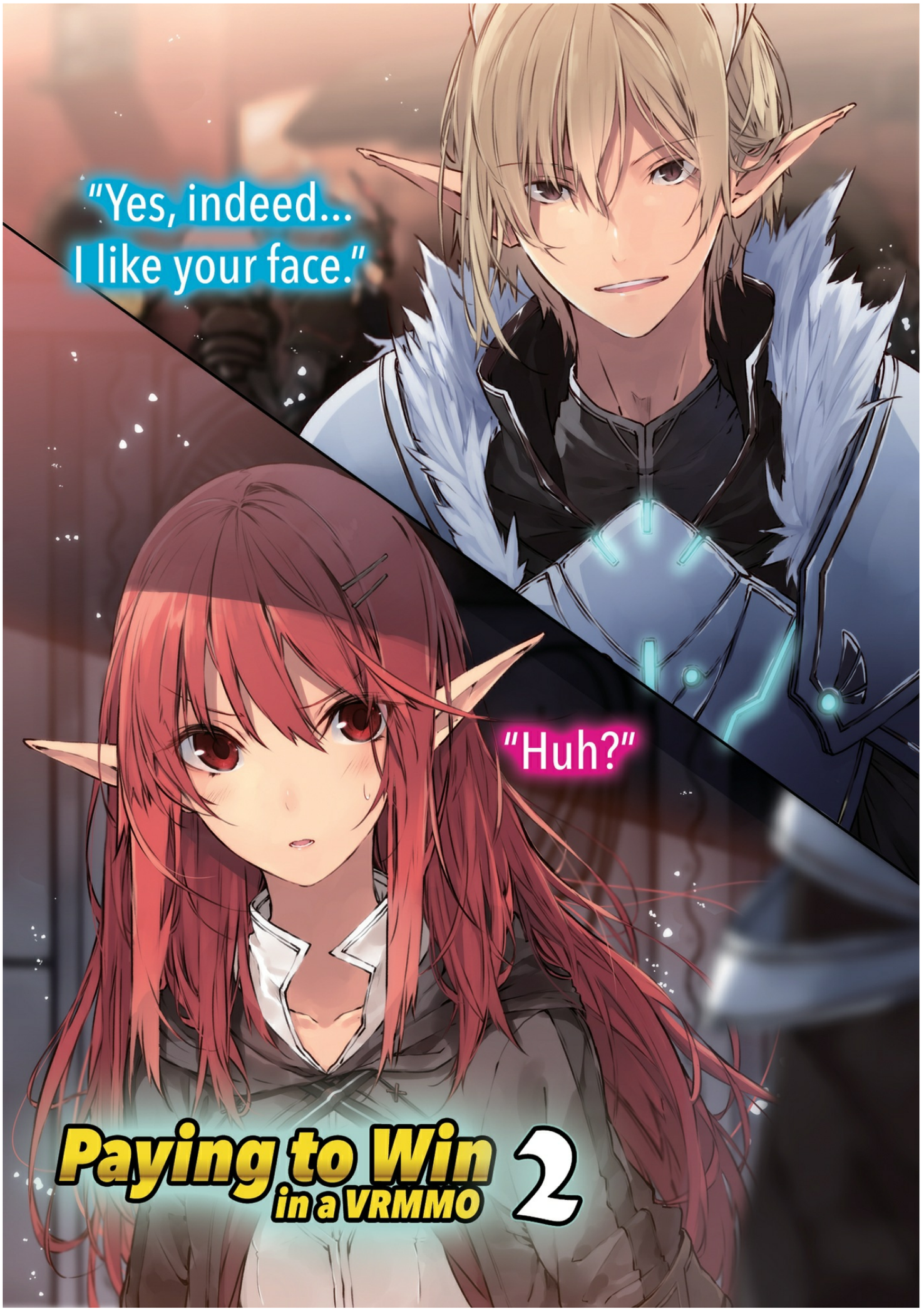
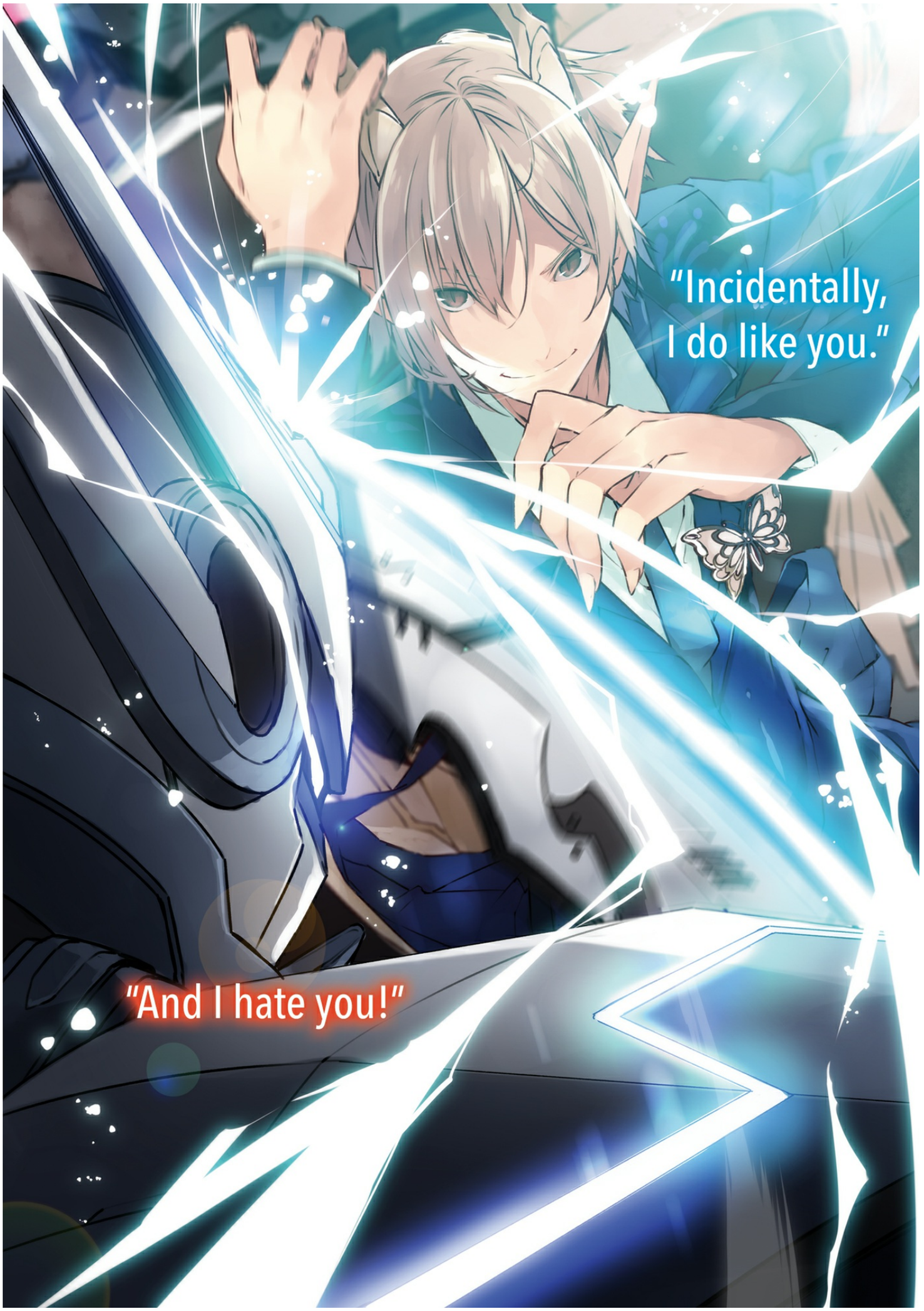

2
Blitz Kiva
illustration/
Kuwashima Rein
Paying to Win
in a VRMMO


"Yes, indeed...
I like your face."
"Huh?"
Paying to Win
in a VRMMO
2


NAME: Felicia
NAME: King Kirihito
"Try not to pick any more fights."
NAME: Iris
"Young heir, do you not have... any tact at all?"
"It's people like you, throwing all that money at them, that make the devs act so crazy!"
"Everyone has their own way of enjoying the game."
NAME: Ichiro


"Incidentally,
I do like you."
"And I hate you!"



0 - Prologue

1 - Noble Son, Boast

2 - Noble Son, Recall

3 - Noble Son, Tell

4 - Noble Son, Pick a Fight

5 - Noble Son, Display

6 - Epilogue

0 - Prologue

One day, two small packages arrived at the penthouse floor of a luxury apartment complex in Sangenjaya.

That in itself was not unusual; it was a place where people lived, so it was natural for the apartment to receive packages from time to time. Moreover, the resident of this particular penthouse was the young prince of the financial world, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. It wasn't uncommon for him to receive extravagant gifts — with attached letters reading "hoping for your continued support" — from people with whom he'd had only a single, passing interaction.

The apartment was so used to receiving such gifts that the arrival of the small packages wouldn't usually be worthy of any special mention. Except, that day, Ichiro went out of his way to sign for the packages himself. He also gave the delivery person a gift of expensive juice from Ginza Sembikiya, and returned to his living room in high spirits.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," his maid, Sakurako Ogi, murmured as she caught sight of him while bringing him his morning coffee.

"Could you tell?" he asked.

"I most certainly could." Sakurako set the cup down in front of Ichiro, who was sitting on the sofa.

"Ah, thank you."

"They don't appear to be very large packages. Might I ask what's in them?"

"I can tell you what's in one of them," Ichiro said as he picked up one of the two small packages and carefully began to unwrap it.

Sakurako hugged the tray in her arms as she leaned over the back of the sofa to watch. Except when serving his coffee or tea, it was part of her creed as a servant to always remain behind or beside him.

He opened the thin, flat package, then carefully extracted the item from its

packaging paper. It resembled a butterfly made of silver, resting its wings. Its fanciful coloring reflected the room's fluorescent lighting in a way that was quietly breathtaking.

"Oh..." Sakurako whispered, her breath indeed taken. "It's a brooch, isn't it?"

"It is a brooch, yes."

"The one you wear in *NaroFan*?"

"Yes, the one I wear in *NaroFan*."

Ichiro Tsuwabuki's avatar in the VRMMO *NaroFan* — in other words, *Narrow Fantasy Online* — was a rather unconventional one. First, there was the fact that he had named his character after himself, but that actually wasn't the biggest problem.

The problem was that, despite *NaroFan*'s world featuring a general high fantasy aesthetic, his avatar went around clad in dark blue formalwear. A suit with a glossy finish meant to evoke butterfly wings was eye-catching enough by itself, but on top of that, as if to cement the unique costume's theme, he also wore a butterfly brooch with a rather ungainly design.

The brooch that Ichiro now pulled out of the box and gleefully pinned to his chest was identical to that one. Its flawless recreation of the design's exquisite awkwardness reflected highly on the skill of the artisan who had crafted it.

Yes, this was the work of an artisan.

"Did you like it so much that you asked that silversmith you know to make it?" Sakurako asked as she checked the name of the sender of the small parcel.

"That's right. The design is ungainly and the execution is poor, yet I quite like it."

"I see." Sakurako cast a glance at Ichiro's chest. The butterfly's wings were spread triumphantly. It certainly did not, in Sakurako's opinion, seem appropriate to the high-quality suit that Ichiro typically wore. But she could not deny that the image — of a being spreading its wings regardless of whether it fit in with its surroundings — suited Ichiro to a T. "Has it been a whole ten days since the Iris Brand incident? Time certainly does fly..."

“A mere ten days, from my point of view,” Ichiro said. “I love how rich my time has felt lately.”

The two began to speak a bit more earnestly to each other, recalling their shared experience.

“After that, I had a feeling you’d start something else, and...”

“Hmm?” Ichiro asked. “Did I start something?”

“You certainly did...” Sakurako began, before opting not to bring up Ichiro’s outrageous behavior the other day at the Grand Quest. Ichiro had done what he wanted then, and to try to argue would be “nonsense.”

The Iris Brand incident had taken place shortly after Ichiro had begun playing *NaroFan*. It had all started with a girl whom he had met while searching for new equipment. An interesting girl, in Ichiro’s opinion.

That butterfly brooch had brought them together. As Ichiro had said, the design was ungainly and the execution poor; it was also statistically deficient, offering a mere two skill slots and a luck modifier of +3. The difference between it and the equipment painstakingly crafted by the game’s official designers was like night and day. A sad little item, but still Ichiro liked it.

“Now, then...” Ichiro stood up, leaving the other package untouched.

“Are you ready to head out?” Sakurako asked.

“Yes. I believe the ceremony was to start at 11:00. Would you drive me?”

“Certainly, sir.” Sakurako offered him a reverent bow, still hugging the tray to her chest.

As she did, she glanced back upwards, and asked...

“In the interest of caution, Ichiro-sama, may I ask...?”

“Yes?”

“You’re attending a party at the store run by the daughter of the president of Tsunobeni, Inc., aren’t you? The young woman starting her own fashion brand.”

“Yes, Megumi Fuyo. She’s opening her first boutique, and, well, we are acquaintances. I’ll only be stopping in briefly, though.”

“I’m sure it’s meaningless to ask, but... will you be wearing that?” Sakurako was referring, naturally, to the slightly awkward brooch that Ichiro had affixed to his chest.

As mentioned earlier, the brooch had been designed by a girl Ichiro had met in *NaroFan*. She was a bit rough around the edges, but a forthright girl. Sakurako was fond of her, too, and she knew that Ichiro enjoyed that sort of personality, which made him like the brooch all the more. But even so, it wasn’t something to be worn to his current destination.

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said, brushing off her doubts in his usual way. “From an objective point of view, I recognize that Iris’s design is sloppy, lacking in originality, bizarre in the ways it does try to be original, and so ungainly that it could never compare to the fashionable, universally accessible yet slightly high-fashion designs of Megumi, the woman who I am about to go see...”

“W-Wow... That just about covers it...”

“...but that is merely the objective point of view. I like this brooch, and thus, I will wear it. Any further questions?”

“It was the answer I was expecting, so no, not really,” Sakurako responded as she set Ichiro’s empty coffee cup onto her tray. “In that case, Ichiro-sama. I shall bring the car around. I’ll call you when preparations are finished, so please, wait a moment.” She gave him another reverent bow.

As he watched her head out, he stroked the silverwork butterfly on his chest with a sense of satisfaction, and said: “Yes, very good.”

1 - Noble Son, Boast

Tsunobeni, Inc. was a large company, one of the leading drivers of Japan's financial world alongside Tsuwabuki General Trading and Tanaka Manufacturing.

Its president, Eikei Fuyo, had been blessed with a daughter while in his mid-thirties, and had raised her like a princess. Early in life, she had demonstrated an unparalleled talent for the arts.

That daughter, Megumi, had finally achieved her dream of starting up her own fashion brand, MiZUNO. Most of the apparel that they sold was designed by Megumi Fuyo herself.

She was a young female entrepreneur, single, in her late twenties, with no scandals to her name. This naturally led to many young businessmen coming to her boutique's opening ceremony with flowers in hand. Megumi Fuyo greeted them all, and, with the dazzling smile of the born elite, as well as overwhelming charisma and not a word out of place, she dashed the ambitions of each of them in turn.

It was just around that time when...

"Congratulations on your new brand, Megumi."

Our noble son appeared from the midst. For some reason, he was carrying a bag instead of a bouquet. Of course, he was the much-envied prince of the economic world, and the others could only gnash their teeth at his incredible aura of personal charisma.

For the first time that night, the smile on Megumi Fuyo's face was genuine. "Ichiro! It's been so long! So you really did come."

"Yes, I did," he said.

The smile that she presented him with — denied to the men who had offered her bouquets before — was a purely girlish one. Well, perhaps "girlish" was not the right description for a woman of 28 years, but... let's not pry into that one

any further. At any rate, Fuyo's welcome for Ichiro was different than it had been for the others.

He wore his usual odiously composed expression, and he hadn't brought flowers. The young heir was known as an iconoclast, so it came to no one's surprise that he hadn't prepared the standard offering. Yet this just gave the young, status-seeking hopefuls of the economic world all the more reason to scrutinize Ichiro's gift to the woman of their designs.

"First, Megumi, I prepared this to celebrate your new business," he said, presenting his gift.

"My!" With her hands pressed to her chest in delight, Fuyo was every bit the image of the charmed maiden. "I never thought the day would come when you'd give me a present, Ichiro. You've always been so... well... uncooperative."

"Nonsense," he said. "I possess the desire to celebrate a friend's new venture, just like anyone else."

Fuyo would have liked to say something about one particular word in that statement, but her upbringing had not been the sort that taught a person to say everything that was in their heart. For now, she simply accepted the item that Ichiro pulled out of the bag and handed to her.

It was a wooden carving with a tribal air about it.

"My..."

"It's a god of prosperity worshiped in a small island country in the South Pacific," he said. "I went there some time ago in pursuit of new bug species, and it was given to me by one of the locals. When I heard you were embarking on a new business venture, I decided I'd give it to you if we ever had a chance to meet."

It was a gift in bizarre taste, and some might wonder if he was mocking her. But Ichiro Tsuwabuki was very serious. It was enough to make the young businessmen gathered in the hall back away a step.

"I'm so happy..."

But what was even more incomprehensible to them was the way Megumi

Fuyo hugged the wood carving to her chest.



“I’ll treasure it,” she said. “Er, it may not fit to the store’s atmosphere, so I’ll have to keep it at home, but...”

“Do with it as you wish, Megumi. I leave it up to you. As long as it makes you happy, that’s what matters.” There was a curious satisfaction in Ichiro’s expression.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki was a man of great refinement, blessed with impeccable aesthetic sense. How could someone like him choose a present like that? And now that they looked again, the butterfly brooch pinned to his chest was also rather cheap-looking and crude for a bit of artisanal silverwork...

But Megumi Fuyo, the present’s recipient, seemed no less than overjoyed by it.

Was there something about the exchange that only those of the beyond-rich-and-famous class could understand? Or was it an exchange unique to Ichiro Tsuwabuki and Megumi Fuyo? The young businessmen racked their brains over the sight.

Ichiro and Fuyo had known each other for about five years — both a long and short time, depending on how you looked at it.

At first, their connection had been a rather superficial one, based solely on the fact that she was the daughter of the head of Tsunobeni, Inc.

But they were relatively close in age, and during a time when Fuyo had been racking her brain trying to decide what to do with her life, Ichiro had given her some useful advice. She had formed a strange emotional attachment to him that day, and things had been like this ever since.

For his part, Ichiro didn’t think of them as particularly close, but he didn’t dislike her, either. He thought of her as a friend. If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have come to her business’s opening celebration, and he certainly wouldn’t have given her a present. He was well aware that Fuyo’s attitude and feelings for him went beyond that, but to do any more for her would be nonsense. In his own mind, Ichiro had drawn a line.

The main ceremony had finished, and it was time for the guests to socialize

and network. Naturally, Ichiro had quite a few prominent figures attempting to cozy up to him, which had him quite annoyed. It was at this point that Megumi Fuyo took the initiative to speak to him.

“Ichiro, are you enjoying yourself?” she asked.

Given his experience as described above, he couldn’t claim to be enjoying himself at all. In truth, he was mostly thinking about what he would do in *Narrow Fantasy Online* when he got home, and wondering what Sakurako was up to in the Lincoln in the parking lot. Ah, but as far as the latter went, the answer likely required no deep thought; she was likely just playing games on her cell phone or watching a DVD.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki was not one to mince words. “To be blunt, I haven’t been enjoying myself much.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “I suppose you haven’t changed in that regard.”

“Indeed. Change is never easy, and I have no need to do it in the first place,” Ichiro said.

At that point, Ichiro noticed the woman that Fuyo had brought with her. She looked a good ten years younger than Fuyo, and a bit younger than Ichiro, as well. She was wearing a business suit that smelled faintly of desperation, and her expression was awash with the tension and exhaustion of one who had too much to do every day. All that aside, it was rare to see a young woman like her at an occasion like this.

“Megumi, who is this?” Ichiro, realizing Fuyo would be interested in introducing them, decided to beat her to the punch.

“This is Azami Nono, a young businesswoman,” Fuyo said with a bright smile.

The description “a young businesswoman” would seem to apply to Fuyo, as well, but... yes, of course. The more he looked at her, the more he noticed how young this girl was. She looked as though she had only just lost her baby fat.

But that name, Azami Nono. There was something familiar about that name...

“The male businessmen still far outnumber us, you know?” Fuyo said. “So we find ourselves exchanging opinions quite often.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Ichiro Tsuwabuki,” the girl said politely. “I’ve heard about you.”

“A pleasure, Azami.” Ichiro smiled cheerfully as he took the outstretched hand of Azami Nono. “Only good things, I hope.”

He looked at the card she offered him, and his eyes narrowed.

“What’s this? President of the Thistle Corporation? Ah, so you’re the head of Thistle...”

“It’s a small company, only just founded,” she said.

The Thistle Corporation was a recent start-up meant to develop software that incorporated virtual reality technology, but Ichiro Tsuwabuki was familiar with it for other reasons. The VRMMORPG *Narrow Fantasy Online* that he’d started playing and had become engrossed in recently was Thistle’s main product. In other words, the person standing before Ichiro right now was the one in charge of the all-powerful development team.

“I’ve been enjoying *NaroFan*,” he said. “Do forgive me for putting such a burden on the server the other day.”

“Ah, certainly... So that was you after all, was it?” Azami asked with a strained smile.

Fuyo tilted her head in confusion.

Ichiro was talking about something that had happened a few days ago, during the Grand Quest to liberate the Delve Necrolands. He had, to put it bluntly, gotten into a fight with another player. Then, during the match, he had taken advantage of his own connection speed and the overwhelming processor power of his commercial-grade hardware to inflate server traffic and cause a slowdown attack. Such attacks were known as DOS attacks when done maliciously, or, more commonly, F5 attacks.

It was likely that the only players on the server who had been able to move properly during that time were Ichiro Tsuwabuki and possibly Sakura Ogi, who shared his play environment. The blessings provided by the high-capacity quantum connection were vast.

“It did seem a rather immature tactic, though,” Azami said.

“Nonsense,” Ichiro laughed. “I love doing things that test the boundaries of the rules. Though now that it’s been prohibited, I can’t do it again.”

It seemed that the dev team hadn’t anticipated that form of attack, either. The next day, they had done emergency maintenance to reinforce their servers, and added a line forbidding DOS attacks into the user agreement. There had also been concern that the swell of pay-to-download potions and other items he had bought to cause the traffic surge would wreak havoc with the game’s economic balance just by existing, so Ichiro had destroyed them all personally.

“Ichiro, do you play VR games?” Megumi asked. She looked surprised, as if she had finally caught up with the conversation.

“Yes,” he said. “Well, I’ve always had interest in Drive technology. How to put it... Some time ago, I heard the stories of a young prodigy who had graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the age of ten. I learned of the theory by reading her graduate thesis, though I thought it would take five or six years to put it into commercial use.”

“Yes, that was me,” Azami said. “That was nine years ago now, I suppose... and I developed the Miraive Gear with Pony Entertainment three years ago.”

President Azami rattled all this off lightly. An unreadable something crept into Ichiro’s expression.

“Ah, I see... Incidentally, I graduated from Harvard at the age of nine.”

“I am aware,” Azami smiled back brightly.

Ichiro felt a faint touch of sourness as he felt the competitive spirit start to rear its head within him. He enjoyed competition, and he would continue to enjoy it in the future, but comparing past accomplishments to puff up his pride was counter to Ichiro’s sense of aesthetics.

“Anyway, if you have time, I think we might have a lot to talk about when next we meet,” Ichiro said. “Playing the game has made me quite interested in the development side of things. Is it true that you leave the more detailed balance adjustments to AI?”

“Yes, that’s true,” she said.

“The first time I logged in, I attempted to pick up a rock in the Volgund Volcanoes area and eat it.”

“Um?” Ichiro’s outrageous comment, given without warning, was enough to startle even President Azami.

Fuyo blinked rapidly.

“But even that was realistic,” he said. “The taste and the texture both. From both a storage space and a technology perspective, I doubt you’re programming the stats for every single rock, but I wonder.”

“It’s a crowdsourcing system... ah, why don’t you visit my company sometime? I’ll explain then.”

“Kanda, was it?” he asked.

“Jinbocho. I’ll take you to an excellent curry restaurant.” Despite her exhaustion and nervousness, President Azami’s career woman facade never cracked. It was as one might expect from someone who, unlike Ichiro and Megumi, had come from a middle-class upbringing and thrown herself into the economic world at the mere age of 19.

With that said, she excused herself, saying she had some business to attend to at her company. She thanked Fuyo for introducing her to Ichiro, then left the ceremony venue.

“I should thank you, Megumi,” Ichiro said. “The president of Thistle is an excellent connection to have.”

“Ichiro, you’re not going to try to get close to Azami to gain... ah, game benefits, would you call them? Are you?”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro assured her. “I’m a player in the game, nothing more. I don’t want to do anything to compromise that position. There are likely many ways in which I could seek out preferential treatment, but at the day’s end, if I couldn’t enjoy myself as a player, it would cease to be interesting.”

“I don’t know much of anything about the game, but as always, you set my mind at ease, Ichiro,” she said.

After President Azami left, the two remained for a while, exchanging chitchat. Ichiro looked at the clock. It was just about time. He was starting to think he should leave, have dinner with Sakurako somewhere, then return home...

And while Fuyo likely didn't mean to delay him from that, she did end up speaking up timidly to ask him a question. "Ah... Ichiro? This may be a strange thing to ask, but..."

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's about that unusual brooch of yours." She was referring to the silver-crafted butterfly on Ichiro's left lapel.

"Oh, that? It's something a friend of mine designed for fun, and I liked it so much that I had a craftsman acquaintance of mine make it. I haven't told that friend yet, of course."

"I beg your pardon for saying this, but it really... doesn't suit that jacket, you know."

It was a natural thing to say, coming from a fashion brand president and designer. Her tastes in that regard were extremely sensitive. She likely didn't mean to speak ill of it, but the pronouncement had turned out quite harsh.

The words, though, only seemed to improve Ichiro's mood. "Nonsense. I just told you I liked it. Of course, I'm aware that, objectively speaking, the design is ungainly, and there are many far better accessories out there."

Ichiro's boastful pronouncement caused Fuyo's expression to darken.

"Ichiro, may I ask the name of this friend of yours?" she asked.

"Iris is the name."

"Oh, a foreigner?" Fuyo asked earnestly, head tilted. Ichiro, naturally, responded just as earnestly.

"Japanese, I believe."

"Striiike!"

"Yes!!!"

Asuha’s slingshot-like underhand pitch struck the third batter out, leading to a changeover. She was firing on all cylinders today. Ace pitcher Asuha Tsuwabuki was unstoppable, brandishing a fastball exceptional for a middle schooler and allowing her school to continue to dominate the day’s practice match.

This was why she could never quit softball. Asuha was a pitcher of severe highs and lows, her execution heavily influenced by her biorhythms. But when she was on fire, the feeling was addictive.

“Heh heh heh! You see that, Kiryu?” She turned to flash a V-sign at her friend sitting in the stands.

She had invited Sera Kiryu to watch her softball practice for a variety of reasons. One was Sera’s own attempts to get out a little more frequently, to extricate from the lifestyle of a shut-in.

One was Sera’s demonstrated interest, however faint, in Asuha’s softball club.

And finally, there was the fact that Sera so outstripped Asuha in the world of video games that Asuha felt a selfish desire to show off to her friend in her own element.

At any rate, Asuha was on fire. Three up and three down was a new personal best, and her satisfaction had led her to flash a V-sign to Sera in the stands.

But Sera was playing a mobile game.

“...You jerk!”

On her way down the mound for the inning change, Asuha threw a hard fastball that beaned Sera right in the forehead.

It looked extremely painful.

“Tsuwabuki, you sure can throw hard...” Sera said, kneading her injured forehead.

In the end, Asuha’s team had won their practice match brilliantly, in no small part thanks to Asuha’s incredible pitching. Asuha had been expecting to be showered in praise, but her coach had just sighed and said, “Now do that in an official match.” It had left her feeling crabby. Thus, she scowled as she treated

the lump she'd left on Sera's forehead.

"Right? It's pretty amazing, right?" Asuha demanded.

"I don't know much about baseball, but I can't believe an underhand throw could hit so hard..." Sera said.

"It's softball, not baseball," Asuha said firmly. She was out of her depth when it came to video games, but this was a subject on which she could hold her (flat) chest high. "Oh, that reminds me, Kiryu... You saw how well I could throw the ball back there, right? But I can't do it like that in the game. Doesn't that seem unfair?"

"You mean in *NaroFan*?" Sera asked. "Throwing, like... knives and stuff?"

"Yeah, that."

In *NaroFan — Narrow Fantasy Online —* Asuha played a Thief character named Felicia. Thief-and Scout-exclusive Skills and Arts included throwing techniques like "Throwing Skill" and "Throw Knife." Asuha had taken them without hesitation, thinking she'd be able to apply her knack for softball. Instead, she had ended up throwing wild pitches.

"What did you expect?" Sera asked. "If you could do what you did in real life, there would be no point in having Skills and Arts."

"Yeah, but still... why? I did these beautiful throws. It was just like how I throw the ball in real life."

This time it was Sera's turn to speak with pride as Asuha pursed her lips in frustration. "Tsuwabuki, the laws of real-world physics don't apply in a game. Your pitching form is based on a different set of physical laws, so a throw that would result in a beautiful pitch in the real world won't work the same in a game."

Certainly, if the nonathletic Sera Kiryu could become the nimble swordsman "King Kirihito" in the game world, that had to be the case. But it was still hard for Asuha to accept.

"You need to calculate execution time based on your stats plus Skill and Art modifiers," Sera said. "Of course, figuring out the best execution timing comes

down to the player's own skill, which..."

"Um, Kiryu. Is this gonna be a long lecture?" Asuha asked.

If this was leading up to becoming a game system rant, Sera was unlikely to come up for air anytime soon. Asuha decided to nip things in the bud before they went there. Sera, also seeming to realize the faux pas, blushed and looked away, then continued a moment later in a lower tone.

"I'm saying, if you would just raise your stats a little, it might start to feel more like it does when you play softball..."

"Hmm..." Asuha said. "So the fundamentals are important, even in a video game, huh?"

Perhaps it had been naïve of her to assume that she should be able to apply her real-life special skills to the game. After all, if the only people in the game who could fight properly were the ones who practiced karate and judo in real life, there would be no point to any of it. The world had to be friendly to shut-ins like Sera Kiryu.

"I have a feeling you're thinking something very rude right now, Tsuwabuki," Sera said.

"Just your imagination," Asuha said quickly.

Oh, but that's right...

Asuha turned Sera's words over in her head for a few minutes, then came upon a thought.

"Kiryu, what about Itchy?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you think about Itchy?" Asuha asked. "I mean, you know... using microtransactions to raise his level and his stats... what's his, um... player skill like?"

"Itchy," naturally, referred to Asuha's second cousin, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. Though he had only begun playing the game two weeks ago, he had managed to fight Sera Kiryu, AKA King Kirihito, the quintessential hardcore gamer, just a few days ago. What's more, he had won. Of course, the way he'd done so had

been slightly shifty...

But Sera still acknowledged Ichiro Tsuwabuki's talent, and the loss had allowed Sera to grow as a person. It had been a truly memorable match.

"The old man's got so much going for him..." Sera said.

As in the game, Sera referred to Ichiro as "old man." Sera had originally tried calling him "Itchy," after Asuha's nickname for him, but Asuha had laughed and laughed, and so that had been the end of that.

"I hate to admit to it, but he's extremely skilled as a player," Sera said. "But it's not only that. The way he uses money is so lame, it feels like cheating, but..."

"The microtransactions, you mean?" Asuha asked.

"It's not just the microtransactions. It's his play environment. He's probably got a commercial-grade broadband quantum connection, and his Miraive Gear is probably a Cocoon, not an X. He may have overclocked it, too. You add in a personal-use laser cooling system for a high bandwidth quantum connection, and it adds up to hundreds of millions, even billions..."

"In a language I can speak, please."

"It was," Sera protested, then coughed, and began again.

According to Sera, it was common for well-off hardcore gamers to spend big money on improving their play environment. When it came to VRMMOs, though, it wasn't so easy. From both a monetary and an access perspective, it was hard for a regular person to get hold of the necessary equipment. As the heir to a huge corporation, though, Ichiro Tsuwabuki could probably pull strings to get things that other people couldn't, which felt a bit unfair.

Sera used a portable game system to log onto the internet and show Asuha the cost of the commercial Miraive Gear Ichiro was likely using. The sight of the eight-digit price point left even Asuha trembling a little. She felt so lower middle class.

"And while we're talking about his cash flow, there's also the DOS attack he used in our last battle," Sera said. "One 800-yen Basic Item Pack comes with

three potions, and one inventory slot can hold 99 of any one item. Now when we consider that he maxed out his inventory with just potions, and had enough left over to rain them from the sky...”

“Please don’t do the math!” Asuha exclaimed. “Are you trying to drive me crazy, Kiryu?!”

“Aren’t you curious about how much money it took to beat me?” Sera asked earnestly, pulling out a calculator.

Asuha did not have to ask why her friend was walking around with a calculator. It was necessary to calculate damage in certain trading card games. Though as far as Asuha knew, Sera had never been challenged to a duel in the middle of the street.

Asuha sighed as she watched. Sera was a gamer through and through. No matter how gracefully her friend had admitted defeat before, the desire to be the best still remained.

“Okay, so how much did Itchy’s equipment cost?” she asked. “Was that pay-to-download, also?”

“I don’t know. I’d never seen it before, so it’s gotta be an original graphic skin. The internals are probably recycled from existing equipment, but...”

“What the heck?” Asuha looked up in surprise. You could make armor with original graphics? She’d never known that. She was still figuring things out as she went along.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s equipment certainly was strange: a dark blue suit designed to evoke the image of butterfly wings. Asuha was a low-level player, so she had just assumed you got equipment like that when you reached higher-level areas. But now that she thought about it more carefully, Itchy’s equipment didn’t look anything like the armor worn by players of the same level range.

“Explain, Kiryu. But keep it concise and to the point!” she demanded.

Objectively speaking, it was an impudent request, but Sera complied. “I mean using 3D modeling software or something to overlay your own graphics on an existing item. Only the crafting classes can do it, though.”

“Aww...” Asuha slumped over.

Crafting classes referred to professions like Blacksmith and Alchemist, which Asuha hadn’t taken.

Felicia, Asuha’s avatar, had finally broken level 40. This level was a major checkpoint, unlocking lots of powerful Skills, Arts, and equipment all at once.

As a girl through and through, Asuha wanted powerful equipment, but she also wanted things that looked cute. She liked her current equipment set because of that. For a moment, she’d thought using original graphics would be a way of getting around her problem. But the world was, after all, not that kind.

“If you want to buy equipment, you should go to Glasgobara Merchant Town,” Sera said.

“Oh, yeah... Mr. Kirsch mentioned that...”

Looking at her watch, Asuha noticed that it was getting late. They’d ended up talking longer than she meant to. If she didn’t get back, her parents would worry, then get mad, then take away her dinner, then not let her log on to *NaroFan*. Sera’s household was apparently a lot more lenient, but the life of a girl in middle school was so cruel.

“Kiryu, are you logging on again today?” she asked.

“Yeah, guess so. After I do my homework for the day.”

“Oh, how noble of you,” Asuha said. It had been less than a week since summer vacation had started. She hadn’t even gotten started on her summer homework yet.

“Well, it’s not like we could meet up in the game anyway...” Sera said.

“Yeah, Felicia’s too weak.” True as it might be, the statement still annoyed Asuha, who gave Sera a chop to the neck in retaliation. Sera let out a groan and pitched forward.

After getting home, Asuha’s first stop was the bathroom to wash off all the sweat and mud. After her bath, she filled herself up on dinner, and then, following Sera Kiryu’s example, decided to spend a little time studying. But after

only five minutes, she let out a groan and reached for her Miraive Gear.

She could do her homework anytime. There was something in *NaroFan* that she could only do today.

The truth was, Asuha had an ambition. She wanted to form a guild.

A guild referred, basically, to a team of people who worked together. They weren't necessarily friends, though Asuha thought about it that way. Though different games had different names for them, most MMORPGs had a system where a small group of people could form a community. These community units got certain benefits, like a special intra-community messaging system that normal players couldn't use, and the ability to pass along important items easily.

Asuha had been vaguely aware of the existence of such a system even before Sera had taught her. She had also joined temporary communities, known as pick-up guilds, a few times. But she had never formed a serious guild before.

To be more precise about Asuha's ambition, she wanted to invite Ichiro Tsuwabuki to a guild.

Asuha loved her cousin Itchy, so it was only natural that she had come to such a conclusion. She would be the guild leader, and it would give her a logical reason to lead him around in the game. It was natural and healthy for friends to want to form a guild together, Sera had told her.

She had asked if "Kiryuhito" would like to join, too... and been given a magnificent cold shoulder for her trouble. The stubbornness of the solo player ran deep. Sera had even refused her friend requests.

Regardless, she would make a guild. Knowing Itchy, he probably hadn't made any proper friends within the game, and she couldn't imagine him attracting a clique. Thus, she would invite him to her guild first thing. She was very worked up about the idea.

She put on her Miraive Gear (the standard consumer version) and lay down on her bed. Quantum waves resonated with her brainwaves to draw Asuha into the fictional realm. Soon, Asuha had become the Thief Felicia, an adventurer taming the continent of Asgard.

“Ahhhh...” Felicia stretched out in the grassy field where she had just touched down. The air in Vispiagna Meadow beside Starter Town was as fresh as ever. Of course, it was all just an illusion woven together by quantum information, but still, her brain delighted in its perception of oxygen created by the greenery all around.

She opened her menu window and checked the clock in the lower right. It would be some time before Ichiro and his companion would appear.

Felicia remained in the menu and checked her item list, selected the movement item Warp Feather, and used it. It was a consumable item that let you warp to a town you had visited before in an instant. Kirschwasser had previously escorted her to almost all the towns in the game so that she could archive them. One of those had been Glasgobara Merchant Town, the town Sera had mentioned to her that evening.

The location often played host to events for crafting class players, and items freely circulated there. As a result, many of the crafting class players had adopted Glasgobara as their home base.

Smoke rose from the buildings, and the shrill sound of steel hitting steel rang out all around. It reminded her of a place called Irontown that she’d seen in an anime movie a long time ago. Incidentally, that movie had actually come out a little while before Asuha was born.

“Wow...” she murmured.

Nearly all of the buildings in the town were crafting guild houses. Most of the equip items lined up in front of their stores were suits of armor and helmets, as well. They weren’t all metallic, of course. There was a smattering of items that appeared to be made from powerful monster hide or scales.

It was a flea market atmosphere.

An interesting town, she thought, and it was fun to walk around in. It was fun, but...

“I don’t see any cute equipment...”

Most of the wares on display were bulky armor or dreary robes. There was nothing that looked cool, let alone cute. If this was the best they had, she might

have to stick with her current weak equipment.

Wait, she thought. It was too early to make up her mind. She remembered what Mr. Kirsch had told her.

When Itchy's attendant, the veteran gamer Kirschwasser, had first showed Felicia to Glasgobara, he had said this:

"Listen to me, Lady Felicia. Even if they are located on main street, the guilds that display their wares in open-air booths aren't usually the largest guilds. They sell their wares cheap, and you get what you pay for. A wise gamer may buy the potions and such that they sell, but they buy their equipment somewhere better."

Felicia had asked how you found "somewhere better."

"Go to the large guild houses," Kirschwasser had said. "They have a high standard for their member players across the board, so they can make high-quality equipment. They have a wealth of both knowhow and component items."

In other words, what Felicia was looking at now was not the true heart of Glasgobara. The more merchant-like part of the merchant town was further in. Though she enjoyed the chaotic atmosphere of the town's main street, she continued to press forward.

She continued for a while until the open-air booths turned to buildings. The stores had signs out in front of them, and they looked like they had customers going in and out frequently. These must be the "somewhere better" that Kirschwasser had mentioned.

One large shop in particular caught Felicia's eye. Its sign read "Akihabara Forging Guild." She felt like she had heard that name somewhere before. Then she remembered: it was one of the top guilds they had seen in the Delve Necrolands during the Grand Quest. She wondered if they could make some good armor for her there, but something made her hesitate. This was the kind of place that Sera Kiryuhito might come, not a level 40 nothing like her.

Her eyes wandered, timidly. Then she saw it.

Catercorner from the guild house, on the other side of main street, was

another building of the same size. It was a stylish black building, very different from the stone guild houses that surrounded it. Although there was no forge smoke rising from it, she wondered if it might be another crafting guild house.

Let's go in, Felicia thought, making up her mind. After all, the building was so cool. Very different from all those smelly old workhouses. If they really were a crafting guild, they would surely carry very fashionable armor.

Whether it would be within her reach, of course, was another question.

Written on the guild house, in gold letters, were the words "Iris Brand."

2 - Noble Son, Recall

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school.

She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up. The bus home from school rattled around her as she thought back to the events of two weeks ago.

In the VRMMO *Narrow Fantasy Online*, Airi played the Elf Alchemist, Iris. Her avatar's name was a play on her real one. Her surname, "Kakitsubata," was the name of a flower that was called "rabbit ear iris" in English. She had been amazed when she'd learned that.

Rabbit-ear iris. That was very cute in its own way.

Yes, Iris was a girl. She liked cute things. She had a no-nonsense personality, and had often served leadership roles in her groups in middle school, but she still liked girlish, cute things. Back then, she had styled herself a competent fashion advisor, and her path in life had extended from there.

But along that path, she had faced a few setbacks and frustrations, and ended up retreating into the VRMMO. She had won the game hardware, which usually cost 70,000 or 80,000 yen, at a bingo tournament in town.

Iris was a girl.

She had fussed around with accessories to make designs she liked, and set them out in her booth for people to buy. It was a small thing, but it delighted her. To further that end, she had bought various Miraive Gear proprietary software, including 3D modeling software. But there weren't many players who wanted to buy accessories or tools that brought little statistical benefit just because they were a bit unusual looking.

Even so, she had to make money somehow.

It was a game, so she didn't have to worry about living costs for the most part. But to create items using the "Craft" Skill, she needed some kind of income. Iris's daily in-game cycle was to log in, travel to Vispiagna Meadow,

collect ingredients, make potions, “Craft” some unique accessories to her taste, put them out on display, and then log out.

To be honest, she wanted to try making weapons and armor, too. She had that 3D modeling software, after all. She wanted to make armor that reflected her own bold design sense, then watch a first-rate avatar beautifully stomping on mobs while wearing it.



But every time she logged in, she found that the only items she sold were potions, never the accessories she had worked so hard on. The sight depressed her and made her feel talentless.

Maybe it was time, she thought.

The rush that she had felt when she first logged in was beginning to wane.

The reality of the scenery and the towns...

The lively animation of the monsters...

There was an incredible level of skill on display, which was especially clear to someone like herself who had used 3D modeling software. Ever since Iris had learned that it was possible to craft equipment items with your own designs in this world, she had chosen her path. But that decision was now wavering.

If she was going to pursue her dreams, she really needed to do it in the real world. Perhaps using this cyber world as practice for the real one had been a futile gesture from the start.

Okay, she decided. Today would be her final day. The Miraive Gear had come at a high cost, but she would just write it off as a lesson fee at the school of hard knocks. With all that in mind, she had logged in that day to put an end to it. But...

“Huh? It sold...” She opened her item window, then checked her shop tab. The inventory was empty.

She left her home and came out to the front, where a copy of her avatar was operating her booth. This was known as a “Seller Avatar,” and it could answer simple questions and sell things to characters as an NPC while you were logged out. You needed the “Seller” Skill to use it, of course.

“Oh, hello, there. I’ve been waiting so long for you to log in.” Standing in front of her store was a young man of the rare Dragonet race. He was dressed extravagantly, head to toe, in pay-to-download items, and the smell of the devoted whale drifted out from his every pore. The mere fact that he was a Dragonet meant he had bought the premium pack, as well.

Iris was a penniless student in the real world. Hostility and caution rose up in

her.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Nonsense. My name is displayed above my head. But that hardly matters right now...” This Dragonet man, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, continued, seeming a man of truly grating self-confidence. “Yes, indeed... I like your face.”

“Huh?” Iris asked.

Those words would change Iris’s life in *Narrow Fantasy Online* forever.

Thinking back on it now... Airi Kakitsubata thought, bringing her recollections to an end as the bus swayed around her.

Thinking back now, her first encounter with the young heir had not been romantic in the least.

Insolence. Audacity. Unrestrained depravity. When it came to describing him, even the relatively unacademic Airi could conjure up advanced vocabulary words with ease. To be perfectly frank, she found his extremely poor taste when it came to all things money-related and his utterly self-centered disregard for other people’s feelings absolutely galling.

“Just who *is* that guy?” Airi muttered aloud to herself once the bus was less populated.

A premium pack-exclusive race, pay-to-download items in every equipment slot... That was how he had been when they’d first met. His copious eccentricities suggested that he must be a wealthy man in the real world. The Knight, Kirschwasser, who always accompanied him had mentioned being the young heir’s servant in the real world, too. His butler, maybe?

Airi’s thinking took a brief tangent to mull over the question of whether people really still had butlers in 21st century Japan.

The young heir was bizarre. How had she gotten mixed up with a person like that? She still couldn’t fully explain it. Once again, it hadn’t been a romantic first meeting in the slightest. He had needled her terribly, and there was little to love about that smirking, above-it-all attitude of his.

And yet that same young heir had bought the original accessories that had gone so long without selling. And he had also asked her that question...

Would you like to try making armor for me?

Weren't those the words that she had been waiting so long to hear?

Yes, she acknowledged. They were. She was embarrassed with herself.

Just how much of a pushover are you? she found herself thinking. *Grow a spine, Airi Kakitsubata!*

The bus that Airi was riding finally reached the stop near her house. She got down off the bus and tried steeling her nerve once again.

She was grateful to the young heir. *In part.* But that was all. From now on, she would be resolute with him. If she gave him one single inch, he would walk all over her. She had to be on guard against any such manipulation.

Her long exam period was finally over. Starting today, Airi would return to *NaroFan* as the Elf Alchemist Iris. She renewed her resolve once more.

Both of her parents worked, which meant the house she came home to was an empty one. She washed up hurriedly, then dashed to her room, threw her bag to the side, and pulled out the Miraive Gear box that had been sealed deep in her closet.

Then, something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye.

She found herself pausing. It was a file folder containing a collection of design drafts. It held a blue and black formal suit jacket and trousers, designed to resemble the wings of a butterfly in the game called the Radiant Morpho. After much trial and error, she had produced... well, it was an accomplishment as far as her designs went; a shining masterpiece in her personal history as a designer.

Oh, no... Airi thought.

As she had looked at the design, she had ended up smiling. Her nerve was growing un-steeled. She couldn't help but remember the hateful heir's reaction to it.

No, oh no...

Yes, he had given it a rave review. Airi didn't have much experience with getting compliments on her apparel design, and since she had been starting to think she had no talent, she couldn't help but feel elated over the praise.

But don't forget... she said.

Don't forget the hateful things he had said, even in the midst of all the praise. Don't forget all of the trouble he had caused to people around him with his eccentric behavior, and the humiliation it had brought here.

There we go. Cooldown complete.

She wouldn't let herself begin to like the young heir again. Then hopefully, next time, she would present him with a super high-fashion design sheet that would really knock his socks off.

"You just watch me, young heir!" Airi quietly boasted to herself as she fixed the Miraive Gear in place. After one week, Airi Kakitsubata, as the Elf Alchemist Iris, would return once more to her battleground.

Incidentally, the crafting guild to which Airi belonged was named Iris Brand. The guild leader was that odious young heir. It had been supposed to be a temporary guild, to be disposed of after she had created his equipment. But then, for some reason, he had built a large, fancy guild house and given her all kinds of things she didn't need, and at some point, it had been decided that the guild would remain.

That big argument had been really bad, too. He had made an enemy out of one of the three great guilds of *NaroFan*. Of course, that had more or less calmed down by now, but Ichiro had still built that big fancy guild house just diagonally from them for no reason. He had been wrong to do that, too.

The guild house was far grander than the open-air stall she had run before opening Iris Brand. It had a black, stylish exterior with the "Iris Brand" logo in gold lettering.

It looked like a real high-fashion boutique. Naturally, since the young heir had built it to look that way. It was a big pain.

Was it going too far to say that? No, it really was a big pain.

Her avatar, Iris, manifested in her personal atelier on the guild house's second floor. She checked her appearance in the full-length mirror.

"Iris" was an Elf Alchemist with long red hair. Until very recently, she had worn the Alchemical Robe that was her class's starting gear, but on the young heir's recommendation, she had changed it to a completely original design. The designer for Iris Brand could hardly look cool in the proverbial "dyer's whites," wearing clothing that was still white because the dyer was too busy dyeing cloth for other people. The underlying data for her outfit was just standard Mage equipment, though.

The young heir's equipment was a modern-style suit, so Iris had had to design her own equipment with that in mind, but she had chosen to preserve a strong fantasy flavor. She had straddled the line. Certainly, she had pulled the coloring from the clothes she was wearing that day, and the design of her middle school uniform's blazer, and various other references. But she couldn't make a design that got too far away from the fantasy aesthetic.

"Okay!" Iris clenched and opened her hands, checking the feeling of being her avatar again after so long.

Iris Brand was opening in earnest today. The lobby of the guild house was lined with her experiments in making original design armor. (Of course, their underlying specs were mostly trash.) She wondered if a single one of them had sold in the week she had been away from the game, or if she had received any special orders for original design armor.

She checked the menu window and noticed that neither of her fellow guild members were logged in at the moment. Iris threw the door open and left her atelier behind, running out onto the balcony that overlooked the atrium that made up the floor lobby. She leaned over the banister to see how things were looking.

There was one customer.

Well, what were you expecting? she told herself. Feelings of disappointment and dejection were beginning to rear their heads once more.

"Welcome!" Iris descended the stairway and greeted the customer in a rather loud voice.

“Oh, yes. Hello!” It was a girl with silver hair. She straightened up as she was addressed and turned to face her.

On her feet were Leather Boots. Starter equipment. She also wore a Feather Ribbon that could be purchased in Starter Town. Her rarest equipment was a Healing Coat that required a composite recipe to make, but it was also something you could get relatively early in the game.

This must be her first time in Glasgobara, Iris speculated.

“You’ve got lots of unusual equipment here, huh?” the girl said as she rummaged through the armor on display.

Ah, Iris thought, her smile straining, *I messed up the modeling on that one. Please don’t look too close...*

“Yeah, they’re all my original designs!” Iris said. “Their stats aren’t much underneath, of course, so don’t get your hopes up in that regard, okay?”

“Oh, really?” the girl asked. “But I mean more in how they look. You don’t see many people wearing cute clothes like these...”

That was true. Iris felt a brief wash of shame over the thought.

First, most of the game’s players prioritized stats when it came to armor. That stood to reason, since it was hard to achieve much without good stats.

Second, as her guildmate Sir Kirschwasser had recently informed her, those players who did prioritize style over substance tended to come in two major groups: One was people who genuinely didn’t care about stats and just wanted to worry about fashion. The other was players who were so skilled, they didn’t need to worry about equipment specs. Players with specific play gimmicks usually fell into the latter category.

Those who fell into the former category, then, typically just hung out enjoying life near Starter Town, and therefore never made it to Glasgobara. Iris, then, was advised to focus on the latter group. But players like these often had high standards, and even when they came all the way to a store, it was rare for them to put in an order and then leave. It was embarrassing.

“Um... Felicia, is it? Did you make it here solo?” Iris said, checking the girl’s

name as she asked.

“No way!” Felicia said. “A friend brought me here. I’m not really that powerful...”

“Oh-ho...” Iris said.

“A friend brought me” implied that she hadn’t formed a party with players of the same level range and fought their way through under great hardship. She was being power leveled.

“You must have a really good friend,” Iris said.

Usually, newbie gamers led around by more experienced ones fell into one of two categories. Either they became so imbued with their leader’s ideas of efficiency that they lost their sense of whimsy about the game, or they ended up getting so annoyed that they disengaged completely. It was extremely rare to see someone in Felicia’s situation who would still want cute equipment. Iris hoped she would be grateful for her leader’s maturity.

Felicia’s expression brightened at Iris’s words. “That’s right!” she giggled. “He’s talented, he’s cool, and he treats me as a real adult! He’s my beloved second cousin!”

“O-Oh...” Iris said.

So they weren’t just friends, they were relatives. She had never of heard someone hanging out with their second cousin before. Iris was relatively close to her family, but the sight of the girl grinning and praising her (likely quite a bit older, from the way she was talking) relative to the skies was slightly off-putting.

“If only the young heir were so reasonable...” Iris said.

“Young heir? Is that a friend of yours?” Felicia asked.

“More like a nemesis. Though he’s my guild leader, too...” Iris heaved a sigh up to the atrium’s towering ceiling. “He’s so selfish and self-centered and capricious and dictatorial, but every so often he says something considerate. It really gets on my nerves.”

“Wow...” Felicia’s eyes widened. “There are people like that out there? That

stinks.”

“He’s my sponsor, you could say, or my patron, I guess. Well, given all that, I can’t just refuse him, and I’m grateful in a way, too, but... oh.” Iris suddenly remembered she was talking to a customer, and stiffened. She didn’t have anyone to vent to in real life about this, and she’d ended up ranting without meaning to. It did make her feel a little bit better, though. “Anyway, you want to buy something? I mentioned before that none of the display items have very good stats, but if you have time, I’ll can take an order for a new design.”

“An original design, huh?” Felicia asked. “I was talking to a friend today and thinking that might be the way to go...”

“Right?” Iris said. “Wow, I so rarely meet someone who gets it...”

The young heir “got it,” too. That was why she felt grateful to him, despite the way his attitude stuck in her craw.

“Um, about how much do the designs cost?” Felicia asked.

“It’s the cost of the base equipment, plus a little surcharge,” said Iris. “What’s your level, Felicia?”

“Forty.”

“Okay, let me think of what would be good...” Iris put a hand to her chin and thought. But her own knowledge of *NaroFan* was shaky, and she hadn’t downloaded the Miraive Gear’s proprietary browser, so she couldn’t search for information while playing the game. If only she could ask Kirschwasser for advice.

Just as she was wondering when the two of them might show up, with impeccable timing, the door to Iris Brand opened.

“My, there are two people here, for once,” one voice said with a hint of amusement.

“Well, this saves us the trouble of contacting you.” Another voice followed.

The best timing possible. Iris had just been waiting for them to arrive to discuss the specifics of equipment. But just as she opened her mouth to call out to him, Felicia also spoke up happily.

“Young heir!”

“Itchy!”

Realizing something was off, the two immediately shared a glance.

The young heir Tsuwabuki Ichiro smiled in the utmost happiness and said, “Hey, Iris, Felicia.”

“Why did no one call my name?” The silver-haired old knight Sir Kirschwasser pouted from where he stood behind the young heir.

It was nothing else but this. Felicia’s talented, cool, treats-me-like-a-real-adult beloved second cousin and Iris’s selfish, self-centered, capricious, dictatorial, occasionally-says-something-considerate galling young heir were one and the same. It was a small world, and the world of the game was even smaller.

The three of them sat in the Iris Brand lobby, at an expensive-looking chair and table set.

“The three of them” referred to Ichiro, Iris, and Felicia. Sir Kirschwasser remained standing to one side with a teapot in hand. Had he been wearing a tailcoat instead of heavy plate mail, he would be the spitting image of an elegant butler.

“Excellent tea, Sir,” Ichiro said. “Where does it come from?”

“Thank you,” Sir Kirschwasser replied. “I converted spiritgrass from the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea into tea herbs.”

“Hmm, I see.” Ichiro brought the cup to his mouth and drank it down. A merry blipping sound indicated a temporary stat increase. Ichiro laid the empty cup on the saucer and looked over at the seated pair. “Now, you two, I suspect you have something you wish to say to me.”

Iris was turning her eyes away diffidently, while Felicia was full-out sulking. Their expressions were the total opposite of what they had been when he’d walked through the door.

“I don’t,” Iris said eventually. Apparently tired of averting her eyes, she leaned back against her chair and reached for the spiritherb tea that Kirschwasser

proffered.

“Good,” Ichiro said. “Felicia, then?”

“I-I do, but...”

“Yes?”

“I do, I do! But umm, umm... it’s... it’s just...!” Felicia clenched her little hands into fists, eyes downcast as emotion seemed to seethe up inside her.

“I see,” Ichiro said. “So you concocted a plan in your own mind that you would invite me to form a new guild with you, and you also talked to King and decided that you would buy yourself new equipment. But once you finally logged in, you found out I was already in a guild, and that it was with the guild that does equipment design that you were interested in, and now you’re frustrated that it feels like I stole your lead in both regards.”

“That’s right!” Felicia hit the table and stood up. “I know saying it won’t mean anything, but I’ll still say it! Itchy, you idiot!”

“Nonsense.” Ichiro took a second cup Kirschwasser offered with a perfectly calm expression.

“Ha ha ha, Lady Felicia. I believe ‘two-timer’ is the more appropriate term at times like this.” Kirschwasser smiled knowingly. “I had also been thinking about proposing a guild to Master Ichiro when he told me about Iris Brand. I found it very frustrating. Isn’t that right, Master Ichiro?”

“I suppose,” Ichiro said. “Though I believe I’m still granting your wish of playing through the game with me.” Even an objective witness to the situation would regard Ichiro’s breezy expression as extremely irritating.

Although that didn’t seem to be the only thing Felicia was sulking about. She cast a sudden, icy glance in the direction of Iris, who was sitting beside her.

“Wh-What?” Iris looked back at Felicia.

“U-Um, well...” Felicia stuttered as well.

“Allow me to interpret.” Ichiro said, intruding on the conversation once more. “Felicia, as my second cousin, believes she has a duty to monitor my romantic interactions. Thus, now that she knows we’re in a guild together, she wants to

determine your worthiness for me.”

“Itchyyyyy!!” Felicia rose and pounded the table two or three times more.

“Perhaps I was wrong?” Ichiro asked.

“You’re not wrong, you’re not wrong! You’re not wrong, but... nnngh!” Poor Felicia was driven to holding her head in her hands while performing a strange sort of dance.

Ichiro’s expression remained as placid as ever. Kirschwasser calmly poured more tea, while Iris just stared in shock.

“Young heir, do you have... *any* tact at all?” she asked.

“Nonsense. I’m sure it’s not something Felicia wanted pointed out, but coming right out with it is better than leaving this vague ill will hanging between the two of you.” Ichiro placed his teacup on his saucer. “Now, Iris, let’s hear your defense.”

“What defense? We don’t have that kind of relationship... do we?” Iris asked.

“I agree.”

“R-Right?” Iris’s expression was a mix of confusion and relief. “Listen, Felicia... Like I told you at the start, I really do not like the young heir. At all. I’m grateful to him in part, I’m far more annoyed by him, and I’m very likely to beat his brains out some day.”

“Ha ha ha.” Ichiro, for some reason, just laughed in delight.

“Well, I know it’s rude to speak ill about somebody’s family, so I’ll leave it at that,” Iris finished. “The point is, we’re not like that at all. So just relax, okay?”

“Ugh...” Felicia looked up from her position, which had at some point become “lying on the floor, clutching her head in her hands.” She looked at Iris, and then at Ichiro. “I’m not sure I’m convinced...”

“Young heir, you should say something, too,” Iris said. “Or Mr. Kirschwasser.”

“I don’t have anything in particular to say...” The silver-haired knight remained as laid-back as ever.

“Hmm...” Ichiro assumed a pondering posture. Iris and Felicia didn’t know

each other, but if Felicia wanted to join Iris Brand, he would be happy to have her. He couldn't have her bizarre preconceived notions getting in the way of her priorities, though. "Well, it might be a problem if you don't have an accurate understanding of the situation. Why don't I spend the day telling you that story?"

"You mean the story of how the guild was founded?" Felicia asked as she got up off the floor.

"Yes. Or, more precisely, the story of what happened before I met up with you in the game." Ichiro gave her a gleefully enthusiastic smile.

Felicia looked to be feeling a swelling unease.

Iris let out a very small sigh.

3 - Noble Son, Tell

“By the way...” Felicia spoke up. Ichiro had suggested they go somewhere else to tell the story, so the four of them had left the Iris Brand guild house together. “...Is Iris the one who designed your equipment, Itchy?”

“That’s right.” Ichiro smiled and spread his arms to show off his clothing.

Iris looked away self-consciously.

It was the typical embarrassment of the inexperienced creator who wasn’t yet accustomed to having her designs shown off. Felicia, though, was incapable of understanding that. All she saw was the rapture in Ichiro’s expression, and it confirmed her suspicions. She had tried to ask Ichiro about his equipment a little while ago, during their trip to the Necrolands during the Grand Quest. He had just brushed her question away with a cryptic smile.

The Ichiro Tsuwabuki that Asuha knew almost never smiled in such a satisfied way. Beneath his usual unflappable visage was always a sense that he was bored to tears. Asuha knew that.

There hadn’t been a trace of that the other day, either, when Ichiro had crossed swords with King Kirihito. That should be a reason for her to be a bit jealous of Sera Kiryu, too, but setting that aside...

Setting that aside, the existence of a strange woman who could make Ichiro smile with such satisfaction was dangerous in her mind. Her second cousin sensor was starting to ping. Everything about Iris set off warning bells. Even though Iris herself had protested that their relationship wasn’t like that, she was still dangerous.

“Of course, I like the suit’s design. But I think my favorite part is the brooch,” Ichiro said, indicating the butterfly on his lapel.

It must have been Iris’s design as well, but the graphic was a little sloppy compared to the others. It didn’t look all that great to Felicia, but she knew that she was somewhat biased herself, so she didn’t say that out loud.

“Young heir, could you please stop talking about that brooch?” Iris murmured, causing Ichiro and Felicia to both turn back to her.

“Why?” Ichiro asked.

“You know why!” Iris looked up at him, shouting. “It’s embarrassing! It’s like a big neon sign saying ‘novice designer at work’! Not that I think of the rest of your equipment as perfect, of course!”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said. “Regardless of how you may feel, I greatly enjoy this brooch. It’s far from a masterpiece, certainly. The graphical rendering is sloppy, the aesthetic sense is poor...”

“So you realize it!” Iris shouted.

So, Felicia thought, *it’s not actually that great...*

“Iris, are you a designer in real life?” Felicia asked.

“The story you’re about to hear should cover that, I believe,” Sir Kirschwasser said, standing at the head of the party. “Now, right this way.”

Felicia looked up, surprised. They’d only walked twenty steps. “That was fast.”

It was the house of the Akihabara Forging Guild, diagonally across from the Iris Brand building. One of the three great guilds of *NaroFan*. As a fellow crafting guild, they were likely in competition with Iris Brand. Was this really where he was going to tell the story?



“This is where you’re going to tell the story?” Iris’s face betrayed clear discomfort, as well.

“This is where I’m going to tell the story,” Ichiro confirmed. “It will allow us to hear from a greater variety of people.”

He did not immediately open the door, though. Instead, he turned around as if on a sudden inspiration, and gazed out over Glasgobara’s main street.

“What, heir, did you see someone you know?” Iris asked.

“No... it’s nothing,” Ichiro said. “Let’s go inside.”

In response to Ichiro’s words, Kirschwasser opened the door. A bell attached to the door jangled, notifying those inside of their upcoming entry. Felicia peeked in and saw the guild house lobby, which was very different from Iris Brand’s. If anything, it was on the cramped side.

Or perhaps it only looked small because of how it was packed with items on display, and customers who were browsing through them. Many of them looked surprised as they saw Kirschwasser opening the door, and Ichiro standing in front of him.

“H-Hey... Isn’t that...”

“Is that Tsuwabuki?”

“What does he want?”

Their voices spoke in hushed whispers, but they could be clearly heard.

“Itchy, what did you do?” Felicia asked.

“Nothing in particular,” he said. “Isn’t that right, Iris?”

“Your definition of ‘nothing in particular’ is different from that of a regular person,” Iris retorted. “Right, Mr. Kirsch?”

“Hahaha... Iris has your number, sir.”

In other words, he had done something quite serious. That made sense. Felicia was reminded of that post on Matsunaga’s blog about some big tumult Ichiro had caused. She hadn’t read that article then, but she wondered if that had been related to this.

A door at the back of the lobby opened, and a man came lumbering out of it. “Oh, it’s you, brother. How can I help you?”

This avatar had the short stature and girth associated with the Dwarf race. On top of that, he had a long, shaggy mustache that resembled the steel wool she used after cooking experiments. The hammer and tongs that hung at his waist were the “weapons” used exclusively by the Blacksmith class.

Above his head was his avatar name, “I’m With Stupid →”

“I’m With Stupid →?” Felicia tilted her head, confused. “That’s his name?”

“It’s what we call a gag name,” Kirschwasser said, responding to her question. “It’s not unusual to see someone set a name like that as a joke, and then regret it later.”

“He is very skilled, though,” Iris leaned in and whispered to them. “But because of his name, you wonder what to call him, right?”

“Hey, I can hear you,” Mr. Stupid said, arms folded and glaring at them. “You can call me whatever you like.”

“I call him ‘Bossman’ myself,” Ichiro said. “I believe everybody does. Though I hear Stroganoff calls him ‘Sakata the Stupid.’”

“What the heck...” Felicia tilted her head.

“What the heck...” Iris also tilted her head.

“A reference from before our time, I believe,” Kirschwasser said, gazing into the distance with folded arms.

“Now, can I ask what you want?” Mr. Stupid demanded. “You’re not here to mock us, are you?”

“I was hoping to explain to Felicia about the incident that occurred,” Ichiro said. “I’m not here to mock you.”

“You *are* mocking us, then.” But despite Bossman Stupid’s words, he shrugged and pointed to a set of chairs at a table in the corner of the lobby. It was of clumsy design, completely unlike the ones at Iris Brand. “Well, I won’t throw you out. If you want to talk, you can do it over there.”

“Thank you,” Ichiro said. “By the way, is Ed here today?” It was another name Felicia didn’t recognize.

“Who’s Ed?” she asked.

“Edward.” Iris gave a clipped response to Felicia’s question.

Edward. She felt sure she had heard that name somewhere before. Certainly, it was not an uncommon name. But she felt like wherever she had heard it, it had not been in an English textbook, or a manga. She had heard it somewhere before in this game.

“He’s not here yet, but he will be soon, I expect,” Bossman Stupid said. “Well, have a seat.”

“Ah, certainly.” Ichiro leisurely walked towards the chair that Bossman had indicated.

“Th-Thank you for your hospitality...” Felicia bowed politely, then followed after.

Iris and Kirschwasser murmured similar pleasantries as they entered the lobby after them. The eyes of the customers followed them curiously. It made Felicia feel a bit self-conscious.

“Okay, Itchy. Why did you bring us all the way out here?” she asked quickly.

“I thought you might wish to hear various objective accounts of what happened in the week before I met you,” he said. “I did make some trouble for Bossman and Ed here.”

“You’re actually aware of it?” Iris breathed in disbelief.

“Yes, though nothing that merits, for example, what the men browsing equipment over there are saying about me. And, as I was merely doing what I wanted to do...”

“Yeah, yeah. We get it. Of course!”

Ichiro’s assertion had been sounding like it was going to run long and be pointless, so Iris forcefully cut him off. Despite that, Ichiro’s expression was far from dissatisfied. In fact, there was a definite feeling of glee mixed in with it as he arrived at the table.

It really did give her chills. A shiver ran up Felicia's back. She had never known her second cousin to enjoy talking with a woman that much. Of course, she knew that he wasn't the kind of narrow-minded man who would let Iris's occasional objections get under his skin, but what was with that... that strangely peaceful, satisfied expression?

"Does it bother you?" Kirschwasser smiled from where he stood beside the obviously nervous Felicia.

"Y-Yes, of course," she said. "Doesn't it bother you, Mr. Kirsch?"

"I knew what Master Ichiro had in mind when he approached Iris... being a loyal retainer."

"Th-That gets under my skin! It really annoys me!" she cried.

"Ha ha ha. If I may say, Miss Felicia, you seem determined to look at Master Ichiro through a certain filter." Even Kirschwasser's lighthearted laughter was exactly like that of Ichiro's when he was in a good mood, which just served to make Felicia feel even crabbier.

Asuha Tsuwabuki, age 14, was still subject to rampant attacks of ego. It was the age where it was very hard to control one's feelings. Felicia puffed out her cheeks and stomped her way to a chair.

"Now, let us begin," Ichiro said softly, hands folded on the table.

An audience had already formed around them. Of course, they had all originally come to the Akihabara Forging Guild to buy the guild's superior equipment, but the sight of Ichiro Tsuwabuki — who had grown quite (in)famous over the incidents of the past few days — made them very curious to see if he was about to start something else.

"It all started the day after I spoke to you at Great-grandfather's party," Ichiro said. "First, I began playing *NaroFan...*"

◆ ◆ ◆

Ichiro Tsuwabuki had bought the commercial-grade game hardware, the Miraive Gear Cocoon. More precisely, he had bought two of them.

The machine, developed by Pony Entertainment, Inc., was sideways

compatible with their personal headset VR Drive machine, the Miraive Gear X. The Miraive Gear X already had an incredible eight teraFLOPS of processing power, but the Cocoon came mounted with a laser cooling system on top of that, giving its processing a floating point number of up to 200 teras. These specs gave it the processing power of the supercomputers of old, and the thought that you could buy such a thing for just a bit over 100 million yen was a terrifying sign of the march of technology.

When he mentioned this to Sakurako, she just shouted, “I don’t know about that!”

A moment later, she calmed down enough to add, “But I’ve heard that a *Senjo no Kizuna* cabinet can go for about 15 million apiece, so from that point of view, I see why so few arcades carry the Cocoon. And since it’s for playing internet games, that would change the price point.”

“I have no idea what *Senjo no Kizuna* is,” Ichiro answered. They occasionally had conversations like that, too.

Usually, only arcades licensed by the Entertainment Business Law could buy cabinets that had an internet connection, but Ichiro had sent out a request to Pony and been approved for the purchase. The Tsuwabuki family and Pony Entertainment, Inc. usually had a rather complicated relationship, but as customer to seller, it was different.

And so on that early summer day, as the sweltering sun beat down, the proudly hard-nosed Director of Sales for Pony Entertainment, Inc. and a few of his subordinates brought that monster machine which was the size of a compact car.

“Mr. Tsuwabuki, for your direct purchase of our Miraive Gear Cocoon, we offer you the most heartfelt...” he said.

“Right,” Ichiro cut him off. “You can skip the pleasantries. They’re all nonsense, anyway.”

“I am Daigo Aragaki, Sales Director for Pony Entertainment... Regarding setup and installation...”

“Oh, I’ll handle that, too,” Ichiro said. “I intend to play it myself, after all. The

thought of someone else tampering with it is nonsense.”

Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s ability to deal so flippantly with that hard-nosed Director of Sales suggested he had a bit of a hard nose himself.

The men in their work clothes entered the apartment. It was awash with the sort of luxury that they would probably never again witness in their lives, yet they did not stare nor bat an eye. They were model professionals.

Following Ichiro’s directions, they brought the load, still in its packaging, into a room, then tore the cardboard, styrofoam, and plastic wrapping apart to reveal it. The surface was all flawless, metallic silver curves, punctuated by the engraving “Mi-L/RiveGear COCOON” written in stylish blue letters. The transparent black plastic facings atop the silver body gave it a truly futuristic image. A form that could encase an entire human body with room to spare.

“Wow. You did buy the Cocoon!” A maid entered the room with a joyful cry.

This was something that got the attention of the workmen. She was holding a tray in both hands with several glasses on it.

“You’ve all been working very hard, and it must be hot out there. Why don’t you wet your whistles?” The maid — Sakurako, obviously — walked between the men with a beaming smile, and offered them each a glass of ice. She then poured a sweet-looking liquid into each glass. The men, including Aragaki, all hesitantly put the glasses to their lips, and their eyes widened at how delicious it was.

“I couldn’t believe he bought one for me, too,” the maid said excitedly. “I’ve never been happier to work for Ichiro-sama.”

“Well, it’s hardly a dent out of my bank account,” Ichiro said.

The maid giggled. “I think I’ll be able to have a more fulfilling *NaroFan* life than ever before. Hehehe...”

“Yes.” Ichiro looked over the documents Aragaki had handed him while the package was being opened. He also flipped quickly through the nearly 300-page tome of a manual.

Once he finished reading, he took the toolbox that Sakurako had brought and

removed the cabinet panel with seemingly practiced hands. He removed the bundle of cords, gave them a look-through to discern precisely what they did, then extracted them one by one and began hooking them up. He seemed to have no trouble with it whatsoever. Even Aragaki was amazed.

With nothing left for them to do, they had no choice but to leave as Sakurako saw them off with her angelic smile.

About half an hour later, the online connection for the ultimate VR game system in the penthouse floor of the luxury apartment complex Tsuwabuki Pavilion Sangenjaya was ready to go.

“Which means it’s time... for this!” As she spoke, Sakurako pulled out the *Narrow Fantasy Online* premium package.

The limited edition had originally had a very small first printing, and the used games shop he had bought it from hadn’t hesitated to mark it up. To find it, Sakurako had had to roam all over Akihabara, using black market sale routes known only by staunch otaku.

And so, the young heir Ichiro Tsuwabuki could finally begin playing the game. The VRMMO, rather.

First, there was a need to make an avatar. According to Sakurako, the game’s avatar options were so extensive that a person could spend a whole week or more fussing over them, but after a mere five minutes, Ichiro rejected them. It seemed that no matter how he combined the options, he couldn’t recreate his own face.

Ichiro bought 3D modeling software on the spot, worked it to make a face that looked enough like his, then overlaid the modeling data onto his avatar. Overlaying original graphics required a payment in real-world money, but to Ichiro, the cost was basically like throwing a coin into the charity box.

The pride that compelled him to be himself even within the game was an admirable thing, although it walked the line of disgusting narcissism.

Afterwards, Ichiro finished setting various parameters for his character. After choosing his race, class, and beginning skills, he received an announcement:

“Choose your pay-to-download course and additional options. You can

change this later.”

In addition to the basic fee, there was the “Extra Course,” which increased the wares available in NPC shops and lowered their cost; and the “Royal Course,” which slightly increased the money and EXP you got from defeating monsters (by 10%). There was also the “Starter Course,” which thankfully could only be used during the first month of play, and gave you extra bonuses for things like income and EXP.

“Additional options” referred to helpful pay-to-download services. The “Basic Item Pack” let you buy packs of potions and other consumables with real money, and “Booster Pack” gave you significant boosts to the money or EXP you earned for 24 hours. Some might say there were almost too many options, but for working adults who didn’t have a lot of time, they were useful methods for catching up with the heavy users. The pay-to-download equipment was also beneficial to players who preferred fashion over effectiveness.

Ichiro couldn’t be bothered to explore them thoroughly, so he just bought them all.

With that all finished, Dragonet Magi-Fencer Ichiro Tsuwabuki was ready to touch down on the stage of the game.

When he opened his eyes, he appeared to be in a small room. There was a wood-grain floor and a simple bed, and a small, unvarnished table in the corner that felt rough to the touch.

Naturally, there was nothing electric of any sort. Through the glass of the room’s lone window, he could see a peaceful townscape with brick-lined streets.

To his five senses, everything seemed perfectly natural. He walked around the small room a few times, feeling both the hard texture of his boots and the familiar weight of his own mass. The provided dresser wasn’t well-made by any stretch, but he could see the attractive face of “Ichiro Tsuwabuki” that looked just like his own, and his symmetrical form clad in leather armor, within it.

Could human ingenuity really deceive the brain to this degree? Ichiro was, for once, speechless. This was quite extraordinary indeed. He could see why so many people were obsessed with this game.

He knocked three times on empty air with the back of his fist, a key motion that caused the menu window to open up in front of his eyes. It worked with a combination of thought activation and virtual touchscreen. (Technically, it was possible to control the system only with the former, but giving a real sense of "I'm in control" was better to prevent detachment from the conscious mind; thought activation alone often caused accidental call-ups.)

The menu window contained many options — he could check his stats, his equipment, assign Skills and Arts, and more. He touched "Config," which brought up a menu regarding pay-to-download items. One could check their virtual currency balance for the logged-in account (he hadn't bought any, so this was zero, naturally) and credit card information here.

There was also a list of items already bought, and a list of course names and pack names. Each pack name was accompanied by a wrapped box icon, and touching each one caused a message window to appear.

"You got Potion x5. You got Antidote x5. You got Remedy x5. You got Reviver x5. You got Fatigue Restorer x5..."

Ah-hah, so that was how it worked.

Ichiro opened the game items he had bought with real-world currency one after the other. Then, he touched the "equip" listing on the menu window. It displayed an image of Ichiro himself dressed in his leather armor. There was a list of things he could equip to each area of his body, and the lists also included armor and accessories that could be bought with microtransactions. The pay-to-download equipment did seem to have better abilities than the starter equipment, though the defense bonuses didn't seem to be much of an improvement. Many of these items were tie-in from popular anime series; purely for fashion, most likely.

Very good.

The leather armor was insufficiently suited to Ichiro's vanity, so he tapped a few choices from the list and equipped them instead.

He walked down to the first floor and left the building, where he found a Knight he didn't recognize calling out to him.

“There you are, Master Ichiro!”

References to external appearance meant nothing in a VRMMO, where one could lie about how they looked. Nevertheless, the man standing before him was a virile middle-aged man with striking slicked-back silver hair. The name above his head was “Kirschwasser.” The broad one-handed sword on his belt and heavy-looking kite shield on his back indicated a high strength stat. The clink of metal upon metal sounded out as he walked towards Ichiro.

Several seconds later, Ichiro spoke. “...Are you Sakurako-san?”

“That’s right!” The voice was deep and resonant, nothing like the usual voice of Sakurako Ogi.

“Oh, nonsense,” he complained. “This does no one any good.”

“Aw, what do you mean by that?” Sakurako Ogi’s Knight looked surprised when Sakurako realized that Ichiro’s avatar looked exactly like Ichiro himself. When he explained that he had even used modeling software to accomplish the look, she seemed dumbfounded.

“Of course, it does cost a lot of money to overlay original graphics, doesn’t it?” she asked, as Ichiro tested his avatar with a few basic motions, opening and clenching his fists, twisting his torso. He was enjoying being able to move the fictional body as he wished, as well as the impediments that the game’s strict stat systems placed upon such movements. Of course, these too were all sensations created by quantum signals, but to bring that up would be nonsense.

“Sir, I assume you’ve never created your own designs with modeling software, then?” Ichiro asked.

“I lack the technology,” the Knight said. “And, well, to change item graphics, you need a crafting class. Master Ichiro, are you that obsessed with appearances?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Ichiro said. “It’s not that I care what others think about me, but I do want to look like myself, in a way that satisfies me, personally.” In that regard, his current Faerie Armor did not quite make the grade.

“Well, at least *you* admit to it, Master Ichiro,” the Knight said, looking annoyed.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“There are quite a few *NaroFan* players who are obsessed with appearances... Of course, it’s not something I’m particularly concerned with.”

One of the most popular features in any MMORPG was the character editing function: the ability to painstakingly craft your character from their face to their silhouette, and pick the equipment that was most flattering, or coolest, or cutest, as you preferred. There was no small number of users who used their avatar more like a dress-up doll than anything else.

Narrow Fantasy Online, and VRMMOs in general, made full use of that multitudinous character edit function, and many, many users worked hard to create the most attractive avatar possible. Some of them even used it to present as another sex, as made obvious by the maid-cum-Knight that now stood in front of him.

But that was not the real problem.

However much effort someone put in to their character editing, the nature of VRMMO was that the player became their character completely. They had to move that character with their own hands and feet, and see through their eyes. They couldn’t watch themselves heroically slaying all those mobs.

They could not, to put it bluntly, ogle their own character.

This was a blind spot of VRMMOs that its creators failed to realize, and it had caused internet crossplayers to flee the game in massive numbers.

“And so, to appease those who still wished to view their characters in action, they added a skill known as ‘Perspective Change’ that allows one to view their avatar from a third-person perspective,’” the Knight concluded.

“Ugh, nonsense.” Even the young heir had to let out a groan at that. “I see you didn’t pick a female character, Sakurako-san.”

“Well, just think of it as a form of cosplay,” the Knight said. “I really enjoy this sort of roleplaying. I’m not using it right now, but I took ‘Perspective Change’ for fun, too.”

“Though you more or less cosplay every day in real life, as well,” Ichiro said.

“Ha ha ha!” Knight-Sakurako let out a cheery laugh in his gravelly voice, then cleared his throat. “Master Ichiro, Master Ichiro, I am the dedicated Knight, Sir Kirschwasser, of a line that has served House Tsuwabuki for generations. I’ve come to act as your bodyguard as you explore the new continent of Asgard. What do you think?”

“Hmm, I see,” Ichiro said. It seemed Kirschwasser was already mentally designing the scenario. Of course, from the game setting standpoint, it was hard to imagine how such a long-standing master-servant relationship could exist between Dragonet and Human families, but it wouldn’t matter in terms of their progress through the game. To nitpick would be nonsense; if that was what his servant wanted to do, he would allow it.

But now that he’d begun playing, what to do next? He’d started playing because of Asuha, but she currently had tests, and so wouldn’t be around for a week. Which meant that Ichiro Tsuwabuki had no particular objective. The closest he had was a desire to explore every corner of the fictional space created by the Drive technology.

When he ran that by Kirschwasser, the Knight assumed the smug look of the experienced gamer, and responded, “Let’s raise your level.”

And so they did.

They went out the front gate of Starter Town into a grassland that spread as far as the eye could see. Vispiagna Meadow contained no powerful mobs, and it was easy to acquire provisions and healing items there. Thus, it was considered a sort of practice stage for newcomers to *Narrow Fantasy Online* to grow accustomed to the controls and the game system.

Tsuwabuki Ichiro and Kirschwasser ignored all that and headed straight for the Volgund Volcanoes.

This region was designed for characters of level 20 to 30. Once a player had gotten used to *NaroFan*, taken off their training wheels, and formed a party, the Volgund Volcanoes were usually their next destination. It was not an appropriate place to take a player who had debuted less than an hour ago, but there was a method to Kirschwasser’s madness.

“This place has the most delicious mobs,” he said. “Wait here while I go

looking for one.”

To someone of Sir Kirschwasser’s level, the monsters in the Volcanoes were nothing to fear. Ichiro noticed small fire-breathing lizards here and there, but they must have been programmed to avoid high-level players, as they merely roared at them from afar.

A dialogue box popped up in front of Ichiro. “You got Fireweed. Add it to your inventory?”

It seemed it was an item that allowed him to breathe fire. Fantasy, indeed.

He answered “Yes” to the dialogue box, which caused the Fireweed he had extracted to glow and disappear. He then selected “Item” from the menu and found the Fireweed mixed in with the consumables he had bought from the microtransaction menu.

While Kirschwasser was searching for mobs, on a whim, Ichiro decided to pick up a small rock on the ground. He did not receive the prompt to add it to his inventory; perhaps it was too small to be of any use.

Curiously, he brought it to his mouth. It had a strange, bitter taste and a gravelly texture. Right after he put it into his mouth, a message window appeared with a buzz of warning.

“That is not a consumable item!”

So he wasn’t allowed to swallow it, then. Even so, it was incredible that he could put it into his mouth and experience the taste and texture. His little experiment had left him even more impressed by the attention to detail put into the setting.

Obviously, every little pebble on the roadside couldn’t have its own stats programmed into it. He wondered what possible program they could have written for it.

“Master Ichiro, I found one,” Sir Kirschwasser said. “Let’s get moving.”

Ichiro didn’t see anything that looked like a monster nearby, but Kirschwasser insisted. Perhaps the Skill he had employed earlier had been Far-Sight or Clairvoyance, or some kind of radar-like ability. Ichiro stood up and began to

follow after.

As explained earlier, the Volgund Volcanoes were an area designed for adventurers level 20 or higher. To a level 1 adventurer like Ichiro, with equipment not much better than the starter set and the poor defense stats that implied, even one hit from a minor monster would prove fatal. Nevertheless, he strode forward, unafraid. (Of course, much of that fearlessness stemmed from the understanding that this was only a game.)

After walking for a while, Kirschwasser suddenly restrained Ichiro with one hand. They hid behind a boulder and peeked around it.

“Sir Kirschwasser, you remind me of my local guide, Mario, who showed me around during to my trip to the Amazon last year,” Ichiro said.

“Oh, did you find him reliable?”

“Thanks to him, I was able to know the rare experience of being attacked by crocodiles and jaguars.”

“He wasn’t useful at all, then!”

Ichiro had been able to save Mario, and they had managed to survive none the worse for wear, but he might not be able to get them out so easily this time. Programs could be very inflexible, after all. For the moment, at least, he had to accept that the character Ichiro was much less capable than its real life counterpart.

In which case, he might as well put his full trust in Kirschwasser.

At his guide’s urging, Ichiro peeked past the rock to see what lay beyond. It was a monster, its appearance difficult to describe, patrolling the area cautiously. It was like a bipedal lizard with black and white stripes. It wore a helm and armor dulled by volcanic ash, but the blade it held in one hand still gleamed.

“Lizardman Zebras,” Kirschwasser said, then offered a concise explanation. “They have by far the highest Technique Points offered by mobs in this level range.”

In *NaroFan*, in addition to distributing the bonus points acquired by leveling

up, a player could also increase their stats by hunting monsters and using Skills. Some characters spammed these methods to acquire higher stats relative to their level, while other players avoided it because it made things too easy. The Technique Points that these Lizardman Zebras had were a hidden attribute related to the advance of Skill and Arts levels.

There were five kinds of Lizardmen in the Volgund Volcanoes, including the Zebra, and each was customized to a different stat, such as Strength or Dexterity. The location's usefulness as a place to grind stats led heavy users to refer to it as the "Lizardman Dojo."

This had all come to light through voluntary player investigation. Ichiro would later learn that that "volunteer" who had figured all this out was a man named Matsunaga, the same one who ran the walkthrough wiki and aggregate blog. But setting that aside...

"Knowing you, Master Ichiro, you've bought a number of pay-to-download bonuses, haven't you?" Sir Kirschwasser asked.

"You make me sound like an unpleasant rich fool who spends money indiscriminately."

"So, you did buy them?"

"Well, yes."

"If you'll pardon me, Master, from an objective point of view, that would make you an unpleasant rich fool..." Kirschwasser cleared his throat, then said...

"I brought you here to use those bonuses more efficiently. Let's raise all your Skill levels so that you can have an exhilarating, enjoyable *NaroFan* life."

"Setting aside the question of whether raising Skill levels will give me an exhilarating life, I am willing to try," Ichiro said.

The Lizardman Zebra, wielding a scimitar, cautiously approached them. Ichiro readied his Magi-Fencer's starting weapon, the Mage Saber, and Kirschwasser stood in front of him protectively.

It was rare for Ichiro Tsuwabuki to feel reassured by the sight of someone else's back. Of course, that balance of power would be overturned a week

later... but at the time, they didn't know that.

The battle that followed was extremely mechanical. In fact, that was the intent.

Kirschwasser was a Knight/Fighter/Acolyte, so he specialized in protecting his comrades. Over and over again, he protected Ichiro from the Lizardman Zebra's slashes, then stunned it with Shield Bash. Ichiro then fervently slashed at the now-defenseless Zebra, and once its health bar got low, Kirschwasser healed it and returned it to normal.

The Zebras had a low spawn rate, so they had to use a single Zebra as much as possible. There was something almost inspiring about how it sprang back up vigorously every time, without a trace of dejection.

"Sir Kirschwasser, did you build your character primarily for support?" Ichiro asked.

"Not especially. The Knight has an Art known as 'Pain Charge,' so the damage I take doesn't go to waste."

Ichiro kept attacking and attacking, making the utmost use of all the Arts and Skills he learned, and each time his fatigue bar built up over 60, he drank a Fatigue Restorer from his inventory and resumed attacking. His Skill and Art levels skyrocketed, and the increase in his damage was obvious.

"That was your third Fatigue Restorer," Sir Kirschwasser said. "Shall I give you one?"

"No, that's fine. I get them for free, anyway." Ichiro selected the microtransaction menu from Config. Kirschwasser looked horrified.

"You do not get them for free! You're spending real money on them!"

"Nonsense, nonsense. In terms of time-to-earnings ratio, game currency is more expensive than yen. Thus, this way is more efficient."

During this bourgeoisie comedy routine, the Lizardman Zebra attacked a few more times, but Kirschwasser blocked with his shield, knocked it back, stunned it, then healed it. It was, indeed, "delicious."

How many times had he attacked at that point?

The high-speed swordplay weaving together Skill Level 21 “Sword Technique” and Arts Level 36 “Bash” allowed him to unleash damage digits unthinkable from a Level 1 player, which began to take gouges out of the Lizardman Zebra’s HP gauge. Even taking into account that the “Staggered” status ailment was reducing its defense, the 272 damage was still impressive.

Letting out a baleful cry at the one-sided slaughter, the Lizardman Zebra fell prostrate on the ground of the Volgund Volcanoes. The painstakingly detailed 3D model then disappeared into points of light.

“Splendidly done,” Sir Kirschwasser said.

“Yeah.” Ichiro had no trouble fully accepting the praise.

A light fanfare rang out, and a window listing his rewards for defeating the mob appeared on the screen. His many boosts led to an unbelievable amount of experience points and gold obtained. His level skyrocketed to 17 at once.

“Master Ichiro, for your first kill to be a Lizardman Zebra is truly impressive,” Sir Kirschwasser said.

“Well... ah, it was a bit of nonsense. I only did it because you prevented him from attacking.” He could deal with the allocation of bonus points from his leveling up later. If he dumped it all into strength, he could get “Break Object” immediately, but there were a great number of attractive Skills with prerequisites in other stats.

“Shall I search for another Zebra?” Sir Kirschwasser said. “Or if you want to increase your strength, there’s one called a Lizardman Big Body, as well.”

“I’m sorry, Sakurako-san, but it’s 6:00.” Ichiro looked at the clock display at the corner of the window, then shrugged.

When he said something like that, the middle-aged Knight, Sir Kirschwasser, had no choice but to revert to Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s personal servant, Sakurako Ogi, once more. Her avatar wore a hangdog expression not befitting a dignified middle-aged man. When the 3D models rendered overreactions like that, it was a sign that the player had gotten overly emotional.

“Ichiro-sama, why don’t we have cup ramen tonight?” she asked hopefully.

“Nonsense. You must work for your paycheck.”

Kirschwasser slumped deeply. “Very well... I understand... I’ll go on ahead and get things ready... Is 8:00 acceptable for dinner?”

“That sounds best,” he said. “I’ll let you pick the menu, but I would prefer to have fish today. It’s possible to send messages to the player in the Drive directly using the Cocoon’s exterior terminal, so when things are ready, use that to let me know.”

“Okaaay.” Sir Kirschwasser cheerfully began preparations to log out, then suddenly seemed to remember something. “Master Ichiro, there’s an item that will take you back to Starter Town. Let me give it to you. I’ll be logging out now, and while your Skill levels are high, it’s too dangerous for you to be out in the volcanoes alone.”

Kirschwasser moved to open his item window, but Ichiro held out a hand to stop him.

“No, that’s all right. I’d like to go exploring on my own for a while.” He continued, “The death penalty in this game is to lose your inventory and equip items, yes?”

“You’re left with only your starter equipment. It’s extremely unfair to the players, isn’t it? Well, I’ll be going now!” With those last words, Kirschwasser reflected Sakurako Ogi’s usual excitement.

Now, what should I do until dinner? Ichiro wondered after Kirschwasser was gone.

Perhaps he should head back to town, exploring on the way, then take one of the beginner quests to gain class-exclusive Arts. He wanted to do a bit more scrutinizing of potential stat distributions, though...

While Ichiro was thinking, he heard a low growl from behind him. He turned back around and saw the mob he had just defeated — more precisely, another of the same type — flitting out its tongue as it walked towards him. A second Lizardman Zebra.

Seeing it up close, he felt once again inspired by the craftsmanship that had gone into these monsters’ creation. The texture of their skin was so realistic,

and gazing upon it through his character's eyes made it even more awe-inspiring. He often went out to observe unusual insects in great detail, and this reminded him of the reverence he felt during those times; towards the mysteries of living things and to their maker.

Ichiro was struck by an idea, and approached the Lizardman Zebra fearlessly. The Zebra seemed excited by the approach of such defenseless prey.

"Graaaah!" A second later, it slashed at Ichiro with an eerie cry.

Ichiro simply watched with the cool gaze of a scientist waiting for the results of an experiment. The scimitar collided with Ichiro's head, taking his HP immediately down to zero.

The world around him went black. Then an unsympathetic message window popped up, reading, "You are dead."

When he woke up, he was in Starter Town. That stood to reason; where else was he going to respawn?

He opened his item inventory from the menu window, and saw that, indeed, all the consumables he had bought earlier were now gone. His equipment had also reverted to the starting leathers. Since their design was not to his taste, he quickly went through the microtransaction menu once more.

He then checked the status screen and confirmed that one of his Skills had received a slight bonus. It was the Dragonet race-exclusive Skill, Dragon Scales. He opened his browser and checked the wiki, which explained that it was a Skill that reduced damage based on its level. It also said it wasn't very useful in practice. For one thing, it was hard to raise levels of defensive Skills if you weren't a defense-oriented character like a Knight, and it wasn't useful enough to spend a Skill slot on either way.

Well, that was nonsense. Ichiro would figure out his own way of doing things.

Certainly, he could imagine that it would be difficult to raise defensive Skill levels. Skill levels typically increased when they were triggered during combat, relative to the Technique Points of the opponent they were used against. In order to grind defensive skills, then, the only choice was to get hit, again and again. It would be boring work, and it would come at a cost.

“Hmm...” Ichiro rubbed at his chin thoughtfully.

Incidentally — now, this is a total digression, of course — that day, from a little after 6:00 PM to about 8:00 PM, players claimed they had repeatedly sighted a mysterious Dragonet coming and going between Starter Town and the Volgund Volcanoes. He would walk deep into the volcanoes, “return by death” to Starter Town, somehow re-equip all the armor he should have lost, and then march triumphantly back to mountains. This mysterious, terrible zombie avatar, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, became the subject of a bit of speculation among new and intermediate adventurers.

When Ichiro received Sakurako’s message that dinner was ready, he was gazing at the “Dragon Scales Lv 42” message in his skill window and feeling a strange sense of pride.

“I’d like some new armor,” Ichiro announced from the dinner table. It was his third day of playing *Narrow Fantasy Online*.

“Armor?” Sakurako asked, looking up as she set the dishes on the table. “Ah, but first, dinner is served.”

“Thank you. Sakurako-san, you may join me.”

“Okay! With your permission, I will join you.”

He made this offer every day, of course. But the ritual was necessary to maintain the boundary between their oftentimes fuzzy master-servant relationship. Once, as a tease, he hadn’t said it, and so Sakurako had remained standing in her designated spot the entire time with tears in her eyes. Feeling bothered and guilty, Ichiro had lasted a mere five minutes before he’d given in. It was a bitter memory of defeat.

“Now, you asked about armor?” Sakurako continued.

Ichiro skillfully extracted a bit of horse mackerel from the plate with his chopsticks, and gave her a nod.

“You’ve been grinding your basic stats the last few days, and your Dragon Scales Skill has grown quite advanced, hasn’t it?” she asked. “You probably wouldn’t need new armor to explore the higher-level areas...”

The pay-to-download armor that Ichiro Tsuwabuki currently wore didn’t offer much in the way of defense, but it opened quite a number of skill slots. The past three days, to increase his Dragon Scales Skill level, he had thrown himself on the swords of Lizardman Zebras over and over again. He had lost that armor an absurd number of times to the game’s death penalty, and bought it just as many times. He must have bought it at least a thousand times.



Since he knew that he would be returning by death, most people would assume he would hold off on buying it again until his Skill level was where he wanted it to be. Indeed, that is what most people would do. But the young heir simply could not stand being clad in that most basic of leather equipment. So each time he died, tirelessly, he paid another 1,200 yen to buy himself a new microtransaction suit. It was extremely bourgeois.

“But this is still tie-in equipment,” he said. “It wasn’t made just for me. It’s a bit unsatisfying, you know?”

“Well, I understand what you mean...” Sakurako said, slurping her miso soup. “But Ichiro-sama, aren’t made-to-order items expensive?”

“Nonsense; I have the money.”

“Not yen, galt!”

“I expect I can handle that, as well.” Ichiro had an extreme money booster just like his experience booster, and any time he got a rare drop item, he sold it without mercy. He had incredible negotiating skills provided by “Bartering Lv 38.” On top of that, he never bought items from NPCs, and, well, a life without spending tended to add up.

“If you want armor made, you should go to Glasgobara Merchant Town, I suppose...” Sakurako mused.

“That’s the large town beyond the volcanoes, yes?” Ichiro confirmed.

“It hosts a lot of events for crafting class players, and it’s easy to get both components and recipes there,” she said. “Of course, given the name, the dev team likely intended it to be for them, I suppose. The name comes from Glasgow plus Akihabara.”

“I’m not sure if that makes it easier to picture, or harder.”

“In practice, it’s a bit like a big avenue lined with large crafting guilds,” she said.

That, too, made it both easier and harder to picture.

At any rate, Ichiro wanted his own unique armor. Though Ichiro wasn’t the type to fuss over how people saw him, he did care about his clothes acting as an

extension of himself.

His trademark outfit in the business world was a black suit with light purple necktie and handkerchief — all made-to-order, naturally. It was only natural that he would feel that way about his game avatar, too, and thus, he longed for a highly original, made-to-order costume. High-level crafting class players could take existing equip items, tweak their stats and special abilities, and create items that matched a person's individual taste and style.

"Sir Kirschwasser, your shield is made-to-order as well, isn't it?" Ichiro asked.

"Hmm, I suppose it is... but it's just a slightly enhanced version of the existing Kite Shield," Sakurako replied. "For a bit of fun, I had an image of cherry blossoms textured onto the shield's surface."

"An original design, then?" Ichiro asked.

"Merely texturing on an image rather than trying to replace the whole graphic doesn't take especially long," she explained. "All the guilds make up their own unique mark and have their members texture it somewhere on their armor."

"Replacing the whole graphic" referred to what Ichiro Tsuwabuki had done during his character editing stage; creating new graphics from scratch, and paying real world money to have it skinned on. Using original 3D graphics increased the data bus and the burden on the server, which cost real world money. Specifically, Sakurako had discovered through a bit of later research, it cost 800 yen.

"Hmm..." he murmured.

"Ichiro-sama, you've barely touched your food."

"Really?" he asked. "I've always been a light eater, though..." But it was true that he had been so busy thinking that he'd found it hard to engage with his meal. "Anyway, I'd like to go to that merchant town you mentioned."

"To get a made-to-order armor that pleases you?" Sakurako asked. "It seems like it would be an expensive order. Or perhaps it would be surprisingly inexpensive. It's hard to say."

"Well, I don't intend to make a difficult request," he said.

“But it’s the merchant who will decide if it’s difficult or not, after you tell him what you want.”

“Hmm, true.” The exchange caused Ichiro’s expression to cloud very slightly with worry, and he nodded in agreement.

Whether she knew what weighed on his mind or not — well, she probably did — Sakurako changed the subject. “Ichiro-sama, it’s a bit early yet, but would you like your after-dinner tea?”

“Yes, lightly brewed roasted green tea,” he said.

Their conversation continued on through after-dinner tea. Ichiro logged in to the world of *NaroFan* about an hour later.

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“...And that is how I ended up coming to Glasgobara,” he finished.

“This is taking too long!!” Felicia shouted. “Way too long! Iris isn’t even in the story yet!”

“You expressed interest in my first week of the game, so I decided to tell that, as well,” Ichiro said, his expression diffident.

For some reason, Kirschwasser had prepared a tea set with a teapot, and was offering a cup to Iris, who was looking rather bored.

“Incidentally, this tea tastes quite similar to the roasted green that I made him that day,” Sir Kirschwasser said.

“Thanks.” Iris took the cup, with a somewhat puzzled expression. “Mr. Kirsch, I don’t know much about your real life, but do you cook for the young heir, too? You seem a bit more than just his butler...”

“Hmm? Oh, well... ha ha ha. I also serve as Master Ichiro’s driver when he leaves the house.”

“You’re his chauffeur, too?” Iris asked, looking surprised.

Felicia suddenly realized that Iris didn’t yet know that Sir Kirschwasser was Ichiro’s maid, Sakurako Ogi. She wanted to shout “He’s a woman!” but that would just make things more complicated. It was also against game etiquette to

reveal someone's real-life affairs, as she had learned from the King Kirihito incident.

Ichiro continued, "Anyway, I then headed to Glasgobara... that is, to this very town we're in now."

"To make equipment!" Felicia added.

"Yes, to make equipment. The first person I met there was Bossman..."

"We still haven't gotten to Iris?!" Felicia exclaimed.

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Ichiro arrived in Glasgobara Merchant Town sooner than he had expected. As he walked, he opened his menu window, and checked the *NaroFan* wiki in the game's proprietary browser. It explained that Glasgobara had been the first new town unlocked since the service had started, via a large-scale Grand Quest two months in. The players had defeated the volcanic dragon Volgund who ruled over the area, securing a settlement for craftsmen, primarily Dwarves. All players who'd participated had received the rare item "Volgunnic Alloy." In the hands of NPC merchants and Blacksmith players, it could be used to develop powerful weapons and armor.

While there was no harm in visiting, Ichiro was starting to realize it might not be so easy to get the armor he wanted made. He could hear the sounds of steel-upon-steel ringing out from the houses, which all seemed to be homes of crafting class players. Most of the equip items lined up in the booths on their porches were mail and helmets. As Sakurako had said, many of them had simple graphics textured onto them, and they all more or less looked the same.

He walked down the road with a rather gloomy feeling in his heart. Of course, Ichiro meant no disrespect to the players he saw leaving those shops with such elated smiles. He wasn't aware of it, but he was the kind of person who couldn't feel comfortable unless he was special. It was childish, yes, but the truth was that he had managed to become an adult without ever meeting someone who could cure him of his more childish aspects.

"Hey, buddy. Are you a whale?"

Ichiro heard a hoarse voice from behind him, and turned to look. It was a

short, stout man with a dirty-looking mustache. He was such an archetypical Dwarf that Ichiro at first assumed he was an NPC. But of course, an NPC would never ask a question like that. His most startling trait of all was the arrow icon and avatar name that hung above his head.

It was the man Ichiro would later be instructed to call “Bossman,” the leader of the Akihabara Forging Guild. In other words, it was “I’m With Stupid →.”

“What brings you here, Whale?” the man asked. “Glasgobara offers everything from potions to missiles.”

“I have as many potions as I need, and I don’t expect to run out anytime soon,” Ichiro said. “I was looking for some new armor.”

“Oh-ho!” Bossman narrowed his bulging eyes and examined Ichiro’s current armor.

Judging by his ability to recognize that Ichiro was a whale at a glance, Mr. Stupid likely knew that his armor was pay-to-download. It wasn’t exactly everywhere, but it wasn’t a rare piece of equipment to see, either. It was his Dragonet race that made him stand out more than anything.

“I beg your pardon, but I have ‘Insight: Armor,’ and as far as I can see, that equipment’s durability hasn’t dropped low enough for you to require new armor just yet,” the man observed.

“Nonsense. I’m looking for an armor to call my very own.”

“Ah, made to order? I see.” Bossman grinned and introduced himself.

He ran the biggest manufacturing guild in *NaroFan*, and his ability to say that like it was a blunt fact rather than a boast was quite a likable trait. Of course, he also didn’t seem especially obsequious, either. He simply held an implicit trust in his own ability, and that of his guild members. Ichiro thought he seemed like a fine tradesman.

“Is it all right for the leader of such a guild to go walking around on his own?” Ichiro asked.

“Well, we are the game’s largest crafting guild, but it’s not as if I’m putting hammer to tongs all day,” the man said.

Any player with a crafting class could restore the durability on any weapon or armor. Player-created items were an exception, though. To repair equipment forged by another player required an Ironmaking skill level higher than that of the player who made it. Since the Akihabara Forging Guild were the top crafting players in the game, for the most part, only members of their own guild could repair the weapons they made. Apparently the vast majority of their customers were repeaters seeking said durability restoration, or improvements to their equipment to match their level.

“Hmm, excellent business sense...” Ichiro mused.

“I run a small electronics shop in Akihabara,” the man said. “To be honest, it’s smaller than my blacksmith shop. I mostly sell computer parts through the mail.” He made it sound like he was applying his real-life business skills to the game, but it was hard to tell if he was joking or not.

Because they didn’t want to keep talking out in the street, Bossman led Ichiro to his guild’s personal workshop. Ichiro followed the eccentric Dwarf, feeling a strange sense of hope. Given the man’s name and sense of dress, he seemed to have a unique aesthetic, and originality was something Ichiro prized above all else.

“Hey, you guys, we’re back!” Bossman shouted out hoarsely as he opened the door to come into his guild house. The shop floor was filled with customers and guild members, who all returned their leader’s greeting.

“As long as you’re here, buddy, I’m going to take you to our guild’s most trusted member,” Bossman added.

“I would love to meet him.”

Bossman strode through the lobby to a door with an “authorized personnel only” message window pasted to it, and showed Ichiro in.

The workshop echoed with the piercing sounds of hammer hitting hot steel. Just like in the Volgund Volcanoes, Ichiro could feel the heat and humidity crawling over his skin.

“The atmosphere really does create a mood, doesn’t it?” he commented.

“That’s right. To be honest, to make weapons and armor, we just put all the

materials on the anvil, hit it with the hammer, and it's done."

That made sense to Ichiro, given that it was a game. But it still seemed somehow crucially lacking.

Most of the craftsmen in the workshop stopped as they noticed the honored guest their boss had brought in. Only one man continued hammering on his anvil silently. Bossman walked up to the man and greeted him, and only then did he finally stop.

"Hey, Ed."

"Welcome back, Bossman," the man named Ed responded in a rather monotone voice.

"Let me introduce you, buddy," the man told Ichiro. "This is my number-one apprentice, Edward."

"You have apprentices?" Ichiro asked.

"Of course. Though there's no Skill for handing down techniques or anything like that..."

The only motion for striking steel with a hammer was the one that came with the Blacksmith-exclusive Art, "Iron Forge." That plus Skill effects like Ironmaking and Refining were what allowed a player to combine component items and make new equipment. Of course, the success rate changed depending on the player's Skill and Art levels, which could also confer some numerical bonuses.

In other words, not one of these players knew a thing about blacksmithing; they just randomly swung the hammer around and around. Even so, the sight was enough to awe a typical newcomer.

"Ed's a premium pack user just like you, buddy," the man added.

"...A pleasure," Ed said.

"Yes, a pleasure indeed," Ichiro agreed. "If you introduced us, does that mean you want him to make my armor?"

"The sort of thing you're asking for will probably be expensive," Bossman said. "But I think he can handle it. And if he can't, I'll do it."

“Hmm...” Ichiro thought for a few seconds. He didn’t doubt that these were the best crafting players Glasgobara had to offer. But first, he’d like to see some of the work they produced.

“I’d like to see some of Ed’s pieces. Then I’ll decide.”

Ed twitched at the use of his nickname, but nodded and pointed to the item on the anvil he was hitting with his hammer. Several component items lay there, packed all together.

“I’d like made-to-order armor, if possible,” Ichiro added.

“I’ve taken a number of orders customized to match the owner’s battle style,” Edward answered once again in his flat, nearly monotone voice. “Normally, anyone can make armor with a recipe and the necessary components, but you can also add secret components not listed in the recipe to provide new item abilities or greater stat bonuses. Messing around with that is my specialty.”

“Hmm...” Ichiro folded his arms with a hint of dissatisfaction.

Edward didn’t seem to notice it, and took the hammer off his belt once more.

A recipe was indispensable for making any kinds of weapons or armor with desirable stats. They could be purchased from NPC merchants in Glasgobara, but Alchemists or Blacksmiths got a huge discount when buying them. There was an unspoken rule, however, that when buying made-to-order items, the customer should be the one to buy the recipe. Thus, buying the items a craftsman had elected to make on their own tended to be much cheaper than buying your own items made-to-order.

Once the craftsman had prepared the item, they would be visited by a pop-up window which would let them choose the item’s design. They could combine multiple parts, patterns, and colors based on the component items and recipe, and come up with the final armor design based on that. With all that done, Ed readied his hammer in his hand, and swung it down hard on the components.

Bang, bang, bang, bang.

A satisfying metal-on-metal sound rang through the blacksmith’s shop.

“It’s done.”

The completed armor used components taken from the plant-type monsters that lived around the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea. It was colorful enough to belie the metallic components that went into making it. A truly radical design. Ichiro touched it lightly to check its stats.

Defense bonus +72, Skill slots +12, Durability 102/102. The price was 7,200 galt.

The reason Ed let him inspect it so casually was apparently because he considered it already sold. Certainly, the stats were much higher than those of the Faerie Armor Ichiro was currently wearing...

Standing behind him, Bossman nodded in satisfaction. But Ichiro was not pleased.

“Could you let me think about it a while?” he asked.

Edward flinched at Ichiro’s question. “...Are you unsatisfied?”

“From an objective point of view, there’s nothing wrong with the stats. From an objective point of view.” Ichiro didn’t try to keep up appearances with even a half-hearted smile, though he was attempting to spare Ed’s feelings in his own way. “But what is or isn’t ‘good armor’ is something I decide for myself.” Making concessions for no reason is nonsense. So I’d like a little time to think.”

“You’re pretty insensitive there, buddy,” Bossman murmured, but Ichiro just waved a hand dismissively.

“Of course, if I walk all around Glasgobara, and can’t find a single acceptable item... Well, I’ll think about it then. As I said before, the stats on the armor Ed makes are excellent.” With that, Ichiro left the workshop behind.

As he made his way out of the forge, many of the craftsmen stopped and turned to watch, having noticed a change in the atmosphere. For just a moment, Ichiro was struck by the realization that he may have done something hurtful to the young man named Edward. He instantly dismissed it, though. *Nonsense.* Ichiro wasn’t the kind of man who could compromise himself in order to protect someone else’s pride. The armor Edward had made did not fulfill Ichiro’s request, and that was the truth.

Back to square one, then. With gloomy footsteps, Ichiro wandered through

the merchant town. He strayed from the thoroughfare into a back alley, looking at the mysterious potions and things lined up in front of a small outdoor booth, when suddenly something caught his attention.

An accessory.

And of a design he'd never seen before.

Even in Glasgobara, he'd never seen original accessories. The "Craft" Skill required to make them was largely considered undesirable, because no matter how hard you worked to make an accessory, their abilities were little more than add-ons.

"Excuse me. About this accessory..." he began.

"Welcome to Iris's Shop!" the woman he talked to responded with a smile, but he quickly realized there was no player inhabiting it. It wasn't an NPC, either. It was what was known as a Seller Avatar, which would sell the items in a player's shop for them while they were logged out. Which meant that she could not give him the answer he sought.

"Do you know when your shop's owner will return?" Ichiro asked.

"Iris is scheduled to log in every day at 7:30 PM."

"Hmm, then I suppose I'll wait. Ah, and could I buy all the items you're selling in the storefront here?" Ichiro asked.

To think that this would be where he made his first in-game purchase... But the money spent was trivial. Once the items were transferred from the shop to his inventory, he took one out and looked it over in his hands.

It was a silverwork brooch styled after the butterfly wings Ichiro liked so much. The polygon rendering was a bit sloppy, of course... but that was just all the more evidence that it wasn't native to the game.

It was handmade: a true one-of-a-kind design.

A smile appeared on Ichiro's face; it was the kind of smile that he rarely showed to anyone. The piddling bonuses the accessories offered didn't concern him. Ichiro had found it. The player with the crafting skill that he had longed for.

Ichiro couldn't wait to meet this Iris person, the owner of the store.

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“So this is the brooch you bought, then?” Felicia stared in disbelief at the butterfly brooch pinned to Ichiro’s lapel.

“Please, stop staring. It’s so embarrassing...” Iris murmured, keeping her eyes averted.

Ichiro said nothing, but merely brought his teacup to his lips with a thoroughly pleased expression. Still, if what he’d said was true, that brooch must have been the first item he’d bought in the game.

The polygon rendering really was sloppy.

“Did you really think it was all that great?” Iris ventured.

“In all honesty, I found the design crude.”

“Well, excuse me!” Iris said, glaring at Ichiro. “It’s the first thing I ever made for the game. I know that’s not much of an excuse, but it embarrasses me.”

“But you were happy he bought it, weren’t you?” Felicia asked.

“Well...” Though she seemed to agree with Felicia’s suggestion, Iris wouldn’t admit to it outright.

It really did get under Felicia’s skin, and she was determined not to let the subject continue. She tried to think about something else instead.

That’s right. Ichiro had mentioned a man named Edward, and Felicia was sure she’d heard that name somewhere in the game before.

It was just as she folded her arms and began to think that a sound rang out, announcing that a player had logged in to the guild house lobby. Iris, Kirschwasser, and the other players listening to the story all turned to see who it was.

Felicia looked as well, then stared speechlessly, in shock.

The player who’d appeared was far from the usual humanoid silhouette. Nonhumans were not unusual. Felicia often saw players, like Ichiro, who had horns and tails, and characters who wore full-body plate mail could look quite enormous. But this one was fundamentally different. It had a protruding

breastplate that resembled an inverse triangle, large gauntlets, and wore what looked like a full-face helmet over an unusually small head. Instead of eyes, it had two glowing, narrow lenses.

“Hey, Ed,” Ichiro greeted him.

The man froze in his tracks as Ichiro addressed him. His eyes darted about — or rather, his lenses flickered. “M-Mr. Tsuwabuki...”

“Oh, is this person Ed? That is... is he a person?” Felicia looked between them quickly, while Ichiro remained perfectly calm. Judging from Iris and Kirschwasser’s reactions, it seemed this was indeed the Edward in question.

“He’s Ed, yes,” confirmed Ichiro. “He’s a Machina. That’s a premium package-exclusive race.”

“Oh, is that... what a Machina looks like?”

“It is.”

Edward didn’t respond, but from the way he went silent and the light of his blue lens-eyes dimmed, he clearly wasn’t feeling well.

“Ah, s-sorry...” Felicia stammered.

“No, it’s not your fault...” A synth effect overlaid Edward’s voice as he spoke.

The air around them was tense. Ichiro’s presence clearly made Edward ill at ease. The story suggested that the animus must have drawn from Ichiro’s snub of Edward, but that wasn’t enough to explain this atmosphere.

When Felicia looked to Iris for answers, she saw the other girl cringing, as if she was trying to disappear. There was none of her in-your-face attitude from before.

“Oh, Miss Iris,” Edward said. “I’m sorry about before.”

“Oh, yeah, um, it’s okay...” Iris mumbled. “Don’t sweat it. It’s all his fault, anyway...”

The sight of Edward apologizing politely to Iris, and Iris blaming it all on Ichiro, just made things even more confusing.

“...Ah!” Despite her confusion, Felicia traced back the thread of memory in

her mind, and at last arrived at her goal.

The name Edward... The leader of the Red Sunset Knights, Stroganoff, had mentioned it when they were wandering the Necrolands looking for King Kirihito.

“I remember now! You’re the one Itchy knocked out with one punch!” Felicia clapped her hands as she finally made the connection in her mind, then realized she had made a fatal mistake.

“I’m sorry...” Felicia apologized again as she saw the light in Edward’s eyes dim once more.

“No, it’s okay... That is what happened...” Edward slumped despondently and shook his head. He was seeming to her like a rather decent person.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who had apparently taken out this decent person in one punch, merely set his empty teacup down on his saucer with a satisfied expression. “I was just telling Felicia here about how Iris Brand came to be founded.”

“Though he hasn’t actually gotten to that point yet...” Iris murmured.

“I was just getting to the meat of the story. Ed, would you like to join us?”

“Me?” If Edward had had a normal human face, it probably would have been contorted in horror. Machinas had a variety of facial parts to choose from, and it seemed quite a few of them were human-like. But with Ed, the eyes were the only part from which you could read his emotions. Judging from the way he acted, that might have been intentional.

“Very well. I’ll join in.”

But surprisingly, he accepted the offer, and with a murmured “excuse me,” he sat down in an empty seat.

Judging from the way he was acting, he didn’t seem like he was looking forward to a harmonious discussion. Rather, he seemed to have only joined in because the thought of turning Ichiro down made him uncomfortable.

“Mr. Ed, are you the kind of person who really doesn’t like to lose?” Felicia asked idly.

Edward said nothing.

“I’m sorry...” she said.

“It’s okay...”

The apology-and-dismissal interaction had happened a third time.

Sir Kirschwasser spoke up. “Sir Edward, here. A humble cup of tea.”

“Thanks.” Edward took the tea that Kirschwasser laid before him. He raised the cup to his mouth instinctively, but the cup hit his face-plate and let out an empty clank.

Seeming slightly embarrassed, Edward removed the obstructing plate. There was no mouth beneath it; just a small slot.

“Being a Machina must be hard, huh, Mr. Edward?” Felicia asked politely.

“Well, I’m the one who chose the race...” Edward dexterously poured the tea into the slot.

“Now that we’re all here, let’s continue the story,” Ichiro said, seeming genuinely glad to have Edward around.

He had always been this way. Felicia knew that well. He had a tendency to like someone more the more they hated him, so it was only natural that he had taken a shine to Edward.

But, that meant...

Felicia raised her eyes to the ceiling for a moment. The thought was too frightening to pursue.

“Iris, I’d like to hear the story from your own lips,” Ichiro said.

“Huh? Mine?” The red-haired Elf startled as the conversation was abruptly thrown to her.

“Yes. I’ve told the story up until I met you. I’d like to hear what made you decide to create my equipment.”

“Easier said than done...” Iris’s gaze became rather distant. “Well, don’t expect me to make it sound interesting...”

Despite that, she took a deep breath, and picked up where Ichiro had left off.

4 - Noble Son, Pick a Fight

Airi Kakitsubata was 17 years old, and attending a clothing design trade school. She wanted to be an apparel designer when she grew up.

“What did you say?” Iris asked in displeasure. All the joy she had felt at seeing the accessories she made sell had now passed.

Had he just said, “I like your face”? Was this some kind of new pick-up line? With the decline of crossplaying brought about by VRMMOs, you naturally saw a lot more of that. The appearance you crafted for yourself in a VRMMO had become vastly more important than avatar settings had been in any online community prior.

A handsome man with the kind of blond hair and blue eyes you never saw in the real world was whispering those sweet words in her ear. Even someone as guarded as Iris would find herself swayed by that. You didn’t see as many women hitting on men, but there were cross-players out there. Iris had heard of quite a few young men who had ended up traumatized by come-ons from someone who had turned out to be the wrong gender entirely. Ah, but enough digressions.

What mattered was that the Dragonet standing in front of her now was an extremely handsome man. It was only natural for Iris to mistake it for a pick-up line.

“I was asking if you’d like to make armor for me,” he said.

“Before that.”

“Ah, that I like your face? If that bothered you, I apologize. It’s true that objectively speaking, mine is more attractive...”

What was he talking about?

“Do you always choose who you want to make armor based on what they look like?” Iris demanded.

“In the real world? No. In this world? Yes. You made your face yourself, didn’t you?”

She was stunned. He was absolutely right.

When she had originally made her character, she hadn’t felt any special inspiration from the countless avatar parts provided. She’d stewed over it for hours and hours, trying out different combinations, but each time something had bothered her about it. After stewing over it for a long time, she had bought some virtual cash from a convenience store in the middle of the night, downloaded some 3D modeling software, and gone right for the character maker.

It wasn’t completely her own design, but she had modified the parts she didn’t like, and fine-tuned a few details in ways that other players wouldn’t be able to. It had resulted in a unique character face that no one else in the world could imitate. Iris was very proud of it, but this was the first time anyone had ever pointed it out.

The man selected several items from his menu window and brought them out. They were the original accessories that Iris had designed.

“Those are...” she began.

“You designed these personally too, didn’t you? Of course, I was a bit worried due to the sloppy renderings on the polygons, but...”

“Th-That’s just... because I was tired after coming home from school! My face is perfect, right?” What was she saying?

“Yes, seeing your face, I feel much more at ease. I want armor designed from square one. I haven’t found anyone here in Glasgobara making such things.”

So this was the man who had bought all of her accessories? While part of her was honestly happy about that, her feelings were still ambivalent. She was happy to see her originality appreciated, but he didn’t seem to care much for the designs themselves. Caught between the two, though, the happy side won out, if only slightly.

The offer from this man — Ichiro Tsuwabuki — was extremely appealing. The proposal of creating an original armor design was slowly revitalizing her waning

interest in the game. But...

“My ‘Create Armor’ skill level isn’t very high,” she admitted.

There were quite a number of crafting class Skills. At first, the only ones available were Refining, Ironmaking, and Craft. But once a player’s Ironworking level reached a certain point, they could acquire Create Armor and Create Weapon, as well. She herself had a dream of creating armor someday, so she had bought the Skill itself. Unfortunately, she hadn’t managed to level it up very high just yet. She didn’t know what level armor the man was going to want, but if he was elite enough to be ordering custom-made items, any request by him would probably be too high for her to handle.

If she’d known this was going to happen, she would have gone out of her way to do more grinding.

Regret squirmed inside of her. Even if she started now, she probably wouldn’t make it in time.

And yet, the man’s response was this: “Regardless, you are the only person I can count on.”

He continued, “I don’t know much about the production process of armor, so I don’t know if it’s possible. But I don’t mind paying any of the real money required to create the original design.”

“Well... I don’t think you can do that unless we create a Crafting guild...” She was starting to feel like the conversation was moving on without her.

“Then let’s make a guild,” he said.

“Y-You can’t be serious...”

“Nonsense. I’m always serious. Well, I can’t deny that the things I say often make others believe me mad...”

If the requester was going to offer to pay real money for her armor crafting, Iris wasn’t going to deny him. In fact, if the reverse had happened, if he’d said, “I’ll pay you in galt, but you provide the real funds,” she would have socked him one.

The problem was that Iris’s Create Armor level was extremely low, and the

man didn’t seem to understand what that meant. When you tried to create armor and failed, you didn’t just waste the components.

When Iris made her accessories, at least, she first had to put the components on top of a magic circle, then select the design from a pop-up window. Then in her case, she had to drag and drop the .obj file of the 3D model she had made to convert the accessory into a totally original design.

This was the point when the real money fee for optimizing the 3D model came in. In other words, every time she failed to make the armor, that fee would also go to waste. She had to admit it was an extremely unkind setup, but then, creating items wasn’t the main point of the game, and it did force you to click through a warning message of “If you fail to make the armor, you won’t get your money back” three times in a row. Iris didn’t bother to question it at this point.

Applying the design cost money because that was the source of the greatest burden on the server’s data bus. Succeed or fail, the burden was the same. But of course, Iris didn’t know that.

Anyway, that was how one applied an original design. She had never tried an original armor design before, but the process was likely the same.

If Ichiro was going to take on the burden of cost, then he had to know that he would have to keep paying every time Iris failed at the creation. While he appeared to be a whale, he was surely underestimating how many times that might happen. If he could at least give her an upper limit...

“Do you have an upper limit?” she asked.

“Ah, my bank has asked me not to reveal my credit limit,” he said. “But it’s not any amount you have to worry about.”

“I didn’t mean your credit limit! Are you trying to go bankrupt?!” she exclaimed.

“Ha ha ha, nonsense. My, what an amusing joke. If I ever went bankrupt, it would mean the world economy was in ruins.” He really did appear to be mad.

“Oh, darn it... Don’t blame me if it costs a ton, then,” she said.

“Nonsense. I don’t mind spending money for a quality product.”

Iris opened up the menu window and called up the art tools from the Config window. The game’s basic software allowed you to draw simple designs in pencil or chalk, but the add-on allowed for more precise lines, as well as the ability to convert designs to .pdfs and send them to a PC or a smartphone. It was compatible with 3D modeling software, and it was extremely convenient for converting a design to 3D, but on the whole, it was more popular with Achievers and Explorers than Crafters.

“So, what kind of design do you want?” she asked him.

“Let me see. Something to match the brooch,” the man said, pulling out the blue butterfly brooch that Iris had made. The polys really were rough, and it was fairly embarrassing to look at.

“Th-That... was for a woman, actually...” she stammered.

“Oh? It seemed unisex to me. Depending on the rest of the outfit, it could look quite fetching on a man, don’t you think?”

It was true that the main reason she had meant it for a woman was because women’s equipment in the game tended to be more for fashion than for combat. Most men’s equipment was made with an eye towards looking cool in battle, with the most stylish being heavy medieval fantasy armor and superhero-style designs. The butterfly brooch wouldn’t look good on any of them, which meant this man wanted something closer to modern-day apparel.

It was tickling her creative urges. She sat down next to her booth with pencil in hand, and used the drawing software to detail her ideas on the canvas. She cast a glance at the man, and saw that he had opened the same drawing software. Now that she thought about it, his face was also composed of parts she’d never seen before in the game... She doubted he was in the same business as her exactly, but perhaps he was in a fine arts field, at least.

“Oh, I decided to buy this program after seeing yours,” he offered.

Did money simply mean nothing to him?

With practiced movements, the man drew what looked like a design sheet, and swiped it to Iris’s window. “That’s what I wear around in real life. Of course,

I'll give you free rein with the design, but this is the sort of clothing I like."

The image he'd sent her was on the line between casual and formal, fashionable without losing its high-class appeal. If that's what he wore every day, was he some kind of rich heir?

"Oh, sorry," the man said, suddenly looking up. "I have an appointment. I have to log out for now."

"Ah, I see," she said. "Will you log in again when you're done?"

"I don't know. I'd like to, if I have time, but I have a great deal to take care of lately."

"W-Well... could I friend you, then?" Why had she stammered when she'd said that? This might have been her first male friend in the game.

"Certainly," he said offhandedly, then pressed the friend request confirmation button.

It had been a long time since Iris had spoken to the friends she had started playing the game with. They had supported her decision to live in Glasgobara as a crafter. But by now, they were probably off somewhere making progress through the game. She began to feel a bit sentimental as she wondered where they were.

"By the way, what should I call you?" she asked.

"Whatever you like. Tsuwabuki, Ichiro, or young heir, if you wish. Well, I don't especially like being called the last one..."

"Young heir, then," she said. It seemed exactly the right thing to call him, given his snobbish air. Besides, Iris was a fan of that famous Japanese major leaguer, so she didn't want to call him Ichiro.

The young heir didn't look especially unhappy, but simply shrugged his shoulders and logged out. When he was gone, Iris turned back to her drawing tool.

She was going to design his armor.

After a few minutes alone with her own thoughts, that reality finally began to hit her.

Her dream was to be an apparel designer; if possible, with a focus on fashion. She knew it would be a rough road ahead, and part of her wondered if she couldn't afford to be taking time out by playing this game.

But...

What she was allowing herself to do now was surely not in vain. Even if it was just in a fictional realm made of 1s and 0s, she was taking her first steps as an apparel designer right now.

Out of everything around her, that feeling was the one thing that wasn't an illusion caused by electrical signals to her brain.

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"That reminds me," Iris said, stopping in the middle of her story. "What was it you had to do back then?"

"Nothing of particular note," Ichiro said. "The president of Tsunobeni asked me for some investment advice, that's all."

"Is that a joke?" she demanded.

"Nonsense. If I wanted to joke, I would say something outrageous."

Was he claiming that his boasting wasn't outrageous? Iris felt exhausted, but judging by the unconcerned expressions of Kirschwasser and Felicia, who knew him in real life, apparently this was standard fare.

Iris wasn't very familiar with Tsunobeni, Inc. itself, but she knew that the president's daughter, Megumi Fuyo, had founded her own fashion brand, and that she was one of the fashion designers Airi Kakitsubata respected the most. But now was not the time to bring that up.

"But Iris, were you selling accessories the entire time before you met Itchy?" Felicia asked.

"Yeah," Iris responded. "I really wanted to design armor too, but Craft was the only skill I had really focused on grinding, and the only items you can make with that are accessories and such."

She hadn't had much knowledge of the game at the start, so she had worked on increasing the wrong skill. Accessories were a lot less useful than weapons

and armor, so no one was going to start buying them just because they had slightly original designs.

That was the reason she had become so disheartened after retreating from the real world into the game, and still found herself unable to sell anything. That was why she had been so grateful for the young heir, who had appeared just then with appreciation for what she was doing. Even if he was a thoughtless, arrogant pig...

"...It's a point that's been raising the ire of users somewhat," Edward suddenly interrupted the conversation, and all eyes turned towards him. "There's a service fee for converting original graphics into items. But the system isn't set up for the requester to be able to pay that fee for the maker. RMT is prohibited in *NaroFan*, so the maker pays everything, and ends up on the losing side."

"Mr. Kirsch, what is RMT?" Felicia asked.

"Real money trade," Sir Kirschwasser, a walking encyclopedia of online game slang, answered immediately. "A system where you can sell in-game currency and items for real money."

"Well, there were quite a few players who adapted original designs onto armor and put them out in their booths, like Iris did," Kirsch added to Edward's statement. "At the start, anyway. But while they did sell, they were mostly bought by players who were never heard from again. Which meant the makers were spending 800 yen of real money to make something that a nobody player just walked off with. And in most cases, they probably didn't recover its durability, and just let it break. So eventually, the designers realized that making original armor designs was a fool's game."

"Ah, I think I understand," said Iris. "I never sold anything, so I never even thought of that..."

In that sense, maybe she had been right to make accessories, which didn't have durability and thus rarely broke. Of course, since nobody had bought them, the point was moot...

"So, was the finished design all that great?" Felicia asked.

“Perhaps not from an objective point of view, but I quite liked it,” Ichiro said.

It sounded like it was meant as a compliment, so Iris opted not to object.

Ichiro’s fixation on the word “objectively” seemed to come from his refusal to be swayed by the viewpoints of the masses. At least, that was what Kirschwasser had told her.

Sometimes his own opinions lined up with the objective perspective, and sometimes they didn’t. The point was that Ichiro didn’t lie when it came to things like this. If he said he liked it, then he did.

“Hmm...” Felicia studied the clothing Ichiro was wearing.

Iris was proud of it, but she still felt embarrassed seeing it scrutinized like this.

At last, Felicia murmured under her breath, “Lucky...”

Just that one word. It took a great deal of effort for Iris not to smile.

Ah, but that was just a sign that she was too frivolous. Taking it as proof that she needed further resolve, Iris steeled her nerve once more. She had to get to the point where, when she received a compliment, she could just run a hand through her hair and say, “But of course!”

It was foolish of her to act cocky just because the young heir liked them. In that respect, having Felicia’s approval represented a big step forward.

As for how she had felt when the young heir had praised her...

Iris wanted to drive it out of her mind, but the memories came back in a rush.

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Airi Kakitsubata giggled madly to herself. She was 17 years old, and attending a clothing design trade school.

She wanted to be an apparel designer when she grew up. But why was she looking so pale?

The school that she attended brought together prospective fashion designers, so naturally, the standards of style there were generally high. Airi was no exception to this rule. The talent that had drawn her peers to declare her a fashion leader in middle school hadn’t changed at all since she’d become a

second-year at her home economics specialty school. Of course, there were girls in her class more flashy than her, but in addition to her better-than-average fashion sense, she was quite attractive herself. What's more, her self-confidence in this respect only served to make her even more so.

But for some reason, today, she had lost some of her luster. Her skin was looking rough, there were bags under her eyes, and her hair was styled sloppily. On top of that, the smug little smile on her face led her to look a bit like a possessed demon, and she had a tendency to mouth off in ways that caused the adults around her to flinch.

Of course, she was only 17. Her desire to be acknowledged by someone was exceptionally strong, and being at a trade school where she could shoot for her dream just made her more so. Even if it was just in a fictional world, the young heir had given her a place to shine.

He had selected one of the accessories she had made, told her to make a design that went well with it, then logged out. They had only spoken for about 30 minutes. Not long at all. Afterwards, Airi, a.k.a. Iris, had thought hard about his personal taste.

Despite all her big talk, everything she had done so far — from giving fashion advice to friends, to looking into brands, to daydreaming designs — had been for women's fashion. She had surprisingly little knowledge about men's fashion. Therefore, even though it was late at night, she called her homeroom teacher to ask a few questions.

Her teacher had certainly been surprised, but had seemed to be able to tell from the way Airi pressed the point that she was passionate about the subject, and so the teacher had answered her questions exhaustively.

Alfred Dunhill, Giorgio Armani, Prada... Well, Airi couldn't deny that the teacher's own tastes were mixed in there somewhat, but it was still a useful reference.

One night later...

Inside the fictional world and unaware of the color entering the sky outside her window, Airi sent her finalized design to the one male player on her friends list, then proceeded to sleep like a log for the few hours remaining before

school began.

That she could enjoy the game not through battle or dungeon exploration, but through her biggest strength in the real world... that was the thing that made her happiest.

That morning, she found an email in her inbox.

“I’m glad I asked you.”



She couldn’t stop herself from smiling.

She had overslept so badly that she was nearly late to school, which meant her appearance was a mess. But she was so satisfied with her work that she didn’t care. She kept looking at her inbox and grinning at those five words. Even when she was with her close friends, she spent most of her time gazing off into the distance.

The time it took Airi to get from school to her house was 30 minutes by train, 20 by bus, then 10 by bike. An hour in total.

Normally, after school was over, she’d spend some time chatting with her friends, and only get home at 6:00 PM. She would enter the empty house (her parents would be at work), take a quick shower, and prepare a light meal. By the time she logged in, it would be 7:00 PM. She got sweatier in the summer, so her showers had been on the long side lately, but the one she took today was fast enough to scare a crow.

She had also made do with fast food on the way home, so by the time she was ready to log on, it was only 6:30. She put on the Miraive Gear X — a gesture familiar to her by now — then lay down on her bed. She watched with impatience, this time, as the standard Pony Entertainment, Inc. title logo beamed slowly into view in her consciousness.

Hurry, hurry, take me to that world!

As *Narrow Fantasy Online* finally booted up, Airi Kakitsubata transformed into the Alchemist, Iris.

When she opened her eyes, she was in her usual compact little workshop. She wondered whether, if she went outside, she would find the Dragonet man standing there smiling at her impudently once again. But naturally, perhaps, he wasn’t there this time. She felt just a little bit disappointed.

Iris took a few deep breaths to calm herself. She knew that taking deep breaths did not mechanically offer a relaxing effect on the body in this world, but it still helped her to regain her calm.

The Seller Avatar was programmed to answer basic questions about her, so

the young heir would know that she usually logged in around 7:30 every night. He'd surely come by then. She found the name Ichiro Tsuwabuki on her friends list, and sent him a message to let him know she'd be waiting in front of her store.

But what should she do until he came?

She thought about making potions like usual, but was there something else she should give priority to? Oh, yes. She had to level up her Create Armor skill.

Iris knew, secondhand, that there were two ways to make armor: with a recipe, and without. If you wanted to make something you knew would work out the way you wanted it, you chose the former. But it was also possible to just throw together components and an existing armor with the Alchemist-only Art "Alchemical Circle" to make something more or less workable.

Having the sub-class Blacksmith, Iris could also use Iron Forge, but there was no real difference between the two Arts, aside from whether they pulled from the intelligence or strength stat. Her Arts level for Alchemical Circle was higher, as well, so there was simply no reason not to use it instead.

Iris checked her money on the status screen, then began marching around the booths in the back alleys. She bought up practically free, seemingly useless component items, and random bits of old armor with barely any durability left, and returned to her own residence.

She didn't know how much higher she would be able to get her Skill level today, but she had to get it as high as she could. Iris activated her magic circle from her inventory, and threw the Medieval Chainmail, the Fieldgorn Horn, and the Vulture Wing she had bought into it.

She could choose the finished design for the parts, but to save time, she just chose the default one. Then, she closed her eyes and focused her mind. The use of spellcaster Arts didn't require much in the way of special equipment or actions. A powerful imagination was the most important thing.

Her workshop darkened as a visual took shape, one of particles of light floating up from a circle. A crest made from light took shape above the circle, as well, shining even brighter. She could feel it. In her mind, she struck a forceful pose.

Clunk.

Doodly-doodly-doo.

A cheap BGM sounded out, followed by a galling “You failed to make it.” message window. What sat above the magic circle now was just some kind of unidentifiable scrap. She picked it up, and saw a popup window this time that said, “Add Failure to inventory?”

“Ugh, that didn’t go well...” she murmured.

But she wouldn’t give up. It was okay to fail. It was true that successes would increase her level faster, but rather than taking time to figure out combinations that were easy to succeed at, it was faster for now to just keep failing and failing. Iris put the items and armor on top of the magic circle again, and imagined...

Clunk. Doodly-doodly-doo.

Clunk. Doodly-doodly-doo.

Clunk. Doodly-doodly-doo.

Clunk. Dat-data-dat-daaa!

Clunk. Doodly-doodly-doo.

In the end, out of dozens and dozens of trial and error combinations, only one of them succeeded. She threw the remaining Failures in the trash and looked at the one completed armor.

By coincidence, it seemed she had managed to succeed at a special combination, which offered a unique graphic different from the leather armor it had once been.

Leaf Armor. Defense Bonus +2. Skill Slots +1. Durability 5/5.

Oh, come on! How exactly is this armor?! she thought indignantly. As far as

she could see, it was just a single leaf! There was no fashion beast brave enough to try this on.

Iris didn't realize this, but the Leaf Armor was actually considered one of the new armor-maker's best options, and it had increased her Skill points significantly. She was very lucky to have succeeded on the first try, but thanks to that, her Create Armor Skill had increased by two levels.

The others were all failures in the end, but it was still quite fun. The hard work of creation was a different sort of enjoyment from that of thinking up designs. She was just following the rules built into the system to find the right answer, but successes still provided some of the ecstasy of solving a difficult riddle through trial and error. This was the primary way crafting classes enjoyed themselves in the game.

But she couldn't afford to be distracted by that. The young heir wanted her to make something for him. That was the one thing she mustn't lose sight of.

Just then, she heard an electronic "ding," and a window opened to inform her that she'd received a new message.

It was from Tsuwabuki Ichiro. The young heir!

Not bothering to read the message, she flew out of the workshop. It was exactly 7:00 PM.

The Dragonet stood there with the same cool smile he'd had yesterday. "Oh, hello."

"Thanks for coming. Um, is this a friend of yours?" she asked.

Standing next to the young heir was a middle-aged Knight clad in heavy full plate mail. He had slicked-back silver hair, masculine features, and the wrinkles on his face told of a long history of battle. Of course, "long history" was just a turn of phrase. The game hadn't even been around for a full year yet.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," the Knight said. "I am Kirschwasser, a Knight. I have served House Tsuwabuki loyally for generations..."

"Ah, Sir," the young heir interrupted. "Please, none of that roleplay right now. It's nonsense."

The young heir's interruption of the introduction caused the man named Kirschwasser to slump over slightly. "I see. Well, I see to the Tsuwabuki family in real life, as well. My master wanted to form a guild, and he needed another person."

He "saw to him"? *Was this man a servant, then?* Iris wondered. She knew that the young heir had money, so maybe having a butler wouldn't be completely surprising.

"That's right. As I mentioned in my message, I saw your design sheet," Ichiro said. "I'm impressed that you could come up with that in one night."

"Heh heh heh!" Iris sniffed proudly as the young heir brought up that subject. He had even said, "I'm glad I asked you." She felt like that was certainly something worth being proud of.

"Not to be arrogant, but it was pretty good, huh?" she asked.

"Yes, quite good. I can see the influence from Dunhill and Armani and Prada, but for something made by a girl like you overnight, it's quite good."

She could hear her self-confidence harden and crack. And then the next thing he said...

"From an objective point of view, I probably could have made a better design myself."

At the young heir's side, Kirschwasser was cradling his face in his hands.

Naturally, Iris turned scarlet and blew her top. The Miraive Gear's brainwave scanner traced Airi Kakitsubata's emotional state, and displayed the Alchemist Airi with a manga-style overreaction.

Praise me to the sky, you idiot! She felt so ashamed she wanted to tear the Dragonet to pieces where he stood.

"Then... then maybe you should have designed it!" she exclaimed.

"Nonsense. I have no interest in things considered 'objectively good.' I decide what I believe is good." But the man remained buoyant. "You worked all night to put together an original design for me. That effort is important. No matter what the rest of the world might say, I believe that this is good. I'm glad I asked

you. That was no lie. I personally like this design, even if no one else does."

Why couldn't he just compliment her in a way that would make her happy? Kirschwasser looked mortified, as well. He likely wanted to offer suggestions on parts that the young heir could trim from his statement. It was really just pathetic.

Iris spoke again, trembling. "Next time, I'll create a design that'll make not just you, but the world gasp in shock..."

"Yes, I do hope you will." It was a bit eerie, hearing the young heir say those words, so Iris decided to leave it rather than pursue it.

The bizarre war of words had left her strangely tired, even though she seemed to be the only one who saw it as an argument, or felt at all drained by it.

The young heir's expression hadn't changed in the slightest. Like an Evil Toad hit with "Acid Ray."

"So, what are we going to do?" Iris asked. "Make a guild?"

"Yes, let's go make one," Ichiro said. "There's a branch of the Adventurers' Guild in Glasgobara, after all."

"I believe all we have to do is bring a party of three to talk to the receptionist NPC," Kirschwasser agreed.

The Dragonet Magi-Fencer, the Human Knight, and the Elf Alchemist walked together down the alley. It was a curious combination for a party. Most people would raise an eyebrow at the suggestion that they were going to create a crafting guild. Fortunately, the receptionist NPC asked only the pre-programmed questions, which saved them a lot of trouble.

The Adventurers' Guild in Glasgobara sat at the end of the town's main street, with the Akihabara Forging Guild in a seat of honor to its left. Aside from the inns, the guild was the only place on main street that didn't have ironworking smoke pouring out of it.

"By the way, will you be the guild leader, young heir?" Iris asked.

"Hmm, I suppose so," Ichiro considered. "Though if you especially want to do

it, I'll concede leadership to you."

"No, that's okay," Iris said.

They bantered lightly back and forth at the reception desk while talking to the NPC.

"What do you think we should name the guild?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Does it matter?" Iris replied. "We're going to break it up right after, right?"

"Actually, I already know what our guild name will be," Ichiro Tsuwabuki said, in a tone that — unusually, for him — suggested a double meaning to his words.

Once he finished selecting their starting members and guild classification, the NPC formed the guild, and then asked for its name. A touch window appeared, and the young heir tapped a few key panels in it.

Iris Brand.

"Iris Brand?" Iris, whose character name was being used without permission, repeated in a dumbfounded tone. Surprisingly — well actually, not at all surprisingly — the young heir did not bat an eye at her objection.

"That's right," he said. "You're the one creating my armor, so shouldn't the name be something along those lines?"

"What's your real game?" Iris demanded.

"Nonsense. I don't wish to say it right now."

"Then at least put more effort into the lie!" she shouted.

Next, the NPC asked about what should happen to the guild's funds if it ever broke up for some reason, and if they would like to put money into the guild's account immediately. The young heir answered both without hesitation. It was as if he had planned it all out from the start.

What are your Guild Skills?

"What shall I choose?" he wondered. It was the only time he asked for input.

A crafting guild would naturally choose "Ironworks" or "Laboratory," to increase item production efficiency as much as possible, but it wouldn't take that long for Iris to complete one set of armor, and she would be the only one

receiving the benefit in the meantime.

To create armor would also require the collection of ingredients, so there were also choices for “Searcher,” which would let members re-roll their drop items once, and “Explorer,” which let them encounter mobs that had a lower spawn rate. Increasing their guild’s favorability rating would also allow them to acquire more Guild Skills down the line, but that point was moot for them.

In the end, they decided that the two guild skills they could acquire would be “Ironworks” and “Searcher.” Now all that remained was to choose their guild house. It wasn’t necessary to have one, but if they wanted one, Iris thought it would be best to choose her room in the back alley.

To construct a house on main street will cost one million galt, the NPC said.

“That should do it,” Ichiro said. There was a cha-ching sound, and the young heir’s cash on hand reduced by 1 million.

“Why?!” Iris shouted. “You won’t have enough to pay me! Even if we’re in the same guild, creating armor is still a business!”

“I still have nine million left,” he said. “Will that not be enough?”

“Not at all! Not nearly enough!”

This was how the conversation went every time. Iris one-sidedly attacked him, Ichiro remained unfazed, and as a result, Iris was left running recklessly on a treadmill. A sad sight. Iris was sick of it, but she had a feeling this wasn’t the last time they were going to have this dance.

They finished the process and placed their guild house, causing part of the map of Glasgobara to be redrawn.

Kirschwasser gazed at the new map, murmuring. “This is right across from the Forging Guild’s house...”

If only Iris had then seen those words as the foreboding sign they were.

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“Itchy, even in the game, you’re bourgeoisie!” Felicia exclaimed.

“I just had nothing else to spend it on,” Ichiro responded coolly. “I’m sure

there are top players in the game with ten million or more.”

Iris was starting to enjoy having Felicia around to say everything she wanted to say to the young heir for her. She wondered if Kirschwasser, who was with Ichiro as his servant all the time, felt the same way.

Felicia had looked troubled as she’d listened to Iris’s talk about how the guild house was created. If the tactless way the young heir had talked about her back at Iris Brand was true, then maybe she really had wanted to form a guild with him.

“So you created the guild to have your equipment made?” Felicia asked.

“Well, that was the original intent,” Ichiro said.

“Hrmmm...” Felicia scowled. She was likely fighting with the urge to say, “Why don’t you close it now, then?” But apparently not even she could be that selfish.

“I know how you feel, Lady Felicia.” Sir Kirschwasser sipped his tea with a placid expression. “I felt the same way. When I asked about the circumstances behind his desire to create a guild, the answer shocked me beyond the capacity for words.”

“If you were beyond the capacity for words, you wouldn’t be able to talk,” Ichiro said.

“As you can see, this is the kind of person Master Ichiro is.”

As his real-life servant, Kirschwasser was likely used to this sort of thing. Even so, anyone would be struck dumb by the news that he’d requested armor from a girl he’d just met, who had a low Create Armor level; and moreover, that he had formed a guild to shoulder the unknown, likely-to-balloon cost burden for it.

“I had been hoping to form my own guild with Master Ichiro... but well, this is fun in its own way.” Sir Kirschwasser, ever the considerate adult, cast a wink her way as he spoke. “And it means we have Iris with us.”

He really was considerate. He really was completely unlike the young heir in that regard.

“Hmmm...” Felicia screwed up her face, working hard to process all this.

As the conversation threatened to come to a standstill, Ichiro quickly cut to the chase. “And that was more or less the way we founded the guild. Afterwards, all we had to do was get Iris to work creating my armor. I wanted to be meticulous with the components, so we had a great deal of discussion as to what armor should be used as the base.”

“Components?” Felicia asked.

“For instance, the underlying data for the jacket I’m wearing is that of the Radiant Armor, and to make Radiant Armor, you need a Radiant Morpho Wing. The jacket itself has a butterfly wing motif, so I wanted components that evoked that image. Hence, the use of Radiant Armor as the base.”

Incidentally, some of the pieces of Ichiro’s armor used pay-to-download blueprints to make, and every time Iris failed, Ichiro had had to buy new blueprints with real money. But Iris opted not to mention that. Even without that, she didn’t want to think about how much real money the young heir had been forced to spend because of her.

She didn’t want to, but...

...if the success rate was 1%, and each graphics change cost 800 yen, then to create the entire suit of equipment had likely cost somewhere between 400,000 and 600,000 yen.

Narrow Fantasy Online was an MMORPG. Iris didn’t know much about games, but she knew that in this genre of game, the object was to make oneself stronger to defeat more powerful enemies. She also knew that there were people known as “whales” who threw vast quantities of money down the drain to accomplish this.

She had heard incredible stories of whales to whom 400,000 or 600,000 yen was mere pocket change. But even then, the money would be going to more efficient ways of making their characters more powerful. To spend that much money simply for the sake of “appearance” — which had nothing to do with the game’s authoritative barometer of “strength” — was simply absurd. And on top of all that, he was even paying for the blueprints.

Although she was grateful for the young heir’s proposal, this was all beyond Iris’s understanding.

No, it wasn't beyond her understanding. She had a feeling that she did have a hint as to why he was doing this. She thought back to a journey she had taken to the deepest part of the volcanoes with the young heir, searching for ingredients for the belt...

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A shadow large enough to block out the sky lurked between the ravines of burbling lava. Its skin was stained black from extended heat exposure, and unlike many of its species, it did not merely "contain" metal. It was pure Magi-Metal itself. This fearsome life form, with its unyielding armor and formidable magic resistance, was believed to exist only in legends.

It was a Magi-Metal Dragon.

The form of a man stepped impudently up to it.

The dragon snorted hellfire from its nose. "Descendant mine... Why troddest thou upon this forbidden soil?"

"Actually, I want one of your scales to make my new belt," Ichiro said.

No one, since the quest's original release, had ever come before this dragon admitting to such a self-serving reason. The beast was unimaginably huge, its entire body rendered in meticulous graphic detail. Its two eyes, like drops of blood, were so lifelike that it was easy to forget it was just a game. It invoked such a primordial terror that even the terminology and walkthrough wikis warned it could send players into a panic at the sight of it.

But the only thing on Ichiro's mind was...

"Did you hear that, Iris? It looks like its conversational patterns change when dealing with Dragonet players!"

"I see! Great attention to detail, huh!" Iris shouted back. She was hiding behind a huge boulder, about 50 meters away from Ichiro.

How had she gotten herself into this mess? What was she doing here? The sight of the enormous dragon had caused her knees to buckle. On a whim, she had asked to go with the heir to collect materials. How could she have been such a fool?

Volcanic Dragon Volgund had been an earlier Grand Quest boss. The Magi-Metal Dragons were its kin. Dragons only spawned in this region if you accepted a quest from a nearby village to bring a “Dragon Gem” dropped by dragon-type mobs to the village elder. But even if you took that quest, there was no particular need to go hunting for the most ferocious of all dragons, the Magi-Metal, to complete it.

Yet it was Iris who had boldly written “Magi-Metal Dragon Scale Belt” on the final draft of the young heir’s clothing design. Of course, she was regretting that now.



“Impudent mortal... Meet thy end, wreathed in flame!” The dragon’s proclamation triggered the start of battle, which it kicked off with a stream of scorching fire from its mouth. Ichiro didn’t even flinch as the “Infernic Breath” flowed over him.

Iris held her breath.

A gallant-yet-tense melody began to play a few seconds later. But as the rousing BGM kicked in, Ichiro merely opened the menu window and began checking his own stats.

His Dragon Scales and Fire Soul, raised to such high levels as they were, greatly reduced the fire-based damage that he took, so he had lost surprisingly little in the way of HP. Unbelievably, Ichiro seemed to be using this battle to fiddle with his stats. She wanted to yell at him, but couldn’t; crying out in the middle of battle stood a chance of drawing the monster’s aggro.

Naturally, the game’s battle system was not turn-based. The enormous dragon stood up and followed through with a rending attack against Ichiro with its claws. Each one was as long as he was tall, with a wicked curve to it like a reaper’s scythe. Yet the merciless sickles failed to make contact.

The young heir leaped, his body moving lithely through the air.

He then let out a faint noise of effort as he unleashed a whirlpool that bound the Magi-Metal Dragon’s body. It was the water-attribute attack spell “Spiral Flood.” The great waves of damage stole the heat away from the lava and shaved away at the great rocks, causing a wave of steam to billow out through the room.

He couldn’t keep the dragon bound for long — only two seconds, in real time — but that was more than enough time for Ichiro to land and ready himself. He drew his Mage Saber and took a stance.

What other “Hero” would ever challenge such a dragon with starter equipment?

The Magi-Metal Dragon was merely a program, and would not cry out no matter how close it was to death. Pattern changes at certain health levels would have had to be added by the devs out of consideration for players who

couldn’t read boss HP. Still, the damage he dealt with that one hit had clearly been significant. Iris sweated bullets as she watched the scene.

Ichiro took his Mage Saber in a reverse grip stance.

In *Narrow Fantasy Online*, there was a hidden modifier known as “Stance.” The pose you struck just before activating certain Arts could change the speed of its execution, or the damage that it dealt. Sometimes it could even add additional effects. Many stances had already been discovered through voluntary investigation, and added to the walkthrough wiki.

This stance Ichiro assumed was a Magi-Fencer stance that he had discovered for himself. It gave a considerable modifier to his class-exclusive Art “Strash,” and it could be canceled after activation with many other arts and weapons.

The Dragonet man watched the raging, fire-breathing dragon as if it were a thing a world away from him, and did not budge one inch. The dragon built up heat in its mouth and unleashed another Infernic Breath.

The young heir took the second blast head-on. Iris wondered why he didn’t dodge. But she immediately knew what the answer would be if she asked.

Nonsense. Even it’s only with 1 HP left, all that matters is whether you win.

The instant the breath cut off, Ichiro sprang off the ground. He had the support Art “Dash Thrust” that increased his explosive speed, and it pushed his body to the limit. If the Magi-Metal Dragon had had a will of its own, would its eyes have registered shock at this? Or would it have been so blinded by rage that it couldn’t see anything?

The reverse-gripped Mage Saber flashed.

Strash! Sparks flew off the hide of the Magi-Metal Dragon, tougher than any metal in the world. But that blow was not enough to pierce it completely. Instead, Ichiro focused on his left hand, and grabbed the scar he’d left with his bare fingers. In an instant, he manifested his Dragon Claws, which then sliced the rest of the way through the armor.

He used his claws to gouge deeper into its throat, then invoked “Cast Break” followed by “Hydro Press”; waves of physical and magical damage that only a Magi-Fencer could deal out. The dragon had zero defense in the spot where its

armor was compromised. Ichiro continued pouring fatal damage into that spot, using attacks it was weakest against by combining the effects of “Weak Point Knowledge,” “Fervent Slashes,” “Water Soul,” and “Point Blank Magic” together.

Then, to add insult to injury, he kicked it in the jaw as he flipped away from it through the air, and landed. It was the result of the neural scanner tracing Ichiro’s intentions faithfully, combined with his sky-high agility stat. Even his manner of sheathing his Magi-Saber was elegant.

“I-Impossible...” the dragon groaned. “I... I, who have lived life eternal... to be vanquished by one so trivial...”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said. “Enough of that. I could hardly be provoked by being called trivial by a program...”

The Magi-Fencer spoke without even bothering to turn around, as the massive creature collapsed behind him. It was followed by a tremor and a cloud of dust. The detail put into the visual was indicative of the passion the designer put into this quest, but the emotion it inspired was immediately quashed by the cheery fanfare that played and the accompanying message window.

“Hey, Iris. I won,” Ichiro said casually.

“I... I can see that...”

Since Ichiro and Iris were acting as a party, they shared some of the results. Iris first read the message window.

Level up. That was good.

Money acquired. That was good, too.

She scrolled through the window and read the drop item list.

“Acquired Magi-Metal Dragon Scale.

Acquired Magi-Metal Dragon Scale.

Acquired Magi-Metal Dragon Scale.

Acquired Dragon Gem.

Magimeta.”

She closed the window. She needed three scales to make the belt, right?

Then she had as many as she needed. He had HP and fatigue to spare, so he could probably fight another one if he had to. Unfortunately, they would’ve had to wait some time after the quest had been finished to try again.

They descended to the foot of the volcano, gave the Dragon Gem to the NPC elder of the small village, and that was that.

With this, she could make the belt. Technically, the belt was just a design, with the underlying data being that of a Magi-Metal Earring, but when you chose the design for an accessory, you could also change where it displayed. There was nothing unusual about changing an earring into a belt. Of course, like most accessories, it provided little in the way of stat modifiers. For all the difficulty of acquiring the components, all it gave you was a few extra skill slots.

It was then that a thought occurred to her.

The young heir was looking for unique, original armor. Naturally, that was why he was so obsessed with the design. But the underlying data would be no different from the utterly unremarkable Magi-Metal Fold armor, with the design being the only thing that had changed.

Could that really be called his own original armor, then? Shouldn’t she be paying a little more attention to stats, too, to make him genuinely good armor?

Iris decided to ask him directly.

“Nonsense.” It was the predictable answer, given in the predictable way. But what followed was slightly different from usual. “...at least, it would be easy to dismiss it as such. But I do not wish for my designer to be unsatisfied with my answer, so allow me to expand upon it.”

As they walked their way down from the Volgund Volcanoes, Ichiro continued, holding up his index finger as he spoke.

“It is true that function is important. Even real-world clothing designers concern themselves with ‘functionality.’ And I know that because this is a game,

the function of an armor is considered all the more crucial. But functionality is not everything. There is also ‘design.’”

Iris idly tilted her head. She felt like she’d heard those words somewhere before.

“Let us consider the design to be one part of an armor’s abilities,” Ichiro continued. “You could say, then, that the ‘ability’ I am seeking is the design itself. That is the reason why I spoke to you. Even if its other abilities are not unique, as long as the design is, then it is a brand-new armor for my purposes.”

His words crushed Iris’s rising doubts immediately. At the same time, she remembered where she had heard the words before. Her favorite fashion designer had said something very much like that.

She had told a story about a time when she was feeling uncertain about the direction of her designs, and a male friend of hers had given her similar advice. It had provided her with the same clarity it was providing Iris right now.

“Design is a part of functionality.” Having it put to her that plainly, she had said in the interview, it was as if the blinders had suddenly come off.

“Do you accept that?” Ichiro asked.

“I accept that,” Iris answered.

“Ah, good.” Ichiro nodded in satisfaction.

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The flashback ended.

It seemed, in the end, that young heir’s words then hadn’t been improvised to make her feel better; he had really meant them. His own satisfaction was the most important thing, and anything else was secondary. Which meant that Ichiro Tsuwabuki pouring real money into his equipment’s design was no different from the standard whale seeking out greater ability and efficiency.

To the young heir, they were one and the same, and anyone who said differently was trafficking in “nonsense,” perhaps.

Even so...

Iris cast a glance back at Edward.

Even so, not every player appreciated that sort of freewheeling playstyle. At the very least, Edward clearly didn't. Even knowing it was only a game, he had put so much effort into one goal, because he truly believed in it. The young heir, appearing out of the blue and shaking that value system, must have been a hard pill for him to swallow.

That had been the cause of the... well, it wasn't so serious as to call it a tragedy, but whatever it was, it had stemmed from that.

"Iris, are you thinking about something?" Felicia peered into her face and asked.

Iris couldn't hide her wince. "Oh, did it show?"

"Yeah, kinda." Felicia seemed like the honest type. She was also mouthy in the same way Iris was, but Iris could probably learn a thing or two from Felicia's forthrightness.

At some point, a peaceful mood had settled over the group in the lobby, likely the result of the tea that Kirschwasser had poured. The ability to turn grass-type items into special drinks came from the "Tea Ceremony" Skill.

To take a momentary digression, tea created with this Skill give a temporary boost to stats. But the effect didn't last long, so Tea Ceremony fell largely into the domain of "flavor Skills." In the sense that they pursued Skills with little practical benefit very earnestly, Kirschwasser and Iris were very similar, but Iris envied the fact that the Tea Ceremony Skill was so well-suited to Kirschwasser's character.

Kirschwasser really went all out at times like these; he had even begun preparing sweets to go with the tea. Ichiro whispered the word "workaholic," but the Knight in question appeared quite happy to serve.

"Okay, so..." Felicia murmured, munching on one of the sweets that came after their tea, "...if I'm following the story right... Itchy, you formed a guild with Iris after visiting Bossman and Ed here, and giving them the cold shoulder?"

"Yes, that's right."

“And then you set up the guild right across from Bossman’s?”

“Yes, I did.” Ichiro’s expression remained unfazed.

Felicia stared at him, jaw slack. “Itchy, you’re... such a free spirit...”

“Hmm, I suppose I am.” It wasn’t a compliment, but the young heir seemed pleased anyway.

“He certainly is a free spirit,” Iris said. “Right, Edward?”

“You want me to answer that?” The Machina sitting next to them let out a low wheeze as he looked over at her. He must have been feeling flustered. Of course, he had very few expressions, so it was hard to say for sure.

“Most people would assume you were picking a fight, wouldn’t they?” Felicia’s question was on point. She had hit the nail on the head, one might say.

In truth, of the many problems that Ichiro had caused through the founding of Iris Brand, that was the one that could most be considered to be “starting something.” Of course, he had had no intention to mock or make light of anyone. He had merely decided that it was Iris and not Bossman or Edward that could make his ideal armor. And he had put the guild house there merely because it had seemed like the best place for it at the time.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki was not a hard-headed fool who couldn’t understand other people’s basic feelings. It was the fact that he understood them and still did what he wanted anyway that caused trouble. Even when he was a child, the usual method of dissuasion — “Little X doesn’t like that, so please stop” — had never worked on him.

To explain the founding of Iris Brand in full, there was no avoiding telling the next series of events. Even so...

“This is awkward...” Iris murmured. She cast a sidelong glance at Edward, then resumed her story.

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Carrying the Magi-Metal Dragon Scales needed to create the belt, Iris and Ichiro returned to Glasgobara.

It was the time of day when, even in the metropolis of Glasgobara, you didn’t

see many players coming and going down the broad main street. Most of the open stalls were being run by Seller Avatars, as well. It simply wasn't as bustling as it usually was.

"That felt pretty easy, didn't it?" Iris asked.

"I suppose," Ichiro responded smoothly. "You have a high Craft level, so you'll likely succeed in creating the accessories the first time. Having only the minimal components required shouldn't be an issue."

"The real problem is the armor," Iris said. "The jacket and the slacks and stuff... I don't know how many of those components we're going to need to amass..."

The jacket and slacks would both use ingredients from a mob known as Radiant Morpho. It was a giant butterfly monster that lived deep in the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea, one that had an extremely low spawn rate. They had to find it and beat it, and each time, it would drop two or three of the item they needed. They'd need to save up ten to create the Radiant Armor that would serve as the basis for the Radiant Morpho Wing Jacket.

And that was assuming she would succeed on the first time. Iris's Create Armor level was low, and the Radiant Armor had a low success rate from the start. She didn't even want to think about how many butterfly wings she was going to end up converting into worthless garbage.

"Well, I have a few ideas of my own regarding how to collect the wings, so just make the belt and the necktie for now," Ichiro said. "In the meantime, you should take whatever time you can to increase your Create Armor level."

"Of course I will, but... I have a bad feeling about this..." Iris murmured.

As they walked down main street, talking, their conversation was suddenly interrupted.

"Hey, buddy."

A voice was addressing them from behind.

They turned to see a Dwarf with a red mustache waving to them. Ichiro held up a hand and returned the greeting.

“Hey, Bossman.”

Iris recognized him, too. He was the leader of the game’s largest crafting guild, the Akihabara Forging Guild. As usual, the avatar name “I’m With Stupid →” shone brilliantly above his head.

They were both crafting class players, but the difference in terms of their ability and their reputations was as wide as the distance between Earth and the moon. Of course, they specialized in different things, so it wasn’t as if she idolized him or anything. Still, he was enough of a celebrity that she was surprised to be addressed by him. Iris’s eyes darted around as she wondered how these two men knew each other.

“Buddy, it isn’t right, what you did,” the Dwarf said with a frown. Despite the words, though, there was no trace of malice about him.

“To what do you refer?” Ichiro asked.

“You’re the one who built that guild right across from us, right?”

“Yes.”

The guild house of the Akihabara Forging Guild was also known as the Glasgobara UDX Workshop. It had a flea market area for weapons and armor out front and in the lobby, and the equipment they offered was of significantly better quality than what NPCs sold. They also took orders, though those, of course, came with additional cost. It had also been the largest guild house in the city, serving as the face of the city to everyone who came.

It *had been*, that is.

Overnight, a guild house of the same size had been built catercorner from it: the cutting-edge crafting guild “Iris Brand.” It had only three members, and the guild leader was Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

It would be easy to interpret that as a casting of the gauntlet.

“I just logged in and saw this. Gave me the shock of a lifetime,” Bossman said.

In this world, if you had enough galt, you could build a castle overnight. Not a week after a town was unlocked with its Grand Quest, buildings began sprouting up like mushrooms; overnight construction to astound even

Sunomata Castle. Iris had never seen it happen firsthand, but she had certainly been rattled by the way the Iris Brand guild house had just appeared there out of thin air.

“Buddy, you’re not planning to take us down, are you?” Bossman asked.

Iris cringed reflexively at the glint in the Dwarf’s eye. Bossman’s assumption was a natural one, but Ichiro just shrugged in response.

“Nonsense. If Iris Brand were enough to take you down, that would indicate very poor business skills on your part. No need to worry; from an objective point of view, the brand name power that the Akihabara Forging Guild has built up over time won’t be undermined that easily.”

“Oh, really? I’m relieved to hear that!” Bossman let out a bellowing laugh and pounded Ichiro on the back.

His strength stat had been worked out through constant use of Iron Forge, yet Ichiro did not so much as flinch under the blows. Of course, players in towns were fundamentally incapable of taking attack actions (for which this would qualify) against each other, so Bossman could hit him forever and not deal any real damage.

Pounding Ichiro’s back for a while seemed to satisfy the Dwarf, who then turned his eyes to Iris. She was about to hide behind the young heir, but then she realized what she was doing and stopped herself. Her pride reminded her that she would rather die than hide behind him.

“So, m’dear, you’re his new Blacksmith, are you?” Bossman asked.

“She’s an Alchemist, actually,” Ichiro said. “Though she does have some Blacksmith skill...”

“In terms of my class, yeah... But, um, I’m not really worthy of being called a blacksmith...” Iris struggled with a lack of self-confidence, unable to look Bossman in the eye.

Bossman fixed his eyes on her. As a Dwarf, he was shorter than Iris, but his stout frame, scraggly beard, and glinting eyes exuded quite a lot of pressure.

Having a Dwarf like that glare at her, Iris found herself wanting to run away,

and fast. Of course, she couldn't do that with the young heir behind her. She couldn't bear to embarrass herself in front of him.

"M'dear, what's your Create Armor Skill level?" Bossman asked.

But when faced with a question like that, she couldn't help but flush as she answered: "Um, it's... 12."

Yes, 12. And that was the result of fervent grinding. It had originally been 3.

"Oh, 12, is it?" Bossman grinned.

Yes, that was right. A player like Bossman probably had a Create Armor level close to the Skill's max limit. Iris's level would surely sound like trash to someone like him.

Certain that he was making fun of her, Iris turned a deeper crimson.

But the next words he spoke were thus:

"That's just fine."

"Huh?" Iris looked up in surprise.

"It takes guts to try to compete with us at such a low level," Bossman said. "I like it. I admire people with that kind of backbone."

"Um, but I wasn't trying to compete..."

"Whatever you meant to do, m'dear, you're fighting for our customers, which makes you a rival. You've already taken one big customer from us. Well, have faith in yourself. This man's an odd duck, but I'm sure he had his reasons for choosing you."

Iris could sense the young heir shrug behind her. She felt relieved.

No, this was no time to feel relieved. She had been designated a rival by one of the game's three great guilds. Her legs were trembling a little.

The game wasn't supposed to have anything to do with her real-life aspirations to become an apparel designer. It wasn't as if, say, Megumi Fuyo, the fashion designer that Airi Kakitsubata idolized, was viewing her as a rival.

Even so, she felt acknowledged. The satisfaction of it shook her soul. She had to see this through, no matter what.

Of course, all that she could do was create armor and accessories in accordance with what the game system allowed. There were absolute numerical limits on what she could do that could not be transcended through effort and passion.

Still, she had to see it through.

As Iris steeled her nerve, the young heir said to her, “You seem more pleased by that than you were with my compliments.”

“Your tastes are so bizarre, the compliments mean nothing.”

“I see. So that’s how you see things.” Ichiro rubbed his chin and nodded, as if processing this new knowledge.

She hadn’t technically lost an argument, yet Iris felt a twinge in her chest as though she had.

“Well, that’s all I had to say,” Bossman said. “Goodbye, and good luck to you.”

With that, Bossman began walking away, casting a longer shadow than one would expect from his diminutive frame.

“Isn’t it ridiculous that he would think we were trying to take him down?” Ichiro said with a carefree smile as he watched the Dwarf walk away. “He’s the type that wouldn’t die if you killed him.”

“You’re looking pretty happy, young heir,” Iris said.

“I suppose I am.” It was nice to see him looking so pleased. The happiness of a client (what a nice ring that had!) was a designer’s greatest wish.

At the same time, Iris knew how twisted his emotions tended to be. So while it was nice to see, it also unsettled her slightly.

“This game has been so full of fun things,” Ichiro said. “I’m so satisfied.”

“Hmm, I see...” While she would quarrel with the “full of” part, she couldn’t deny that the experience had been fulfilling.

“And despite what he said, Bossman seems like a good man,” she went on.

“No, he’s not a good man.” The young heir said this outrageous statement with the same bright smile. “He just has the confidence to be generous. He’s

certain that he can't possibly lose, so he can accept any opponent he finds, no matter how powerful. That's the attitude you see in a person with towering self-confidence and the ability to match it."

"Young heir, was that a roundabout way of complimenting yourself?" Iris asked.

"You could tell?"

"I could tell."

Rather than denying it, the young heir happily confirmed it, then continued. "Well, Bossman and I have nothing to prove to each other, so I'd be happy to co-exist peacefully like this, but..."

"But?"

"But I don't think everyone will think the way that he does."

Iris tilted her head. The young heir had a tendency to say things that were either so straightforward or so cryptic that she had no idea what he meant.

"Do you have someone in mind?" she asked.

"I believe I do," Ichiro said. "I expect a few players will think I was picking a fight with Bossman, and will find my behavior intolerable."

"So you knew that, and you still did it..." Iris muttered.

It was only natural for Iris to think the young heir was too free-spirited. She had benefited from that, but there were probably players whose pride would be hurt by it.

Iris wasn't the kind of person to laugh off the idea of someone investing their pride in the game. After all, it was her own pride being acknowledged in the game that had invigorated her to this degree.

But... wait a minute.

Iris raised her eyes abruptly. "Excuse me, young heir."

"Yes?"

"I wasn't able to ask, because of how the conversation ended up going, but..."

“Oh, you want to know how you stole Bossman’s big customer?” Ichiro finished smoothly. Before she could snap back at him, he continued, “The first place I went, when I was looking for a guild to make my armor, was the Forging Guild. They couldn’t give me what I wanted, so I said I’d go elsewhere, and then I found you. So from their point of view, it appears that I picked you over them.”

“That’s what I thought!” Iris snapped, unwittingly raising her voice to a scream. “That’s what I thought! So that’s it! And then, despite all that history, you built that big stupid guild house up there, right across the street from them!”

“Yes, and?”

“It’s perverse!”

“Nonsense.” The young heir shrugged, as usual.

Iris wondered if this wouldn’t just make the problem worse. The Forging Guild couldn’t possibly have found this amusing. Bossman had been magnanimous, but that didn’t mean other players might not still come after them.

He’d been brought there by Bossman, shown the workshop, and acted utterly insolent (Iris hadn’t been there, but she was certain he had). Then after all that, he’d decided that they weren’t what he was looking for, and left. What were the members of the game’s largest crafting guild to do *but* be offended?

Then, two days later, the same man had founded his own workshop diagonally across the street.

Wars had been fought over lesser insults. What could they have taken from it but “You can’t make the armor I want, so I guess I’ll have to make my own”?

No, that was surely how they interpreted it. Anyone seeing it from the outside would assume malicious intent.

“I’ve gotten a little afraid,” Iris muttered.

“Have you?” Ichiro asked.

“Let’s get back to the guild house right now.”

“Yes, let’s do so,” he agreed readily.

She certainly was afraid. But of course, she couldn't stand the idea of clinging to him, so she kept her distance as she continued on, walking with exaggerated strides.

When they got back to the guild house, they found Kirschwasser had already made it back with the Blue Bird of Paradise Wing. All she needed to finish the accessories, now, was a Jewel Quartz from the Wrath Wyrmhollows. But it was already getting late, and while Iris wasn't tired yet, the young heir refused to work late into the night. So, they dispersed for the day.

The next day came. As usual, Iris logged in a bit early. She checked the guild menu and saw that the young heir and Kirschwasser had already logged in, but she didn't see them in the guild house, which meant that they were probably off gathering components.

Iris placed the recipe and the Magi-Metal Dragon scales on top of her magic circle. She closed her eyes and focused her mind, causing particles of light to begin to rise up from the edges of the symbol.

The name of the Art was "Alchemical Circle." She had raised her intelligence stat through grinding, and combined with her high levels of Craft, it all but ensured the combination would be a success.

She had designed the belt and the wristwatch based on the components of the recipes that would be used to make them. Recreating the luster of metal and the reptilian scales had been quite an ordeal, but she felt satisfied with the 3D graphics she'd ended up with.

Iris herself would be paying the real-life funds for these two accessories.

She didn't know how much money the young heir really had, but it wasn't that she felt sorry for forcing him to pay for everything. It was just that Iris had supreme confidence in her ability to craft accessories. The reason the young heir had chosen to shoulder the real-money burden for the graphics changes was a psychological one; it allowed her to work without needing to fear failure. (Of course, it wasn't only that, but to Iris, that was the important part.) Thus, her pride wouldn't allow him to pay for her in the field in which she had greatest confidence.

A cheerful fanfare rang out, and the light enveloping the circle suddenly extinguished. The usual process, the usual sight.

Usually, this would have been the part where she would feel a pang of depression, wondering if this latest accessory would ever sell. But this time, that wasn't the case.

"There we go..."

She held up the belt, striking a little victory pose. She looked forward to when the young heir returned.

Though it was a belt, it was permanently affixed into a ring shape. That was only natural; the .obj file she had created wasn't designed to move. Though if it weren't such an inflexible block of data, it might have been useful as a sub-weapon — a whip made out of dragon scales.

Since the item had no equip requirements, she added it into her inventory, then selected "Equip" from her menu window to test it out. Watching it flash into existence over her Alchemist Robe reminded her of the tokusatsu hero shows she had watched with her little brother when they were children.

This was one reason she loved making accessories. According to the system, it was a Magi-Metal Earring. But when applying the new graphics to it, she could assign it to a different part of the body. This allowed for great flexibility when customizing your avatar.

"Yeah, that should do the trick," she said.

She twisted her upper body as if doing warm-up exercises. She hadn't programmed any movement data into the belt, yet it moved naturally with her body. This was where the lion's share of the graphics optimization process went: Each customization required the transmission of a considerable quantity of data, and about half of the money spent went to those transmission fees. Of course, Iris didn't know that.

Next, the wristwatch.

From her inventory, she selected Orichalcum, Mythril, and Jewel Quartz, and set them out on the circle along with "Recipe: Gorgeous Bracelet." This would be a bracelet becoming a wristwatch, so unlike the belt, it would be more or

less the same before and after. The young heir himself would texture the watch function onto it, so for her part, it was no different from making a bracelet.

Just as she was placing the items onto the magic circle, she realized that she had a visitor.

It seemed like such a large guild on the outside, she hadn't thought anyone would come visiting so soon... yet, a message popped up to tell her that someone was inside the guild house. Butterflies began flapping in Iris's stomach. After what had happened yesterday...

Iris left her "workshop," descended the staircase, passed through the cavernous front hall and opened the front door.

"Ah, excuse me," she said. "We don't have anything for sale yet..."

Looming in the door was a tall mechanical man dressed in full plate armor, with two swords on his belt. He had the dangerous air of the true adventurer about him, yet the civilian's hammer on his belt indicated he was actually a Blacksmith.

The imposing air about him had been enough to cut her off mid-speech. The Machina race didn't have many emotes, but just the way he towered there — cutting off her path to escape, casting a long shadow into the room — filled her with terror.

"U-Um... er..."

"Are you the only one in the house right now?" the man asked as he gave a piercing look up and down Iris's body.

In the real world, trade school student Airi Kakitsubata was a courageous woman. If a pervert touched her butt on the train to school, she wasn't afraid to yell out and hand him over to station security. But this man's gaze, though intrusive, did not fill her with the same visceral revulsion.

It wasn't that the *NaroFan* system and brainwave scanner wasn't picking up on his true intention, and it likely wasn't the Machina's lack of unique emotes, either. It was because the emotion in his eyes as he looked her up and down was something else.

“Are you an Alchemist?” he asked. “What are your subclasses?”

“B-Blacksmith and Mage... Um, what do you want? Who are you?” Airi Kakitsubata had an inkling of what that emotion was.

The school Airi was attending was full of girls who aspired to the world of fashion. They were all very confident, each believing that their own clothing designs were more polished than anyone else’s. Airi was no exception.

Her confidence was backed by her experiences in middle school, where she had earned envious looks from her friends as the girl in their class most likely to become a star fashion designer.

But Airi had learned, much earlier than most do, how empty this youthful confidence was. She did have talent, certainly; or perhaps she simply, unconsciously, put in more effort than most. Either way, the result was the same.

The school she now attended was full of people who had superior design sense to hers, and the adults mercilessly pointed out the immaturity of even their excellent designs. Airi found it intolerable, and she couldn’t deny that part of the reason she had begun playing the VRMMO in the first place was to escape that reality.

Airi looked up to those more-talented girls from a dark, hopeless abyss. And when she looked at them, the look in her eyes was not the same as the envious glances that her peers in middle school cast her way.



Jealousy and hatred, misplaced scorn... and a bottomless feeling of disappointment at the sheer unfairness that she was not the one in their place. Such was the emotion in this man's eyes.

Then again, maybe she was just misinterpreting. She didn't want to think that a fictional world could drive a human being to feel such things. But what was this feeling of repugnance and frustration that sprang up inside her when she looked at this man?

She knew.

Iris thought back to the conversation she had had with the young heir the day before. It was just what she had feared. The man standing in front of her was a Blacksmith whose pride had been wounded. To ask him what he was doing here would take great courage.

"Don't worry about me. Can you make armor?" the man said in an inflectionless voice augmented with a mechanical effect.

Her heart pounded in her chest. "N-No..."

"I think you can. I heard that there were three people in this guild, and the other two are a Magi-Fencer and a Knight. If you're going to make a crafting guild, one of your members must be able to make equip items."

Technically, the system did not require that, but it was still common sense. There were a few crafting guilds that were mainly established to sell off potions and other consumables, but such a guild wouldn't have built a guild house this large.

That stupid young heir! This guild was supposed to be disposable! she fumed.

The man opened his inventory and took out a number of items. They were all armor recipes.

She picked one up, and found it had a dizzying level of difficulty. She could try to make it dozens of times and still not stand any chance of success.

"I have all the components ready. Of course, if you succeed, I'll pay you," he said.

The Machina man didn't know Iris's Create Armor level. It was impossible to

see someone else's stats unless you were friended, or they gave you permission to inspect them.

She thought about just asking if he wanted to see her stat screen, as that would be better than embarrassing herself with the recipe. But the man's forbidding aura and glare kept her silent.

Contradictory emotions swirled inside her heart, never quite settling on anger. Hesitantly, she took the recipe and components from him, then led him to her second floor workshop with heavy steps. With the dark way he had been looking at her since he'd come in, she couldn't just yell and drive him out like she normally would.

The recipe he had given her would only be sold by NPCs if the buyer had a high Create Armor level. Iris had heard of it, but this was her first time seeing it in person. It was the type you couldn't buy secondhand, either. She might not ever see it again.

Of course, its rarity corresponded to the high stats of the armor it produced, and it had a comparable level of difficulty, as well. In both regards, it was far beyond the level of the dropped recipes the young heir had been bringing to her.

Ah, I knew it... Iris thought.

He was definitely a member of the Akihabara Forging Guild. Things were getting really dicey. He had come all the way to Iris Brand, which didn't have a single thing for sale, accepting the challenge he was convinced the young heir had issued.

The man followed her into the room without a single word spoken. He watched intently as Iris cleared away the components currently in the magic circle, and replaced them with what he had given her. Normally she'd be very fussy about the placement, but she couldn't even think about that now.

Silently, she closed her eyes and raised her hands to the symbol, then focused her mind, and activated Alchemical Circle.

Light began to well up around the edges of the circle, wreathing the components within. A familiar sound effect filled the room, as if the visual itself

were being converted to sound. It was followed by another familiar noise, signaling the process's completion. Before she could even wonder how it turned out, the negative BGM that always inflamed her irritation made it eminently clear.

It was a failure.

I knew it, she thought, followed by a sudden numbness that filled her body. What must he think of her right now? But before she could even look at him, he proffered another recipe and set of components.

"Next." His tone was completely businesslike.

The recipe was significantly lower in difficulty than the previous one, the kind you could easily buy in a store. The components were also easy to acquire, and available in Vispiagna Meadows.

I can do this, she thought as she cleared away the failure and placed the new items on the magic circle. She activated Alchemical Circle and initiated the fusion.

It, too, failed.

Her face was on fire. *What was I thinking?*

Just because the difficulty was a few levels lower didn't mean she could easily make the armor in question. The game's emotion tracer detected her awkwardness, turning her face bright red. She focused her eyes on the floor. She didn't have the courage to look at the man. It was too easy to imagine him laughing at her.

But the reaction he revealed was not one of mockery.

"...round." She could only make out the last syllable of the phrase he had murmured. Looking up, timidly, she saw the usually stoic Machina's face contorted with some unrestrainable emotion.

"...Stop joking around!"

It was anger. The violent emotions he had kept pent up finally found their release, gushing out of him in a torrent. But their expression was far from rational.

He strode past the cringing Iris towards the center of the room, to stomp hard on the failed combination in the circle.

The words “stop joking around” were merely a mindless expression of his frustration. He would have been happier if it had been a joke. But he must have known that that wasn’t the reason that Iris had failed. She simply didn’t have the ability, right now, to create the armor on the recipe he gave her.

To this man, that was the far greater crime.

“Um, Mr. Edward, p-p-please calm down...” she stuttered.

At last, Iris was sure of the man’s true identity. He was the Akihabara Forging Guild’s second-in-command, the Machina Blacksmith, Edward. He was called the Fighting Blacksmith because he could play on a high level both in fighting and crafting. The fact that he could do this was a sign of the extreme care he had put into planning his character build. Without question, he was one of the game’s top players.

That playstyle was a symptom of a slight VRMMO addiction — or more likely, that he was a full-fledged gaming junkie — but that would just contribute even more to his pride in his status in the game.

Edward whirled back around. The Machina’s inhuman appearance, combined with his overwhelming anger, was a sight that caused Iris’s knees to buckle.

Edward was trembling, one hand clenched into a fist. A jumble of feelings and urges raged inside of him, and he was clearly straining to keep them in check.

“Are you people mocking me?! Are you mocking my boss? Building this huge damned guild house and staffing it with one useless Alchemist? Stop joking around!”

“Useless” was a pretty harsh term, though Iris couldn’t actually argue with him.

Still, no matter how angry Edward got, they were in the middle of a city. His fists, his sword, his hammer... none of them could hurt Iris. No pain would be transmitted through her nerves.

But that was just as far as the system went. The malice and hatred he directed

towards her, unlike anything she had ever been subjected to before, were like daggers through Airi Kakitsubata's heart. That only got worse when she realized it was the natural extension of the same jealousy she had directed towards those students above her in class.

She wondered if she would feel better if she just let him hit her. But just as she was thinking that...

"Forgive the trite expression, but I'm not a fan of this sort of behavior." At some point, the young Dragonet man had appeared at the room's entrance with the usual odiously cool look on his face. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't look especially angry, either. His posture was, as usual, indifferent.

"Young heir..." Iris murmured, dumbfounded.

The silver-haired Knight also peeked in from behind him. "I am here, as well."

"Sir, could you please stand in front of Iris?" the young heir asked casually. "I don't think Ed will mind, as his hatred would be better directed towards me, anyway."

"Yes, sir." The middle-aged Knight, Sir Kirschwasser, moved to kneel in front of Iris, armor clinking. "Were you hurt, Iris?"

"Rationally, there's no way I could be hurt, because of the system... but thanks, anyway," she said. "You really saved me."

"Not at all."

As the young heir predicted, Edward immediately switched the target of his anger from Iris to Ichiro.

Of course, since he had no reason to be angry with me, Iris thought, belatedly feeling some indignation of her own.

"Now..." With a brazen attitude, the young heir raised his index finger. "...you're angry with me, because you think I spurned your boss to ask Iris to make my armor instead, correct? And I see some failures on the floor, which means you came here to test Iris's abilities. If you had found them acceptable, you'd planned to back off. You made up your mind to settle things. I admire that."

“Y-You... You’re...!” The man probably wanted to ask who the hell Ichiro thought he was. It was likely that all three people present except for Ichiro felt the same way.

“But it turned out that Iris’s Skill level was quite low,” Ichiro continued. “The fact that she did not meet your standards made you emotional, and you had just reached your breaking point when I returned. However, I am serious when I say that I want Iris to make my armor.”

“You slapped us in the face!” the man shouted.

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said. “I would never exert such effort without cause. It’s more as if you ran into my hand.”

Well, Ichiro could certainly use a slap himself, with that personality.

“From an objective point of view, I can understand the logic behind why you’re angry with me,” the young heir said. “But then, let me ask you this: What is it you want me to do?”

Edward froze, trembling. He appeared to be struggling to restrain his anger and remain logical.

Iris didn’t know what kind of person the Machina Edward’s player was, but she was starting to worry about his blood pressure. She wondered if he was receiving alert messages about changes in his health condition.

Iris could think that way now that she felt safe herself, which was a bit self-serving of her.

“I want to make you apologize to my boss! I’m sure even *you* are capable of asking for forgiveness!” the man burst out.

“I am physically capable of it, but I don’t wish to do it,” Ichiro said.

“Then I’ll force you to do it! Remove the battle prohibition in your guild house! You’re the leader, so I know you can!”

“Oh, not today. We can do it another time, can’t we?” Ichiro said in the tones of a man watching the weather to decide whether to put his laundry out to dry.

Iris began to feel anxious as she watched the conversation go further and further down its dangerous path.

Edward wanted Ichiro to apologize to his boss. As a gamer, he likely had great respect for that Dwarf, so it was only natural that he interpreted the young heir's actions as a show of disrespect towards him. It was a misunderstanding — Ichiro had been looking for something else from the beginning — but Edward didn't understand that.

Iris couldn't find it in herself to laugh at his narrow-mindedness, either. They were two of a kind, and she empathized with his anger all too easily. Even if he could be made to understand, she doubted it would quell his rage. His pretense of wanting Ichiro to apologize for the disrespect to his master was gradually being displaced by another, deeper feeling.

Edward had probably spent his entire time in the game believing that Bossman was the only crafting player better than him. Ichiro had shaken that worldview. In exchange, Edward wanted to smack him down, hard.

"After all, I believe I'll have all my armor finished within three days' time."

"Huh?!" Iris croaked, forced from her calm analysis of Edward's mental state. "Wait a minute, you can't just decide—"

"If you wish to cast down your gauntlet, I'll gladly pick it up then," Ichiro continued.

"You've already picked up quite a few things, Master Ichiro..." Under Kirschwasser's narrowed eyes, even Ichiro was forced to cringe a little bit.

"Yes, such as the ire of others..." he admitted.

"So you do realize it," Kirschwasser sighed.

"So, what do you think?" Ichiro turned back to Edward, who fell silent in response.

No matter what else, there were strict local rules in guild houses, which meant that they couldn't fight or duel there without the permission of the leader. It would be much the same outside.

If Edward really wanted to, he could jump Ichiro from behind once he got out into the field, but that wouldn't be very satisfying.

"All right... You can show me this 'armor' you're making then," Edward said.

His voice, with its usual mechanical overlay, trembled, the result of the emotional tracer faithfully reflecting all the tension in his voice.

Edward still had the wrong idea about what kind of armor Ichiro wanted. When he saw the final product, perhaps he would accept that and stand down, or perhaps he would go through with the fight. Realistically speaking, it would probably be the latter.

“Allow me to walk you out,” Sir Kirschwasser offered.

“No, thank you,” the man said coldly.

“Don’t be that way...”

Accompanied by Kirschwasser, Edward left the building.

Immediately, Iris’s anger exploded. “Are you stupid?!”

“Is this my thanks for saving you?” Ichiro asked.

“Yeah, I’m very grateful. But that’s irrelevant to the question of whether or not you’re stupid!”

“True enough. But I am not stupid. If I were stupid, it would make everyone in the world—”

“Cut that out! It’s nonsense!” Iris banged on the wall in frustration. “I’m asking if you’re serious about fighting Edward!”

“I am,” Ichiro confirmed, without a second thought. “Iris, don’t tell me you think he’s going to beat me.”

“It’s the opposite, actually...” Iris let out a big sigh. “Listen... I’ve heard that Edward is really strong. He’s probably the best fighter out of all the crafting class players. But he still can’t beat a combat specialist with a mountain of microtransactions behind him! Which means you’re just going to take him on and beat the hell out of him! It’s immoral!”

“I believe he lost the moral high ground when he decided to barge into someone else’s guild house and begin screaming at a girl,” Ichiro began, glancing at the failures piled in the corner of the room. “And while it is true that I need not compromise my morals in the face of the low moral standing of another... still, I choose my own morality. If he knows he can’t beat me, he

doesn’t have to fight me. If he decides to fight me anyway, knowing that, then it must be because he feels this is something he cannot yield on.”

“So you’re just gonna beat the hell out of him, then?” Iris demanded.

“I am. The fact that he cannot yield is irrelevant to whether or not I will lose a challenge I accepted.”

“Iris, Master Ichiro is always this way,” Kirschwasser said as he returned to the room.

He had said he was Ichiro’s servant in the real world, hadn’t he? Which meant he must see this sort of thing an awful lot. She felt sorry for him.

“Anyway, you should keep your voice down,” Sir Kirschwasser continued. “The system does not treat a building’s exterior and interior as discrete maps. You appear to have dealt a significant blow to Lord Edward’s pride.”

“Ah...” Iris clamped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. Edward had already heard everything she said, including her belief that he couldn’t possibly beat the young heir.

“Sir, did he say anything else?” Ichiro asked.

“That he was going to ‘crush the armor the girl made into powder.’”

“How bold of him,” Ichiro commented. “Then, Iris, you must make me splendid armor that will not be crushed into powder. I only have the components for the shirt and the jacket, but we have one hour before you log out. Feel free to fail up to fifty times on either.”

Burning with embarrassment, Iris really wanted to throw her own fist into the young heir’s smiling face.

◆ ◆ ◆

Felicia’s smile had stiffened. Edward had averted his eyes awkwardly, while the young heir’s expression was as calm as ever. Unbelievably, he was actually sipping the tea Kirschwasser had brewed as he gazed out the window.

“Um, Itchy, are you really incapable of reading the mood?” Felicia asked.

“Nonsense. I...”

“He *can* read the mood; it’s just that, after doing so, he still does whatever he wants,” Iris shot back. “See? He’s about to say ‘I can read the mood, but what I do with it is up to me to decide.’”

“...Iris said it all, so I shall not repeat her,” Ichiro said calmly.

Cutting him off at the pass was the only way for Iris to get through these interactions with any satisfaction.

“I’m impressed that you knew that,” Kirschwasser said, sounding impressed.

But she didn’t want to know that. She didn’t want to know this man at all. And yet, in the few days they’d known each other, she had come to know him in nauseating detail.

“By the way, that armor of yours, Itchy... it’s butterfly wings, right?” Felicia asked.

“The Radiant Morpho, yes.”

“Did you really hunt that many of them?”

“Hmm...” Ichiro turned his eyes to the ceiling. He seemed to want to correct Felicia’s words, but was thinking up the shortest way possible to do so.

“He didn’t exactly hunt them.” The gentle response came instead from Kirschwasser. “Master Ichiro was reticent about killing the butterflies, so he used ‘Steal’ to get the necessary components.”

“Isn’t ‘Steal’ a Thief Art?” Felicia tilted her head.

She was a Thief character herself, so this was common knowledge to her. As the name suggested, Steal was an Art that let you steal item drops from monsters. It was limited to Thieves — or Scouts or Shinobi that fulfilled the right conditions — so not many people had it.

Ichiro’s classes were Magi-Fencer/Fighter, Kirschwasser’s were Knight/Fighter/Acolyte, and Iris’s were Alchemist/Blacksmith/Mage, so none of them should have been able to use Steal.

Should have, that is...

“The Art Jewel,” Edward muttered.

“What’s that?” Felicia asked.

“*NaroFan* is nearing its one-year anniversary, so the developers have begun offering up some interesting pay-to-download kits. The ‘Experience Another Class Item Pack’ was one of them. Players can get up to three of them for free.”

Felicia’s eyes widened at Kirschwasser’s explanation. “Um, what the heck? I didn’t hear anything about that.”

“It was offered only during the week when you couldn’t log in due to your tests,” Ichiro explained. “I believe the kit currently on offer is ‘Skill Booster.’”

“And starting next week, it’s ‘Barrier Feather,’” Kirschwasser continued. “I expect that to make quite a stir, as well.”

The contents of the anniversary player service kits would change every week. The first three were free. The fourth came with a cost, and players who had just gotten started could have up to five free. It really was utterly reckless of the devs.

Items like the Art Jewel and the Skill Booster were way too useful, which had earned severe complaints from the community. The price, 500 yen per pack, which was not too expensive but not extremely cheap, either, further spurred the criticism.

“It’s like saying you’d better buy as many as possible during that one week. It’s not fair.” Felicia’s pout summarized the outcry precisely.

“So, I bought up a great number of Thief Art Jewels, and used those to steal the Radiant Morpho’s drop items,” Ichiro said.

“I thought so!” Ichiro’s outrageous statement caused Felicia to pound a fist on the table. “How many did you use?!”

“How many?” Ichiro asked. “Iris, how many wings did we go through, again?”

“You think I remember?” Iris said, partly in exhaustion.

Felicia was livid. “It’s people like you, throwing all that money at them, that make the devs act so crazy! Edward, say something!”

“Oh, sorry,” Edward said. “I actually spend quite a bit, too...”

“You too? You too?!”

“What do you expect?” Edward asked. “Thistle is a small business, and they have high server and maintenance costs for the massive amounts of data they need to store and process. Offering up donations is part of our duty, as fans. I don’t know how old you are, Felicia, but that’s how online games have always worked.”

“Let us debate the merits of microtransactions another time,” the man who had started the argument said with a cool expression.

“U-Um. Right. The story was just getting good!” Felicia said, managing to switch gears smoothly. “Um, so, what happened with the duel?”

“I won,” Ichiro said, as if it went without saying. Another one of his more odious traits.

5 - Noble Son, Display

“Erk...”

The strangled noise came just as they were about to resume the story, following the sound of the guild house door opening. They all turned around to see a man in a black coat in the process of spinning around and leaving.

“Hey, it’s Kiryuhito!” Felicia called out.

And it was indeed him. *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s second strongest solo player, a.k.a. King Kirihito. He was a rare sight among the people in that lobby, so his appearance sparked something of a buzz around the room.

“It’s King Kirihito...”

“I’ve never seen him in the flesh before...”

“Is it true he fought Tsuwabuki recently?”

It was as if some rare beast were walking among them. And in terms of encounter ratio, perhaps that’s what he was.

“What are you guys doing here?” King Kirihito asked, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

Ichiro was as unfazed as ever, drinking the tea that Kirschwasser had brewed. No one had counted how many cups he had drunk, but it was clear it had been quite a few. You couldn’t get full and be forced to stop in the game.

Ichiro turned to King. “Just having a sort of discussion circle. You?”

“My weapon durability’s getting low... Oh, there you are, Edward.” He hadn’t exactly been called out, but now that he’d been seen, King Kirihito must have realized that trying to leave now would make him look foolish. And so with as brazen an attitude as ever, King called to the seated Machina. It seemed they knew each other, as well. “I need you to re-up XAN’s durability.”

“R-Right... Got it.” With the subject being what it was, it was unsurprising that Edward was feeling low-energy. But he quickly put on a relieved expression (of

a sort) and nodded. From his perspective, it probably seemed like a great excuse to leave the conversation.

He took the unadorned straight blade proffered by King, then retreated quickly into the workshop in the back. Considering that they would be dredging up the story of his loss, it had been in rather poor taste of Ichiro to invite him to join the discussion in the first place.

Iris had pointed something like that out, but the young heir himself had dismissed her concern as “nonsense.” In truth, Ichiro had merely wanted Edward to join them because he liked him. But it was still in poor taste.

“A pleasure to meet you, King.” Kirschwasser offered a cup of tea to the still-standing man. “Thank you for taking care of my master the other day.”

“Ah, thank you.” King took the cup, and stared in disbelief at the silver-haired Knight. “‘Master?’ Are you the old man’s wife?”

“Ha ha ha. I am his attendant. His servant.”

Not even Kirschwasser could speak without a little strain after that. Felicia had also jumped to her feet, leaving Iris as the only one who didn’t know what was going on.

Only Ichiro and Felicia knew Kirschwasser’s true gender, as far as they knew. They had no way of determining if King’s words were a joke or not.

“So you come here too, Kiryuhito?” Felicia said, adjusting her position in her seat. “They call you the lofty solo player, so I always assumed you never talked to anyone.”

“I need to recharge my weapon’s durability, and there are players that will stock items cheaper than NPCs. So there are a few stores I frequent,” King said, showing absolutely no intention of joining them in a seat. “My weapon has a high rarity and repair difficulty, so the only ones who can repair it are Bossman and Edward. Of course, they charge accordingly. That Bossman’s a real skinflint.”

“Hmm...” Felicia mused.

Behind his glib words hovered the faintest trace of admiration for the game’s

top crafting players. That seemed to surprise even Felicia.

Iris poked her in the shoulder. “Um, Felicia?”

“What?”

“I seem to be the only one who doesn’t know who this is...”

“Oh, right.” Felicia nodded, then cleared her throat and pointed to King. “That’s Kiryuhito.”

“A more substantial explanation, please?”

“Um...” She flicked her eyes around the room, looking for aid from “Kiryuhito” himself, but he merely sipped his tea with an indifferent expression.

In exchange, Ichiro responded (while also drinking tea with an indifferent expression), “Kirihito, also known as King Kirihito. He’s one of the game’s most famous top players.”

“Huh, I’ve never heard of him...”

“Well, I’m only famous among a certain set,” King said, showing no sign of being hurt by Iris’s words. Maybe he had a reasonably healthy self-image. In that respect, he was just like Ichiro. “So, what were you talking about?”

“What I was doing before I met you,” Ichiro said.

“Oh, the fight with Edward?” King asked. “Matsunaga told me about that. I saw his blog, too.”

“That’s right, it must have been hard on Sir Matsunaga, with all the ‘no reprinting’ drama lately...” Kirschwasser murmured.

“He likes to choreograph his own stories in the game anyway, so I’m sure he wasn’t hurt that badly by it,” King responded. “Lately he’s been aggregating Twitter reactions.”

When Kirschwasser joined in the conversation between Ichiro and King, it led to a very in-depth conversation. Iris, with realization, and Felicia with half-realization, both shouted “Ah!” and hit their fist into their palm.

“That’s right, you said it was on Matsunaga’s blog!” Felicia cried.

“So I did,” Kirschwasser agreed. “But the article was not favorable towards

Master Ichiro, so I did not believe you would enjoy reading it."

"Yeah, so you said I shouldn't!"

"R-Right... The article on vsoku aggregate..." Iris said, joining the conversation at last. It seemed she had read the article, too.

Ichiro opened up the Miraive Gear's exclusive net browser and called up the page of the aggregate blog in question: *vsoku@VRMMO aggregate blog.* It was an information site run by Matsunaga, a *NaroFan* player and leader of one of the three great guilds, the Dual Serpents.

The contents tended towards gossip, with little in the way of objective information. Long ago, the blog had been part of the old internet console wars. Though it had never sided with any one camp, it had focused aggressively on clickbait and trolling, and earned large numbers of hits with the flame wars it incited. Now the contents focused solely on VRMMOs, and it wasn't nearly as dubious.

"This is it." With a bright smile, Ichiro opened an article entitled "*NaroFan*: Obnoxious Whale Found (lol)."

Felicia grimaced openly. "The 'obnoxious whale' is you, right, Itchy?"

"That's correct." It was clearly meant as an insult, but for some reason, the term seemed to please him.

Felicia peeked over his shoulder at the article, and soon, Kirschwasser and Iris joined her. King remained where he was, leaning back against a pillar and apparently unsure of what to do with his now-empty teacup. He occasionally glanced at Kirschwasser as if hoping for a refill, but his glance went unnoticed.

Naturally, the article's contents painted Ichiro as the villain. The site's major format was collecting message board threads, which were ordered in arbitrary ways, which made it seem, to the viewer, like the consensus of the internet at large. There were numerous pictures, too; screencaps taken with the game's pay-to-download app.

"Who took these?" Felicia asked.

"I don't know," Kirschwasser said. "Someone with the Dual Serpents, most

likely. They do seem to hide out all over the game, hunting for material. I didn't even notice them at the time."

Even so, at a glance, it was clear that the article was exaggerated. It was enough to cause Felicia to scowl for a few seconds. She didn't like seeing people besmirch the name of her beloved Itchy.

There were quite a few topics discussed there, including the Iris Brand incident, expressed through message board threads and other resources edited in a biased way. There were links to video sites, too.

"Many top and mid-range players in the game owe a great deal to the Forging Guild, so it's easy to paint me as the villain," Ichiro said. "It would also get Matsunaga more hits."

"But this is twisting the truth," Felicia pouted. "I don't like it."

"I don't know, what's written here is all pretty valid..." Iris murmured back.

"There's only one thing that happened, but there is more than one truth. How one interprets events is up to the individual," Ichiro said smoothly, then glanced up again at King Kirihito, who was still struggling with his empty cup. "Now, Sir Kirschwasser. Won't you pour tea for everyone again?" he asked. "Then we'll reveal what the truth was from Iris's point of view and mine."

"Yes, sir." The silver-haired Knight bowed respectfully.

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The young heir Ichiro Tsuwabuki's heinous behavior soon became the talk of the artisans of Glasgobara. The tale grew arms and legs in the telling, as well as six wings, two horns, and a tail. In other words, it had been exaggerated.

Glasgobara was a town full of players who were deeply invested in the game in ways other than the standard front-line achievements. Naturally, this had led to message boards being swarmed with discussion about the provocative actions of the obvious whale Ichiro and the poor treatment he had given to the Akihabara Forging Guild's second-best crafter, Edward.

The problem was that no one tossing around opinions had observed the incident personally. They had all gotten their information secondhand.

The information that Edward had meant to leak only to his trusted guild comrades soon spread from them to *their* trusted friends, and then further and further from there, to satisfy the internet's need for intriguing gossip. It was unavoidable. There was no stopping people from talking, especially in an age when mountains of information could be disseminated with one press of a key.

This manner in which the rumors spread also explained why most people who heard about it sided with Edward. When he had told his fellow guild members about it, he had naturally downplayed the areas in which he'd been morally deficient: in other words, the part where he had barged into someone else's guild house and threatened an Elf girl. That much was to be expected; who expects someone to be impartial when venting to their own friends? It was no fault of Edward's that the story had spread in such a one-sided way.

Besides, the reason the rumors had spread to the wider internet was because of the interest in the player of the Ichiro Tsuwabuki character.

"It sounds like the name of an idol who skyrocketed to popularity five years ago."

"It sounds like a guest lecturer who came to my university once before."

"It sounds like the man I saw strolling through the halls of my company with its president."

"It sounds like the musician I saw play a challenging violin solo at a concert one time."

"It sounds like the nice gentleman who helped us when I went hunting for beetles in the forest with my son."

Could they all accept that this was all the work of the same man, Ichiro Tsuwabuki?

Not even the ridiculously glowing terms in which he was written about on Wikipedia included all of that. It mentioned that he was the son of Meiro Tsuwabuki, head of the Tsuwabuki Concern, and that he had briefly skyrocketed to fame as an idol singer about five years ago. Far more space was dedicated to the latter, which meant that the article gave an impression of Ichiro that was rather removed from his reality.

But in the end, most players never even made the connection between Ichiro Tsuwabuki the person and Ichiro Tsuwabuki the character. His name had appeared on a message board's "famous person sighting" thread, but there weren't many fans passionate enough to find out if it was really him, and since he had almost no posts on his Twitter or Facebook accounts, it was nearly impossible to follow his private life. So most people assumed it was just some wannabe.

In any case, the breakdown between Edward, who was quite famous in his little world of crafting players, and Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who had a lot of potential as a conversation topic, had caused many more players than expected to follow the proceedings with proverbial popcorn in hand.

Edward, who was high-strung at the best of times, found this very disconcerting. But what of Ichiro, then?

"Oh, that's very good."

Ichiro didn't mind at all. Well, that probably went without saying.

His jacket, made from the Radiant Morpho components, had miraculously succeeded after only a few tries, and they decided to use the leftover wings for the slacks. Originally, Iris had thought she might need to use a cheaper set of components and recipe for the pants. But since they had so much to spare, she decided to try making them from the same material as the jacket.

The results were a disaster, with all the beautifully glowing butterfly wings converted to hideous scrap. But Ichiro and Iris agreed that they didn't want to give up. He went hunting for more Radiant Morpho wings, and after 123 tries, the slacks were finally completed.

The number of "Item Steal" Art Jewels he used must have far outstripped that number. Iris didn't want to think about it, but at least it would be a happy day for the bank accounts of the Thistle Corporation.

"Now we just have to make the vest and the leather shoes, correct?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Well, we have quite a few components," Iris said. "Maybe I'll just make

them.”

“Has your Create Armor level increased, Iris?” Ichiro asked.

“Y-Yeah...” There was still hesitation in Iris’s voice.

Her mind was still occupied mostly by something she had read that morning. It was a rumor about a feud between a Machina Blacksmith and a Dragonet Magi-Fencer in *Narrow Fantasy Online*.

The fact that they were both premium package users had given the story’s reporting a more sensational edge. Ichiro didn’t seem to mind, but Iris couldn’t help but dwell on it.

She wasn’t such a dedicated netizen that she spent a lot of time on message boards, but she regularly checked the aggregate blogs, and was rather well-informed about online culture.

She had first gotten involved with them to gather more information about *NaroFan*, so naturally, the first one she had read faithfully was the site that specialized in VRMMO-related articles. The blog had done an article about the quarrel from the other day. It had been edited in a biased way, but Iris had no way of knowing that. Most of the opinions in the comment section were in support of Edward, and the ones that weren’t mostly came off as typical contrarian trolling.

Was she doing the right thing by siding with this man?

As she felt these doubts begin to rise in her mind, a voice in her head scolded her firmly. If she told him what was on her mind, he would laugh and call it “nonsense.”

This wasn’t about doing the right thing. The young heir valued her designs. He may say awful things sometimes, but he hadn’t been lying when he’d said he wanted her to make his armor. Thus, there was no need to question if it was right or wrong.

It was just that Iris had also come to understand the meaning behind the way that man had looked at her: the injustice of not having your abilities fairly evaluated. It was a childish emotion, indeed, but Iris had an inkling of how that felt.

Or was she just becoming sympathetic to him? Maybe that was it.

“Is something the matter, Iris?” Sir Kirschwasser tilted his head.

“No. I was just thinking about something...” With that, she opened her menu window, then pulled some fatigue restorers out of the guild’s communal item box.

Using Arts or being active for long periods of time built up fatigue, which could inflict the status “Sluggish” and affect a player’s mindset. All the things weighing on her mind must be tiring her out, Iris thought as she put the recovery object to her lips.

“While I would like to equip it as soon as possible...” Ichiro said. It was just a shirt, slacks, a jacket, and three accessories, but Ichiro looked upon his equipment with fondness. “...you are the one making the armor. Even if your mindset is not directly connected to the functioning of your Arts, I still do not wish to equip any items that you made while scowling.”

“You could just say, ‘If you’re tired, take a break,’ you know,” Iris said.

“Nonsense.”

It must be nice, being so ignorant of other people’s feelings, she thought, but then quickly reminded herself that that itself was a childish emotion. Besides, even if he understood how she felt, it wouldn’t change one inch of how he spoke or acted.

She sighed.

“I hear that sighing reduces your ‘luck’ stat,” Ichiro commented.

“I know. But that only affects the critical rate for item creation. And I’m allowed to fail repeatedly anyway, so what does it matter?” Iris sat down in a chair by the wall of the workshop.

“Shall I make some tea?” Sir Kirschwasser asked.

“Please do,” Ichiro said.

“I’ll have some, too,” Iris added.

Kirschwasser gave a slight bow and left the room. At times like these, he really

was just like a butler. He would probably look great in a real butler costume, but he seemed to enjoy his full plate armor. And anyway, she was in no position to be volunteering such things, given her current Create Armor level.

“Young heir...” Iris began.

“Yes?”

When she addressed him, he had been passing the time in his usual way, reading some kind of English news site in the proprietary browser. He seemed to like to read newspapers when he was unoccupied. Airi Kakitsubata’s final report card for English looked like a row of ducks every year (all 2s — the highest grade was 5), so she couldn’t even guess at what the article could be about.

Iris hesitated for a moment before voicing her concern. “Have you ever failed at anything?”

“No,” he responded immediately. “I suppose I have made mistakes before. But that in itself is a matter of subjective opinion.”

“Wow, really? You’ve made mistakes? Tell me more,” she prodded, a slightly wicked smile on her face.

The young heir narrowed his eyes slightly and closed his browser. “I was taking my college entrance exams. One minor calculation error cost me a perfect score. It was very awkward to realize it as I was marking my own test.”

“A-Anything else?” she asked.

“No.”

Iris fell silent. How to respond to that? It was so outrageous, she wasn’t even sure that it was the truth.

“Incidentally, I chose to withdraw my college application that time and retake it the next year, and that time, I received a perfect score. So I personally don’t count the mistake,” Ichiro said. “And yet, it remains on my record. I find it quite frustrating. If I had a time machine, I’d happily go back and redo it.”

“W-Wow... H-How awful for you...” Iris felt her smile twitch.

It was a good thing that she didn’t know he was referring to a Harvard

entrance exam, and that he'd taken it when his age was in the single digits.

Who was it that said, "When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you?" "Abyss" didn't refer just to crevices in the earth, but to the sky far above, as well. Iris felt an instinctive need to change the subject.

"Speaking of which, you... um... Are you married or anything? You seem pretty stable, and you have money."

"That's quite a personal question..." Ichiro said. "As the human race has already reached its apex in me, I have no interest in procreation. So if I feel like getting married, I will. And if I don't, I won't."

"How often do you get called a creep?" she asked.

"I haven't counted, but it's likely less often than you're thinking."

It was then that Kirschwasser returned with a tray of tea, sparing Iris from any more of Ichiro's unbearable pomposity. Often she'd dismiss such talk with a "yeah, right," but he did seem quite wealthy, so she couldn't help but think that maybe it was true. The fact that she let herself think that was even more unforgivable, in her mind.

"What were we talking about?" Kirschwasser asked.

"The fact that I am the perfect organism, and thus have no need to marry."

"That's not much of a topic," the old Knight replied. The rich aroma wafting up from the cups was one rarely seen (smelled?) in the real world. "Of course, Master Ichiro, you could still get married twenty or thirty years hence."

"True. You have more to worry about than I do, Sir."

"What a hurtful thing to say..."

Iris enjoyed the fragrance of the tea as she listened to their conversation, which seemed somehow simultaneously mellow and barbed.

"Now, Iris, are you feeling like you've failed in some way?" Ichiro asked.

Being dragged so abruptly back to the subject caused Iris to nearly spit out her tea. The program did allow for such reaction emotes, but fortunately, she had omitted them from her potential repertoire.

“Wh-What?”

“Since you brought it up so abruptly, I was wondering,” Ichiro said. “Or was the marriage subject your primary concern?”

“N-No! Um, that’s right... I don’t feel like I’m failing now, but in the past...” All of a sudden, she found herself wrestling with her words. “I sort of understand how Edward feels... And like, you’re being pretty mean to him...”

“It’s nonsense to turn this into an attack upon my character. Well, I don’t mind, personally. One must work past mistakes and failures within oneself.”

“Most people can’t just blast through them like you do, though,” Iris said.

“I am aware,” Ichiro replied, bringing the cup to his lips.

Then he set the cup and saucer on one of the many tables set in the lobby, and opened his browser again. He pulled up a certain page, then turned the window in Iris’s direction and flipped it. It was the same aggregate blog page she had been looking at this morning.

“You saw that page?” Iris asked.

“I try to stay abreast of things.”

“In the end, I guess it’s hard to accept that someone is better or more popular than you...” Iris admitted. “Though you probably wouldn’t understand that.”

“That’s right. Because in the end, I am always the strongest and the coolest.”

Hearing that, Kirschwasser murmured something about Tsuwabuki exceptionalism.

“I am me, you are you, and Ed is Ed,” Ichiro said. “You shouldn’t let it bother you.”

“Wait, are you trying to cheer me up?” Iris asked.

“If you wish to think that, you may,” Ichiro said. “In the end, all interpretations are subjective. I do like Ed, but I do not think he would listen if I told him that.”

“Yeah, I think he hates you,” Iris agreed.

“That is his prerogative. So, are you satisfied?”

Iris took the cup away from her mouth, the white bottom of the cup visible beneath the little bit of liquid remaining. It had been delicious tea. With another sigh, she set the cup down on the saucer. “I’m not, to be honest, but I do feel refreshed. The tea was delicious.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” Kirschwasser said with a smile as he took up the tray.

In the end, Iris still felt as nervous as ever. No matter how many platitudes the young heir employed, it wasn’t easy to just accept it.

All interpretations were subjective. That was true. But it was those subjective interpretations that had let people accept articles on aggregate blogs as unvarnished truth, and so the young heir’s reassurances (if that’s what they were meant to be) didn’t make her feel much better.

Edward said he would crush the armor I made into powder. He must hate me, too. But I don’t want him to break it. So I have to make it properly.

Okay.

Iris stood up. “It’s time to make the vest and the leather shoes.”

“Oh, please do.” The young heir nodded with his usual cool smile.

Yeah, that’s all I can do right now, Iris whispered to herself. But it wasn’t with a feeling of resignation. The thought was more of a rousing one.

She was going to make armor. It wouldn’t be very strong armor, it wouldn’t be attuned to the young heir’s stats, and she’d failed and failed and wasted so much. But this was all that she could make. She just had to do it.

Several hours later, at last, the full armor was complete.

Glasgobara was unusually lively that night, the result of the quarrel between the Machina and the Dragonet several days before.

The aggregate blog’s coverage meant that a great number of people learned about it without firsthand knowledge of what had happened. At some point, they had begun treating it like a major Glasgobara event. It had been over a month since the last Grand Quest, after all, and the players were itching for some action.

There were also a lot of front-line achievers who relied on the Akihabara Forging Guild. The result was that main street was currently dotted with avatars dressed in the sort of high-level equipment you didn't often see in the mid-level merchant town. They had returned there with a feeling of nostalgia.

It had been three days since Edward had started the trouble at the Iris Brand guild house, which meant that today was the day Ichiro had said that his armor would be complete. The middle-aged knight had politely delivered a message to Glasgobara UDX Workshop that Tsuwabuki's armor had been finished, and that had accelerated the situation even further.

"You're stupid. You're so stupid..." Iris muttered.

"When you say those words, it just sounds like 'fine weather we're having' to me."

Needless to say, this exchange was Iris and Ichiro.

It was taking place on the guild house's second floor as the two of them watched the crowds forming on main street below. Spectators had surrounded the house, curious to see this new "armor" of Ichiro Tsuwabuki's. The message boards had been full of posts in support of Edward, but in the end, most of the people here had primarily come to rubberneck. It was clear that their motivation wasn't anger at Ichiro's hubris, but pure schadenfreude: a desire to see him reduced to a laughingstock.

There was no reason to take such mob mentality personally.

Ichiro looked at himself in the vanity he'd set up in the room. He was covered from head to toe with the equipment Iris had designed. Its defensive values weren't very high relative to Ichiro's level, but it did offer him quite a lot of Skill slots. He could have gotten more Skill slots if that had been his priority, but to Ichiro, the design components had been what was most important.

"We'll be like lambs to the slaughter out there..." Iris muttered.

"Nonsense, nonsense," Ichiro said. "Such is the way of all works of art. And this really is very good armor. I liked it quite a lot in your design sketches, but it looks even better on me."

"That's true," she admitted. The young heir really did seem happy about it.

“Now, Iris. Let’s go out there.”

“Um, no... I-I think I really am too embarrassed, or... terrified...” Iris was cringing. “Couldn’t you just go out alone?”

“I think it’s better to go out with the designer. I’d like you to explain the design, you see.”

“Not a chance!” She didn’t know why she was so hesitant, but it brought feelings of shame and regret surging up from the depths of her heart. Somewhere in her mind were voices saying, “I thought you had confidence in your design,” and, “This is your chance to get everyone to acknowledge you,” but she wanted to smother them down.

It was all my fault. Please don’t be so mean to me. I just have no self-confidence. I’m always on the verge of being crushed by the weight of my own pride.

But the young heir’s encouraging smile did not falter.

Yes, this was the proverbial “face of self-confidence,” Iris thought. He didn’t need a basis for it. He could be flipped over with one motion of a lever, and whether he ended up facing up or down, he’d always know he was still himself. Iris couldn’t be that way.

But that was okay; she didn’t want to become insufferable.

In this moment, though, she had no other choice.

She let out a sigh. Her “luck” stat, which reset every time she logged in, decreased. If she had to go out, she would go. Grumbling about it wouldn’t change anything.

She’d ride on the life raft of his insufferability. No matter what else, the young heir had acknowledged her. Even if all of humanity said no, as long as one unshakable yes remained, it was still worth sticking with.

“If I become a laughingstock, will you take responsibility?” Iris asked.

“Oh, certainly not,” he retorted. “If people want to laugh, let them laugh. Which has more value: the no of all of humanity, or the yes from me?”

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” she said.

Just then, the workshop door opened with a clack.

“Well, is it all settled?”

The stern Knight Kirschwasser entered with his usual impeccable timing. Iris had to wonder if he’d been spying on them. He was carrying a tray with a teapot, cups, and saucers on top of it.

“Hello, Sir,” Ichiro commented. “How are the people outside doing?”

“Well, they’re happy with their tea.”

Had Kirschwasser been serving tea to everyone? She wondered where he’d found enough cups...

“Mr. Kirsch, can I have tea, too?” Iris asked. “I’ll drink it before I go.”

“Perhaps I’ll have a cup, as well,” Ichiro added.

“I had a feeling you might ask.” Kirschwasser poured their cups of tea while balancing the tray on one hand. Anyone could perform the act with a high enough “Tea Ceremony” Skill, but Iris suspected Kirschwasser’s player was used to doing this sort of waiter-y stuff anyway. Even the act of handing the cup upon the saucer to her was done with perfect grace.

The scent of mysterious herbs calmed Iris’s heart.

She gave a small nod and brought the teacup quietly to her lips. *Okay, I can do this.*

A large crowd of rubberneckers had formed in front of the UDX Workshop. The ever self-righteous Edward couldn’t understand why people were so curious about something that was none of their business.

Bossman had said he would be on late that day because of work. It hadn’t just been that day; this had been going on for several days lately. Edward knew that Bossman ran a computer parts shop in the real world. Apparently, he’d managed to land a major account, and it had been keeping him rather busy.

Edward used a PC in his own real-life job, and he had wanted to visit Bossman’s shop. But when he suggested it, he’d been laughed down with the words “Never mix RL and the game.” Yet, when he’d wanted to expand his

memory and asked Bossman about estimates, Bossman had just said, “You’ve been working so hard lately, let me send you a good one.”

Edward respected him deeply. Bossman had once told him with a smile that he’d never graduated from high school, yet Edward found him better a man than himself, who had worked so fervently to graduate from college. He wondered what Bossman would think if he knew what he was trying to do now, about the situation he had found himself in.

He didn’t want to think about it. The boss would surely be mad at him — and that was the best-case scenario. He might even lose all respect for Edward.

Ah, but he probably already knew about it. Whether in real life or in the game, Bossman was always checking the bigger message boards in his spare time. Even if he was only checking sporadically, he had surely already been informed about the current situation. Feelings of self-loathing swirled within Edward, but he didn’t know how to force himself to grow up. He could not forgive that man for what he’d done, and that was the fact of the matter.

Edward had often been told that he was lacking in flexibility. But while he knew he needed to fix that, he wasn’t sure how to go about doing it. He didn’t know what that man had been looking for when he had asked to have armor made, but whatever it was, he couldn’t imagine how an Alchemist — who couldn’t even create low-level armor — could be the one to make it.

Things he couldn’t understand tended to hasten his displeasure.

Edward stood in front of the UDX Workshop, arms folded, appraising the current circumstances. There was a Knight handing out tea to the crowd. He had come to offer Edward a cup, as well, but Edward had refused him. The Knight had looked slightly hurt by that.

“You’re way too serious, Ed,” an Anthromorph guild member told him while sipping his own cup of tea.

Though of the Anthromorph race, he was more like a “kemono-mimi,” a human with animal ears. The race options let them change their tail and claws, and choose from a wide range of eyeset parts. Anthromorphs also tended towards physical classes and combat-oriented stats, so it was rare to see players of that race choose crafting classes.

“It’s only a game, so you should just take it easy,” the Anthromorph continued. “Like everyone else.”

“Even if I take it easy, there are some things I just can’t let slide,” Edward said stiffly.

“Yeah... I guess that’s just who you are. Ah, well.” The laid-back Anthromorph took a slurp from his teacup. “Oh, they’re coming out.”

He was right. The door to the guild house across the way had opened. The commotion among the onlookers died down, and magical lamps began lighting up with a loud *Pop! Pop!* A tune began to play, sounding like light jazz, and the man of the hour, the Dragonet Magi-Fencer, appeared from within. There was even show smoke billowing out of the door.

What on Earth? Edward’s mouth dropped open, while the Anthromorph man by his side started laughing his head off.

“Ha ha ha! What the hell is that?”

A similar feeling was disseminating through the crowd. The unexpected showiness of his entrance had prompted a chain of laughter that seemed self-perpetuating. The Elf Alchemist walked out behind the Dragonet man, eyes downcast and face bright red.

Of course, Edward could not have predicted this development, either. This was... This was almost like...

Edward shook his head and squinted at the man’s equipment. As far as he could tell, these weren’t existing game graphics. They weren’t just superficial textures pasted on to the surface of existing graphics, either. They were completely unfamiliar models.

“It’s just ordinary clothing,” his Anthromorph guild companion said, aptly.

Yes, that was right.

Slacks and a jacket. And beneath the jacket, a vest and dress shirt. There was a bit of blue in the coloring, but what was really eye-catching was the luminous sheen on both pieces, like the smooth luster of an insect.

Faint yellowish speckles ran down the shoulders to the chest, mimicking the

markings on a butterfly’s wings. A blue butterfly brooch was pinned to his chest.



Reactions from the onlookers ran the gamut, from “What the hell” and “That’s not armor” to “So that’s it” and “It’s certainly unusual.” There was also an opinion that came mostly from other crafting class players: “Wait, did he spend real money on that?” But their comments rolled smoothly off the Dragonet’s back.

The crowd parted as he walked, and the Elf Alchemist continued to follow timidly behind. The Dragonet Magi-Fencer Ichiro made a beeline for Edward.

Once he was before the rigid man, Ichiro asked him, with a smile, “What do you think?”

“Wh-What do I... think?” As Edward stammered, the guild member beside him burst out laughing again. “S-Stop joking around... Is this... are you... are you trying to hold a fashion show?”

“I don’t *think* I am,” Ichiro said. “I am. I’ve never walked in a Paris collection, of course. But when you add the design together with my own charm in wearing it, I believe it to be on par with any top brand.”

What in the world was he talking about?

Her eyes still downcast, the Elf girl opened Config in her menu window and called up a text file. “U-Um... it’s, well... I-I wanted to incorporate... th-the unflappable mood of the client, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, and... the... the image of... insects... which he really likes...”

Even Edward felt embarrassed at hearing her haltingly spoken lines. It was like she was being put up for public humiliation. Ichiro’s expression of satisfaction as he listened just made him feel for her even more. She must have gone through a lot to get this far. Maybe that, by itself, was worth respecting.

But just as he was on the verge of giving in, Edward recovered, and cut the girl off midway. “Enough! What do you think you’re doing? I didn’t come here to watch this farce!”

“I think it’s pretty fun, myself,” commented his guild companion.

“Would you shut up?!” Edward shouted, reproaching the unwelcome interruption. Then he took a step in Ichiro’s direction. “How exactly is this

armor?”

“It is armor because the system recognizes it as such,” Ichiro said. “It could be better in terms of capabilities, but it was clearly the right choice to use Radiant Morpho for both the tops and the bottoms. Look! It’s original graphics, yet it shines even in the dark!”

“Th-That wasn’t what I meant!” Edward exploded. Ichiro’s gleeful explanation just grated on Edward’s nerves even more.

“Nonsense.” Ichiro dismissed even this anger with calm. “I believe it should be clear now why I turned down you and Bossman and had Iris make my armor instead. Of course, if I’d told you that, perhaps you would have thought of the same thing... But I wanted someone who had a passion for original designs from the outset.”

Ichiro’s words weren’t easy for Edward to accept. They was fundamentally opposed to the armor-making philosophy he had taken as gospel up until now. He could understand caring about design. That was why, when creating armor, he combined parts in original ways, and chose his colors carefully. It was one reason why his armor was so popular.

But... but still... *come on!* You couldn’t completely ignore function in favor of an original design! If you could, then what was the point of the equipment that he and Bossman had been creating up to that point?

“Better to be unique than great?” “Our differences are what define us?” How could you say that in an MMO, a place where numbers ruled all?

“Hmm, I see,” the Dragonet said in the same tones as before, despite having no way to know what Edward was thinking. “You said you wanted to pound the armor Iris designed into powder, didn’t you? Would you like to try?”

“What...”

“I assume that your weapons and armor were all made by you,” Ichiro said. “Why not try it? You’re confident in their abilities, aren’t you? Even so, you made somewhat flexible equipment to suit your own goals. If you claim you won’t acknowledge my equipment, it’s the only recourse.”

Edward immediately realized what he was saying.

The guild member who had stayed quiet before out of politeness now raised his voice in concern. “Hey, Ed, you may be strong, but you’re a crafter. He’s a proper combat class, isn’t he?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Edward said. “I have the weapons and armor I made myself. I can’t lose.”

He didn’t fully believe those words. It would be hard for a crafter to beat a combat class. Not impossible, of course...

The truth was that Edward had defeated far more mobs than most combat class players of the same level who didn’t put the same care into their builds that he did. He often protected his own guild members from etiquette-breaking PK gangs outside the city limits. But this was on a completely different level. Anyone would admit that, when facing a combat-class player backed by a premium pack and numerous pay-to-download services, he’d be at a distinct disadvantage.

Even so, he couldn’t take back what he’d said.

It was true that he had absolute faith in the armor and weapons he had made. Their abilities were surely superior — he would never say that, but it showed in his manner. To back off now would be a betrayal of that self-confidence. Not only that; it would be a betrayal of Bossman, who had taught him all he knew.

“Don’t be stupid,” is what Bossman would probably tell him if he heard that. But Edward would still say it...

To back off now would be a betrayal of Bossman, who had taught him all he knew.

A message window popped up in front of Edward. “You have been challenged to an in-town duel by Ichiro Tsuwabuki. Do you accept?”

Naturally, he touched “Yes.”

A large magic circle appeared around them, a massive battle arena created by the system. The audience, who had been excited by the fashion show, immediately let out a cheer that far dwarfed any noise they had been making before. They cleared out of the magic circle, leaving the two combatants to glare at each other.

“Incidentally, I do like you,” Ichiro said.

Upon hearing Ichiro’s words, Edward realized something. His desire to avenge the insult dealt to Bossman had been the impetus that started all this. But now he could say one with confidence:

“And I hate you!”

The two stood on either side of the duel ring, facing each other.

The Dragonet Magi-Fencer, Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

The Machina Blacksmith, Edward.

Of course, Iris and Kirschwasser stood among the spectators. Iris watched over the young heir Ichiro with an expression that couldn’t quite be called concern. It was more of a “that idiot’s really done it now” kind of face. The look on Kirschwasser’s face was likely similar.

A combat class versus a crafter class. It was the combat class Ichiro who had initiated the duel, so the results were all on him.

“So, who do you think will win?” Iris asked, feeling like a side character in a battle manga.

“What is there to say?” Sir Kirschwasser asked. “Perhaps it’s a ‘the righteous will triumph’ situation.”

“Then the young heir’s going to lose,” she said.

The two focused their attention on Edward — or more precisely, on his equipment.

The full plate armor he was wearing was class-restricted, which meant Edward must have had Fighter as a subclass. As a Blacksmith, he had probably focused on increasing his strength stat and various related abilities, which were probably well compatible with a physical DPS class. His fighting style was probably that of a heavy warrior, and the two swords that hung on his belt were likely his preferred weapons.

But just as they were thinking that, Edward opened his menu window and called out some new equipment. They manifested from accumulating particles

of light with *bwom, bwom* sound effects, attaching themselves all over Edward's armor. They protruded from his body, looking like thrusters, stabilizers, and vents. But if you strained your eyes, you could see that they were all broadswords.

"H-How many weapons does he have?" Iris stammered.

"That's a crafter for you..." Kirschwasser commented.

Items in the game didn't possess weight while they were in a player's inventory, only while they were manifested. If a player went over the encumbrance limit allotted by their strength, they would be rendered immobile. But Edward's leisurely walk while bearing over ten weapons at once showed he had more strength than he needed.

Not many players in *Narrow Fantasy Online* walked around with multiple weapons. This was, in part, because of the game's death penalty. In a show of uncommonly cruel design, the game was designed to make you lose all your equipment and inventory items if you died, which led to hesitance about carrying more than one weapon. Those who got past that hesitation wielded those weapons with pride, as a sign of their confidence in themselves.

I won't lose. I won't suffer the death penalty.

It was with that same self-confidence that Edward said what he did: "You can choose the rules."

"It will be a one-round match," Ichiro said. "A deathmatch, penalty in place."

These were the strictest rules possible for a city duel. The only difference from an interplayer battle out in the field would be that it wouldn't count as a player kill in the winner's status. Otherwise, it was exactly the same. A one-round match meant they would keep hitting each other until one of their HP meters gone. The penalty meant that the loser lost all of their items.

A thrill of excitement ran through the crowd. Edward had made that bold proclamation despite being at an overwhelming disadvantage. They were cheering his chivalry, but that wasn't his true motivation: it was his pride as a Fighter that he would not lose. And one other thing...

"Does he really want to destroy the armor I made?" Iris asked.

“I expect so,” Kirschwasser said. “But it was Master Ichiro who proposed the fight this time, so we’re in no position to complain.”

Ichiro set the rules, Edward agreed to them once more, and the stage for the duel was set. Seeing that, Kirschwasser and Iris backed away, together, to the wall.

The magic circle — in other words, the ring — was there for atmosphere, but the system itself did not forbid outside interference. You could set certain things to be against the rules in the settings, but Ichiro had chosen “anything goes.”

The countdown initiated.

It started at 5, and slowly ticked down in between the two glaring fighters. Actually, only one of them was glaring. The other was standing there coolly — perhaps “gazing” would be a better word — with the air of a dignified king.

The fighter of the streets rebelling against the haughty noble. That was the image that the two conjured up.

The numbers counted down: 3, 2, 1. The word “Fight” appeared.

It was Edward who charged first.

Most of the spectators, imagining Ed to be a power-focused counter-type, were surprised by his sudden charge.

He pulled out two of the swords that stuck out of him like vents, and thrust them both through the air, tracing beautiful arcs: a simultaneous activation of “Horizontal Edge” and “Vertical Edge.” It was a move that could be performed only by a dual-wielding master, and the Dragonet responded with his bare fists.

Horizontal and vertical. He cool-headedly predicted the track of both swords, and rather than evading, caught each with one hand.

“Tsk.” Edward clicked his tongue, but the stalemate did not remain for long.

Edward knew that for that instant, both of Ichiro’s hands were sealed. So without a moment’s hesitation, he released both swords, pulled out the two sticking out from his shoulders, and struck.

“Mmgh...”

Ichiro failed to dodge — actually, it seemed almost as if he wasn't even trying — and the strike landed a direct hit, sending out a blood spray visual as Ichiro's HP shaved down.

Looking unfazed, Ichiro threw aside the swords he had caught in each hand, then thrust his right fist forward. The visual of "Dragon Claw" triggered, indicating this was no longer a mere fist, but a deadly weapon.

Edward drew back. Bare-handed attacks were hampered by short reach, so his reaction was a proper one. But he didn't miss the minute opening that Ichiro's stepping in had created.

With both swords in hand, Edward slashed down with all his might, then pulled out two more swords and lashed out in pursuit. One by one, Edward's swords were ending up stuck into Glasgobara's main street.

It was a wasteful strategy, in Iris's opinion. He'd had a comical amount of broadswords sticking out of his plate mail, but now he was close to running out. It was true that each hit was dealing significant damage to the young heir, but...

"Mr. Kirsch, are those swords cheap?" she asked.

"You would know better than I about weapons, Iris... or I thought you would, but I suppose I'll answer you. They're Mirror Blades. Certainly not weapons to be used and discarded. They have special properties, which makes them surprisingly expensive."

Only two of the Mirror Blades sprouting from Edward's armor had gone unused at this point. There were two more broadswords dangling from his belt, as well, which meant that he had four of his preferred weapon remaining. But it wasn't as if he was in trouble. In truth, Ichiro was the one on the defensive.

The audience didn't seem to have a high opinion of this cool young man's ability, either. He hadn't appeared to mount a single proper attack, and he had only clearly blocked one of Edward's, at the very start. Why, then, was he so calm?

Edward, acting as if he was still on guard about the eerily quiet Ichiro, at last pulled the two swords from his belt. Each one was at least 90 centimeters long. He ran at the young heir again and slashed his main weapons at once, in wide

swings away from his body. The swings drew arcs around him, and he brought them both down, aiming for Ichiro's head.

He then transitioned instantly from "Circular Edge" to the unpredictable "Multi-Edge." Ichiro caught the move with his cool gaze, and attempted to strike out decisively with a bare-handed "Weapon Guard." However...

An instant later, one of Edward's flank armor plates burst open, launching a winch arm from within. The arm pulled a Mirror Blade out of Edward's back, and tore it through Ichiro on a diagonal-upwards trajectory. He was too distracted by the two blades coming at him from the air to react.

"Hey!" Iris shouted in shock.

"He's got 'Hidden Arm'!" a spectator cried.

"Yeah, that Machina-exclusive Skill..."

Sounds of shock rose up among the spectators, but that was not the end of Edward's fierce offensive. The "Rocket Booster" on his back fired, drawing him up close to Ichiro in a flash. His three blades all assaulted the Dragonet man from different angles.

Ichiro's health was being chipped away, and he hadn't done a thing to counter it.

The crowd was on their feet. This was feeling like the moment that would clinch the crafting-class player's victory over the combat-class whale, and their cheers communicated that expectation to the participants.

But despite the situation he'd found himself in, Ichiro seemed utterly oblivious. Judging by his totally relaxed expression, the main thought on his mind seemed to be, "I'm glad he's not ripping my clothing."

"Young heir, if you lose and my armor gets ruined, I won't forgive you!" Iris screamed.

"Nonsense," Ichiro said. "Just remember what you said to me the other day, the thing that made Ed so mad on his way out."

"That was a very different situation!"

Knowing the young heir's perverse character, she was hoping that his pathetic

showing so far was part of an act. But even if it was, Edward's tactics were stupendous. He must have felt he'd been underestimated, and had chosen his armament with utmost care. He might have been hot-tempered, but he knew what it meant for a crafter to fight a combat-class. If he could defeat the whale while he was being underestimated, he should.

"I won't show any mercy!" Ed had shouted when the fight had first started. That was the meaning of those words.

There was a crashing noise, and now, the armor of his shoulders detached. A special piece of equipment he had attached with "Mount Weapon" now unveiled itself.

"Th-That's..." Iris gasped. "...the Lost Gun!"

Iris was aware that she had basically become a sideline character at this point, but she still couldn't contain her cry. It was one of the "ultimate weapons," of which only a handful could be found scattered throughout *NaroFan*. And Edward's third class was Musketeer.

The gun barrel poking out from Edward's shoulder began charging up particles of light. Ichiro watched the motion with narrowed eyes.

"Young heir, don't think you can dodge this!" Ed called.

"Nonsense. As long as you watch where the gun barrel is aiming, it's always possible to dodge."

The moment after he said that, there was a flash. The young heir tilted his head. It was the slightest, most offhand of motions, and Iris only then realize that he was doing it to dodge. It had been a truly spontaneous action, and that alone had been enough to take Ichiro out of harm's way.

At least, it should have been.

One instant later, the light struck Ichiro in the back, producing an impressive damage visual. It was clear that he was slightly staggered by the blow.

"I see! Very clever!" Kirschwasser's eyes widened.

Iris saw what he meant a moment later.

The place where the young heir was currently standing... The Mirror Blades

that Edward had seemingly abandoned before were all around him, sticking out of the ground. Edward had bounced his laser off of a series of blades to target Ichiro in his blind spot.

“Heh, I see he brought it out,” a new voice said. “That’s Edward’s ‘Reflection Laser’!”

The speaker was an Anthromorph, who seemed to be one of Edward’s guild companions and had arrived at some point to stand near Iris and Kirschwasser.

“Is ‘Reflection Laser’ an Art?” Iris asked him.

“It’s an all-range attack capable of striking from any angle, by combining the Mirror Blade and the Lost Gun,” the Anthromorph said. “Edward and I stayed up three days straight thinking it up. We even created an app to calculate the reflection angles!”

“Hmm, I suppose I won’t argue the point of where you got the idea from,” Sir Kirschwasser said.

“Edward and I stayed up three days straight thinking it up!!” he insisted.

It seemed the small console window Edward had opened up near his hand was the app he’d used to calculate the angles. There were countless Mirror Blades set up around the young heir. In a way, it was like each one of them was a laser turret ready to fire. Ichiro was effectively surrounded by enemies.

“Young heir!” Iris cried.

“I told you not to worry,” he said in that infuriatingly calm way of his, as if he had the situation well in hand.

“How can you be so relaxed?!” she exclaimed.

Iris hadn’t actually seen the young heir fight very many times. Certainly, she knew that he had the skill to effortlessly take down a Magi-Metal Dragon solo. And watching him shrug off that many attacks from Edward suggested the character stats he’d poured his funds into building up had paid off.

So why wasn’t he doing anything? Why was he allowing him to get hits in? Out of the kindness of his heart? Iris began to feel annoyed, and wondered what he was thinking.

“No need to worry, Iris,” Sir Kirschwasser said with a bright smile. “Despite what appearances may suggest, Master Ichiro cannot be satisfied unless he is the coolest in every situation.”

“Actually, that’s exactly what appearances suggest...”

“Well, that is true. So, there’s no need to worry.”

Edward’s second barrage was three quick laser blasts in a row, a chain attack made possible with the gun Art “Burst Shot.” The fired lasers passed through multiple Mirror Blades, and each diffused the shot. The bright diffusion of the light bathed even the audience in its glow.

“Hmm.” Ichiro’s free hand moved quickly. If you had enhanced sensory Skills, you could see his arm strike three points precisely in the air. The diffusion of light died down, and the avenue’s lighting returned to normal.

Edward gasped. This time, it was his eyes that widened in shock.

“It’s just ‘Weapon Guard,’” said Ichiro. “It’s not that difficult. I always wanted to try that, really.”

“Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy...” Iris shook her head forcefully.

Kirschwasser shrugged.

With “Dragon Claw” activated, his bare fists had functioned as weapons; hence, he’d been able to use “Weapon Guard.” It was as if Ichiro had simply wiped the triple laser barrage away with his hand, like a scene out of a movie or a superhero show.

The young heir then tucked the hand into his pocket and spoke up, languidly. “My image processor has a floating point number of 200, so I can react to the speed of laser fire with my Perception stat. It only works because the ‘Lasers’ in this game are not actual stimulated light, of course.”

“Mr. Kirsch, what is he talking about?” Iris asked.

“It would be difficult to explain in just a few words...”

“So I can assume it’s just the usual bragging, right?” she asked.

“Yes, more or less,” Kirschwasser said, acknowledging Iris’s understanding.

“Now, Ed,” Ichiro said as he turned back to face him. “Are you satisfied yet?”

“.....”

“I understand this might hurt a bit, but I won’t apologize for it.”

“What—” Edward started, but before he could finish, Ichiro’s body had already slipped inside his personal space.

Ichiro pulled his tightly-clenched fist back and snapped it forward like a bowstring in a mere 0.2 seconds. What combination of Skill and Art could reduce activation time to that degree?

Edward’s thought — *I have to counter it* — was a fleeting one. The next instant, the impact exploded against his solar plexus.

Ichiro’s sky-high “Dragon Claw” level meant that the bare fist dealt unthinkable damage to Edward. In an extra bit of cruelty, Ichiro had also acquired the Dragonet-exclusive Skill “Blowback.”

He sent Edward flying back in a way that would be difficult to put into words. He seemed to have put a bit of thought into the trajectory, as well.

Driven by the physical damage calculation, the fictional energy that propelled Edward’s avatar extinguished. He plowed through one of the magical lamps that illuminated main street, pulverized an NPC shop sign, and broke through a wagon. Then, when he finally hit the ground, he continued to tumble end over end, taking large gouges out of the brick-lined street.

The system inhibited either player from leaving the map while the duel was still on, and so Edward was finally allowed to stop after he slammed into the large arch that read “Glasgobara Merchant Town,” reducing it to powder from the impact.

Was this part of the trajectory that Ichiro had planned? If so, it was really quite cruel.



Small particles of light rose up from the dust cloud, then disappeared. Not even the players with perception-based skills could find the remains of Edward under the rubble. His avatar would now be inside Glasgobara UDX Workshop, sans all equipment and inventory items.

“The winner, Ichiro Tsuwabuki!” the system announcer proclaimed triumphantly, as if everybody didn’t already know.

A second later, earth-shattering applause ripped through the air around them. At the end of the day, it didn’t matter to the spectators which of them was in the right. Rubberneckers were, in most situations, essentially neutral. But because of that, they were happy to give their wholehearted applause to Ichiro, even though he had started out as the unabashed heel.

They had enjoyed it. It had been a good duel.

Ichiro didn’t respond to the adulation directed at him by the crowd. He seemed to just let it roll off his back, and just kept walking towards Iris and Kirschwasser (and Ed’s guild companion, but never mind him).

“See?” he asked Iris.

“R-Right...” she said.

He had settled the duel just like that, as if he’d never been on the losing end at all. In the end, the young heir had only attacked once, with that one final punch. It was a true one-hit KO.

“Now...” Ichiro said.

At this point, the eyes of all players on-site were focused on Ichiro. After checking to make he had their attention, he activated the wind attribute support spell Art “Speaker Voice.”

“Ahem. I am Ichiro Tsuwabuki. Long introductions are nonsense, so I’ll keep it short.”

There was a stir within the crowd. What was this man saying now?

As if ignoring their question — or perhaps, answering it — Ichiro continued. “I think you may now appreciate the sort of armor that I am wearing. Thus, I now officially declare the clothing guild Iris Brand open for business.”

“Huh?!” Iris exclaimed. How many times had she made that sound since she’d first met Ichiro? “H-Hang on, young heir...”

“This girl is the designer,” he said. “She’s the one who made my armor. Isn’t she incredible?”

“Hang on!”

He had pointed to her when he spoke, so naturally, all eyes had focused on her, too. She heard a few comments, like “Hey, a cute girl!” and similar. Her face turned red from embarrassment.

It’s an avatar, so of course it’s cute! You’re all unspeakably handsome men, too!

But the voices among the crowd spread. The reaction was bigger from the medium users who occupied the bulk of the player base rather than from the achievement-focused top players. It was true that his armor was very fashionable.

It was a game, so Ichiro’s ability to endure all of Edward’s attacks uninjured couldn’t have been thanks entirely to the armor. It was just that the cool way he’d fought had been well-accented by the formal suit design he was wearing. If that duel itself had been a side show for the fashion show display, then it was quite an impressive scam.

“If you have the money, bring the components and recipes you want to us,” Ichiro said. “Of course, I’ll handle any real money needed to have original designs created, so don’t worry about that. I think that’s everything. Iris, is there something you want to say?”

“Let me go home,” she muttered.

“As I cannot imagine anyone will have custom order requests right away, we will now return to our guild house.”

With those final words, the man known as Ichiro Tsuwabuki escorted Iris back to their safe haven. Once the two passed through the crowd and disappeared into the house, Sir Kirschwasser thanked the spectators for their attention, and followed his guild mates inside.

The departure left a curious sort of atmosphere hanging over main street of Glasgobara Merchant Town. It seemed an all-too-casual end to a duel with such electric build-up.

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“And that’s about how it went,” Ichiro finished.

“Awful,” Felicia responded.

“Yeah, he’s awful,” Iris agreed.

“Awful and wicked,” Sir Kirschwasser concurred.

“I think it’s fine, personally,” King Kirihito commented, rounding out the reactions.

“But maybe it’s less awful and more stupid...” Iris added.

“You realize that every time you call me stupid, you’re lowering humanity’s average...” Ichiro responded, playing out their usual exchange once more.

The video of Ichiro and Edward’s duel had been recorded using in-game software and uploaded to multiple video sites. Ichiro, who had taken an overwhelming victory over the powerful Edward, had served as good advertising for Iris Brand. Of course, that always came with the criticism that a crafting class couldn’t beat a combat class anyway, which was in turn countered by the point that Edward’s fighting ability was on par with your standard combat classes. And so the arguments repeated over and over in the comment section of the videos.

Naturally, Iris was firmly opposed to Ichiro’s advertisement of Iris Brand. *How could you do that without asking me? I always knew you were selfish, but now you’re just stupid!*

Ichiro’s response had been thus: “I am not stupid.”

And then, very reasonably, Iris had pointed out that that wasn’t the point.

But it was Iris who had eventually given ground. It was true that she was interested in designing armor, and (though Ichiro didn’t know this) she wanted to be an apparel designer at some point in the future. In the end, she couldn’t fight the appeal of the idea of establishing herself, here in this fictional world.

“So, um, did it change anything?” Felicia asked.

“Nope!” Iris shouted back. “Plenty of people thought it was funny and came by to window-shop, but not one of them actually requested a design. It’s been humiliating!”

“I-I see...” Felicia couldn’t hide her wince.

“Well, I suppose, even if they’re original designs, you can’t beat the ones invented by professionals,” King murmured.

Iris froze. He was right. No matter how passionate she was, at the end of the day, she was still a rank amateur. It was just that her designs had happened to appeal to the young heir, which had resulted in her major exposure. Which meant...

“Heh... heh heh...”

“Well, I like it, though,” Ichiro said.

“That’s right, thank you!” Iris responded with sudden anger to Ichiro’s attempt at comfort. “I am grateful to you, young heir. You let me do what I wanted to do. And I’ve actually had a lot of fun.”

Then she continued...

“But the things you say and do make me sick! Next time, I’m going to come up with a clothing design that will make not just you, but the whole world, howl! I know I’ve said that before, but still!”

“Hmm, good.” The young hair gave a satisfied nod, and sipped his tea once more.

6 - Epilogue

With the story over, everyone started talking about returning to Iris Brand. They had imposed on the Forging Guild long enough.

Ichiro (and King Kirihito) said they would be staying a little while longer, but the others took their leave, with Iris at the lead and Felicia and Kirschwasser behind. It had just been a bit of recollection, but it had eaten up quite a lot of time. It was actually rather late in the day, now.

“So now you know,” Iris murmured on the way.

Felicia found herself cocking her head. “Huh?”

“You know, my relationship with the young heir. Right? That’s what you were worried about, wasn’t it?”

Felicia looked back at her blankly, as if to say, “Oh yeah, that’s what started all this.”

Iris felt a wave of exhaustion sweeping over her.

“The story all seems too extraordinary... or maybe too mundane, I can’t tell anymore,” Felicia said. “I guess it was hard on you too, huh, Iris?”

“No kidding,” Iris responded. “It’s like I said when we first met. I find him awful, and while I’m a bit grateful to him, more often he makes me so frustrated I could scream, and I’ll probably beat him to a pulp someday, but I don’t like to badmouth other people’s relatives, so I’ll stop!”

“You’ve badmouthed him a lot already, though...” There was no guile behind Felicia’s words. She was serious.

Of course, Iris was so thankful to the young heir that she couldn’t hate him. But, she reflected, what she felt for him was on a dimension that went beyond like or hate. To put it simply, it was more like the love a person might have for solving difficult entrance exam questions. When she thought about it that way, it was clearly nothing for Felicia to worry about.

To be honest, Felicia seemed to love her “second cousin Itchy” a lot. She wanted to say, “I won’t hold it against you, but please find better taste,” but it was none of her business, really, so she decided to hold off.

“By the way, Lady Felicia, will you be joining Iris Brand?” Kirschwasser asked.

“Hm? Hmm...” Felicia put a hand to her chin and tilted her head thoughtfully. She looked first at Iris, then at Kirschwasser, then at the Iris Brand guild house that towered before them.

The elder Knight’s invitation had been extended purely out of consideration. Felicia had wanted to join the same guild as the young heir, but it would be hard for her to ask to join. Iris Brand was a crafting guild, after all, so there was no objectively valid reason for her to be interested in it. Thus, he must have thought that the kind thing to do would be to ask her.

Iris herself found it a bit awkward, but she didn’t dislike Felicia, so she had no reason to object. But...

“I don’t think so,” was Felicia’s eventual response.

“Oh? A shame.” Kirschwasser raised an eyebrow.

“...Felicia, you’re not refusing for my sake, are you?” Iris asked.

“Huh?! No, of course not!” Felicia exclaimed.

Iris had been wondering if maybe Felicia still had her doubts about her relationship with the young heir, but judging from the girl’s reaction, that wasn’t the case.

There on Glasgobara’s main street, Felicia clenched her hands into fists. “I do want to be in the same guild as Itchy, but at the end of the day, if I’m gonna do one, it should be for something I want to do... that’s what I realized when listening to the story today.”

Iris hadn’t meant it to be an inspiring story, so hearing Felicia say that made her feel a bit self-conscious. “What is it that you want to do in *NaroFan*, Felicia?”

“It’s already been resolved, actually. So has Itchy’s reason for joining... but he’s still having so much fun, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Iris agreed. “He is always having fun...”

The group stopped right in front of the Iris Brand guild house.

“Kiryuhito also takes the game really seriously, despite not actually enjoying games very much...” Felicia said. “So I want to find something, too.”

“It’s a game, so I always feel one should enjoy it that way,” Kirschwasser said, arms folded. “But I suppose the freedom of choice in that regard is what makes VRMMOs so popular.”

As a gamer, he represented those who preferred to engage with *NaroFan* as a game, but Iris and Felicia’s limited social circles hadn’t put them in touch with many players who felt the same way.

And if the Knight was honest with himself, *NaroFan* was quite lacking as a game. The draw for most of the users was just the novelty of playing a VR game. The actual balance was lacking compared to classic computer games in more mature markets.

He continued, “Indeed, you see players like Iris and the Forging Guild, who set up shop as crafters in Glasgobara, and players who just spend their time relaxing in the Vispiagna Meadows with their friends, rather than grinding levels. Thus, Lady Felicia, it is up to you to find your own form of enjoyment.”

“Hmm...” Felicia folded her arms and thought. “Well, you know... Even if I don’t join the guild, I can still come here to hang out anytime. Right, Mr. Kirsch?”

“Indeed. There will always be tea waiting here for you.”

“Yeah...” Felicia nodded, and Kirschwasser smiled.

He pulled on the thick black door in front of him, which gave out its usual squeak of wood. The Iris Brand lobby appeared before their eyes.

Despite knowing it would be that way, Iris couldn’t help but wince at how empty it was. But then, suddenly, she caught sight of a human silhouette moving around the lobby.

Who could it be? she wondered, straining her eyes. What she finally saw startled her.

It was a woman, dressed elegantly. Her race appeared to be Elf, and her outfit was extremely striking. What she was clad in was not armor, but modern-day apparel of the sort that Iris Brand designed. A one-piece dress with what looked like a sleeve belt, in a tasteful houndstooth check pattern. Engineer boots smartly completed the outfit. Her wavy hair, despite its volume, seemed light and weightless, and was topped by a tasteful red beret.

Her coordination was surely the work of a professional, and the sight of her made Iris feel two inches tall. She couldn't hold a candle, a match, or even a spark to this woman's refined taste.

Had there been another person like her in the game? Iris froze. She could tell that Felicia and Kirschwasser behind her were bewildered.

"Is this Iris Brand?" the woman, whose avatar name was Nem, asked with a quiet smile.

"Oh, um, yes!" Iris burst out.

"And are you Iris?"

"Y-Yes!"

Nem gave Iris a piercing look from the tip of her head to the bottoms of her feet, then swept her eyes across the work displayed all over the store. After finishing a full look around, she let out a laugh.

"U-Um...?" Iris asked.

The next words out of Nem's mouth, Iris wouldn't forget for the rest of her life:

"It's nothing."

"Um..."

Airi Kakitsubata. In her 17 years of life, this was only the second time someone had picked a fight with her for no reason.

Naturally, she didn't know yet that this second one had also been sparked by the behavior of the young heir, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. It really was utter nonsense.

Meanwhile, in the Forging Guild's guild house, Edward had finished the work King had asked for and come back out of the workshop. Having its durability maxed out hadn't changed the graphic of the XAN itself at all, yet somehow, it seemed to sparkle more. King Kirihito thanked him with a slightly satisfied smile, and paid Edward for his work.

"The XAN is one of the legendary weapons, isn't it?" Ichiro asked, watching them through the corner of his eye.

"Yeah..." King said. "There's only one of it on the whole server."

"Just like Amesho's knife," Ichiro said.

"Yeah, it's weird..." King murmured as he gave the XAN a few test swings. Despite its legendary status, it was rather plain-looking. "For weapons of which there are only one each in the game to have such ridiculous stats... You'd think all the game's users would hate me."

"Though the fact that you and I can dominate as solo players the way we do says odd things about the game balance to begin with," Ichiro said.



As far as Ichiro knew, the Thistle Corporation was a young company. He had heard that their president, Azami Nono, whom he had met at Megumi Fuyo's party recently, had started as a genius technician, and that she had created Thistle by headhunting geniuses and artistic types from other companies. It wasn't a group that would have the knowhow to create a balanced game.

But the reason the game nevertheless got a steady stream of new players was probably because of the care put into the graphics, creating lifelike recreations down to the smallest detail. That was the part that Ichiro found so satisfying, too.

"It's not unusual for people to play it even as they complain, either," King added.

"That's the nature of online gaming," Edward murmured in response to King. "There's no end to the complaints people have for the devs. If we don't like it, we could just quit. But we keep playing it because we like it, crappy as it is. Am I wrong?"

King shrugged his shoulders. Even if he was, he couldn't be too far off the mark.

"Well, everyone has their own way of enjoying the game," Ichiro said.

"That's true." Edward nodded to Ichiro's words. "If you want to try to become the best in a broken game system, that's fine. If you just want to continue pursuing the plot on the front lines, that's fine. If you want to create armor designs you like the way Iris does, that's fine. Though it's not something I understand, personally."

Ichiro could have said something stuck-up, like "I see you've become a little wiser," but he didn't.

Edward was a proper adult. He had let his emotions make him narrow-minded for a while there, but he wasn't the kind of person to keep that going forever. And at the end of the day, it was the Forging Guild that had the overwhelming support of the game's player base. When Ichiro had ignored that and extended a hand to a half-baked (from Edward's point of view) crafter like Iris, he should have just laughed it off and said, "What a fool."

The reason he hadn’t been able to do that was simply because Edward was too sincere a person. It would be easy to dismiss him as lacking vision, but Ichiro personally liked people who stuck faithfully to their own sense of values. Of course, it was important to be flexible with your ideas, so as not to impose them on others, but it wasn’t right to expect that of all people all the time.

“But...” Edward continued, then paused.

Ichiro prompted him. “Yes?”

“...I really hate you.”

“Really? I like you quite a lot.”

Nearby, King Kirihito murmured, “Adults are such a pain in the ass” as he sheathed his sword.

And that was the end of the small talk. King exited the store, and Ichiro decided to return, as well. As they walked out of the Forging Guild side by side, King Kirihito wore an openly sour expression on his face.

“By the way, old man...” King addressed him as they got out onto main street.

“Yes?”

“Your guild house...”

“Yes, someone’s there.” Ichiro nodded, remembering what he’d seen just a few hours ago.

When they had originally left Iris Brand to head out for the Forging Guild, and then when they had been trading small talk in the lobby, he had sensed someone watching him out on main street. He’d also noticed a little while ago, just before Iris and the others headed back, that the person had entered the Iris Brand guild house.

“Shouldn’t you have gone with them?” Edward asked.

“Are you worried?” Ichiro responded.

“I was wondering if you’d picked another senseless fight with someone.”

Ichiro shrugged, the usual cool expression on his face and one hand on his pocket. “Nonsense. There’s no such thing as a senseless fight. They’re things

that happen inevitably when beliefs and opinions collide. Of course, I'll always win, regardless."

"You're firing on all cylinders today, old man."

"But I may not be the one fighting, this time..." he said.

Iris Brand's black door opened with a clank. And then...

A female avatar stepped out, dressed in equipment he had never seen before. Her race appeared to be Elf. As the woman saw Ichiro, she averted her eyes in surprise. Ichiro quietly narrowed his eyes at the girl. And then he said...

"Good evening. I never expected to run into you here, Megumi."

He could see King in his peripheral vision, watching in puzzlement, but Ichiro ignored him.

Megumi Fuyo. The daughter of the president of Tsunobeni, Inc., and president of the fashion brand MiZUNO. The fuyo, or cotton rose tree, was known in Chinese as the nem, which must have been where her avatar had derived its name. He had meant it when he'd said he hadn't expected to meet her here.

She seemed to steel herself, and then, a moment later, she turned to meet Ichiro's eyes. "Good day, Ichiro."

"I suppose you came here to meet Iris?" he asked. "Were you that worried about the person who made my brooch?"

Nem's only response was silence, which all but confirmed it. She opened her mouth plaintively, then averted her eyes from Ichiro. Then she met his eyes again, and eventually said this:

"Ichiro, I don't understand the meaning of 'good.' If I may ask... is that brooch really that good?"

"Well, the design of it actually isn't good at all," Ichiro answered, as breezy as he was tactless.

From an objective point of view, the design itself was quite crude. It seemed to have been a mere graphical study from the start, as it was clearly inferior to the jacket Iris had designed more recently. When he had had the brooch made in real life, he had faithfully recreated the roughness of the polygons, so that it

would look more or less like the one in the game.

To Ichiro, it still had value, despite that. But even if he explained that to her, she might not understand.

“...I’m leaving.” With that, Nem opened the menu window and prepared to log out.

“Nem.” That one word was enough to stop her.

“Yes?”

“This game is quite fun.”

Nem was silent. Then she said, “I’ll let Azami know.”

And with that, she logged out.

That hadn’t actually been what he was trying to convey, but perhaps for once, Ichiro thought, he had expressed himself poorly.

“She seems like a real pain in the neck,” King muttered.

But Ichiro was smiling. “People can’t control how they feel. Sometimes that can seem like a pain, I suppose...”

“Well, you’re the biggest pain of all.”

“Nonsense.”

King remained staring at the place where Nem had disappeared, then spoke again. “She seemed like a real newbie.”

“I’m impressed that you could tell.”

“The way she walked suggested she wasn’t used to virtual reality, and while her equipment was an original design, the Mage Stick on her belt was beginner equipment. I wonder how she managed to make it to Glasgobara at all...”

Even if they had been led there by a high-level player, it would be difficult for a level 1 player to make it across the Volgund Volcanoes. That was what King’s statement was pointing out. In addition, her equipment was all original graphics, which, as they had discussed at length today, would require a high Create Armor skill to make.

They had no proof that Nem was a low-level player. But King's observations had been accurate. When Ichiro had met her at the party, Megumi had seemed to know almost nothing about the game. She had likely only started playing today.

She had begun the game today, and through some means, arrived in Glasgobara.

Ichiro had a suspicion of what those means must have been, which was why he had told her, "This game is fun." But Nem didn't seem to have followed his meaning.

"What the hell was that?!" A cry rose up from the Iris Brand guild house.

The players coming and going down main street looked over at the sound of it.

Ichiro smiled wryly. "Well, King, our designer seems to be in a bad mood, so I really should be going."

"Sure. Try not to pick any more fights."

"Ha ha ha. Nonsense," he responded with his usual line to King's warning, then returned to Iris Brand.

"What the heck? What was with her? Who says that?! Who looks at someone who's obviously worse and says, 'It's nothing'?! Human garbage, that's who! Total filth! She just came in, picked a fight, and left! Of course, that's partly because I obviously wasn't going to rise to her provocations!"

"Firing on all cylinders, I see," Ichiro commented.

Iris was talking big (with a lot of bluffing behind it). The young heir Ichiro Tsuwabuki nodded in satisfaction at the sight of Iris's usual bluster. Kirschwasser and Felicia had retreated to the far wall, where they were quietly drinking tea.

From the way she was acting, Ichiro could guess more or less what had happened, but he decided to get confirmation from Kirschwasser.

Indeed, his hypothesis was accurate.

The player with the avatar name of Nem had dropped by Iris Brand, dissed Iris's designs, and then left. First Edward and now this. It was sad, the way that Iris continually had people stroll in to crush her self-confidence. Fortunately, she had a strong core. The makeup of Iris's soul was more like crabgrass than the flower she had named herself after, and Ichiro had always preferred weeds to flowers arranged in pristine beds.

"You're looking pretty happy, Itchy," Felicia said, her teacup in one hand.

Ichiro nodded. "Do I? Perhaps I am."

"Lady Felicia, you had suspicions about Master Ichiro and Iris's relationship, did you not?" Kirschwasser asked as he made a new cup of tea for Ichiro.

"Y-Yeah..." Felicia responded, as if noting something unsettling in the elder Knight's calm smile.

"Master Ichiro's behavior towards Iris is much like his behavior towards King Kirihito," Kirschwasser said.

"Huh? Kiryuhito?" she asked. "How so?"

"I won't go as far as to tell you that, but... Master Ichiro, your tea."

"Hmm, thank you."

"Well, Master Ichiro prefers people who are capable of losing their tempers at him," Kirschwasser said. "In that respect, your concerns were half correct."

"I wish you could have told me that sooner!" Felicia shouted, waving both of her hands (which included the cup). The game wasn't so realistic that it would allow the contents to go flying out, and Kirschwasser felt grateful that it meant he wouldn't have to clean the floor.

"Okay, okay, starting tomorrow, I'm gonna go tsun-tsun at Itchy!" she declared.

"I don't believe you'd be capable of it, Felicia, but do try your best."

Kirschwasser's explanation was rather baseless, in Ichiro's opinion, but he wasn't going to go out of his way to correct him. It was true that the core of it was accurate. He really did like King Kirihito, Iris, and even Edward. The game had plenty of value if it had allowed him to meet players like them.

Iris was blazing bright in the face of this new adversity. That was a good thing.

“Ah, welcome back! Young heir!” Iris regained her state of mind, and turned back to address him.

“Mm, thank you.”

“You may not be aware of this, but right now I’m blazing with motivation!” she declared.

“So I see.”

Iris clenched her hand into a fist and thrust it up at the ceiling. “Okay, I’m gonna do it! I don’t know who that Nem woman is, but if she’s picking a fight with me and Iris Brand, I’m gonna make her regret it!”

It seemed things wouldn’t be boring for quite a while. Ichiro smiled in satisfaction, and brought the teacup to his lips.

Afterword

Hi, everyone. How are you doing? It's me. Thanks to you, I got to put out Volume 2.

It'll probably be July by the time it's out on store shelves. It was a surprise to hear that, but you know how it is. When I first started publishing *Paying to Win in a VRMMO* on *Shosetsuka ni Narou*, it was last July, on the 10th. The first chapter of that was the result of a total snap decision, and less than a year later, I'm publishing my second light novel volume! Amazing! So this is "the power of money"! Though I haven't paid a single cent for it!

Never mind! Everyone! Let's talk about the next volume while I'm still excited! Iris/Airi Kakitsubata debuted in this volume. She was a very popular character in the web version. Back when the first volume was announced, the web version readers asked, "What about the evil god? Where's the evil god?!" over and over again. The evil god refers to Iris.

Evil god Iris. She could appear in a Gamera movie, I bet.

But as you can see, when she first appears, Iris is just an ordinary girl who's a little bit stubborn. In the future, Iris will experience a number of hardships (primarily due to the young heir), grow a great deal, and eventually become known as "the evil god." This "growth" is one of the appeals of Iris as a character. I hope you'll keep watching over her in the future.

Those who haven't yet read the web version will be like, "Huh? Evil god?" and well, it's a bit hard to explain, and a bit beyond description, so, well, um...

"Please, just watch how she develops!" is about all I can write. Watch over her!

Another character who makes his debut in the second volume is that bastard, Edward. My design for the Machina race was originally closer to human, or more like simple androids — at least Aigis, if not like Mahoro, you know? But

then during one of our discussions, I got very carried away and we kept adding more. I'm personally very satisfied with it, but I'm sure it made a lot of trouble for the illustrator, Kirishima.

Though, the first time I played an MMO, my character was a lot like that. He was a crafter class, too. I guess I just went back to first principles. Though it made a lot of trouble for Kirishima!

Anyway, I really like thinking up "what-ifs." When it comes to print *PtW* versus web *PtW*, I want to play with the chronological order, go over-the-top in more places, and come up with lots of new developments.

Whether we get future installments will depend on the sales numbers, so I'm earnestly working on the plot right now, but I really want to get onto the next development! There's her, the one who appeared in Volume 1 and has a great role to play, but so far has done barely anything! I really want to put her in the spotlight! And there are so many more characters who have barely appeared in the print version at all! I don't have concrete plans yet, but I hope you'll all be waiting with bated breath!

Now, for the long-awaited thank-yous, because I'm almost out of space!

Um, as usual, thank you to Mr. K from the editorial department, who looked after me despite my taking up a lot of his time! And as always, he's a hottie! May has been a very busy month, hasn't it? Your tips for toasting the amberjack you brought back from your vacation made it very delicious! Buy one for me again, please!

And Rein Kuwashima, for once again drawing such beautiful, eye-catching drawings! Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule! Please, take care of yourself! And I'm sorry for making trouble for you with Edward after your beloved Iris!

And to everyone at Hobby Japan for printing and proofreading, and to the book sellers! Especially you, the one in Nagoya! I don't think you realized it, but after the first volume came out, I stalked your third-floor light novel section! Sorry about that!

To everyone who read my story on *Shosetsuka ni Narou*! I'm going to keep

publishing on the web! Just because I’m a pro now doesn’t mean I don’t find writing fun anymore! I’ll pour my heart into both work and my hobby!

And of course, to you, who picked up Volume 2 after Volume 1! Ah, don’t put it back on the shelf! Thank you!

That’s right! Goodbye!

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Paying to Win in a VRMMO: Volume 2

by Blitz Kiva

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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