanese government, which had sent me, I suspected they were after something more. No doubt they thought there was some profit to be had. Even I wasn’t stupid enough to believe the government would do anything out of sheer altruism.

“And you read with true joy,” Petralka went on, a small smile on her face.

“Huh? I mean... I do?”

“Mm. From where we sit, we can feel your breathing and your heartbeat. We can tell that you are truly absorbed in this manga. When the protagonist is in danger, your breath becomes ragged. When he is in love, your heart pounds. Sitting here, all this is evident to us. And, may we say, quite entertaining.” She said all this under her voice. “Possibly,” she added, “even more than the manga itself.”

Her words pierced my heart. This girl was an imperial majesty. I didn’t know the specifics, but for her to be ruler at such a young age must have meant her parents were already dead, or at least in some state that rendered them unfit for the throne. Whatever the case, they weren’t there for her. There would be almost no one who was willing to ignore her identity as “Her Imperial Majesty”

and engage her as the girl Petralka. Maybe no one at all.

That meant there was no one who knew her heart of hearts. Even her "classmates" lined up along the wall were trying to get close to her because she was the empress. Chances were, they didn't much care about her as a person.

Petralka would have to keep in mind the distinction between an empress and her servants at all times, meaning the distinction between how she really felt and how she had to act. She could never tell anyone what she was really thinking and feeling; she had to treat everyone around her like administrators.

Maybe she felt like there was a layer of glass between her and everyone around her. And if she hadn't been quite so smart, maybe that wouldn't have bothered her, but for better or for worse, she was obviously intelligent. All the more reason—

"Shinichi?" Petralka had raised her voice in annoyance.

Aw, crap! I just wanna give her hug and make her feel better, and I'm sure that's making my heart race, but I guess I can't do that...

Just as my worries were reaching a fever pitch, Myusel came in, not with a knock but with a quiet announcement of "I've brought tea."

The reason she didn't knock was so as not to interrupt my reading aloud. Because she had tea not just for me and Petralka but for twenty other students as well, she was pushing an awfully large cart.

"Pardon me," she whispered, executing a single small bow as she began to get everything ready.

"Thanks," I said, nodding at her. When she had set out the teacups and filled them, she bowed again and left.

I looked silently after her.

"Hmph."

From the direction of my knees came a sound of royal discontent.



Myusel, of course, wasn't participating in my little "academy." This study

group was full of the children of noble families; it was all too obvious that having her there would throw everyone into a tizzy. Plus, she and Brooke had to take care of things around the house—she had a mountain of chores from cleaning to washing to making meals—so she didn't have time to study during the day.

And so...

"Okay, shall we begin?"

I was sitting on the sofa in my office.

"Yes, please," Myusel said, smiling and opening her notebook.

...I was giving Myusel personal lessons before we went to sleep at night.

She was really the first person I had met when I got to Eldant, and in a way my first student, too, so I could hardly leave her high and dry just because things had gotten a little busy for me. Yes, I was tired from the day's study session, but it was just so cute to see Myusel eagerly absorb Japanese from me. It really made me want to do my best for her.

Petralka had ordered Myusel not to "outdo" her, but really, Petralka was just learning during the day and Myusel at night, so there was no danger of the maid outstripping the empress—I figured.

But Myusel sprang something unexpected on me that day.

"Um, Master... Could you... take off your magic ring for just a moment?"

This request kind of came out of the blue.

"Why?"

"Please do it. Just for a few minutes..."

She really seemed to want this, so I wasn't going to turn her down. I mean, I was forever taking that ring on and off anyway—sometimes there were secrets to talk about—so it wasn't like I had any particular objection to it. I pulled the metal band off my finger and set it on the table.

"Okay, it's off. What now?"

It was only after I had spoken that it occurred to me: without the ring, Myusel

wouldn't be able to understand what I was saying. The rings would only work their translation—or should I say, interpretation—magic when we were both wearing them.

Myusel said something in her lilting tones. After three months here, I could at least recognize that she was speaking of Eldant language. I wasn't strong on specifics, but I had learned a handful of simple words, like *retosamu* (master) and *sei* (yes).

She said something else, at the end of which I detected the sound "*shi*."

Myusel's mouth was popping open and shut like a goldfish, her voice sounding strained.

"Shinishi... Shin...ichi-sama. Is... this... good? This... ees... right?"

"*Huh?!*"

I could hardly believe my own ears. Myusel's speech was slow and stumbling, but it was unmistakably Japanese. Her pronunciation wasn't quite spot-on, but I could tell she was saying my name. I mean, heck, she had heard Minori-san and Matoba-san and even Petralka say it over and over, so I shouldn't have been surprised that she could say it, too, but then she went on to practically start a conversation. I sure hadn't taught her that.

Had she been studying on her own in order to surprise me? Where would she have found the time?

"Whoa..." I felt my heart growing warm with admiration.

"Shinishi...sama?"

Myusel didn't seem quite confident of herself; she was looking up at me doubtfully.

I gave an exaggerated nod and said, "Yes. That's right."

"It were... good?" She looked very relieved.

Myusel always seemed just a little bit anxious, but now there was a hint of pride. She was probably happy to see her effort rewarded. She looked so adorable, I suddenly found myself wanting to give her a hug.

No...! Be still, O my arms!

As I fought down my worst impulses, I put the magic ring back on my finger.

“That’s amazing,” I said. “I can’t believe you learned to talk like that in such a short time.”

“Did I really... not sound too strange?” she asked.

“Well... A few things were a little bit off. But you were holding an actual conversation. I understood what you were trying to say, even without the ring.”

“That’s wonderful,” she said, putting her hands to her chest.

I suspected she would be able to write and read hiragana and katakana without trouble soon. It would probably take at least six months for her to get more familiar with the niceties of grammar—verb conjugations and such. But I was confident she would be able to at least communicate what she was thinking.

“You really worked hard.”

“I had you to teach me, Master. And...” She looked down a little. “I wanted to be able to speak the language of your country.”

“Yeah. This means you’ll be able to enjoy anime and stuff without needing anyone to explain it to you.”

On that note, I had been periodically showing Myusel and Petralka anime DVDs of late, but I had to essentially act as a simultaneous interpreter. You can’t put a magic ring on a DVD player.

“No. I—” She was practically whispering now. She looked even more intently at the floor, shrinking into herself as if embarrassed. “One day you’ll return to your country, Master. And I... I hoped I could go with you.” Now her face was completely red.

And me? I was sitting there in stunned silence.

No! Don’t let her trick you, Kanou Shinichi! This is one giant trap. She just... She just wants to go to Japan because the standard of living is so high there. It’s not because she wants to be with you*. Don’t get any weird ideas. Get your hopes up and they’ll only come crashing down. Just like with your old friend.*

My heart was going a million miles a minute, and I sat there trying to talk myself down.



It had been about twenty days since my last inspection, and my “otaku training center”—that is, my school—was ready. I really got a sense of accomplishment when I looked at it, even though admittedly I hadn’t exactly done anything when it came to building it.

“Ooh!”

“This is going to be where we’ll meet starting tomorrow?”

Behind me, the students were looking up at the building and sounding very impressed. There wasn’t actually a study group meeting today. They had just decided to come out here.

All to see their brand-new place of learning.

As far as I could tell, the people of the Eldant Empire knew what a private academy was, but not a public school. So study groups usually met in some borrowed room somewhere—a building dedicated specifically to study had never been built. The school struck them as exceedingly novel.

“Those are all nobles...”

“I wonder if it’s okay for us to be here...”

Some distance away from us, a group of boys and girls had gathered to stare at the new structure—and at me and the noble students. A certain percentage of them were demi-humans. The elf children I had met on the training grounds were there, too.

Good. I’m glad word got out to the commoners like I wanted.

That’s right: this, more than anything else, was the reason I had built this school. If we wanted to spread otaku culture on the scale of a social phenomenon, we couldn’t limit ourselves to the nobility. If we didn’t get at the most numerous part of the population—the commoners—then this would all be for nothing.

So I hadn't held entrance exams for my new school. Plus, tuition would in principle be handled by the Eldant Empire and the Japanese government. In other words, anyone, noble or commoner, could enroll and study here.

With the school in place, more people would be able to get the basic education necessary to spread otaku culture. In a word, this was an investment in the future.

"It's real. It's really real. I just can't help feeling a bit inspired," I said as I stepped into the finished school for the first time.

"I guess," Minori-san said with an amused smile. She had been working here with her fellow JSDF members all throughout the construction.

The other students followed after us. And then, some time later and at a significant distance, came the hesitant commoner and demi-human children.

I had modeled the school more or less on a Japanese one. The exterior looked like any other Eldantic building, but inside it was basically Japanese, although there were some Eldantic touches as well. I had included all the things I was used to seeing in a school: blackboards, clocks, desks and chairs, fire extinguishers in the hallways, and so on.

That might have been part of why the students were looking around in such amazement.

And...

"Master."

I turned at the voice to find Myusel, dressed for an excursion, carrying something into the building.

"Myusel? What's going on?"

"You forgot your lunch," she said with a smile.

"Huh? Oh, uh—"

I had forgotten it. When I told Myusel that I was going to go see the new school building this afternoon, she'd said she would pack me a lunch. She always did the cooking at home, but maybe a packed lunch was different somehow, because she had really seemed excited.

“And you brought it to me? All the way out here?!”

“Yes, sir. Um... I haven’t caused you any trouble, have I?” An anxious expression immediately came over her face.

“No!” I exclaimed. “None at all! I’m very happy!”

What I really meant was: *to think the day would come when I would reach that gold standard where the girl I’m living with brings me the lunch I forgot!!*

I was losing myself in these waves of happiness when, suddenly, the air in the room changed. The students and all the onlookers went completely silent. Wondering what it could be, I turned around and...

“Oh, Petralka—I mean, Your Majesty.”

“Mm!”

Petralka was standing proudly smack in the center of the hallway. Two royal guards armed with swords stood behind her.

After an instant of silence, a murmur spread among the gathered people.

“It’s the empress! Her Majesty is here!”

The kids who attended our study sessions were less startled, but for the commoners and demi-humans, Petralka might as well have lived in the sky. Her sudden appearance understandably startled them.

People scrambled aside to make way for Petralka. They pressed themselves against the walls and knelt or bowed their heads; elves and dwarves fell to both knees to show respect. All of a sudden, the hallway of my school was a very, very somber place.

It’s rude of me to say, but I had almost forgotten that she was the ruler of this country. Petralka, however, looked completely at ease walking among the bowing people. She stopped in front of Myusel and me and nodded with her usual hint of superiority.

“It appears everything is going smoothly.”

“Yeah, thankfully,” I said with a half-smile.

Petralka’s eyes flicked toward my maid.

“Myusel.”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty!”

“How much have you managed to learn?”

“Wha? Um— I—”

“We are already on ‘Kanji Drill 2’! You will never catch up to us now! You may serve at Shinichi’s side and even receive personal instruction from him, but you will find it avails you nothing!”

“Um, y-yes, of course...!” Myusel nodded emphatically.

Petralka seemed kind of obsessed with Myusel’s progress in learning Japanese. She didn’t abuse the maid like she used to—I mean, she was even calling her by name now—but I could definitely pick up on a subtle hostility. I had to admit, it made me a little anxious. Hence, I inserted myself between the two of them and attempted to forestall the empress’s temper.

“Okay, take it easy. Myusel has to look after me and do all kinds of chores. She doesn’t exactly have a lot of time to study. Take today. Last night she had to get everything ready, make me a lunch and all—” I found myself smiling as I indicated the packed lunch Myusel had made me. “The point is, she’s working very hard, so I—”

I was going to say that I didn’t see it as favoritism that I was personally instructing her in Japanese. But Petralka was watching me silently, her lips pursed. Her arms, hanging at her sides, were balled into fists and, for no reason I could figure, shaking visibly. It was like some gauge had finally filled up. I had charged up something very dangerous. But Petralka really startled me:

“It’s always Myusel, Myusel, Myusel with you!” she shouted. It was like she had finally reached her limit, like a bomb had gone off.

Whaaaat?! Who, me?!

When it came to a contest between Petralka and Myusel, I was the only one who was willing to cover for the maid. The empress had everyone in the world to watch out for her, but Myusel—

Oops.

That was when I realized. I was wrong to think everyone adored and coddled the empress. I thought of how happy she was to sit on my knees and speak with someone from the heart.

“We even built you your ‘school’! We gave you our army to help! And yet you treat us as chaff, paying mind only to this maid!”

“That’s not true! I don’t—”

“Silence! Has she seduced you?!”

“Has she *what*?!”

“You, Myusel! I order you out of Shinichi’s house!” Petralka exclaimed.

Myusel’s face was pale; she was trembling.

“Oh, no...!” I said.

This really came on much too suddenly—I mean, wasn’t it pretty unfair?

But... wait just a second. Were these two girls *fighting* over me?!

Oh! I had never dreamed that this day might—

“This is bad.” Minori-san’s whisper brought me back down to earth (or, Eldant). “Shinichi-kun. You have to stop her, quickly.”

“Huh? But this isn’t—”

—*such a big deal, is it?* is what I had been about to say. I mean, she had only been ordered out of my house, and—wait. *Out of my house?!*

“You idiot,” Minori-san said. “We’re just renting that house from the Eldant Empire, remember? Myusel calls you ‘Master’ out of convenience, but it was the Empire that hired her. The empress is her employer!”

“Yeah, but I mean, she’s just being let go from her maid work, right?” I didn’t see the problem. Heck, maybe we could bring her on at the school, then. She could speak a few words of Japanese. Maybe we could have her be a teacher, or —

“She’s not just being fired. She’s being fired by the empress herself because they don’t get along. How do you think other people are going to react?”

“.....Oh.” I went pale as the implications finally started to sink in. Minori-san was right: this wasn’t a country of laws, like Japan. There was one absolute ruler, and at least for her subjects, her word might as well have been God’s. In an extreme case, if she’d wanted to, Petralka could have killed someone here and now, and nobody would have batted an eyelash. If word got out that Myusel had been fired—in public, no less—because the empress disliked her, no noble family or merchant shop would want anything to do with her. Neither, most likely, would anyone that was currently trying to cozy up to the Eldant Empire. Like Japan. Like Matoba-san.

“Your Majesty—Your Majesty, please, have mercy!” Myusel looked like she’d been given the death penalty.

But this only seemed to annoy Petralka more. She stamped her foot and shouted, “You’ve defiled yourself with Shinichi anyway—maybe you can go work in a brothel!”

“H-Hold on, Petralka—I mean, Your Majesty!” That was really going a little too far.

“You stay out of this!” Petralka glared at me, her face bright red.

It looked like I had only managed to turn her anger on me. I found myself settling back as if I were getting into a fighting stance. But if this could soothe the royal rage even a little, maybe save Myusel’s job, it would be worth it...

“Hrrgh?!”

Suddenly, totally out of the blue, a voice interrupted us. It sounded like some kind of shout—and it came from behind Petralka. We all looked to see what was happening, only to find one of Her Majesty’s bodyguards slumped to his knees. Even as we watched, he pitched forward and fell to the ground. What appeared to be a knife was buried in the chinks of the light armor on his back...

I was so stunned I couldn’t even call out. A small pool of dark-red liquid began to leak from under the guard.

“Blood...?” I whispered dumbly, hardly able to process it. I looked in the direction of the other guard, the one still on his feet, and saw a flat, silver thing sprouting from his chest. The blade was badly bent, but it was a sword.

I felt as if time itself had stopped; thick blood ran down the blade and dribbled onto the floor. The royal guard was looking at the sword in his chest as if he didn't understand what had happened. He must have been distracted by the raging Petralka. He finally seemed to grasp what was going on, because he drew his own blade—and then ran out of strength, collapsing to the ground.

"Wha— Wha—"

Three men were standing behind the knights. I had no idea when they had arrived. They were wrapped in robes so thick that I couldn't tell what they actually looked like. It looked like the traditional outfit of merchants from the west. It wasn't especially unusual to see people dressed like that; they were all over the Eldant Empire.

But these men were carrying arched blades, kind of croissant-shaped and about fifty centimeters long. That wasn't very long as swords go, but it would be the perfect size to hide under all that cloth.

Someone gave a choked cry. "Y-Yaaaaah!"

Immediately, screams burst out all over. The students and kids who had been in the hallway started running for their lives, seized by terror. But the unexpected visitors moved to stop them, drawing their weapons.

"Don't move. We'll kill anyone who disobeys." The awful order only led to more screaming.

What is this? What in the world is happening?!

I couldn't scream. I could only stare vacantly. But beside me, Minori-san was showing off what she'd learned in the JSDF. Her reactions were lightning-fast. She drew the 9mm pistol she always carried at her hip, holding it with both hands as she aimed it at the nearest invader.

"I told you not to move!" At the same moment Minori-san was drawing her gun, the robed man reached for Petralka, wrapping an arm around her and dragging her close to him. I wasn't sure he knew what a gun was, but Minori-san's actions and expression probably made it obvious that whatever she was holding was a weapon.

"Crap," Minori-san muttered, and lowered her gun. Petralka was partially

obscuring the man in her sights. If she fired now, she could easily hit the empress.

“U—Unhand me, vile fiend!” Petralka shouted, finally seeming to realize that something was happening.



“If you resist, we’ll kill the empress!” The man held his blade to the young ruler’s white neck. Petralka, obviously grasping the gravity of the situation, shut her mouth and kept quiet.

Before we knew it, the attackers had us surrounded. There was no way out. Everyone stood there stupidly. The man who had taken Petralka hostage proclaimed, “We are the assembly of patriots, Bedouna!”

Everyone there swallowed heavily. Everyone, that was, except me. Unable to quite keep up with what was happening, I instead made a single sound:

“...*Huh?*”

That name pretty much screamed *We’re terrorists!* but none of this felt real to me, like I was watching a bad movie. It was all happening right in front of my eyes, but it was so incredible that I just wasn’t quite taking it in.

But the royal guards lying dead on the floor were real, there was no doubt about it.



I honestly don’t remember the next half hour or so very clearly. I think the completely incredible events going on around me brought on a bit of amnesia. I hadn’t been this overwhelmed even to discover I’d been dragged off to another world—I guess it just goes to show what a shock it is to witness someone dying up close.

Or, maybe that’s not exactly right. I had seen death before. When my grandparents passed away, I had gone to their funerals. But this—this was different. This was somebody killing someone else for their own benefit. In other words, it was the fear of being faced with someone who had decided they didn’t mind committing murder in order to get what they wanted. We’re always taught “life is precious” and stuff, but here was someone with exactly the opposite opinion, someone whose actions defied everything I believed and who could put an end to all my philosophizing with the thrust of a knife.

“Shinichi-kun... Shinichi-kun?” Minori-san’s voice brought me back to myself.

“Oh. Uh...”

“Are you all right? You looked pretty out of it for a while there.”

“Oh... Yeah. Yeah, I’m all right.” I nodded. It was all I could do. “Where are we...?”

I took a slow look around, and realized we were in the school’s self-study-room-*cum*-library. Or anyway, it was the room I had been intending to use that way. It was already full of bookshelves, but they were only about half full. I planned to bring more books from my mansion or from Japan. The gaps in the books that lined the shelves gave the place an eerie sense of emptiness.

Out the window, I could see the sky dyed orange: it was twilight, and the day would soon be over. Standing just beside the window was one of the robed men. One of the “patriots” themselves.

Minori-san informed me that the Bedouna patriots were using the school as a base. But it wasn’t as if they had the entire place under observation. There were actually only nine guys in their “assembly of patriots,” all of them apparently human. It was physically impossible for such a small number of people to patrol this entire building, so they had put their hostages in this library, tying our hands behind us with rope.

Along with me and Minori-san were about five students and kids who hadn’t managed to run away. Whether that’s a lot of hostages or not is something of a matter of opinion, but it was probably more than enough for Bedouna. After all, my students were all children of the aristocracy, and one of them was the most important person in the entire country—the empress herself.

Incidentally, Myusel and Petralka, Minori-san, and myself were against the wall opposite our hostage takers. Apparently, they figured that if they just left us all together, there was no telling what we might get up to, so they had lined us up against the wall so they could keep an eye on us.

“*Ie, Aresshio*,” one of the patriots was saying in what appeared to be distress. “*Odo eu tsuppu rereppume tiu reeto seno? Shi shisu reteppu oto tsuppu ni reeto ekarupu tiu eeto reechau?*”

In point of fact, both Minori-san and I had been relieved of our rings, so we were ignorant of what they were saying. I did recognize a handful of words—for example, I knew that *rereppume* meant “empress,” *i.e.* Petralka.

“To leave empress with... the others, it’s... okay?” Myusel murmured from beside me. She was interpreting into Japanese for us! “Should she be... same place as... watching people?”

This was starting to make sense. In other words, he was asking if it was safe to keep the empress with the other hostages. She was vastly more important than the rest of us, and the man was asking his co-conspirator if she shouldn’t be given special treatment.

“*Eu era ooto etaru oto kuniito guniitirebe on, eu evaa on ratoguse rekurou rofu uin narupu! Ti shi reteppu oto eetagu ruh-a egatosoo ni eno ekarupu rofu giniikau.*”

The man replying with an irritable expression was the one who had first taken Petralka hostage, a huge guy with golden hair and blue eyes. His name seemed to be Alessio, and the others appeared to regard him as their leader.

According to Myusel’s slow but steady translation, these men had not been expecting Petralka to be here, and they weren’t sure what to do with her. Ultimately, however, they had decided to keep her with the other hostages. Managing to take the empress hostage was a huge coup for them, but it also meant that the empire could be expected to deal with them very differently than it might have otherwise. In a worst-case scenario, the imperial forces might just slaughter everyone to ensure the empress’s safety. In that case, keeping her somewhere separate would be even more dangerous.

Alessio was evidently saying something to the effect of, “It’s too late to be worrying about that. We don’t have the manpower to keep one of the hostages separate.”

As far as I could tell, the nine people who had attacked my school represented the entire constituency of the “assembly of patriots.”

Alessio was pointing into the self-study room and saying, “*Ta ina eu evaa taato!*”

At that moment there was a thump, and a weird lump of metal was set down. It was a silver sphere almost the size of a cannonball, the bottom fixed so it wouldn’t roll. It also boasted several interlocking rings. To me, it just looked like an old globe—but judging by the way they handled it, it was something much

more important than that.

“Shinichi...sama...”

“*Regoobu*...” a voice moaned from beside me. It was Petralka.

Myusel began to interpret for the empress. She went on, “I can’t believe they brought that here...”

“You know what that is, Petralka?” I said, Myusel translating my words back into Eldant.

Petralka nodded, a grim look on her face. “*Imarufe bisurupeguze.*”

Apparently, it was some sort of fire-based magical weapon; the name meant “Consuming Flame.” Describing the specifics involved a lot of technical jargon that Myusel couldn’t really interpret, but broadly speaking, it was full of very aggressive fire sprites who, when unleashed, could easily destroy my school.

“Can’t we fight it with magic or something?” I whispered, clinging to this small hope.

But Petralka immediately shook her head. “*Kuuru taato.*”

She nodded in Alessio’s direction. There was an amulet with a lapis lazuli crystal at his belt, and according to Petralka it would react to any magical power in the immediate vicinity by rearranging its speckled pattern. In other words, no matter how quiet we tried to be, he would know the moment someone started a magical incantation. So even if someone tried to use magic, he could stop them—or worse, kill them—before they could get the spell out.

No matter how great a magic user someone was, it was meaningless if they didn’t have time to recite their chant. It’s like how a gun is just a lump of metal if you can’t fire the bullets. Speaking of which, Minori-san’s 9mm had already been confiscated. Her actions had made it more than clear enough that it was a weapon and not something she could be left with.

I sighed. Just half a day earlier, everything had been going so nicely. How did things turn out this way?

“*Doh shi taato*...”

Petralka was saying, “But it’s strange...”

Bedouna, this “assembly of patriots,” lacked resources and organization even by the standards of anti-government rebels, yet they had one of these *imarufe bisurupeguze*, these “Consuming Flames.” Even the Imperial Army couldn’t come up with one of those too readily. It didn’t make sense.

“What you’re saying is, there’s someone out there who gave them the money, or the knowledge, or the weapon itself—or all three. Right?” Minori-san asked.

Myusel translated, and Petralka responded with a nod, “*Supaareppu*...”

Even I knew this word. It meant “probably.”

Petralka was looking extremely grim. This, I presumed, was how she looked when the duties of being an empress truly called. Suddenly, the Petralka I had known to sit happily on my knees or pout angrily seemed a million miles away. Yes, I had known she was the empress, but I had never seen with my own eyes what that really meant.

In stark contrast to my reaction, Petralka talked about the terrorists as if this were a daily affair. Maybe manga, or otaku culture, or her chats with me were a way of forgetting this bleak and deadly world, just for a moment.

“*...Ie.*”

Suddenly, Alessio was looking at us. His hostile glare set my skin prickling. My face stiffened in fear.

“*Ee shi donimu retosamu. Gunirubu mii donuora emu.*”

He was pointing straight at me.

“What? Say what?!”

“Shinichi... sama...” Myusel was giving me a despairing look. “He said... ‘That one bears all the blame. Bring him.’”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

What? Huh? Me? Blame?!

I mean, yes, I am the president of Amutech, but—!

Before I understood what was happening, two men had grabbed me by the

collar and forced me to my feet.

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel cried out, worried for me. But of course, the men paid her no mind. They dragged me like a piece of luggage over to where Alessio was standing with his back to the magical weapon.

“Hey...”

When I looked up, I was surrounded by terrorists.

It was only then that a sense of how much danger I was in sent a shudder down my spine. They looked ready to chop me up at any moment. Unlike Minori-san’s gun, the swords they held at the ready made perfect sense to all involved. Fear ran through me unchecked.

Alessio’s subordinate slid something onto my finger. Wait—I knew what that was.

“So you are the mastermind here.”

It was a magic ring. I could understand what Alessio was saying. But actually, I might’ve been happier not knowing.

“Mastermind?!”

That sounded even worse than “all the blame”! It was like I was behind some really evil plan...

“Mastermind? Me? What have I—”

“It’s a little late to be playing the fool.” Alessio raised an eyebrow in annoyance. “We have eyes to see. This detestable building is itself testament to your crimes!”

“Huh...?” I frowned. He wasn’t making sense.

For some reason, Alessio smiled. “You teach the written word with no regard to race or species. As if that weren’t enough for you, you brainwash our impressionable young children to worship the culture of a foreign country! And above all, you make bold to encourage demi-humans to study alongside human nobles in the very same room! This we cannot forgive—this is a trespass upon the soul of our nation!”

“...Huh?” It took a second for his meaning to register with me.

“Consider: Why do races and tribes exist? Each race has its own assigned duty, which the gods have ordained. The elves possess strong magic; thus they were made less fertile, that they might not proliferate and overrun the land. The dwarves have immense physical strength, able to heft their mighty battle axes despite being no larger than children. The gods gave them this small stature so that they would be at a disadvantage in battle and not be able to commit undue violence. To humans, lacking in both magic and strength, was given the right to rule. Ours is headship over the demi-human races!” Alessio clenched his fist.

Yikes...

I wasn’t even scared so much as I was frustrated. I never thought I would hear someone preaching such an obvious, stereotypical system of discrimination between races with my own ears. Actually... Wait. I guess you hear that sort of thing all the time on the internet. But that’s just what people say in an anonymous space where they don’t have to take responsibility for their words. It might as well be graffiti in a bathroom stall. The net kept you hidden; that’s why they could say stuff like that. Most people wouldn’t dare to go out and proclaim it in public.

It looked like he had given my ring back because he wanted to accuse me to my face of being the destroyer of correct culture. I should have known it wasn’t because he wanted to have a discussion. Having someone stare at you dumbly while you deliver your victory speech probably takes all the fun out of it.

Maybe Alessio could tell what I was thinking, because he narrowed his eyes and demanded, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Huh? Uh, no reason. No reason at all.

That’s probably what I should have said for my own safety. Instead, my memories of being tormented as an otaku decided to rear their ugly head, and I started to run my mouth.

“That is one classic chosen-people complex you’ve got there,” I said.

Wait, what am I saying?!

“What?!”

“Even a kid knows how to rationalize. All you’re really saying is, ‘I’m me, therefore I’m terrific.’ Right? You couldn’t become an elf or a dwarf even if you wanted to, so instead you make fun of them. You’ve never even thought about how much you owe to those people, have you?”

I’m a man, so... I’m a woman, so... I’m Japanese, so... I’m foreign, so... I’m from wherever, so... I went to such-and-such university, so...

They were everywhere—people who wanted to make themselves look better by looking down on those who were different from them. And otaku were an especially ripe target. That was one big reason why I hated people like that.

“Simple enough for an outlander to say,” Alessio growled. “I don’t know where you come from, but... I grant our current prosperity is due in part to the other races. But humans have spent endless years building up the institutions of the state. No other race has achieved this. Grateful to them we may be, but it is only natural that they should revere us.”

I thought of something Myusel had said a long time ago. The demi-humans didn’t reproduce as quickly as humans, so they lacked the ability to oversee or maintain large groups and were vulnerable to sudden famines or natural disasters. In contrast, humans were numerous, making them able to store up supplies via agriculture and form groups to protect them from external enemies. It gave them a lot of resilience in the face of potential extinction.

For that reason, demi-humans could live easier lives by allying themselves with human states. That was why they obeyed and served humans—in other words, exactly the Eldant Empire as I found it.

“The history our forebears have left to us has led naturally to our present prosperity,” Alessio said. “And the culture you and yours are bringing in will undermine it! You outlanders seek to destroy our traditional values! You damnable invaders!”

For an instant, even I didn’t have a comeback. Minori-san had warned me about this. We were in a feudalistic society; what had I thought would happen when I suddenly tried to introduce them to “freedom” and “equality”?

No question, those were the values that lay at the root of the otaku culture I was trying to introduce. Another way of looking at it was that discrimination and class systems were almost always viewed negatively in the entertainment I was bringing in. Can you imagine a main character saying, “So long as the foolish masses obey us of the ruling class and work as we demand, all is well”? Maybe as a gag, but never seriously.

What this all meant was that drumming up interest in otaku culture was practically the same as opposing—indeed, rebelling against—the basic structure of society here. If there was an outbreak of otaku-ism—if it became really popular—people would naturally start to absorb ideas like freedom and equality.

And some people would see that as an assault on particular values. A moral hazard. In fact, if it were being done deliberately, it could even be considered a disaster.

“We shall protect our nation, and the culture of our fathers, from the malign influence of invaders!” Alessio drew the sword at his hip. I froze at the chill steel at my neck. “Before it is too late, we, the assembly of patriots, shall warn the Eldant Empire of its foolishness!”

I couldn’t say anything.

“To begin with, we will make you an example and kill you!”

“Master—! Shinichi-sama!” Myusel cried from over by the wall.

Just when I thought my throat was about to be split...

“Will you not cease?” The voice that saved my life, sounding both exasperated and sad, was that of Petralka. “This is ridiculous. Have you done all this merely to kill Shinichi? If so, you’ve wasted your effort. He is a mere figurehead.”

This seemed to shake the men far more than any begging or shouting would have done.

“What do you mean?” Alessio said, turning to Petralka.

She smiled sadly and said, “He is but a messenger, retained by the country of

Japan. As is this woman.” She indicated Minori-san. “They are neither aristocrats nor nobles in their country. To kill them would do Japan no harm. It would hardly be noticed. They would simply send someone else. Indeed, if such a thing happened in my country, I would raise up the murdered ones as tragic heroes and use them to stir up my servants. ‘These inhuman monsters have killed those who sought only to bring us peace and pleasant diversion,’ I would say. ‘Murdered them! This unscrupulous band of self-proclaimed patriots must not be allowed to exist!’”

The men looked at each other, startled. Then, with a disgusted noise, Alessio took his blade away from my neck. They let me go with violent force; I tumbled to the ground and crawled back to Myusel and the others.

“You are all right, Master? Are you hurt?!” Myusel looked like she might burst into tears. I felt the strength drain out of me, just thankful to have escaped with my life. I stole a glance at the terrorists and found them huddled up, whispering about something. Presumably they were talking about what to do next.

I was safe, for the moment. That thought was foremost in my mind, but...

“Are you okay, Shinichi-kun?” Minori-san asked.

I couldn’t bring myself to meet her eye. What Alessio and Petralka had said had caused me to realize something.

Was it possible we were—

“Shinichi-kun? Are you okay?”

“...I’m okay.”

This wasn’t the time for that question. I set aside my doubts for the moment and said, “Um... Any chance you can call in the special forces or something?”

I wasn’t sure about Eldant, but in Japan we had pros to deal with situations like this. Minori-san shook her head in frustration and said, “There are problems of jurisdiction.”

According to what she said next, the JSDF was well-equipped and well-trained, but because of the laws or something their hands were basically tied; there were restrictions that kept them from being able to respond to our

situation. It didn't help that all this stuff involving another world was not public. Anyway, even if they'd sent in the special forces, they wouldn't have made it in time.

"We'll have to do something on our own," Minori-san said. "Shinichi-kun. Could you shove your face into my chest?"

"Huh?!"

I found myself doubting her sanity. Did she realize the position we were in? Not that I wasn't extremely happy about her request.

"Y-You mean like this?!"

"Yes, right! H-Hey... You could afford to protest a little, you know!"

"Sorry," I said. At the same moment, I realized I could feel something hard against my cheek. It was...

"Hrn..."

"Donf sob so buried (Don't sound so worried)," I said. I had found what we were looking for.

"Shinichi?!" Petralka said. "What do you think you're doing? At a time like this?!"

"Master?!

She and Myusel both seem to have the wrong idea—but now was hardly the time to explain. With the thing I had found still in my mouth, I lowered my head—crap, now it was going to look like I was trying to go for her butt as well as her boobs!—and when I felt her fingers brush my cheek, I opened my mouth.

"Thanks," she smiled.

What had we transferred from my mouth to her hand? A fountain pen.

But I was sure she wouldn't hide just any old fountain pen in the cleft of her breasts. The positioning of my body kept Alessio and his men from seeing what was going on as Minori-san worked the pen with her fingers, pulling off the barrel, where you would normally find the ink reservoir, to reveal a small knife, not quite ten centimeters long. A real pen knife!

I didn’t suppose that was standard-issue gear in the JSDF. It must have been a bit of private property.

“Where on earth did you...?”

“Heh. I thought something like this could happen, so I asked myself, ‘What would Fujiko do?’”

“What a question...”

I wouldn’t really expect younger otaku to get that one.

Here she was, carrying a knife designed not to look like a knife—someone had some strange hobbies.

“You’re so dense,” she said, working the knife in between the loops of rope around my hands. She wasn’t trying to cut them, just get the knife in there—so Alessio hadn’t noticed us yet.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Petralka and Myusel were watching wide-eyed, but of course they knew better than to say anything that might attract Alessio’s attention.

“What are you planning?” Petralka whispered. “Cutting the rope will achieve nothing.”

“Yeah, fair enough.”

We were unarmed. They had swords, not to mention a bomb.

And me? I was a middle-class kid, and a shut-in to boot. Not to brag, but I totally lacked anything resembling fighting skills, and I didn’t have any convenient special powers I could activate during a situation like this. Sure, Minori-san was JSDF, but I figured even she couldn’t take on nine guys by herself. If only we had something, anything, that could serve as a weapon.

“Wait, I’ve got it,” I said. “There is a way we can fight.”

Petralka looked at me, puzzled. “What’s that?”



I looked out the window. In the distance, the dark of the night was broken up

by lights—signal fires. The fires, built at set intervals, reflected off soldiers clad in body armor. I didn't even have to look at the emblem on the flags they held—I knew it was the Eldant army.

They already had the school building surrounded. But they were keeping their distance, observing the situation, with no sign of doing more. I couldn't really blame them—with the empress here, they couldn't afford to do anything too forceful.

As for our situation, things were a little calmer for the time being. The terrorists had jumped at every little sound at first, but the more time passed and the more things settled down, the more they seemed to relax. They spent less time staring at us now, and some had even sheathed their swords. I had read someplace that humans can't remain in a state of high alertness for very long. Our bodies are just built that way—even neurochemically.

"I wonder how long they plan to keep this up."

It was a simple remark, and I hadn't really been looking for an answer, but Petralka whispered back to me. "Traditionally, the hostage-takers send out a messenger at dawn," she said. "But they also frequently kill one of the hostages to show how serious they are."

"Y-Yikes..."

In other words, we had to do something before the sun came up. It probably wasn't quite midnight yet, so we had some time, but we couldn't afford to dawdle.

"U-Um...!" Myusel spoke up reluctantly.

"What is it?" the guard growled.

The maid was bright red and looking at the ground. "P-Please... let me go use the... the facilities..."

As a matter of fact, none of us had used the toilet since this whole ordeal began. It was understandable that some people might be reaching their limit. Several of the other students also looked hopefully at our captors.

"No," the man said. "You can just go right here. It's as much as a vile half-elf

deserves.”

“Please...” she said. “For pity’s sake!”

“Shut your mouth!” the man shot back. “It’s no concern of mine.” Then he turned his back on Myusel, pointedly ignoring her.

“Well... What about me?”

All eyes in the room turned to me. The man turned around again and spat out, “Weren’t you listening? Do it right here!”

“Right, you said, ‘It’s as much as a vile half-elf deserves,’” I reminded him. “But I’m human.”

“Screw you. I don’t care if you’re—”

“Disgusting half-breeds aside,” Petralka put in, “are you really going to treat even Shinichi, a human, like that? It sounds like this vaunted ‘traditional class society’ of yours is an awfully selective place.”

The man turned red but couldn’t offer a comeback.

“Regardless of station,” Petralka went on, “by your own logic, any human is more to be respected than any elf, isn’t that right? If you claim he should simply sit here and wet himself like livestock in a field, right in front of all these people—well, it can only suggest that you men aren’t afraid to bend your own self-proclaimed rules.”

There was no one who could best the loli empress when it came to giving people a sarcastic dressing-down. Her childish looks no doubt made her words sting all the more. I guess there are some “M” types in the world who enjoy that sort of thing, but these terrorists weren’t among them. Probably.

“Hrgh...” The man’s face twisted in frustration.

“Just take him.” A voice came from the entryway. It was Alessio. He was glaring at me and my friends. “It’s obvious they won’t shut up otherwise, and it’s depressing to have someone wet themselves in one’s presence, anyway.” He gestured with his chin, and the guard got up dejectedly. He came over to me and took me roughly by the arm.

“Come on. If you try anything funny, I’ll kill you.”

I was dizzy; he handled me about as gently as a suitcase.

He dragged me away from the wall. Right when we reached the door to the classroom, I stopped dead.

“What are you doing?!” the man demanded. “Hurry up and—”

This was my moment.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~!!

The quiet in the room was shattered by the music and singing that suddenly boomed from my pocket. My smart phone, which I had turned up to maximum volume, was playing its ringtone: the theme song from *Rental☆Madoka*.

Alessio looked as dumbfounded as the rest of his crew.

While Myusel had been distracting the guard, I had set the timer on my phone. Even people from my world, used to modern technology, would be surprised by a cell phone suddenly going off in a quiet library. So you can guess how much it startled these patriots, who knew nothing about such things.

“What the hell is that?!”

“This guy’s body is making some kind of weird music!”

The guard let go of me as fast as if he had realized he was holding onto a poisonous snake. Totally freaked out. Perfect.

“Don’t move,” I said, putting on my most menacing expression. This was it. I wasn’t much of an actor, but it was now or never. “I’ve already finished chanting my spell,” I said. “I can tear you guys apart anytime I feel like it.”

Think about the lyrics in that theme song: these people had never heard of rock or pop and couldn’t tell Japanese from English; if I said this was the incantation for a spell, who were they to deny it? And I *was* an outlander—they knew I had some special items not to be found in this world.

“No! He’s bluffing!” Alessio was looking at the crystal on his belt. “There’s no magic power here!”
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“Don’t forget, I’m not from this world,” I said, trying to sound as mocking as possible. “Do you really think my magic can be detected by your little toys? Did you ever detect magic when I used any of the things I brought here?”

The terrorists were clearly shaken. So far, everything was going according to plan.

Until Alessio shouted, “K-Kill him! We have the empress here! He can’t possibly be using an area-of-effect attack!”

Well, shoot. He was sharper than I thought.

Seeing the men draw their swords, I felt a chill run through my body.

Yikes! Crap, crap, crap! Don’t look this way!

At that exact instant, there was a soft exhalation of breath, and Minori-san was moving. She had already loosened her bonds—or rather, had cut the rope enough so she could easily break them at any time. She stood up and reached out to grab the nearest guard by the arm. He was astonished. And a second later, he had been smacked in the face hard enough to lay him out.

The fighting arts the JSDF used were fundamentally different from traditional Japanese martial arts—or so I had read somewhere. It wasn’t about spiritual discipline, only about what would actually work in a fight. There were no discrete phases—take a stance, move in, strike. It was just one motion, and then it was all over.

At the same time as she was dragging the guard toward her, Minori-san had buried her elbow in his face. He was already off-balance, and she hit hard. The move took no time at all, defense was almost impossible, and it was vastly more powerful than a simple elbow strike—and I recalled hearing that the spot right under the nose is a vital pressure point.

Whatever. The guard was instantly rendered unconscious. The patriots, not quite able to comprehend what had happened, stood staring stupidly. Minori-san took advantage of the opportunity to grab the fallen guard’s sword; at the same time, she spun the man’s body around with her left arm, using him as a shield.

“Grr—kill that woman!” Alessio got his wits back about him first and set his

men on us. But they still hesitated. Yes: it was because I was there. They thought if they turned their backs to me, I might hit them with magic.

What a ridiculous misunderstanding on their part. Of course I couldn't use magic.

There was someone else in this room they should have been much more worried about.

"Alessio!" one of the men shouted, pointing at the leader's hip. They had finally noticed that the magic-detection crystal was glowing. "S-Someone's using magic!"

They didn't know when I might drop a spell on them, and Minori-san was standing there with a sword in her hand, clearly ready to use it. That was why it had taken them so long to notice what the crystal was doing.

"It's that woman!" One of them pointed at Myusel.

Bingo. She had been looking at the ground, as if she might faint, but in reality she had been chanting a spell. We'd actually had a two-step plan in place: I would distract the guards with my phone trick, which Minori-san would use as a springboard for her attack. But even she was just distracting them from what Myusel was up to.

The men turned toward the maid—but it was too late.

"*Tifu Murottsu!*" she exclaimed. "Storm Fist!"

No sooner had she completed her incantation than an intense power struck the men. Some ball of invisible force slammed into the terrorists. I didn't know exactly what spell Myusel had used, but it was obviously something that hit your opponents with a shockwave. Two of the men simply flew backward, striking the wall. For an instant they hung there, like wall scrolls, before sliding down onto the floor. The whites of their eyes were showing, but they were twitching, suggesting that they weren't dead.

"Dammit!" one of the terrorists exclaimed.

"Don't move," another of the startled men growled, grabbing for the nearest noble kid. "Or I'll—"

But his hand never reached the child—because Minori-san cut it clean off.

“Hrrgh?!”

A huge amount of blood began to spray from the stump. The man stumbled backward, and Minori-san took advantage to land another elbow—another enemy down. This meant four of the men, in other words a third of the terrorists’ strength, had been incapacitated. But then—

“*It burns, it chars, through heat it destroys...!*”

One of the guys standing over by the wall had placed his hands near his stomach as though he were holding a ball, and he was chanting something. A sphere began to float up out of his hands, totally ignoring the laws of physics—it was a globe of red light. I might not have known jack about magic, but even I could tell a fireball when I saw one.

This was bad. It sounded like his incantation was finished. But just as I was starting to really worry—

“Most foolish of you.”

The words came from Petralka. Amazingly, she stood calmly and faced the guy who looked like he was about to launch a magical attack at any minute. The man was obviously surprised, but he could hardly interrupt his spell now, and with the wall behind him he couldn’t back up any farther.

“*Imalfu Muurubu!* Bloom of Flame!” he shouted. It flew straight at Petralka, and yet—

“Haagh!”

An instant later, it was shooting back toward him, like someone had caught a hand grenade and tossed it back. I must have been right about the fireball thing, because both the spellcaster and the terrorist next to him burst into flames. Screaming, they rolled on the floor, desperately trying to put out the fire. A few seconds later, it disappeared, but they were already out of the fight.

“So she’s got magical protection—an amulet!” Alessio growled.

“An empress has many enemies,” Petralka said, almost in a whisper. “Threats domestic and external. Assassination is nearly an occupational hazard. It only

makes sense that we should take measures to protect ourself."

"But I was sure you had no magical items..."

"Obviously, if we carried our magical equipment openly, it would be confiscated. So we always keep our protection close to our body—indeed, our very body is itself a magical item."

Alessio was shocked. But then again, so was I. Petralka doing what she'd just done was not something we had discussed as part of our plan. And what was this about her body being a magical item?

"Magical detection devices only pick up functional magical objects separate from human bodies, is that not true?" Petralka said. "Otherwise, they would react to people's inherent mana, and be useless as detectors."

Most likely, there was some kind of spell or incantation engraved on Petralka's body, such as in the form of a tattoo. Her knights might be able to defend her against someone who rushed at her with a sword or something, but if the attack was magical—especially if it was an ambush from mid-or long range—they wouldn't be able to do anything about it. So the empress made sure she had counter-magic that would allow her to deflect such attacks.

"Now, then." Petralka first glanced at Minori-san, who had taken out two more terrorists in the meantime. Then she stared right at Alessio. "It looks like you're the last."

"Stop right there!" For some reason, Alessio looked triumphant.

Even as he spoke, we could hear a dull sound as of metal objects scraping together.

"The Consuming Flame...!"

Alessio was standing next to the magical fire weapon. He was holding something that looked like a metal card, which he inserted into a small slot. Evidently it was some kind of key to arm the bomb.

"Now I need only a simple incantation to cause my little friend here to explode. Believe me, you won't have time for any spells. Take one step closer to me and I'll set it off. If you don't want to be annihilated, then do as I say."

I'd noticed Alessio wasn't attacking like his lackeys. It must have been so he could pull this ploy. And it was working for him; none of us were moving. I suspected even Petralka's defensive magic wouldn't be able to withstand an attack of that magnitude.

"Ha!... Haha!" Looking around the room, Alessio began to laugh in that crazy way only cornered people can. An instant later, though, his expression hardened. "Hey, where'd that outlander whelp go?"

I guess he'd finally noticed. Specifically, noticed that I wasn't there.

Well, I wasn't far away. Only one wall separated his room from where I was in the hallway.

"Ahh, who cares? As long as I have the empress, I can force them to negotiate."

"No, I really don't think so," I said as I walked back into the room, having found what I was looking for.

"*You?!*" Alessio stared at me wide-eyed. It's only natural that you might doubt the sanity of a former hostage walking right back up to his captor. Obviously, I was no young brave, no manga-style hero. I didn't have any earthshaking powers. Heck, I could hardly pass gym class. But I did have...

"Hey, what's—?" Alessio was staring fixedly at me.

"Oh, this?" I held the item in my hand up to about waist level.

It was a red metal cylinder topped with a black plastic lever. A tube snaked away from the top, ending in a nozzle that looked kind of like a trumpet.

"We call it a fire extinguisher," I said.

I mentioned that I had the JSDF put fire extinguishers here and there around school, right? But this one was missing something—namely, the safety pin.

"Huh...?" Alessio said dumbly. I pointed the nozzle at his face and pulled the lever as hard as I could. The next instant, a pressurized cylinder boasting a top range of seven meters expelled reddish-white smoke directly at him.

As anyone who's ever used one will know, these handheld fire extinguishers are so powerful it's like they're trying to blow out each individual flame, rather

than just stop the fire with their chemicals. It would be bad enough being anywhere in the spray—I have to imagine that standing directly in front of the blast hurts.

Alessio gave a little shout, as if afraid, and threw both his hands across his face like he was being doused with poison. He jumped back, away from the magical fire weapon.

"Expl—hrgghff!"

Naturally, he was in no state to chant a magical spell. The contents of the fire extinguisher had gotten everywhere, the fine white mist making it look like someone had spilled milk all over the room. You couldn't breathe without getting a lungful of extinguisher chemicals; everyone in the room, including Alessio, began to cough.

Fire extinguishers can actually be pretty dangerous: if you use them in an enclosed space where the chemicals have nowhere to go, it's possible to suffocate. But, well, this was an emergency.

Alessio, who had taken the spray full in the face, looked awful; he was clawing at his throat and gasping for breath. At least that might keep him from intoning any spells for a minute.

I tossed aside the empty fire extinguisher and dashed for the magical weapon. I groped at the surface of the weapon until I found the key and pulled it out as quickly as I could, then I heaved a sigh of relief—or tried to, but instead I ended up coughing violently.

Ugh! Totally not cool!

For the record, the reason I used a fire extinguisher was because we were dealing with *Imarufe Bisurupeguze*, the Consuming Flame. I had no idea if an extinguisher would work against fire sprites, but if the idea was that they ignited in order to release their ultimate power—well, then, I thought there was a good chance that flame retardant might blunt the effect. Luckily, in the end the bomb didn't go off anyway.

"Over here, everyone!" Minori-san ran over to the window and opened it. The room we were in was on the first floor, so we could easily escape through the

window. Minori-san hadn't gotten her magic ring back yet, so in theory, her words should have been incomprehensible to the Eldant people in the room—but under the circumstances, no one had to understand her language to know what she was saying. One by one, the hostages got outside.

One might argue that since we had taken out all the terrorists, we were safe... But then again, we hadn't killed them, so they could come to at any time. It was in the interest of safety to get the hostages out of there as quickly as possible.

As the open window let fresh air into the room, it gradually became easier to see. And what we saw was Alessio standing not far away from us. He was just staring into space.

I could see where. He and his compatriots had gotten all their equipment ready, and prepared themselves mentally—I'm sure they never expected to have it all blow up in their faces (figuratively speaking). And it wasn't the imperial army but a hostage who had done it.

Alessio wiped the extinguisher chemicals off his face with his sleeve. His expression was one of pure despair. Most of his hostages were gone, just a few of us left in the room with him. His most important catch, Petralka, was just that moment climbing out the window, helped by Minori-san, who had climbed out ahead of her. It looked like everything was finally all right. I let out a relieved breath.

But reality isn't like anime or manga. It turns out actual terrorists are way worse than fictional ones.

"Hrgh!" Alessio grabbed his sword off the floor and shouted hoarsely, "Did you think—Did you think I would let it end like this?!"

He flung the sword as hard as he could. Despair and madness must have given him superhuman strength, because the fifty-centimeter blade flew straight as an arrow. Straight at Petralka's back.

The spell that protected her body was only a countermeasure against magic. An edged weapon could hurt her just like anyone else. It was supposed to be her royal guard that protected her from physical threats.

The soft, almost wet sound of the sword digging into flesh seemed impossibly

loud. I froze with my hand outstretched. I was neither close enough nor quick enough to do anything about the attack. The sword cut through cloth easily, burying itself deep in its victim's body.

That is to say—in Myusel's body.

Petralka had turned around in astonishment. She may not have seen the moment of impact, but when she saw Myusel standing behind her with her arms held wide, a sword lodged in her body, she surely understood what had happened.

"Urgh..."

Myusel's beautiful features contorted with pain, and she collapsed to her knees.

"Myusel!"

Who had called out? Was it me, or Petralka?

At almost the same instant, there was a roar, and then Alessio slumped forward. I didn't know when Minori-san had gotten her 9mm back, but she had just fired it from her spot on the other side of the window.

"Myusel!" I rushed to her side. She was lying on the floor, her breathing strained. Beside her, Petralka was looking down blankly at the groaning half-elf.

I knelt down next to Myusel. The weapon had pierced her abdomen, and her white maid's apron had turned red with blood. The sword wasn't quite right in the middle of her stomach, but it was still possible that it had damaged some internal organs. I tried desperately to draw on the modicum of knowledge I had gained from reading manga and novels. Internal wounds were very bad news. They weren't like superficial injuries, where things were likely to be okay if you could stop the bleeding. They might require surgery.

I wanted to pull the blade out immediately, but I thought I remembered hearing that if you didn't do it carefully, it could make the bleeding worse—that it was better to leave the sword where it was. *Arrrrgh! Dammit! I'm so panicked, I can't think straight!*

"Why...? Why did you..." Petralka was murmuring uncomprehendingly. "After

we...”

Her voice was cracking, and so quiet I could barely hear her. But I suspected I knew what she was saying. Just before our ordeal, Petralka had very suddenly and rather unfairly fired Myusel from her job. For that matter, she had suggested the half-elf find work in a brothel instead. After all that, what reason did Myusel have to protect the empress?

“Didn’t... Didn’t I...” Myusel was trying to speak with her trembling, bloodless lips. “Didn’t I look... cool...?”

“Huh?”

“Just like in... one of Master’s manga... I wanted to be... like them...”

It dawned on me: there had been a scene much like this one in the very first manga I had ever read to the two of them. Myusel still remembered it—as, I suspected, did Petralka.

“Are you—Are you some kind of idiot?!” Petralka shouted. “What do you mean, *like them*?! Cool? What are you talking about?!”

Petralka reached out and grabbed Myusel with both hands, heedless of the fact that she would get covered in blood. She shook the maid repeatedly, like a bratty kid trying to wake up her oversleeping older sister.

“Is *that* why you did something so—oh! Oh, no!” She stopped shaking Myusel and started shouting. “The blood—the blood! Someone! Someone, quickly!”

At that moment, almost as though they had been waiting for her summons (although I’m sure they hadn’t been), we heard the clanking of several sets of armored footsteps. A group of knights and soldiers burst into the room, all exclaiming, “Your Majesty!”

“Your Majesty, are you all—”

Petralka interrupted. “Get this woman to a doctor, quickly! No, wait—bring a doctor here, as fast as you can!”

“Your Majesty? That girl is just a—”

“Do as we say! This is a command from your empress!”

The edge of anger in her voice caused several knights to jump in surprise and then run out of the room. Petralka turned back to Myusel and whispered, “Don’t you die...”

But there was no answer from the maid.

“Do not die, we forbid it. Do you hear us, Myusel?! This is an imperial command!”

The empress began to cry like a child. The remaining knights and soldiers stood around, obviously uncomfortable and completely befuddled about what to do. Petralka stayed with the motionless Myusel, whispering the same words over and over, both an order and a plea: “Don’t die. Don’t die.”



Our footsteps echoed noisily in the stone hallway. Somewhere in the distance, a bird was chirping. It was a beautiful, clear morning, or at least it looked like one.

I walked wordlessly through Eldant Castle. Minori-san was a few steps away. Given what had just happened, she was carrying not only her usual 9mm handgun, but a duralumin suitcase. It looked like a normal piece of luggage, but inside was a 9mm machine gun—small-bore, in other words. The suitcase could also double as a shield. It was a bit of special equipment for protecting VIPs. Apparently she had requisitioned it in an almighty hurry.

Several days had passed since the incident with the “assembly of patriots.” All the perpetrators had been taken into custody, but that hardly meant the problem had gone away. The impact of their actions could still be felt. Just to give a personal example, without Myusel, the housework was on the verge of overwhelming us. Minori-san was doing her best to keep up with at least the cooking and laundry (she said the JSDF were excellent at making plenty of food in a short time, which they had to do during disaster relief efforts and the like), but without Myusel, it was like most of the light in our house had gone out.

Still silent, we arrived at our destination. It was a big, heavy-looking door. On either side of it stood a knight whose armor bore the crest of the royal guard. They looked very intimidating. This was another effect of recent events. Before

this, the guard had prized formality and ceremony, but now they were in full armor as if ready to go out on the battlefield. I assumed there was a wizard somewhere nearby as well. I heard that the empress's captivity, however brief, had caused heads to roll among the guards' higher-ups...

I pushed aside my hesitation and knocked on the door.

"Petralka? Erm, I mean, Your Majesty? It's me. Can I... Can I come in?"

There was a beat before a voice on the other side of the door said, "Enter."

With the permission of the empress herself, I slowly pushed the door open.

The room on the other side was the picture of opulence. The ceiling formed an elegant arch; you could see smooth wood here and there. A huge window let the sunlight in—or you could go out on the attached patio to enjoy the day. A fluffy carpet covered the extensive floor space.

In the middle of the room sat a huge bed—canopied, of course. It was draped in red sheets of the highest quality.

"You're late, Shinichi."

Petralka sat on a chair in front of the fireplace. Her silver hair reflected the sunlight, as if it were itself a luxurious ornament. She was as adorable as ever, but—it was hard to put my finger on it, but since the attack, I thought her expression looked a little more grown-up. It wasn't that she was less expressive; if anything, it was the opposite. I thought she expressed more things more naturally. Maybe she had been holding back before.

"When we call, you should come with more urgency. Your tea's getting cold."

"Sorry," I said with a bit of a smile. I sat down in the seat next to her.

"But Your Majesty... Shinichi-sama's house is a bit of a distance..." The girl who so kindly spoke up on my behalf was wearing white bedclothes and sitting up in the bed nearby.

"Are you okay to sit up already?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," Myusel responded with a smile. "And it's all thanks to Her Majesty." Her smile widened; it was so beautiful that it would have put any flower to shame.

So, as you may have guessed, Myusel did not die. On Petralka's orders, she was brought to the imperial hospital inside the castle, where magic (of course) as well as every available medicine was put to good effect. No expense was spared, and the most famous doctors in the land operated on her. Normally, the imperial hospital was only used when members of the imperial family were gravely wounded; a commoner like Myusel would normally never even have set foot inside. But again, Petralka was the empress, and this was what she wanted.

Petralka's intervention saved Myusel's life. Until she was fully recovered, however, Myusel would have to stay here in the hospital. Even the gorgeous room we were in was actually a hospital room. I was sure it looked as nice as it did because it was really supposed to be for noble use. The elegance probably didn't make the place any more sanitary, but people want what they want.

"You were pretty darn impressive, Your Majesty," I said. "'If anyone lets this girl die, I'll treat them as rebels against the state—and have them executed!' Hah! Those doctors went white as sheets!"

"We— We were just—" Petralka turned bright red, flustered. *So cute.* "Y-You know those doctors. They only ever work on nobles, and all old people at that. We were afraid they might be... unaccustomed to working on a young woman. We simply reminded them to do their duty!"

"Right. Of course," I said with a smile and a nod.

Petralka only turned redder. "A-Anyway, we couldn't have it getting out that Empress Eldant was saved by the death of some maid! Our ministers would never listen to us again!"

"Right. Of course."

Petralka was practically cringing with embarrassment at this point. If we had been standing up, I was sure she would have given the ground a good stomp. Talk about your stereotypical tsundere.

"But listen, Petralka, I want Myusel back in my mansion as soon as possible..." Truth be told, what I really wanted, of course, was for her to take her time and rest up. But I had a reason for saying what I did. It was a strategy. "Without her around, the laundry is piling up!"

“I’m very sorry, Master. I’ll try to get better as quickly as I can,” Myusel said. But then she exclaimed, “Oh...!” and stopped with an uncertain look on her face.

Ahh. So they hadn’t talked about *that* yet—it had probably only just occurred to Myusel as she was speaking. Knowing Petralka, it would probably be awfully hard for her to take back something she had said—at least if someone didn’t give her a little push.

“We said we would see to it that you were sent another helper,” Petralka said, frowning. “It was you who refused. Myusel was stabbed through the stomach. That is not a wound one recovers from in a few days. We are surprised by your ignorance of the world, Shinichi!”

“No, I know that. I was just afraid that if someone else gets settled in the house, maybe Myusel would find it hard to come back.”

“You need not be concerned. Myusel will be returned to you when she is fully healed.”

“You have my gratitude for your generous consideration, Your Majesty.”

“Hrmph. Interesting how you’re only deferential when you’re in a good mood.” Personally, I wondered whether an empress should be snorting like that, but I kept my mouth shut.

Myusel seemed to grasp what was going on. “Um... Does this mean...” Petralka and I had held our entire conversation on the presumption that Myusel would return to be my maid. In other words, that her firing would be null and void.

I knew Petralka—as both an empress and a person. I didn’t expect her to ever say, “I’m sorry, forget I ever said that.” But I did manage to help her admit, indirectly, that we could ignore the whole incident. I was sure that would put Myusel’s mind at ease, too.

“Your Majesty...”

Petralka didn’t answer, but when Myusel looked at her, she turned her head away as if pretending to pout.

You're not as hard to read as you think you are, kid!

"Th... Thank you..." Myusel said with tears in her eyes.

Granted, it was Petralka's impulsive decision that we were undoing in the first place. But even so, for the empress to budge, even implicitly, for a commoner was something very special. Myusel was obviously moved, and Petralka—well, she wasn't exactly open about her feelings, but she seemed to be going in the right direction.

It looked like this particular problem had been solved. The two of them talked affably after that. In fact, they were kind of ignoring me; I started to get a bit of a confusing yuri vibe from them. But we had averted one potential conflict, and I was glad for that.

"We'll visit you again," I promised, and then Minori-san and I quietly left the room.



I saw a face I recognized at the far end of the long hallway: Matoba Jinzaburou, chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau.

When he saw me, he said, "It seems Her Majesty is in a fine mood."

His neatly parted hair, starting to show signs of white, was the same as ever, as was his dead-leaf-colored suit. He looked as average as it was possible to look; he practically screamed, *I'm totally harmless!*

"Yeah, I guess," I muttered. Matoba-san looked at me questioningly for a moment, but he quickly returned to his vague bureaucrat's smile.

"Ahem. On the subject of the terrorists. It appears an anti-Imperial faction within the Empire was behind them. I believe it was they who arranged for the magical weapon you encountered."

I didn't say anything.

"Not surprised?" He looked at me curiously.

"Matoba-san," I said. There was something that had been bothering me ever since that day. "Am I... an invader?"

He went quiet. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Minori-san's face stiffen.

Matoba-san smiled ambiguously, still not saying anything. He wasn't going to confirm it, but he wasn't going to deny it. He didn't look surprised that I had asked, either. It seemed like this was very much something he'd expected.

And now that I thought about it, why not? The whole "cultural exchange" thing was just a façade. There were all kinds of reasons the Japanese government couldn't move against Eldant militarily, so instead they decided to change how people thought.

A cultural invasion was the ultimate takeover tactic. Military encroachment takes huge amounts of money, not to mention the risk to people and equipment. If your only goal is to destroy the other country, you can rely on carpet-bombing or even nuclear weapons, but then you have to deal with world opinion—not to mention you wind up with a wasteland of a conquered nation. Not worth much.

Compared to that, cultural invasion has a lot of perks. You can affect the whole population, not just the people running the place. If things go well, you could even end up taking over. I've heard this was one of the reasons Christianity spread so widely in the Middle Ages. Setting aside the question of whether the Christians did it intentionally or not...

For better or for worse, modern-day Japan didn't have a religion that so many people got so invested in. Even the stuff we did have was of the "new religion" variety, and they looked too cultish for most people to be interested.

Otaku stuff, then. The people in the Japanese government looked around and saw how young people would happily dump ten or twenty thousand yen in one day on doujinshi, how people trampled each other to buy the hottest video games, and they realized that otaku-ism has a religious aspect. So why not get the people of this new world to enjoy anime and manga and stuff—and then make sure they depended on Japan to provide it?

I had been right about Minori-san—she was a fujoshi, even though she sometimes tried to pretend otherwise. She was actually an otaku herself. I was sure she wasn't happy to see her beloved media being cynically used to make

inroads into another country, but she was also a member of the JSDF, and she couldn’t defy the government.

“Kanou Shinichi-kun,” Matoba-san said, smiling. “Our job is to look after Japan’s national interests.”

That was an awfully nice way of putting it. But then he went on: “The definition of things can change depending on how you look at them. If you believe you’re an invader, then you are, and if you don’t, then you’re not. It’s best not to think too hard about it. All you need to do is figure out how to make otaku culture popular in this nation. It should be a pleasant job for you.”

He spoke so quietly, but to me, it sounded like a threat.

つづく

(To be continued...)

Afterword

Hello, hello. Light novel author Sakaki here.

I'm an itinerant author, plying my trade at one publisher and then another. This book is my first work for Kodansha. Which only makes sense, since it's one of their launch titles (hah).

So, on the subject of this book, *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*. I've actually had the basic idea for the story in my mind for quite some time. I was wracking my brain to come up with some sort of fantasy setting, and since I'm a little twisted myself, I didn't hit on your regular swords-and-sorcery adventure. Instead I started to wonder: What would be the strangest way to approach a fantasy world?

Ever since I started writing novels, dragons have been basically boss characters in fantasy settings. But I thought to myself that if a dragon showed up today, the army would just shoot it full of rockets and that would be the end of it. So I thought about telling the story of a dragon who found himself in the modern world.

With that in mind, I started to think of things that would seem strange in a fantasy setting, and one of the things that drifted through my head was "a company." Wouldn't it be weird, I thought, if you had a company (maybe even a publicly traded one!) staffed by elves, dwarves, lizardmen, and the like? And wouldn't it be even weirder if that company's specialty was manga? The ideas kept flowing and ultimately resulted in this book.

Both our modern world and the annals of history attest that when people and cultures encounter something totally unprecedented, near-chemical changes take place, often in very unexpected ways. How would the entertainment of our own world fare in another? I suspect it would be transformed in surprising ways. I hope my readers will follow these changes with interest, just like the main characters do.

Ichiro Sakaki

27 Oct 2011


Thanks for picking up this book! I put a lot of little in-jokes in the cover illustration. I hope you enjoy both the pictures and the story!
Kugen
EEP!
BANG

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Outbreak Company: Volume 1

by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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