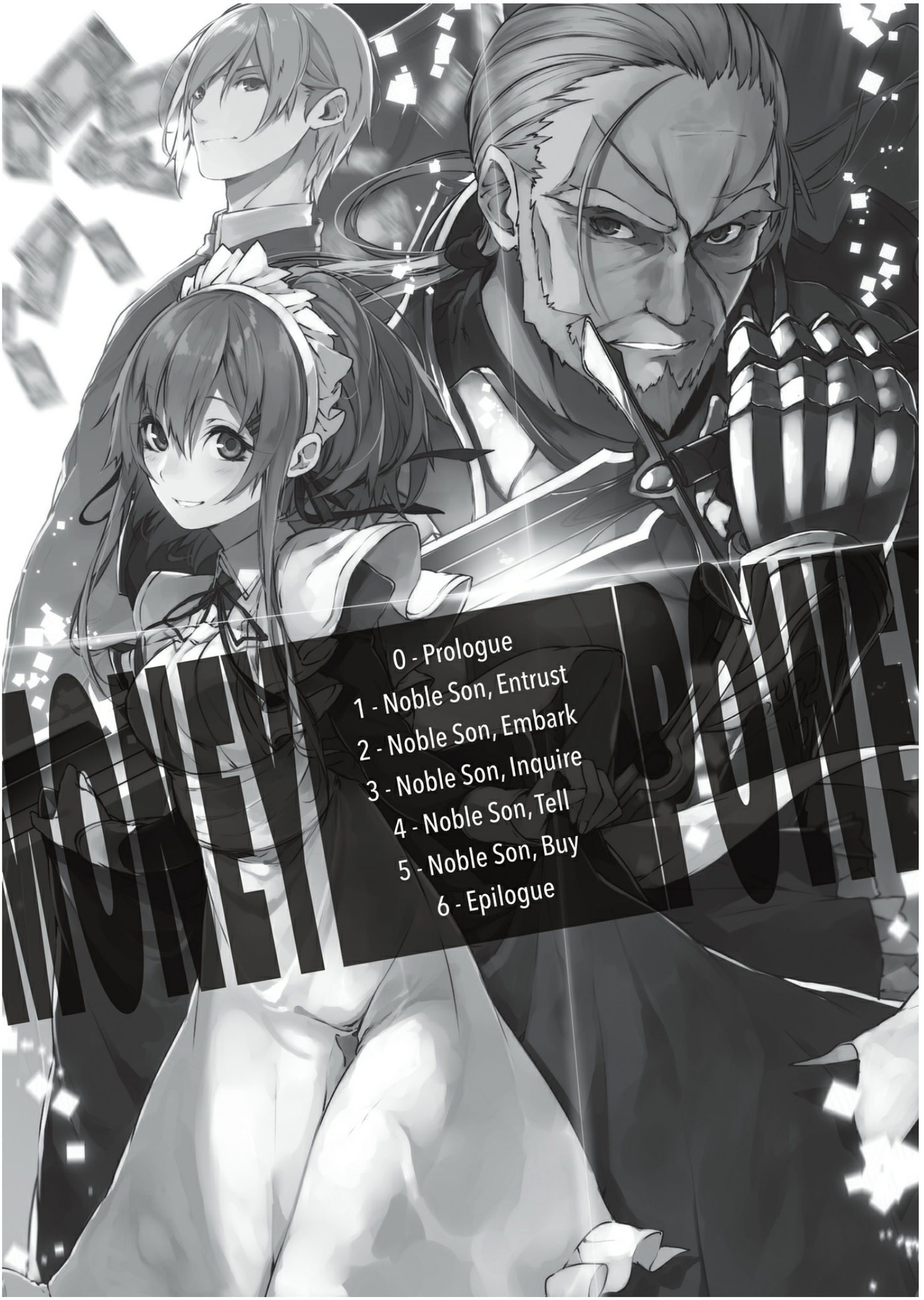

3
Blitz Kiva
illustration/
Kuwashima Rein
Paying to Win
in a VRMMO


"Cooking complete!"
For a maid, housework was a battlefield.
Paying to Win in a VRMMO 3


SUMMER! THE BEACH! SWIMSUITS!
"EEK!"
NAME: Iris
NAME: Felicia
"HYDROOO BLASTEEEEER!"
"IT'S A LITTLE MEW-MILIATING, HAVING YOU ALL STARE AT ME..."
NAME: Sorceress
"IT'S NICE. I HAVE SO FEW OPPORTUNITIES TO WEAR THEM IN THE REAL WORLD."
NAME: Amesho


"Hmm... felt like a passing breeze..."




0 - Prologue
1 - Noble Son, Entrust
2 - Noble Son, Embark
3 - Noble Son, Inquire
4 - Noble Son, Tell
5 - Noble Son, Buy
6 - Epilogue

# 0 - Prologue

“Ichiro-sama, your tea.”

“Mm, thank you.”

It was a usual morning, a usual scene in the Tsuwabuki household. In the penthouse floor of a luxury apartment complex that towered over Sangenjaya in Setagaya Ward, Ichiro Tsuwabuki was enjoying his elegant post-breakfast teatime.

After breakfast, for an hour starting at 8:00 AM, this was the time when he most felt at home. The table was stacked with newspapers containing everything from the vulgar to the refined: English-language newspapers, economic sheets, tabloids, and so forth. Ichiro immersed himself in the information they provided, in addition to that which was provided by the tablet balanced on his knee and the large-screen HD cathode-ray TV in front of him.

Sakurako would occasionally change the flavor of his morning tea, depending on her whim of the day — the fact that she did not do this according to Ichiro’s whim was one of her more willful traits — but she never added anything he definitely wouldn’t want to drink that day, which meant that he always looked forward to whatever random tea he might receive that morning.

“Your Earl Grey,” she would tell him.

“Is that Bergamot Peach?” he would ask.

“Yes, in fact, it is.”

That sort of exchange was also quite enjoyable.

Sakurako Ogi was Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s live-in maid. He had been employing her for five years now. “Housekeeper” might have been a more accurate word for what she did, but she had insisted on the term “maid.” The fact that she wore a maid outfit was of her own volition, as well. How the two of them had met could be a story in and of itself, but there’s no need to write about it here.

Sakurako cast a glance at the TV, which was running a story about the upcoming start of the beachgoing season.

“Oh, the sea... That looks so nice...” she said earnestly.

“You appear to have something on your mind, Sakurako-san.” Ichiro did not look back at her as he brought his tea to his lips, a placid expression on his face.

Sakurako regained her composure as she heard his words. “Yes, Ichiro-sama. I do have something on my mind. But as a mere servant, I would never dream of speaking to you of my selfish desires.”

“Although I did buy this cathode ray TV because you wanted to play video games on a big screen,” he commented.

“That’s true! Ichiro-sama, could we go to the sea this summer?” she asked eagerly.

“If I feel like it.” Ichiro was not especially being mean-spirited; whether he would hear his servant’s request and whether he would approve it were separate matters.

Sakurako’s cherry blossom-pink lips turned into a pout, and she murmured, “Very well...” in response.

“If you wish to swim, we do have our indoor pool here,” he pointed out.

“I am aware,” she said. “I am also aware that you take a swim in it every day before breakfast. I am the one who cleans that pool, after all.”

Despite how he looked, Ichiro Tsuwabuki never missed his personal training sessions. It was less that he wanted to build up muscle mass, and more that he simply enjoyed moving around. Even lately, while he had been primarily engaged in the fictional world of the VRMMO, he still made good use out of the indoor pool and gym facilities in his house as a way to expel his pent-up energy. His ability to not get overly muscular despite how much he worked out was a sort of talent on its own.

But setting that aside...

“Still, I want to go to the sea!” she complained.

“But I don’t, particularly,” he answered.

“Do you remember last year, when you dragged me out of bed in the middle of the night to helicopter you to Hakodate Bay?” she demanded.

“That was because I was craving squid. Is that what you want, though? We could go out fishing on a boat right now.”

“Ah, sorry. It’s really the beach I want to visit...”

“As I thought.” Ichiro glanced back at the TV screen. The beach story had finished, and now they were doing a variety segment about the best places to eat in the city.

Despite having just had breakfast a little while ago, Sakurako Ogi still watched, and occasionally murmured things like “That looks so nice...” in enraptured tones. Ichiro, as a light eater, found this very difficult to understand.

“Sakurako-san, don’t you have to wash the dishes?” he asked.

“I already did,” she said. “I also finished the cleaning, the laundry, and all the morning housework.”

“I see... You’ve been working quickly, of late.” He knew why she was so enthusiastic to finish up her work. She wanted to log into the VRMMO RPG *Narrow Fantasy Online* as quickly as possible. Sakurako had always been a relatively heavy user, and having Ichiro playing the game now had only encouraged that tendency. Still, the fact that she did not rush to log in sooner was because of her pride in her work.

The fact that she played his servant both in the real world and the game world suggested severe workaholic tendencies — but as they say, if you can do what you love for a living, you’ve got it made.

“Well, I don’t wish to keep you waiting for too long. Shall we log in?” Ichiro handed her his empty teacup. Sakurako bowed to him reverently, then returned the cup to the kitchen. Ichiro remained where he was, neatly gathering up the newspapers and the tablet into a pile.

Cleaning this up was part of Sakurako’s job, too, and despite appearances, she took a bit of excessive pride in her work. He would only ever dream of appropriating that work when he was feeling a little bit mean.

“Forgive the wait,” she said, returning.

Of course, she had returned so quickly that he hadn’t waited at all, but Sakurako Ogi never lapsed in her decorum. Their long acquaintance had taught him that he could count on her in that regard.

The commercial-grade Miraive Gear Cocoons that they used to play their VR game were in one of the residence’s many empty rooms. He had also bought 2D fighting game cabinets and UFO catchers to go with them, making the room look a bit like a miniature arcade. They were mainly there for decoration, so Ichiro didn’t use them very often, but Sakurako seemed to enjoy them quite a lot.

On their way to the game room, Sakurako never once walked side-by-side with Ichiro. She remained slightly behind him, a small notebook in hand, and read from it as they walked. “Now, as for your schedule for tomorrow, Ichiro-sama...”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “There’s Thistle in the morning. I’ll be having a business lunch there, so you’re free to do what you wish with the afternoon.”

“Will you be back by evening?” she asked.

“Most likely,” he responded. “I’ll call you before I return, and you won’t have to prepare dinner until I’m back.”

He didn’t turn back, but he could tell that Sakurako was smiling. “Very well, Ichiro-sama.”

He had never gone out of his way to be a good master to her. But to someone like him, whose relationships with people so often chilled abruptly, the master-servant relationship they had cultivated had lasted for quite a long time.

“Has it already been five years?” Sakurako mused, as if reading his mind.

“Already five years, yes,” he said.

“It’s allowed me to grow so accustomed to your eccentricities. It’s only when I see Iris and Asuha’s reactions to you that I remember how strange you really are.”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said.

Sakurako's decorum as a servant was usually extremely proper, but she had a tendency to be a little overly blunt.

"The visit by Miss Nem the other day was yet another thing you started, wasn't it?" she asked.

"I can't say I approve of your referring to that incident as 'yet another thing,' and it was her own decision to tear into Iris. Though I won't deny that an objective analysis would indicate me as the initial cause of it."

"Oh, yes sir," she said. "It's just that when we talk about such incidents, we usually say 'yet another thing Ichiro-sama started' in order to save time."

He couldn't help but notice that her tone was one of someone trying to soothe a hurt child.

Nem was the avatar name of a player who had appeared in *NaroFan* the other day. Her real name was Megumi Fuyo. She was the daughter of the head of Tsunobeni, Co., one of the three largest trading companies in Japan. She was also the president of the new apparel brand "MiZUNO," which had become quite a hit with young people. As for why she had chosen to conceal her identity to join the game and insult Iris, a member of Ichiro's guild, Iris Brand... that was a much longer story.

"Well, what I mean to say..." Sakurako began.

"I see you trying to move on to the summary, Sakurako-san."

"Because we'll be reaching the game room very soon," she said. "So, what I mean to say is, you're simply too eccentric for naive girls like Asuha to understand. If you don't feel the same way they do, you must refuse them in good faith."

"I can't help but feel like you're making terribly rude assumptions about me," he said.

As they approached the room, Sakurako, who had previously been walking slowly behind him, suddenly slid out in front of him to open the door. She then stood in front of the opened door and remained bowing solemnly until Ichiro entered.

“Megumi has made such overtures many times before, but I have always been plain with her about how I feel,” Ichiro said as he sat down in his cocoon seat, and Sakurako took the seat next to it.

“In what way?” she asked.

“I called them ‘nonsense.’”

“That isn’t good faith at all...”

# 1 - Noble Son, Entrust

“Achoo!” she sneezed.

Nem wondered for a moment if perhaps she’d caught a cold. But then she remembered that she was in a purely fictional realm made up of quantum information. If she was sneezing, it couldn’t be from a cold. She covered her mouth in a moment of delayed embarrassment.

“Someone must be talking about you,” the man sitting in front of her said, gazing at the ceiling.

He was tall, with pointed ears. At a glance, one might call him a very handsome man. But that sticky-sounding voice of his, a perfect match for the dank limestone cavern around them, made it hard to think of him in that way.

“Surely you don’t believe that old cliché...” she said.

“No, no. In the game, you see, when the AI determines that a certain account is being discussed, it forces the avatar to sneeze.”

“Th-They really programmed that into it?” she asked.

“Isn’t that fun? *NaroFan*’s balance is pure ass, but they put a lot of effort into pointless things like that. I love it, personally.” The man rolled the words out leisurely, but Nem had no idea what he was talking about.

The game’s designer, planner, and general manager of the design team, president Azami Nono, was a friend of Nem’s alter ego, Megumi Fuyo. Sometimes, when they were talking about her game, she’d boast about all the little silly things she’d programmed in based on old superstitions, like “whenever you sigh, your luck stat goes down.”

Nem’s only experience with computer games had been the Tamagotchis she’d obsessed over as a child. (When a friend she’d worked so hard to raise had died, she’d gone crying to her father about it.) But every time they talked about things like that, she wondered if such design was necessary to make the game fun.

“Now, Miss Nem, was it?” The man leaned back in his seat, as if to proceed to the main subject. “Our guild house’s location isn’t available to the public... I wonder if you have a connection to the developer.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But I was told that you were the most knowledgeable player in the game, Mr. Matsunaga...”

“Ah, no need to apologize. That is true, after all.” The man smiled and spoke in a way that made it hard to tell if he was serious or joking.

The information-gathering guild, the Dual Serpents, was one of *NaroFan*’s three great guilds. Matsunaga the Elf Scout was their leader. Matsunaga ran a *NaroFan* general information site that collected strategies and internet gossip about the game, and Azami Nono herself had told her that his ability to extract information out of the game astonished even the developers.

“Now, let me see,” Matsunaga began, smoothly, before Nem could even think of how to broach the subject. “I know that you started a quarrel with Mr. Tsuwabuki’s guild... Now, don’t act so startled. You see, even if I don’t do anything, I always seem to end up with information about him. My information network is always active around him lately.”

“From what I’ve heard,” he continued, “you bear no grudge against Mr. Tsuwabuki. So I’m very curious as to what you came all this way to ask me.”

“Yes, well...” Nem’s eyes wandered to the eerie green torchlight within the damp cave. The creepy, dungeon-like atmosphere of the place seemed to be draining all of her initiative away.

She couldn’t let things go on like this. Nem took in a deep breath, calming herself and regaining her presence of mind. It didn’t matter where she was, or who she was dealing with. This was basically a business deal. She was the president of a new business herself, and the daughter of Eikei Fuyo, demon of the economic world. This wasn’t her first time dealing with a crafty old veteran.

“I wish to prove that my taste is not incorrect,” she said.

“Ah... hmm.”

Nem had thought she was expressing herself clearly, but Matsunaga’s response was a listless one. She didn’t appreciate that.

Nem was a fashion designer in the real world. You couldn't get by in her world without good taste, and she took great pride in hers.

Yet, a few days ago, something had happened to shake that pride.

"You have a lot of time on your hands, don't you?" Matsunaga asked.

"My time is valuable, and this matter is important enough to me that I have chosen to allot some of that time to it," Nem retorted, unfazed by the needling in Matsunaga's tone.

She wasn't sure just how much he knew about her, but partly in the interest of sorting out her own feelings, Nem decided to explain the circumstances.

Nem's real name was Megumi Fuyo. Her father, Eikei, was the president of Tsunobeni, Co., one of Japan's biggest trading companies. She was friends with Azami Nono, the creator of *Narrow Fantasy Online* and president of the company that ran it, Thistle Corporation. Since she herself was unaccustomed to online games, Azami had provided her with a number of accommodations and advantages.

Nem had begun playing for one reason.

It was only one reason, but it was difficult to explain in so many words.

First, there was the matter of Ichiro Tsuwabuki. They knew each other through their parents' businesses, and they had grown quite close by way of that. When she had been struggling, torn between her position as sole daughter of a large trading company and her dream of becoming an apparel designer, he was the one who had given her advice and spurred her onward. Though he might not have actually remembered that now...

Ichiro was a strange person, in many respects. Even Megumi, whose father had concerns about her naivety, was aware of that much.

It was clear that he had excellent aesthetic sense, and yet he showed no interest in things that most people considered "good." That was why, no matter many "good" things Megumi made, his evaluation was always, "I suppose it is good, from an objective point of view," but he never offered his own opinion about them. For a time, she had just given up, deciding that that was just the kind of person he was.

What had re-lit her passion as a designer was an incident that had taken place just a few days before, at a ceremony she had held for her new boutique.

Ichiro had come, proudly displaying a rather clumsy silverwork butterfly on his chest. The material had looked like real silver, but the design had been utterly lacking in subtlety. In fact, it had been quite cheap-looking.

Ichiro was eccentric. And of course, he had never shown interest in things that most people considered “good.” Even so, he had never once worn an accessory that would invoke the words “tasteless” or “childish.” Even from the perspective of what “most people considered good,” his aesthetic sense was on point. He had good taste.

That was all the more reason she had been so shocked when he had appeared wearing the aforementioned brooch.

It was both tasteless and childish. It looked like the work of a designer who lacked the experience required even to be called a novice. Megumi simply couldn’t understand. Why would he wear something like that? But she knew that if she asked him, his reply would just be, “Nonsense.” So naturally, her curiosity had shifted to the brooch’s maker.

Iris.

It was only by chance that she’d happened to learn that this was a person he knew in a game, not in the real world. She didn’t know this person’s age, or whether they were really a male or a female. She had a lot of questions, but she knew it would be rude to interrogate him about it any further.

She had wanted to meet this person who could make designs that Ichiro Tsuwabuki liked, just once. So she’d made a rather unreasonable request of her friend, and had started playing the game.

“If you don’t mind my asking...” Matsunaga had watched, with vague annoyance, as Nem told her story. “...what exactly do you like about Mr. Tsuwabuki?”

“Ah?”

“Well, I can understand his being generally popular with the ladies,” Matsunaga said. “He’s handsome, wealthy, powerful, and smart...”

“Ichiro’s true qualities are not so superficial,” Nem said stiffly.

“But his *personality*... ah, never mind! Anything else I say will just sound like the jealousy of the perpetually rejected. Now, let me see...” Matsunaga waved his hand as if to wipe away the question. “Anyway, here’s what it comes down to: Iris’s designs are bad, and you can’t stand it. Right? Yes, yes. So, let me see, hmm... You want to prove that your taste is correct. In other words, you want to show her up.”

Matsunaga spoke the words in a rush, as if to make her forget the earlier subject. Even so, his next statement hit the bullseye.

“You basically want to put a scare into Iris, right?”

“Yes... yes, that’s right...”

“I see.”

Matsunaga sounded understanding, but Nem found that it sounded surprisingly frivolous when put into words like that.

“I see. I like it,” the man before her said, with a nasty smile unsuited to his elegant features. “Well, I’ll have to have a chat with my allies before I decide whether the Dual Serpents will assist you. We do love our drama. I can’t guarantee that we’ll aid you, but still, I rather like the proposal.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that?” Nem stammered.

“You want to get her back, right? You can’t accept it, right? You can’t stand that a man who won’t acknowledge you acknowledges a girl who isn’t actually any better than you. I like it.” Matsunaga grinned. It felt like he could see right into her heart, and she didn’t like the feeling one bit.



“An inferiority complex is a precious thing. Oh, I beg your pardon. First, Ms. Nem. Don’t you have a job? I’m sure you can’t stay here forever.”

“Y-Yes...” she said. “If you don’t mind, one more ten-minute meeting, perhaps...”

“Very well,” he said. “I don’t mind. If you come tomorrow at the same time, I can introduce you to some people who will help you. How you use them will be up to you.”

A stark change from his bored attitude earlier, Matsunaga had suddenly become very cooperative. Nem wasn’t sure whether that was something to be happy about or not. Seeing Matsunaga suddenly so full of enthusiasm was, quite frankly, causing her skin to crawl. But to express that openly would be very rude. She should just be grateful that he had understood her intentions and had offered to help.

“Mr. Matsunaga, we still haven’t discussed your compensation for helping me...” she began.

“Oh, I don’t need compensation,” he said. “I’ll help you because it’s fun. If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t. Although, actually... if you do insist on repayment, I’d like you to design some new outfits for our Shinobis.”

Matsunaga stood up as he spoke. Nem thought she saw some movement behind him, but she couldn’t identify any more than that. Her current perception stat wouldn’t allow her to detect the Shinobi Army when they had their obfuscation Skills activated.

Instead, Matsunaga’s words caused her to remember a certain phrase. They were words Ichiro had said to Nem when they first met in the game a few days before.

“This game is quite fun.”

Nem had understood what the words meant, of course, but not what he had meant by them.

And so she rephrased those words to this man, in the form of a question. “Mr. Matsunaga, is this game fun?”

This was the man's answer:

"There's no such thing as a game that isn't fun. There are just people who aren't fun to deal with."

"You don't look like you're having any fun," Iris said as she gazed at Felicia, who was resting her chin in her hands on the table, sulkily.

Ichiro, on the other hand, was enjoying the tea that Kirschwasser had made with his usual gusto.

He cast a glance over at Felicia, then said, "It's nothing to be concerned about. She's always like this when Chunichi loses."

"Chunichi?" Iris asked.

"The Chunichi Dragons!" Felicia shouted as she struck the table with both fists.

"Ahh, you're a fan... Are you in the baseball club at school, Felicia?" Iris asked.

"I'm in the softball club! Darn it! What *was* that match yesterday, Iris?!" Felicia exclaimed.

"What? Me?!"

Felicia's nostrils flared as she went on to rant about the narrow defeat over Nagoya's proud dragon army, and the coaching of their manager (who was apparently neither Hoshino nor Ochiai). Of course, Iris could only unravel about half of what she was saying.

The past few days, Felicia had been stopping by the Iris Brand guild house nearly every day. Iris had assumed she was coming to see her second cousin Ichiro Tsuwabuki, for whom she seemed to have a great deal of affection. This, incidentally, was something that Iris could not understand in the least, but it would be impolite to speak ill about another's taste, so she never told her this.

"I've heard she's their ace pitcher," the silver-haired Knight, Sir Kirschwasser, said as he brought them tea.

Naturally, he was referring to Felicia. Iris recalled having heard that she was in middle school.

“Is that true? That’s amazing,” Iris said. Although she was aiming to become an apparel designer in the future, Iris had never shown any particular propensity for anything, herself. She genuinely found it impressive to hear about someone having the talent to be called an ace in a middle school club.

Iris’s show of genuine surprise seemed to improve the simple-minded girl’s mood a little.

“Heh heh heh, it’s nothing, really!” Felicia giggled.

Correction — it seemed to improve her mood a lot.

“We didn’t make it to the prefectural tournament this year, but we’re working hard for next time! I’m training with my coach right now to develop my miracle pitch,” she said proudly.

“O-Oh, really? A miracle pitch, huh?” Iris didn’t know much about baseball (though softball was the sport Felicia played) so she didn’t really know if a “miracle pitch” was something that could be achieved in reality. Even so, she nodded at all the polite places in the conversation.

“But is it all right for you to be playing a game, then?” she asked.

“I was told to use the sensations in the game as a way to visualize a sure-kill miracle pitch,” Felicia said.

“Sure-kill?” Iris asked. “You’re going to kill them?”

“Well, getting struck out is basically like dying, so sensation-wise, maybe I am.”

“Hmm...” Iris had her drawing tool application open, idly working on some designs with a cup of Kirschwasser’s tea in the other hand. She glared at her work. She had been working on armor designs, but none of them seemed to be coming together.

“Felicia, what do you think of this one?” she asked.

“Let me see!” Felicia cried.

Iris wanted Felicia’s opinion, since she was likely the one closest to her own age. Felicia got behind Iris and glanced over her shoulder at the line of image files in the drawing tool.

Iris made a change in “Settings” to “grant control to other users,” which allowed Felicia to touch the holographic panel with her fingertip and scroll through freely. Iris was on pins and needles as she waited for the reaction. After a while, Felicia offered her opinion.

“Ah, hmm, umm... not bad...”

In other word, not good.

“I see... So I need more training, huh?” Iris let out a big sigh as she closed the drawing tool. Her luck points declined.

“I like your sense of style, personally.” Ichiro, who had previously been browsing the internet in silence, shot that off casually.

Iris narrowed her eyes and glared at the young heir. “Having you be the only person who likes them doesn’t make me happy. Well, it did make me happy, but I can’t let myself be satisfied with that. Understand?”

“Of course, I understand that, based on what you are seeking, the approval of the public at large would be more important than my own,” he said. “I find it praiseworthy that you are not satisfied with my approval alone, but voraciously seek even greater heights.”

His usual roundabout way of saying things caused Iris and Felicia to lean in close, pressing their heads together. Their red and white hair brought out a truly striking contrast.

“That’s a compliment, right?” Iris stage-whispered.

“I think so,” Felicia replied. “Itchy can never be straightforward.”

“I hear you,” Iris agreed. “He’s straightforward about what he wants to do. He just gets there in a twisted way.”

“Though you’re not very straightforward, either, from what I can see, Iris...”

It was uncertain if Ichiro could hear what they were saying — of course, his intelligence and perception stats made it unlikely that he couldn’t — but his expression remained cheerful, regardless.

“But what shall we do next?” Kirschwasser asked, standing at attention behind Ichiro.

“What do you mean? Do we have to do something?” Iris asked.

“We do not have to, but...” A wince appeared on Kirschwasser’s face. “In the few days since you returned to *NaroFan*, we have been sitting around in the guild house, yet we have had roughly three customers each day, all of whom have done nothing but come and gawk.”

“Ugh...” Iris groaned, interpreting this as a knock at her talent.

Iris Brand was a crafting guild, with Ichiro as guild leader and Iris and Kirschwasser as members. The series of incidents surrounding Ichiro and Iris’s chance meeting had propelled them to immediate fame, but the skill of their lone crafting player, Iris, couldn’t keep up, and the spike of interest had quickly died off.

As a crafting guild, they should be producing and selling items. And since they were in a game, the main thing a player needed to produce items was the relevant numerical stat. Iris’s level in the relevant Skill, Create Armor, wasn’t especially high, and the items she created with it weren’t exactly stunning. Put more bluntly, they were crap.

Most people typically never even thought to pursue original armor designs because of the microtransaction cost that came with them. But at Iris Brand, the young heir Ichiro Tsuwabuki could use the brute force power of his pocketbook to mass-produce new designs. From start to finish, the crafting guild Iris Brand’s appeal was rooted in gimmick play. Thus, it wasn’t going to get much attention from the general class of players, who were mostly interested in leveling up and furthering the game’s plot.

Instead, the type of customer that Iris Brand was aiming for was those who obsessed over their avatars’ appearance, prioritized roleplaying, and otherwise fit the description of “actors.” But the mediocrity of Iris’s designs meant that she was failing to attract those sorts of players, as well. The result was a constant feeling of embarrassment, from Iris, about her own lack of ability.

“Thus,” Kirschwasser continued, “I was wondering if we might leave Glasgobara and go off somewhere else for once.”

“Somewhere else?” Iris asked.

“You mean, to level up?” Felicia added.

*NaroFan* was an MMORPG, after all, so that was, of course, the standard method of enjoyment. Raise your level, become stronger, and challenge tougher enemies. But while Kirschwasser was a gamer, he was also an adult. He had not seemed like the type of person who would attempt to force that method of enjoyment upon others.

“What about a trip to the beach?” the old Knight asked after clearing his throat.

“The beach?” Iris echoed.

“Sir Kirschwasser, I see you haven’t yet given up,” Ichiro commented.

“Why not? You won’t take me IRL, after all.” It was rare to see the elderly Knight pout so. “By ‘beach,’ I mean the Manyfish Beach they opened for summer vacation. It’s on the eastern side of Starter Town. There are no dangerous monsters there, as long as you stay on the shore. It’s just there for players to enjoy themselves.”

“Ohh...” Iris mused, staring up at the ceiling. If there were no monsters, then maybe she could rest easy. “The beach, huh? I’m not sure if I’ll get to go to one this year, so it might be fun to go in the game.”

“And it seems the area’s release has unlocked exclusive swimsuit ‘equipment,’” the Knight added.

“Oh, I saw some in the Forging Guild’s guild house,” Iris said. “There must already be recipes for them, right?”

The crafting guilds of Glasgobara Merchant Town, with their open-air stalls, had recently started selling flimsy pieces of clothing that did not seem like they would offer much in the way of defensive abilities. Iris had thought it was appropriate to have swimsuits, given that it was summer, but she hadn’t realized they were associated with a specific area. The sight of someone standing there in flimsy fabric in a world of bulky armor made of metal, ore, leather, and scales would be an especially striking sight.

“Hey, Iris. Design swimsuits!” Felicia cried, leaning over Iris’s shoulder.

“But we were just talking about how my designs weren’t very good...”

“Huh? We were?” Felicia said, confused by Iris’s lack of enthusiasm.

“Indeed, I never said such a thing,” Sir Kirschwasser agreed.

“Yes, nobody ever said that,” Ichiro added.

“Oh, yeah! I just misunderstood and started to get depressed in my own head, didn’t I?” Iris asked.

Kirschwasser and Ichiro’s agreement caused Iris to bite her lip and strike the table with her fist. It was true that no one had said that.

“Well, Iris, I’d like a flower pattern!” Felicia cried. “Something kind of mature!”

“F-Fine! I’ll handle it!” Iris said.

The word “impulsive” did exist in Iris’s mental dictionary — in fact, the entry took up about thirty pages. It was certainly a very encouraging prospect, given her doubts about her abilities minutes ago.

“What about you, young heir?” she added. “Do you want a swimsuit?”

“I have a bit of personal business to attend to tomorrow, so I won’t be accompanying you.”

“Oh, I see. Is it possible you can’t swim?” Iris was attempting to needle him a bit, but he wasn’t fazed.

“Nonsense. When we assemble at Great-Grandfather’s house for New Year’s, it’s customary for us to have swimming races in Kagoshima Bay.”

“That’s just Cousin Mazza trying to start a rivalry with you...” Felicia murmured.

Iris didn’t understand what “long-range swimming in Kagoshima Bay on New Year’s” meant, but Felicia had supported it, which meant it must have had some element of truth to it. And from the way Ichiro talked, even in swimming capability, he was the one perceived as a rival by others.

“Hey, Iris, did you know?” Felicia asked. “Itchy is friends with the dolphins of Sakurajima.”

“I don’t know how to respond something that fantastic...” Thinking idly that the dolphins also needed better taste in friends, Iris turned her gaze to the other man in the room. “Mr. Kirsch? Do you want a swimsuit?”

“I’ll pass, as well.”

“Oh? Will you be accompanying the young heir tomorrow?” she asked.

“Well...” Sir Kirschwasser said.

Felicia tensed up nervously.

The silver-haired Knight shook his head. “The only swimsuits available for a male avatar are trunks or briefs.”

“Huh?” Iris couldn’t understand why that would make Kirschwasser so unhappy. Did he have some kind of problem with trunks and briefs? Was he the kind of person who wore one-piece suits in private?

Ichiro was acting as usual, and Felicia scowled with a nod of understanding, so it was clearly something that made sense if you knew him in real life.

“If you’re going to the beach tomorrow, Sir Kirschwasser, please take care of the two of them,” Ichiro said, cutting off Iris’s attempt to pursue the matter further.

“Huh? You’re really not coming, Itchy?” Felicia asked.

“I did say that I had other business to attend to,” Ichiro said lightly, closing the game’s proprietary browser. “Well, it appears that’s that. Take care of them both, Sir Kirschwasser.”

“Yes, Master Ichiro. I shall do as you ask.” The Knight bowed reverently in response to the young heir’s words. It was an extremely smooth movement, as if he was used to interacting this way all the time.

Iris knew that Ichiro was a wealthy man, and that Kirschwasser acted as his servant in real life, but it was hard to imagine what their relationship in the real world could really be like.

“Hey, Felicia,” Iris said. “Are the young heir and Mr. Kirsch...”

“Y-Yeah?” Felicia jumped slightly as Iris brought up the subject.

“I mean, they seem so at home together,” Iris fumbled. “It’s like they really are master and servant. I mean, he said they really are, but... it’s just so hard to imagine there are still butlers in modern-day Japan.”

Felicia repeated the word “butlers” under her breath, with a troubled expression.

But in the end, “Y-Yeah, right!” was her only response.

As she spoke, Felicia looked towards Ichiro, who was exchanging light banter with Kirschwasser, her gaze full of complicated envy. Perhaps Felicia, who so loved her second cousin Itchy, was jealous of the close trust the two shared.

That was understandable enough; Ichiro and Kirschwasser’s relationship was perfect. Whenever Ichiro went on one of his incomprehensibly circuitous rants, Kirschwasser was always there to explain it in brief, easy-to-understand terms. When Ichiro seemed to prepare to take action for something, Kirschwasser could anticipate it and make preparations in advance.

And then, surprisingly, the reverse was also true. In his own way, Ichiro always seemed to understand Kirschwasser’s intentions without the need to say them. They were completely in sync.

Iris had quite a few close friends, but right now she was somewhat estranged from them, so that sort of intimate trust was something she was genuinely envious of.

“Is something the matter?” At some point, Kirschwasser had made a new pot of tea, and was approaching them with it. Perhaps noticing their gazes fixed on him, he asked the question with his usual gentleness.

Iris held out her empty teacup and responded, “Oh, nothing...”

But even so...

“It’s nothing, but I am a little curious about your relationship with the young heir.”

“Oho?” The man’s eyes narrowed, like a bird of prey.

“What made you decide to work for the young heir, Mr. Kirsch?” she asked.

“He pays well.”

“Oh, I... I see. That’s a very realistic reason...”

Kirschwasser’s expression immediately softened again, and he poured another cup from the pot.

Iris had heard that the Knight was excellent at brewing tea even in the real world, and in the game, he had taken the Skill “Tea Ceremony,” despite it having no direct combat application whatsoever. It was the ability to take herbs and poison grass-type plants, boil them, and create drinkable items. These drinks offered numerous medicinal effects, and they were fairly practical. But like “Cooking,” it was a popular flavor skill for various other reasons, allowing players to enjoy the sense of taste specific to Drive VRMMOs, or to enhance the feeling of roleplaying their avatar.

“Of course, the work environment is good, as well. And he pays my living expenses,” Kirschwasser added, as Iris’s thoughts were sent wandering by the tea’s aroma.

“But there was an incident that prompted it, wasn’t there?” she asked.

“If you would categorize Master Ichiro saving my life as an incident, then yes.”

“I can’t tell if you’re roleplaying or serious...”

Kirschwasser’s only answer to that was a short laugh. Ichiro showed no sign of denying it, but he also wasn’t the type to aggressively work to mitigate misunderstandings, so his attitude didn’t actually suggest anything either way.

“Well, either way, I think a servant like you is wasted on the young heir...” Iris said.

“Nonsense, nonsense,” Ichiro said. “I have my own value, and so does Sir. You could hardly compare us as apples to apples.”

As usual, it was a high-handed way of putting things, but the fact that he didn’t try to suggest that Kirschwasser had comparatively less value suggested that he liked the man quite a bit.

Felicia, watching, scowled in slight displeasure. Jealousy, perhaps? It was the young heir, after all, and she had previously flared up at Iris over a misunderstanding about her relationship with him, too.

“Speaking of which...” Iris began, remembering something.

Iris had been trying as hard as she could not to make enemies while playing *NaroFan* (though she knew that there were people who would always try to stir up drama online regardless), yet she had been the target of malice three times that she was aware of. At least two of them, including the Felicia incident, were the result of the man sitting in the chair, cheerfully sipping tea in front of her.

“Is something the matter?” Ichiro asked.

“No, um... That Nem person who visited the guild house recently...” Iris said.

That was the third person who had acted maliciously towards Iris in the game. The first (Felicia) and the second (Edward) had both been settled, but this had happened so recently that there seemed little hope of resolving it right away.

Like Iris, the woman seemed to be an Elf Alchemist, and also, like Iris, she wore equipment skinned with original graphics. But Nem’s design sense had been transcendent, in a way that had taken Iris’s breath away at first glance. It was like the difference between a puddle and a cloud. But before she could even process the feelings of frustration that inspired, Nem had said those next words:

“It’s nothing.”

Iris had needed a few moments to even realize that shade had been thrown. The woman had said those words while looking at the equipment designs that decorated the Iris Brand guild house. In other words, she’d been mocking the armor that Iris had designed.

Of course, Iris had to admit it. Her designs *were* childish and unrefined. That wasn’t something she could deny. She had to resign herself to that. Still, the nerve of that woman, barging into someone’s guild house and saying that to someone she’d only just met...

“Look, young heir, I’m just curious,” Iris said. “Is she someone you’ve met before?”

“I’d like to leave it to your imagination, but why do you ask?”

“I’ve had three people pick fights with me in the game so far, and if Nem is

involved with you, that means every one of them has been your fault," Iris said.

"I see." Ichiro gave his usual breezy smile and laid his teacup on the table. "If you are seeking an apology, then I apologize."

"So you know her! You do know her!"

"And if I may speculate, the reason she picked a fight with you is also likely because of me."

"That's three for three! Three for three!"

Ichiro didn't seem the slightest bit abashed about it, either. Iris pounded the table to express her irritation.

"H-How does he know her?" Felicia asked, timidly.

Kirschwasser shrugged. "I'm not sure it's my place to say..."

"Hmph. Well, fine," Iris continued, and for some reason, reclined cockily as she did. "Even if she was picking a fight over you, I'm not the kind of person to just sit idly by while someone insults my designs. I'm going to teach her a lesson."

"Hmm, good. Terribly sorry, though," Ichiro said. Though technically an apology, the words didn't sound like he meant them at all.

"Of course, I have to teach you a lesson, too," Iris said. "I have to make you acknowledge my talent..."

Iris was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up. She had known it would be a rough road ahead, so she wouldn't be discouraged that easily. What she was designing in the game was armor rather than fashion. Still, she wasn't going to sit back and let someone criticize her taste in outerwear.

Whenever Iris got riled up like this, for some reason, it seemed to bring the young heir Ichiro Tsuwabuki immense satisfaction. This made Iris feel vaguely like she was being studied, or perhaps, manipulated. Either way, she didn't like it at all. Still...

"Anyway, swimsuits! For me and Felicia!" she cried.

“Oh, yeah. But you don’t have to get so excited about it...” For some reason, Felicia’s expression had grown slightly anxious.

“Sir Kirschwasser,” Ichiro said.

“Yes? How can I help you, Master Ichiro?”

“As I said, I won’t be logging in tomorrow...”

“Yes?”

“...but if Nem interferes with Iris in any unpleasant way, I’ll be counting on you.”

“Hmm...”

“What is it?” Ichiro asked.

“Nothing, Master Ichiro.”

“I see.”

“Is it possible,” Sir Kirschwasser proposed, “that you are worried about Iris?”

“Nonsense.”

# 2 - Noble Son, Embark

It was morning.

For Sakurako Ogi, mornings were a time of battle.

How swiftly and smoothly could she clear out the hordes of chores that stood before her? That was the battle.

She was a lover of tokusatsu heroes, robot anime, and shonen manga. Thinking of herself as the protagonist, and the countless tasks ahead as her swarm of enemies, caused her heart to soar. For a maid, housework was a battlefield.

“Cooking complete!” She stood alone in the kitchen and raised a fist in the manner of a true fighter.

She was going the extra mile and making Japanese food this morning. Most of Sakurako’s own favorite foods were the oily and spicy stuff that let her explore her Southeast Asian roots. But as a servant, she had to match her master’s palate.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki, as a rule, was a light eater, and preferred healthy food. He wasn’t especially picky, so he would go along with her if she prepared curry every day, even for a whole month. Once, she had decided to test how long Ichiro would eat Indian curry before he complained.

Ichiro had never complained, but one morning, he had abruptly greeted her with “Namaste.” That had convinced her to put an end to the curry marathon.

But all that aside, attempting to identify his unspoken cravings was a way for her to test her skills as a maid. Sometimes she got it wrong, and sometimes she just couldn’t resist doing curry either way.

This morning, Sakurako had deduced that Ichiro would want Japanese food.

A very small amount of rice in a bowl, lightly-flavored soup, and salt-grilled butterfish for the main dish. She’d also provided smaller dishes of aemono and

tamagoyaki. Sakurako had come from a middle-class upbringing, but having worked here for five years now, she had grown accustomed to preparing high-class meals.

“Morning, Sakurako-san.” The cool and breezy tone of voice presaged her master Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s appearance in the living room. His hair, a delicate platinum blond, was just a little bit moist. He must have taken his usual swim in the apartment’s indoor pool this morning.

“Good morning, Ichiro-sama.” Sakurako lined the dishes up on the table, turned her entire body to face him, and bowed reverently.

Ichiro looked at the dishes and murmured, “Japanese food today...”

She picked up on the slight note of pleasure hidden behind his indifferent-sounding words and struck an internal victory pose.

She watched Ichiro’s movements quietly as he approached the table. “Well, Sakurako-san, will you join me?”

“Yes, sir! As you wish!” Sakurako nodded happily, and sat down across from him at the small living room table.

“Good job finding butterfish,” he commented.

“I asked the fishmonger in the shopping district about it,” she said excitedly. “You usually start craving grilled fish around this time of year. And butterfish is best for summer!”

“Aha.” Ichiro’s response was rather understated. He didn’t like letting his emotions show through, if he could help it. But she could hardly be his servant if she let that bother her. She hadn’t known him five years for nothing.

“You’re going to Thistle today, right?” she asked.

“Yes, Thistle.”

“If you hear any juicy behind-the-scenes gossip, let me know, okay?” she asked eagerly.

Sakurako was also a game otaku, so although she knew she shouldn’t stick her nose into her master’s business too much, she was very curious about Ichiro’s visit to *NaroFan*’s mother company, the Thistle Corporation.

Sakurako wasn't entirely sure what circumstances had led Thistle to invite Ichiro to visit them in the first place. She had heard that he had been introduced to Thistle's young president (shockingly, younger than Sakurako herself) when he had gone to Megumi Fuyo's party the other day.

Of course, Ichiro was a beyond-rich-and-famous celebrity, both as an heir to a corporation large enough to silence a crying day trader and as a considerably talented person in his own right. It was easy to see why the president of a startup like Thistle would want to network with him.

Not to mention the fact that he threw tons of money to the developers via microtransactions, which made him a premiere customer of the service.

"We'll see," Ichiro said, tearing the butterfish apart dexterously with his chopsticks. "I still don't know what President Azami might want to talk to me about. It's a field in which I have technical interest, so as long as her intentions are not utterly foolish, I expect to enjoy myself. I hope that the rest of you will enjoy your time at the beach, as well, Sakurako-san."

"Even though it's just in a game!" Sakurako protested. It was a real-life beach that Sakurako had wanted to visit; she couldn't even wear a swimsuit in the game.

"If your avatar is a man, can't you wear a man's swimsuit?" Ichiro asked, accurately surmising the motive behind her objection.

"It would expose my chest," Sakurako whispered gravely, grabbing some breast meat from the stewed chicken soup.

Sakurako enjoyed cosplaying and roleplaying as the elder Knight, but that didn't mean she felt like the old man mentally. Even if it would just look like Sir Kirschwasser's chest to everyone else, she couldn't walk around feeling like her breasts were on display.

Sakurako Ogi was an innocent maiden. Even though she was pushing thirty, she was still an innocent maiden.

"Well, looking at Iris's swimsuit designs should be enough feast for the eyes..." she muttered.

"Hmm, good," Ichiro said.

“Is it okay?” Sakurako asked. “Do you think she’ll have to fail a lot, first?”

“I’ve heard that swimsuits are low-difficulty items, so she’ll likely be fine,” Ichiro said. “Ahh, but she’ll need a fee for the graphics overlay. Here.”

Despite being in the middle of a meal, Ichiro pulled out one of his many credit cards. Its stylish black design showed just how well he was trusted by financial institutions. It was a different card than the one he usually stuck into the Miraive Gear Cocoon’s card slot when he was playing *NaroFan*, the “business use card” that he lent to her when she went out shopping for the apartment. Ichiro paid the real money funds needed to run Iris Brand, but it seemed he wanted her to use this card to pay while he wasn’t logged in.

Sakurako silently accepted it and bowed.

“If you need potions or anything, you can buy those, too,” he added.

“I would never be like you in that regard, Ichiro-sama,” Sakurako snapped back. “The fun of the game is doing what I can with limited resources. There’s no tension if I can just pay real money to get unlimited recovery items.”

“But it’s not unlimited,” Ichiro said.

“If you spent your full assets on potions, the server would crash. That’s effectively unlimited.”

“I wonder if even fictional worlds are subject to entropy,” he mused.

“Who knows?” Sakurako had only ever heard the word “entropy” in a certain late-night anime series, so she kept her response vague.

Ichiro chose that moment to lay down his chopsticks, then politely thanked her for the food. He had not left a grain of rice, and he had polished off the fish, too. The bones left behind looked like a true work of art. Sakurako couldn’t understand how he could be satisfied with so little rice, but then, he did this every day.

“There’s not much entropy in the way you eat, Ichiro-sama!”

“Your usage is slightly off,” he said. “Do you want to talk about thermodynamics?”

“No, I’m finished! What would you like for after-dinner tea?”

“Roasted green, I think.”

“Yes, sir.”

She didn’t intend to linger at the breakfast table now that her master had finished eating. Sakurako was able to control her eating speed to make sure she always finished at around the same time Ichiro did. She ate almost twice the calories that he did, but she was always careful to make sure she wasn’t eating like a pig.

Sakurako finished her soup, let out a sigh, then stood up to make the tea. “By the way, Ichiro-sama. About the matter we discussed yesterday...”

“You mean Nem trying to interfere with Iris again?”

“Y-Yes. How did you manage to guess that without a single hint?”

“We’ve known each other for a long time,” Ichiro said placidly, then continued. “I believe I know Megumi’s disposition quite well. She’s not an impulsive woman, but she is proud, prone to misconception, and has a rather reckless side to her. There is a chance that she may take her unjustified anger out on Iris. The truth is, I believe Nem is trying to pick a fight with her.”

“Over you, right?” Sakurako asked.

“Well, yes.”

From the fragments of the story Sakurako had heard, the cause of the quarrel was the brooch that Iris had made. Ichiro had had a real-life version crafted by a skilled and famous silversmith, and had worn it to her party. It wasn’t hard to imagine what must have gone through the head of professional apparel designer Megumi Fuyo when she had seen him so proudly flaunting the accessory.

Hearing the story, then, more or less confirmed it: Megumi Fuyo was in love with Ichiro.

The poor girl.

Sakurako didn’t like to speak ill of her master, but she couldn’t imagine Ichiro Tsuwabuki being a proper romantic partner to anyone. She felt the same way about Asuha. She didn’t know why they put themselves through it all... but no,

best not to think about it.

Regardless, that was the incident that had spawned Megumi/Nem's rivalry towards Iris. It was probably bothering Iris very badly, too. If Ichiro could nip it in the bud, then the hostility might die down. But Sakurako's hopes weren't high.

"Anyway, it was as I said yesterday," Ichiro said. "I'm sorry to ask you this, but if Nem tries to do something unreasonable, I want you to keep Iris safe. If I didn't have business today, I would do it myself... Oh, thank you." The last was spoken as he took the tea she offered to him.

"Like the Edward incident the other day?" Sakurako asked.

"The primary difference between this and the Ed incident is that if Iris accepts her challenge, we'll lose the right to interfere," Ichiro said leisurely as he sipped his roasted green tea. "Speaking of Ed, I've always wondered where he got his handle name from."

"I asked him a while back, and it turned out it's from his favorite character in *Cowboy Bebop*," Sakurako said.

"What's that?" he asked.

"You don't know?! Oh, please! I'll lend you the DVD!"

"If I feel like it."

There was only one anime Sakurako had ever successfully gotten Ichiro to watch via an exchange like this in the five years she had worked for him, but setting that aside...

"Returning to the subject at hand," Ichiro said, "the incident with Ed was sparked by my choosing Iris, who prioritized design over numerical ability, to make my armor. So even if Iris had accepted Edward's challenge, there would have been no easy way of comparing the two. But in this case, the comparison would be between each girl's design sense. Ed and Nem have something in common in that they both disagree with my decision, but if Iris wishes to use her own skill to silence Nem, then I won't interfere."

"But at Iris's skill level, she's probably going to lose, right?" Sakurako asked.

“That’s right. She has no design sense at all.” Ichiro’s words were harsh, but his expression was a joyful one. “If she accepts the challenge regardless, we should respect her feelings.”

Sakurako thought his expression made him look a lot like an archvillain. He always looked like he was really enjoying himself when he talked about Iris’s lack of talent. She had to say, she found it in extremely bad taste.

Then again, even if Iris accepted Nem’s challenge, things wouldn’t necessarily be straightforward. Nem’s designs were acknowledged by the world at large, but Iris’s designs were the ones that Ichiro liked. Nem wanted the latter, while Iris wanted the former. As long as that was true, it would be hard to say what “victory” would look like for either of them. At the least, Iris certainly wouldn’t be happy to have it decided based on Ichiro’s opinion.

“Dear, dear...” Sakurako let out a small sigh. “I understand what you’re saying, Ichiro-sama. As Sakurako Ogi, and as the elder Knight Kirschwasser, I shall follow your instructions to the best of my ability.”

“Hmm, good,” Ichiro said. “You’re quite dedicated, aren’t you?”

“It is my job, after all.”

“But you’re enjoying it, yes?”

“You could tell?” she asked. Though it was partly roleplaying, she did enjoy following her master’s orders.

Sakurako wondered if the great retainers of history had felt the same way. It was truly an ideal job. The pay was good, she had a place to live, and she had three meals a day.

“Leave it to me,” she assured him. “I am your loyal retainer, after all. Will you be departing shortly?”

“No, I’d like to spend some quiet time on the sofa after my meal, as usual,” said Ichiro.

“Yes, sir. Shall I drive you?” she asked.

“I’ll drive myself today.”

“Yes, sir.”

They closed the conversation there. Ichiro sat down on the sofa in front of his wide-screen LCD and started reading through the newspapers Sakurako had set out in advance.

Sakurako, for her part, quickly tidied up after breakfast, prepared some black tea, then set out the key for the Koenigsegg, Ichiro's favorite car. It was a different car from the Lincoln that Sakurako drove. The lustrous metallic blue "Supercar" had a stylish chassis in keeping with Ichiro's taste. Whenever he drove out by himself, it was always in the Koenigsegg.

"I'll see Ichiro-sama off at a little after 9:00, then hurry to finish up the housework... which means I can log in at around 10:00, I suppose..." As she thought things over, Sakurako cleaned the dishes at a speed that would make most people do a double-take, but to write about it in more detail would take more unnecessary space, so, moving on...

"Meow-hoo! Matsunaga, I'm here!" The short, cat-eared avatar beamed at him broadly as she led two others along behind her. Her bouncy aura seemed criminally inappropriate for the gloomy Dual Serpents guild house.

She was quite famous among players of *Narrow Fantasy Online*: Amesho, "the player with over 2,000 friends." Her name derived from "American Shorthair," and she had that breed's same cheerful, curious, sociable personality, which allowed her to make friends within ten seconds of meeting most people.

But Matsunaga knew the truth: she was actually just very skilled at "damsel play." She was friendly with everyone, but skillfully kept them just at arm's length. It was easy to lose track of her clear calculation if you didn't watch her carefully at all times, but no one could incorporate cat puns into their speech that naturally. The effortless way she seemed to use them was the result of total calculation.

...At least, he was pretty sure it was calculation.

In fact, Matsunaga wasn't confident about that at all. Rationally speaking, he couldn't believe this could be her natural personality. He assumed she was just a dedicated crossplayer, but whenever he actually dealt with the girl, she really was very... very natural.

“I see you’re well, Amesho,” he said.

“Purrfect as always! And you look like you’re plotting something wicked, as mewsual, Matsunaga.”

“Well, I won’t deny that I have something in mind. Ah...” Matsunaga cast a glance behind him. Nem was standing there. She looked slightly overawed by Amesho’s personality, but was able to manage a bow for courtesy’s sake.

“Allow me to introduce her. This is Nem.”

“Oh, yeah! Nice to meetcha!” Amesho waved, grinning. “I heard the whole story! Umm, you’re the president of a big fashion brand, and you started playing the game to get revenge on Tsuwabuki, yeah?”

“I do *not* intend to take revenge on Ichiro,” Nem answered, slightly indignantly.

“Well, whatever you’re gonna do, you’ll need a guild! Matsunaga told you about that, mmright?” Amesho asked.

“Yes, more or less.” Matsunaga nodded. Regardless of what Nem was trying to do in the game, she would be better off having players to help her. Especially since she was obviously a beginner. She seemed to be in contact with the game’s development staff, but she didn’t seem to want to rely on them.

Matsunaga had made it clear in advance that he wouldn’t help her directly. The Dual Serpents’ philosophy was to quietly manipulate things behind the scenes, and guild policy was to play the villains and have fun doing it. The members of the guild were all long-time internet friends; they had plotted out their race and appearance in advance, and had made their avatars to one standard. The result was the “Dual Serpent Shinobi Army,” spoken of in legendary tones, and much discussed in rumors — rumors started, of course, by Matsunaga himself.

He could hardly send that same Shinobi Army to accompany Nem; working with Matsunaga would get her branded as a villain in game terms, which would probably be contrary to Nem’s intentions. And trying to explain the concept of “roleplaying” to this rich heiress would likely be a fruitless distraction.

“Now, Amesho,” he said. “As to the favor that I asked of you...”

The people that would make up her guild had to be more or less familiar with the game, more or less capable, more or less discreet, and more or less able to sympathize with Nem's motivations. Matsunaga had had no idea where to start; that was where Amesho came in.

"Oh yeah, yeah," Amesho said. "Of course, I told you I wouldn't join any guilds myself!"

"Though you do have an official fan club, I hear," he commented.

"A fan club is just a fan club! It's official, yeah, but I'm not part of it. 'Cause when you join a guild, it's like picking sides with friends! I could never do that!"

Behind her gleaming, guileless smile, the self-interest in her words flitted in and out of view. She must not have intended to hide much in front of him, Matsunaga thought.

"So anyway, Nem?" Amesho asked.

"Y-Yes?" Nem asked.

"Matsunaga told me the deal pretty much, so I brought my bestest friends with me. I'll introduce you!"

At last, Amesho turned her attention towards the two avatars she had brought along with her. The fact that she was willing to talk this way in front of them suggested that they must, like Matsunaga, have taken an academic view of Amesho's damsel playstyle.

"Finally..." the man murmured.

The man and woman were of very different heights, and it was the man who spoke up, with a grunt. He wore a threadbare, full-length robe, and was a DPS class of the Anthromorph race. His sharp, curved talons came from the effect of the "Beast Claw" Skill, which suggested he was of the barehand combat class, the Grappler.

"I was wondering when I'd be allowed to speak up..." the woman added. She was a striking, petite girl, wearing a black dress in the Gothic Lolita style. She was clearly a support class; most likely a spellcaster. She carried a silver staff that resembled a giant key; it was a rare item known as Randolf the Magic Key,

and it could only be equipped by high-level spellcasters.

The man's eyes glittered red in the darkness. The girl's eyes, by contrast, were a deep and gloomy shade of blue. Just from looking at them, Matsunaga could tell that they filled the conditions of "familiar with the game" and "capable."

The girl was fine, but the man's attitude suggested a rather vulgar personality. Appearing to bite back her nervousness, Nem managed to offer them a greeting. "Yes, um. A... pleasure to meet you."

"Sure." The man gave a short response and nodded. But that was all.

She waited.

He waited.

"U-Um..." Nem began.

"Yeah?" the man said.

Seen up close, his visage was grotesque. He had seemed to have gone for more of the intense visuals available for the Anthromorph race. It was understandable that someone as unaccustomed to the game as Nem would be frightened by him.

"Hey!" the girl said.

Matsunaga was just about to offer some help, but before he could, the girl grabbed the man's tattered sleeve and rebuked him.

"Isn't there something else you should say?" the girl scolded. "She's frightened."

"Shut up. I was thinking up a proper greeting." The man grimaced at the girl's rebuke.



“Um, sorry,” the girl said. “He looks gruff, because he is. His personality keeps him from making many friends, see? But despite how he looks, he was really happy when Amesho asked him.”

“Don’t tell her that,” the man muttered.

“I’m Sorceress,” the girl said. “He’s Taker. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Sorceress. In other words, a witch. An easy name to understand.

The girl’s broad smile had none of the cheer of Amesho’s, and if anything, seemed dulled by pessimism. Was that smile part of her roleplay, or was it a real-life habit leaking through? Matsunaga couldn’t tell for sure. The one thing he could say was that, as expected of anyone Amesho would recommend, they both had big personalities.

Sorceress’s calm, collected attitude allowed Nem the footing to regain her initiative.

“Nem,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She paused. “Taker, Sorceress. Might I ask you a question?”

“Wha—”

“What is it?” the girl asked. “We’ll answer you.”

Taker fell silent, and he glared at Sorceress with his monstrous red eyes. Perhaps they didn’t get along.

“Why is it you’re helping me?” Nem asked. “I admit, I cannot see what would be in it for you. If you are enjoying the game, wouldn’t you be more—”

“We heard the circumstances,” Taker interrupted. “I hate those ‘talented’ types. Well, we can talk about that elsewhere, but don’t worry. From what Sho — Amesho told us, we’re definitely on the same side.” With those words alone, Taker turned back to Matsunaga. “Hey, any rooms to unwind in in this dungeon of a guild house?”

“I could not speak as to its suitability to ‘unwind,’ but the room next door is unoccupied,” Matsunaga said.

“You heard him,” the man said. “Let’s go. You too, Witch.”

“Don’t call me ‘Witch,’” the girl snapped. “I see you’re as lacking in both delicacy and literacy as ever.”

Taker and Sorceress led the hesitant Nem into the side room, sniping at each other all the while. Nem occasionally cast glances back at Matsunaga, who merely waved a reassuring hand as he watched her walk away.

Once the three were gone, he turned to Amesho. “Who are those two?”

“They’re my friends, of course!” Amesho didn’t sound like she was playing dumb. Her answer seemed to be relatively earnest.

“He said he hated ‘talented types,’ though,” Matsunaga said.

“Oh, yeah, that’s mmright! He does kinda have that going on. Well, I don’t think they’d hate guys like Tsuwabuki so bad they’d want to kill them,” she added, as if without a care in the world.

“But Nem is talented, too. She’s a young company president and a first-rate designer. Even if she was sponsored by her father.”

“Oh mew, Matsunaga! You’re one of those guys who thinks talent’s absolute? I thought you were different...” The catgirl looked up at Matsunaga, head tilted. “Nem’s jealous of this Iris girl ‘cause Tsuwabuki acknowledges her, right? But she can’t figure out what’s so great about Iris’s designs, so she feels lost, yeah? Well, I’ve got a feeling she’s just lost her head and is throwing a little tantrum, but what that means in the end is, she’s got nyo talent. The talent that’ll earn you praise from the world, and the talent you want for yourself... they don’t always match up, y’know? I bet you’ve felt the same way, and that’s why you asked me for help. Mmright?”

Matsunaga said nothing. The thought of her seeing through him so easily, so nonchalantly, sent a chill deep through his body.

“A-And why did you agree, Miss Amesho?” he asked at last.

“Me? I’m sorta playing life on easy mode since I’m all ‘power of the community’... So I guess what I want, and where my talent lies, more or less line up. But because you’re my precious, precious friend, Matsunaga, I take any request you have for me seriously. So, if I’m ever in trouble, you’d better help me-owt too, okay?”

The fact that she could say such things without hesitation seemed to be part of Amesho's personality. She was just a natural-born damsel player. The ability to sail through life with the power of connections... it certainly was one form of talent.

"But in that case, I'm surprised that you didn't pursue Nem more aggressively," Matsunaga said. "She seems like she could be a powerful connection to have, in the long run."

"Oh, um. Yeah, for her..." Amesho's smile faded slightly. "From what you told me, it sounded like she doesn't have any friends she can really open up to. So she probably shouldn't be friends with someone like me. She'd end up really dependent, and it wouldn't be good for either of us."

"But even realizing that, you still brought those two here?" he asked.

"Well, yeah. But knowing Taker and Sorceress, they'll be less like friends and more like confidantes. So, I don't mind introducing 'em, but someone like Nem's gotta find friends on her own."

"Ah, Miss Amesho?" Matsunaga asked. Amesho's erudite speech, delivered in her unique speech pattern, suggested someone with a wealth of personal experience in the matter. As someone who had enjoyed the life of a shut-in otaku for over thirty years, Matsunaga felt somewhat abashed, yet managed to ask the question. "I don't really like asking this, but..."

"Yeah, what?" she asked.

"How old are you?"

The cat-eared girl, who hid a formidable character behind an innocent expression, shot him a beaming smile and answered.

"The age when you want to steal a motorcycle and drive off!"

*A teenager?* Matsunaga thought. No... that had to be a lie.

A small building in Jinbocho, Kanda Ward, served as the main office of the Thistle Corporation. Though a small mortar structure, it was still a company building, and it towered proudly over the used bookstores all around it.

In a lot some distance away parked a flashy Supercar that seemed very out of place in the town of Jinbocho. The dihedral door, resembling the wing of a bird of prey, twisted open, and a young man stepped out. He slid his Ray-Ban sunglasses into his breast pocket and squinted against the bright sunlight.

The Thistle Corporation office worker who came out to meet him murmured beneath his breath, “A Koenigsegg...”

The unique doors made it unmistakably a Supercar from the Swedish automobile maker.

Ichiro Tsuwabuki loved his Koenigsegg Agera, but he hadn’t driven it in quite some time. He usually let his servant, Sakurako Ogi, drive him around in his Lincoln, while he relaxed in the back seat. This time, there was no one in the passenger seat, and Ichiro descended upon Jinbocho alone.

“Um, thank you for coming, Mr. Tsuwabuki,” the employee said.

“Yes, thank you for coming out to meet me in this heat,” Ichiro replied.

“I hope you’ll forgive my mode of dress...”

The Thistle employee who came out to meet him — perhaps due to the government’s “Cool Biz” campaign getting entrenched in recent years, or perhaps simply because it was the kind of company they ran — was wearing a casual T-shirt and chino pants. The employee ID hanging from his neck was the sole evidence of his affiliation.

“Nonsense, nonsense,” Ichiro said. “I don’t concern myself with such things.”

From a Cool Biz perspective, it was actually Ichiro’s outfit that would be the problem. His usual suit jacket and slacks made even those looking at him feel hotter, and the fact that there wasn’t a single bead of sweat on his brow was truly eerie. In addition, for some reason, Ichiro’s skin was especially resistant to UV rays, preventing both the production of melanin pigment, and damage to the DNA in the nuclei of his cells. The sight of the man unconcernedly exposing his fair skin even in that bright sunlight... it was as if he had a season all to himself.

Many cosmetics makers wanted to take samples of his skin cells, but Sakurako simply diagnosed it as “I think your DNA just marches to its own drummer.”

Anyway...

“I like the atmosphere of this part of the city,” Ichiro murmured along the short walk to the office. The restless hum of the cicadas made the sunlight feel even hotter. It was annoying, but Ichiro did not feel unreasonable anger towards them, knowing how short their lives must be.

“Kanda is a rather old town, after all,” the employee agreed.

“Nature is wonderful, but I also enjoy towns where you can feel the pulse of the people who live there,” said Ichiro. “I passed through Akihabara on the way, and I like towns like that, as well.” Akihabara was home turf for his servant, Sakurako Ogi. She insisted she could show him around even blindfolded (and had even done it once), so naturally, it was more fun walking around it with her. “I saw them building some kind of large-scale arcade there.”

“Yes, what was the name again?” the employee asked. “I hear they’re installing a lot of Miraive Gear Cocoons there, and they sent us a request for it to be an official *NaroFan* affiliate, too. I guess they’re building it in response to the growing popularity of the VR game market.”

“In an environment where amusement facilities are seeing profits drop across the board... whoever’s building it must be doing very well for themselves,” Ichiro commented.

As they entered the company building, modest air conditioners cooled them off. Although it was a company building, the office portion only took up two floors, in addition to the reception office on the first floor. Thistle Corporation operated with a very small staff; the majority of the building was taken up not by people, but by hardware — countless server machines, strictly maintained.

Put another way, the enormous continent of Asgard that Ichiro Tsuwabuki and the others spent their days exploring was held entirely within this unremarkable mortar building. Within the mass of machines running on the other side of those thick metal doors, thousands of adventurers were, right now, challenging the unknown frontier.

Although Thistle had found many ways to reduce the load, VRMMOs were still known for the incredible data transfers they required. This necessitated far more server machines than conventional MMOs, and the expenses were

overwhelming. According to the employee he had spoken to, they were still operating more or less in the red.

“Good morning. Thank you for coming, Ichiro.” The company president, Azami Nono, addressed him from the farthest part of the narrow office lined with enormous computers. Unlike the first time they had met, she was wearing thin-rimmed glasses. She was also not wearing a crisp businesswoman’s suit, but a simple outfit comprised of a shirt with a few buttons undone and a tight skirt. The workers coming and going from the office were also dressed casually. Some were even wearing T-shirts with anime characters printed on them.

There were three monitors lined up on the president’s desk, in addition to a laptop and a tablet, all linked together. There were two smartphones attached to a charging station, as well as a landline telephone.

“Sorry, I haven’t finished up all my work yet,” she said. “We have an update coming, and the last stretch is so hectic...”

“It’s the one year anniversary, isn’t it?” Ichiro asked. “My servant is looking forward to seeing what sort of event you’ll unveil.”

“To tell you the truth, that’s part of the reason I invited you here...” Her fingers glided across the keyboard, her eyes flicking back and forth between multiple displays. Yet she seemed at ease enough to converse while she did it.

Azami Nono was a genius who had majored in quantum physics at an American university. She had personally invented the Drive technology that made it possible to immerse the consciousness in artificial worlds. She could handle this much with ease.

“And... that should do it. Sorry for the wait, Ichiro. I’ll show you to the meeting room.”

President Azami told her subordinates in the office, “I’m stepping out for a minute, so keep an eye on things,” and led Ichiro to the third floor. This floor contained employee restrooms and meeting rooms, and Ichiro also spotted three employee-use Miraive Gear Cocoons, one of which was currently in use.

He narrowed his eyes.

As an MMO, *Narrow Fantasy Online* naturally had staff members who acted

as GMs. At least one of them had to be logged in at all times, and he was told they had shifts blocked out for the task. Ichiro had never met one in the game personally, but these GMs apparently acted as impartial judges in disputes, and handled event and Grand Quest announcements.

"Speaking of which, I caused some trouble recently, didn't I?" Ichiro asked. Anyone who knew him would feel inclined to interrupt with, "You actually realize it?" but Ichiro said it without batting an eye.

Naturally, Azami was aware of the dispute he had had with the Akihabara Forging Guild in Glasgobara Merchant Town.

"You know that if you're ever in a situation you can't handle by yourself, you can use GM Call," she said.

"That's nonsense," Ichiro replied firmly. "I believe the inclusion of a third-party opinion detracts from the purity of an incident. It's why we have laws about noninterference in civilian affairs. But even if I didn't call them, there was a GM there, wasn't there?"

"Oh, did you realize?" she asked.

"I had an inkling."

President Azami grimaced. "VRMMOs are a type of reality, but they're also a fictional world, which creates problems that are difficult to resolve. It even makes PK-ing more complicated."

Having an unfamiliar avatar — with a real human and a real mind behind it — marching towards you with a terrifying weapon to try and kill you might inspire abnormal terror. And it wasn't something you were just viewing through your monitor, as if it were in a different world — a VRMMO put the player right into the moment. PK problems aside, there were likely also many people who suffered trauma due to an inability to identify the difference between reality and fiction.

"As in the incident where Ed attacked Iris, yes?" Ichiro asked.

"You see more light violence taking place in combat-forbidden areas," she said. "Knowing they can't damage the person they're talking to loosens their self-control, perhaps."

“Hmm... It’s all a bit beyond me,” Ichiro said.

The woman grimaced. “We do what we can to prevent it, but...”

All that Ichiro could say was that there definitely were people like that. Thinking back through history, there had been many people who acted outside of both his own sense of values, as well as the values of objective societal judgment. But those were rare things in the long course of human history, and it couldn’t happen that often in a VRMMO where ordinary people were so absorbed in their diversions.

Or perhaps human hearts were like inscrutable black boxes, and the reality-like fictional world was like the passcode to unlock what lay within. Maybe that was all. Either way, it was not something Ichiro could understand.

“By the way, I’d like to hear the reason you invited me,” he said. “I have a number of questions for you about the game, of course, but let’s discuss your business first.”

“Ah, yes. Good idea,” Azami said, giving a single clap. “Well, as we were discussing earlier, *Narrow Fantasy Online* will be celebrating its one year anniversary in August. As you may know, we’ve been offering all sorts of memorial services this month, as part of the pre-anniversary.”

“It doesn’t seem like players have enjoyed them, to be frank,” said Ichiro.

“Yes, that’s true...” Azami visibly wilted at the comment. She must have stayed on top of gathering information from the internet.

As memorial events leading up to the one year anniversary, the company had offered up numerous services, including the Grand Quest in the Delve Necrolands and various special items. The major controversy among players had been in regards to the latter; a number of items had been released that had broken game balance, and you could also buy more of them through microtransactions. It had caused quite a bitter outcry, and the backlash had resulted in the release of some of those items being delayed.

It had been those pay-to-download items that had allowed Ichiro to easily get the components he’d needed to create his original design armor, so Ichiro, personally, was very grateful for them. But of course, not all customers felt that

way.

Azami Nono was an unparalleled genius to have created VR technology at such a young age. Yet she was, perhaps, second-rate when it came to being a developer and game designer.

“Anyway, please continue,” Ichiro said.

“Okay,” she said. “In the ten days leading up to the anniversary, we’re going to hold a ceremony in the game, unveiling a lot of additional elements and such as the update rolls out.”

“I see,” Ichiro said. “You want me to appear as a guest?”

“Ah, yes. That’s right, but... you’re awfully confident, aren’t you?”

“Well, that’s the only thing I could imagine you inviting me here for,” Ichiro said.

He had a point. But Ichiro Tsuwabuki, able to propose without a trace of doubt that she must be inviting him as a guest, could be described even in the most generous of estimates as “a creep.” Indeed, he was a creep, as many had already acknowledged.

But then Ichiro said, “I don’t believe I’m cut out to be a guest, though. I may be a celebrity even within the game, but from an objective point of view, I believe my fame within the game has taken on a rather negative tone.”

“Of course, we’ll be inviting many other guests,” she said. “Famous players that users might be curious about, celebrities we might use to acquire new players. We’re even sounding out voice actors for interest.”

There was a deeper implication to Azami Nono’s statement. Ichiro’s powers of deduction were very keen when it came to situations like these.

With cool deportment, he made a great show of sitting down on the sofa and crossed his legs. “I see. So my appearance is a message to someone else.”

Having Ichiro Tsuwabuki enjoying *NaroFan* as a player would certainly have meaning. Ichiro hadn’t appeared in front of crowds for close to five years, but his name hadn’t lost any of his renown in certain academic and economic circles.

His family had owned a massive zaibatsu before the war, and even now, he was still the heir to a large conglomerate that was seeing startling growth in all sectors. And of course, he also had quite a large private fortune he had earned himself. Just saying his name would have an effect similar to showing the Shogunate's seal.

Put another way, there were likely pressures mounting on her that would be difficult to avoid without the use of his name. He could imagine several reasons why. For one thing, Azami Nono was a very young company president, and she had likely had to lay a lot of groundwork in order to develop her VRMMO. The process would have forced her to deal with lots of shrewd old men, who likely thought very little of her. Even the conversation they had exchanged thus far suggested that she — though a genius at invention and technology — had no real talent as a businesswoman.

Fictional spaces developed within a quantum realm were still unexplored territory as a market, as well. Even Ichiro had to acknowledge that web-based online communities were still an expanding business model.

*Narrow Fantasy Online* was a game, but it was also a realistic metaverse unlike any cooperative online space previously seen. Every bit of in-depth knowledge and technology in the entire world about that fictional space was housed there in that small mortar building in Jinbocho.

If she wasn't careful, she could be consumed. She wanted to borrow the authority of Ichiro Tsuwabuki's name to fight against that. It was understandable.

"Well, I don't mind." Ichiro felt no particular resistance to the thought of someone else borrowing his personal authority.

"Really?!" she cried.

"A nonsense question," he said. "I do not lie, and have no need to lie."

If Sakurako, Asuha, or Iris had been there, they likely would have cringed at the sheer pretension in Ichiro's words. Unfortunately, the only one who was there at the moment was Azami Nono.

"Besides, I like *NaroFan*," he added. "But there is one condition."

“Yes?” she asked.

“Do not forget that I am but a player in the game. My playstyle may offer a slightly greater financial contribution than other users, but that is all. I have no interest in changing that position.”

Azami surely understood what he was getting at. Ichiro Tsuwabuki wanted to enjoy the game like any other player. His engrossment in the game did not make him want to directly interfere in the devs’ decisions, nor back Thistle financially in case they got into danger of being bought out. The devs could use Ichiro in his capacity as a player in any way they wanted, but he had no desire to undermine their relationship as company and client.

“Of course,” she said. “Thistle is my company, and *NaroFan* is our game. No matter who you are, I don’t intend to let you interfere.”

“Hmm, good. I’m glad of that.” Ichiro nodded in satisfaction.

They continued their discussion from earlier in the day for a while, until at last, Ichiro said this:

“By the way, I ran into Megumi in the game recently.”

Azami stopped suddenly.

“Of course, I’m sure you already knew that,” Ichiro continued.

“That’s right... I checked to see that you had interacted.” There was a slightly pained expression on President Azami’s face.

Megumi Fuyo, lone daughter of the president of Tsunobeni, Co., and head of cutting-edge fashion brand “MiZUNO,” was Azami Nono’s friend. It was easy for Ichiro to guess the reason for her expression.

“I thought so,” he said. “Did Megumi get special help in crafting her avatar?”

“She said she wanted to see what your guild in the game was like,” Azami said. “I mapped a Warp Feather and Glasgobara’s location into her starting data, and gave her the Immortal trait to keep her from encountering any accidents.”

“Immortal” was a special character status possessed mostly by GMs. It canceled out the effects of all damage and debuffs, which meant that Megumi

Fuyo's avatar — in other words, Nem — was untouchable in game terms.

The system was absolute. It was clearly cheating, and favoritism on behalf of the developers. Unfair. Even if Nem didn't exploit her Immortal status to go around PK-ing, it was not an action he could condone.

"I also tweaked a few of her other stats so that she couldn't deal damage to other players or monsters," Azami added.

"A pure observer, then?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes. All data like HP and attack power are sealed," she said. "She doesn't have a level, either, but she can form guilds and take part in events."

In other words, Megumi couldn't do anything. It was clear that President Azami had gone to great pains to keep it balanced. Megumi Fuyo would only have agreed to those conditions if cruising around the world of *NaroFan* was all she wanted to do. Which meant that she probably didn't intend to start any trouble.

"Do you believe that what Megumi is doing is against the rules?" Azami asked anxiously.

"Well, you are the ones who make the rules in *NaroFan*, so I have no objection on that level," Ichiro said. "I have no desire to push my ideas upon you, and everyone has certain things they want to do most. Megumi surely asked you for the favor because it was something that she needed." Ichiro then stopped talking and looked Azami Nono squarely in the eye. "However, if she compromises my beliefs or enjoyment in any way, I will take whatever steps are necessary to oppose her. Of course, I hope that won't happen, but it's rather difficult to know at the moment."

"Not everyone can draw the line as easily as you do, Ichiro," Azami said.

"I agree."

That subject trailed off, and they fell into silence for a few seconds. At last...

"It's 11:00. It's a bit early, Ichiro, but would you like to go out for lunch?" Azami asked.

"Curry, was it?"

“Yes. We are in Jinbocho, after all.”

“Something other than Indian curry, if possible,” Ichiro joked.

Azami dropped her jaw in shock. “You don’t like Indian curry?”

“I do like it,” he said. “But if I’m not careful, I’ll end up eating it every day.”

“Eh?”

One time, he had praised the Indian curry his skilled servant Sakurako had made, and the result was that she had ended up feeding it to him every day for nearly a month. It was a painful memory. She appeared to have learned the concept of self-restraint more recently, but if he didn’t watch himself, he might still end up eating the same thing three days in a row. Incidentally, he could stop such behavior in its tracks by occasionally asking her, teasingly, “Have you been putting on weight lately?”

It was his knowledge of his servant’s tastes that kept him avoiding Southeast Asian food as much as possible when he went out. He was wondering if Jinbocho’s European-style curry would be more to his tastes.

Azami headed for the office to tell her subordinates they were going out for lunch. “Ichiro, do you have plans for the afternoon?”

“I don’t lack them, you could say. If you have something else you need from me, I could adjust, but...”

“Well, the truth is...” She was just opening the office door as they talked. Then, suddenly, she froze.

“What’s the matter?” Ichiro asked.

“Oh...” Azami Nono’s eyes focused on one spot in the office.

Ichiro noticed that the entire room had gone silent. The eyes of all the staff were fixed on the same man Azami was looking at. A strange atmosphere hung over the room.

The object of their gazes was a middle-aged man of moderate height.

“Hey now, don’t be so nervous. You can keep working, you know?” the man said with a distinctly unpleasant smile pasted on his face.

Understanding dawned.

Ichiro remembered this man. He was the CEO of Pony Entertainment, Inc. — in other words, the boss of the company that made and sold the VR game hardware known as the Miraive Gear X and Miraive Gear Cocoon. He recalled that Azami Nono had worked there after she had graduated from college and developed the Miraive Gear for them. She had gone independent shortly after. He seemed to recall that the man's name was Shinya Otogiri.

"Oh, Nono! I thought you weren't here!" Otogiri burst out into a deliberately superficial smile the minute he saw Azami. "The other employees said that you were in a business conference, and asked me to wait... Have you thought about my proposal? *NaroFan* could use a little bolstering with its one year anniversary coming up, eh?"

"...My opinion has not changed," said Azami.

"Oh? That's too bad," Otogiri commented.

*Ah, so that's what it is.* As Ichiro watched the grinning Otogiri, he felt his understanding of the situation deepen.

The reason Thistle was desperate for a supporter like Ichiro Tsuwabuki must be that the pressure from Pony Entertainment, Inc., was getting to be too much to ignore. In order to develop new VR technologies and business models to go along with it, Otogiri of Pony wanted the talent of Azami Nono and the Thistle Corporation.

The grinning Otogiri suddenly seemed to notice the person standing behind Azami — in other words, Ichiro. The superficial smile vanished for a moment, but he immediately plastered it back on. "Well, if it isn't the Tsuwabuki heir."

"Oh, hello." Ichiro Tsuwabuki was not the kind of person to speak deferentially, even to someone much older than him. "Is this our first time meeting in person? Though I hear you and my father have had some extensive dealings."

"True," the man said. "Your father is quite the backstabber. But that's all in the past now. But yes, I see. So, you're the one, eh? That's right, as I recall, you bought that Miraive Gear Cocoon from us." As he spoke, Otogiri continued

casting surreptitious glances in Azami Nono's direction, as if his interest was not fully on Ichiro.

"Yes, and I've been quite enjoying *NaroFan*, thank you," said Ichiro.

"Of course you are! *NaroFan* is an excellent game. That's why it's such a shame. Nono here is a brilliant developer, but she has no business experience. If the company runs itself into the ground and the game has to be canceled, it's going to be heartbreaking for the users. I've been trying to offer them a helping hand, but..."

Otogiri's loquacious attitude spelled out the broad points of the position Thistle was in, and the actions Pony was taking against them, very clearly. It was likely this man wasn't even intending to hide it.

"Or, Ichiro, are you going to buy Thistle? With your finances, it would be possible," the man asked shrewdly. "Having a patron in someone like you, who understands the game... it would surely give Nono lots of peace of mind to develop—"

"Nonsense." Ichiro cut off the smooth-talking Otogiri in his usual fashion. "I will use my money only in accordance with the game's rules. I have no intention of undermining our relationship as developer and user; to become the development team's boss would be to sacrifice that purity. I am unlike you in that regard, Mr. Otogiri."

"...What do you know?" the man asked suspiciously.

"Nothing in particular," said Ichiro. "Azami, let's get curry."

"Um, right..."

Ichiro turned away from Otogiri and descended the stairs. Azami let the office staff know that they were going out to lunch, then ran after him.

Shinya Otogiri watched them leave.

Outside, the rays of the midsummer sun beat down on them. Ichiro did not squint, but kept his usual cool demeanor, one hand in his pocket, as he gazed up at the blue sky above.

Sakurako would be logged in to *NaroFan* by now. He hoped she was enjoying

the beach...

...and that nothing else in particular was going on.

# 3 - Noble Son, Inquire

The summer! The sea! The swimsuits!

That is to say, Iris and her friends had made it to the beach!

Manyfish Beach.

There were quite a lot of people around there — naturally, since it was a recently-opened field — but only about half of the players had gone to the trouble of buying swimsuits to enjoy the fictional reality seaside. The rest were adventurers wearing the usual boring metallic and monster-hide armor, and the comparative skin exposure between them approached the absurd.

Iris and Felicia were both dressed in swimsuits that Iris had designed and created before they had headed out. They were two-piece bathing suits based on a flower print, and she'd created them after doing careful research on all the latest trends. Still, there was nothing especially interesting about them. Felicia had given them high praise, but Iris regretted that they weren't more inspired.

Even so...

Iris looked over the beach with hands on her hips.

The male avatars outnumbered the female ones overwhelmingly. Perhaps that was a reflection of the demographics of the player base: it was easy to lie about one's gender in a game, but it looked like not many men were perverted enough to disguise themselves as a female avatar and then put that avatar in a swimsuit, as well. Naturally, there were no women wearing flashy original swimsuits like Iris and Felicia, which meant the two girls got a lot of attention.

*Negative* attention.

"Oh, Iris. I don't like... the way they're staring..." Felicia said, hiding behind Iris.

"Y-Yeah... I think... yeah..." Iris stammered.

Was this how it felt to be undressed with the eyes? In the real world, Iris

worked hard to keep her slender form and nice legs, and she'd felt the gazes of men on her at the beach or the pool often enough. But here at Manyfish, there were far, far more.

Iris's body in the fictional world of the game had added Elvish stature modifiers to her real world proportions, which meant that she was taller and more willowy than the Airi Kakitsubata of the real world. She didn't look like herself, either, so it wasn't as if it was Airi's own body that was the object of the attention...

...but it still didn't feel good to be stared at.

"Hmm." Sir Kirschwasser let out a heavy hum. The silver-haired elder Knight was there on his master's orders, acting both as their protector and as the young heir's proxy. He was wearing Full Plate Mail, which was surely not appropriate fashion for the beach in midsummer. "This... This atmosphere reminds me of... that."

"Huh? Of what?" Iris asked.

"The thing held every year in August and early December... ah, no, it's better if you don't know. Let us just say that there are always people who get the wrong idea about the cosplay booth," Kirschwasser said, then drew the Knight Sword that was hanging from his hip. He turned towards the characters leering at Iris and Felicia and thrust the sword's point at them. "I beg your pardon, but photography is forbidden. Close those screen capture apps this instant."

*Did he really need to draw the sword?* Iris wondered, but perhaps that was part of the roleplay.

Most of the players closed their holo-panels under the weight of his stern gaze, but one enthusiastic camera brat balked at it. "Come on, give us a break. It's just a game."

He moved to take a picture of Iris and Felicia in their swimsuits. The two of them quickly hid behind the heavy-plated Kirschwasser.

The Knight let out a small sigh. "Indeed, it is just a game. If you refuse to comply, then, shall I be forced to use force?" The Knight Sword glinted in the midsummer sun, and Kirschwasser's fighting spirit gave off a similar shine.

Iris wasn't entirely sure, but she was under the impression that *Narrow Fantasy Online* was a game that tolerated PvP, and perhaps even had a tendency to endorse it. It meant that you occasionally saw situations like this, where minor disputes would be solved with violence.

The camera brat wore a mohawk and spiked shoulder pads, attire which spoke volumes about the kind of person he was. He clucked his tongue lightly and pulled a knife from his belt.

"Hee hee hee *hee*! Well said, old man! Then I'll take you down and get as many sexy photos as I want!"

Iris wondered what kind of character he was supposed to be playing.

"Hey, my little brother drew his knife... Kyee hee hee hee *hee*! Now we get to see blood!" Behind the man with the knife stood a similar-looking post-apocalyptic punk, who let out a mad laugh as he watched.

Most of the players walking back and forth along the beach began to gather around what was looking like a duel. Not a single person seemed eager to try to stop them.

Thus, beneath the blue sky, white clouds, and summer sun on the water's edge, the post-apocalyptic spiky mohawk punk and the silver-haired elder Knight faced each other and prepared for battle. Due to some playfulness on the designers' parts, perhaps, Manyfish Beach did not forbid inter-player combat.

"Ah, Iris, shouldn't we stop them?" Felicia ventured.

"I'm not sure..." Iris said. "I don't even know if this is something we *can* stop..."

Iris and Felicia seemed to be the only ones at a loss for what to do.

The mohawk man standing across from Kirschwasser began threatening him with a piercing voice as he licked his blade like a hooligan. "Hee hee hee *hee*! Let me warn you, my knife is coated with poison!"

Immediately, a noxious purple visual floated up from his body, and he fell to the ground before his mad smile even had time to fade. Then his body

dissipated into particles of light, which dispersed into the sky with a shining, mystical shimmer. He was dead.

“What was he even trying to accomplish?” Iris exclaimed.

“Everyone has their own way of enjoying the game...” Felicia murmured.

As the two girls gazed at the poison knife and spiked shoulder pads that had fallen on the beach, the rubberneckers hoping for a fight dispersed with an air of disappointment.

The other mohawked man clutched his “little brother’s” knife and shoulder pads to his chest, then ran off crying. It was clear he couldn’t possibly be serious, but even as roleplay, it was a hard thing to understand.

“I have driven off the offending ruffians,” Kirschwasser said, turning back to Iris and Felicia with a subservient air.

“You didn’t really drive them off,” Iris said. “More like they self-destructed...”

“You see men like that sometimes,” Kirschwasser said. “They enjoy playing the villain.”

“You were pretty rough with him, still...”

“Well, he was a hooligan, after all.”



Kirschwasser sheathed his Knight Sword and shrugged. “Regardless, I will keep you safe all day, so go and enjoy yourselves in the ocean. You have those new swimsuits, after all. I will do everything in my power so that you may frolic, free from worry about the gazes of the rabble.”

“But knowing there are people like that around...” Felicia said, squirming.

“I guess it’s pretty selfish to put on swimsuits like this and then say we don’t want our pictures taken, huh?” Iris mused.

“That’s not true,” Sir Kirschwasser said. “You wish to wear lovely clothing, but you don’t wish to have people leering at you. Both are signs of an innocent girl’s heart. I fully understand.”

*Always the adult*, Iris thought. A noble man who both understood and respected the female heart. So different from the young heir. Of course, in the young heir’s case, it wasn’t that he didn’t understand how women felt. He understood it, but he didn’t respect it, which made it feel even meaner.

But enough thinking about him. He wasn’t here, for once. So...

“Okay, Felicia! Let’s swim!” Iris raised a fist into the air and shouted.

“Iris, are you a good swimmer?” Felicia asked.

“I took swimming lessons in elementary school. What about you?”

“I’m an all-around sports girl!”

“Then let’s do it!” Iris cried.

Iris and Felicia ran across the sandy beach, side by side. The elaborate processes of the Miraive Gear used quantum information to project the feeling of running through breakers into their brains. But they didn’t care about the scientific aspect of it. It was summer, they were in swimsuits, and they were at the beach. Who wouldn’t want to enjoy every second of it?

The red-haired girl and the white-haired girl both dove into the sea, kicking up a splash that sucked in the sunlight and glittered like thousands of jewels in the air.

They didn’t come up.

“What were those devs thinking?!”

They had been pulled out of the water a few minutes later, and were now taking a breather in the cabana set up near the shore. Iris was ranting angrily.

“They set up this whole big beach, then make it so you can’t swim right unless you have the ‘Swimming’ Skill?!”

“I suppose it’s a boon to the otherwise useless Swimming skill, but it really does seem rather backwards,” Kirschwasser said as he drank his tea with a sigh. Bringing his tea set into the cabana did feel like an infringement on their business, but since it seemed like the tables and chairs were just set up for people to relax, nobody said anything in particular.

“Why have swimsuits if we can’t swim?” Felicia plunged her straw into her iced tea and began to blow furious bubbles.

“Seriously,” Iris fumed. “Now that I look, it seems like only a few people really came to swim...”

“It seems there are rare monsters and items in the water, and some take the Swimming Skill to go on treasure hunts... but well, I don’t think you’d be much interested in that,” said Sir Kirschwasser.

They were in a game, after all. But it was a hard world they lived in, if they needed a Skill just to do basic beachgoing.

Iris wasn’t pouting openly, but she did throw herself forward onto the table to show that her interest in the whole affair was waning. “Now I don’t know what to do.”

“At times like these, I believe beach volleyball is the usual choice,” said Kirschwasser.

“I can play beach volleyball pretty well, too!” The self-proclaimed all-around sports girl Felicia puffed out her (lack of) chest proudly.

If they came to the beach and ended up just hanging around and drinking tea, it would be just like what they always did. It was a total waste. What was she even paying the 980-yen monthly fee for?

“Is that Sir Kirschwasser I see?” someone addressed their group as they were resting in the cabana.

“Well, if it isn’t Lord Stroganoff,” Kirschwasser replied with a tone of surprise. “Good to see you again.”

Felicia spoke up, too. “Oh, um, from the Knights!”

Standing before them was a giant of a man, about two meters tall, with glorious red hair and beard and an imposing aura, who was wearing nothing but a pair of swim trunks. *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s exquisite lighting engine rendered the man’s burly musculature with tremendous authenticity. The trunks didn’t have a pattern, but the color scheme suggested a setting sun over the water. There was also an inner tube hanging off his shoulder.

“You know each other?” Iris asked.

Kirschwasser and Felicia nodded in response.

“We met him during the period when you couldn’t log in because of tests,” said Kirschwasser. “He’s the leader of the Red Sunset Knights, the game’s strongest guild.”

“Heh...” The red-haired macho man perked up a little bit at the description.

Now that she looked, it seemed many of the players visiting the beach were gazing from afar at this man named Stroganoff and the “Red Sunset Knights” he had brought, and were whispering.

*Was he really that famous?* Iris wondered. She didn’t have much interest in the Achievement side of the game, so she really had little knowledge about such things.

He was the Human Fighter, Stroganoff the Monstrous, and he had brought along his four sub-commanders: “Baron” Gazpacho, “Saint” Tiramisu, “Demon” Gorgonzola, and “Shooting Star” Parmigiano-Reggiano. Just hearing their names was enough to make her hungry.

They were all in swimsuits, as well.

Naturally, as the strongest guild, the Knights were full of dedicated gamers, and most of them were male. Tiramisu stood out quite a bit, in fact: the

“Saint”’s swimsuit was a midriff-bearing monokini woven with contrasting white and indigo threads. The provocative, revealing lines belied her holy title and made it hard to know where it was safe to rest your eyes. Tiramisu, the woman in question, was smiling awkwardly, perhaps a little bit embarrassed.

“Where’s Tsuwabuki today?” Stroganoff asked.

“He is not yet on,” said Kirschwasser.

“I see...” Stroganoff let out a noise of faint relief.

“Did you come to enjoy the beach?” Felicia asked. Perhaps her question was improper to ask the game’s strongest guild, but with the way they were dressed, they really did look like they had come to enjoy the beach.

“We came to beat a boss monster that’s been appearing offshore,” Stroganoff said as he stuck out his defined pectorals.

“To defeat boss monsters everywhere is the Knights’ sole desire,” one of the four sub-commanders announced.

“Mr. Tsuwabuki got the kill-steal on us the other day, but he won’t have it so easy this time,” another added.

“This time, it is the Red Sunset Knights who will kill the boss first!” a third declared.

“We’ve prepared a banana boat with enough seats for all,” a fourth supplemented.

Despite being a little confused, Iris asked hesitantly, “But, um... in those swimsuits?”

“These are not mere swimsuits,” Stroganoff said proudly. “These were made-to-order by the Akihabara Forging Guild, produced with care by Sakata the Stupid himself. Their defense modifier is +2,800, and they increase water magic resistance. Excellent armor for fighting water monsters.”

“Sakata the Stupid” referred to the leader of the Akihabara Forging Guild, the greatest crafting guild in the game. His actual name was I’m With Stupid →. From the way he talked, he and Stroganoff must have gone back a long way. She seemed to recall that the young heir had said something like that once

before, too.

“Um, well, ah... do your best,” Iris said.

At first looking uncertain of how to respond, Stroganoff eventually seemed to take her words as well-meant encouragement. “Thank you. We shall. Give our regards to Tsuwabuki, as well.”

He cast a glance to the others around him, and at last, the game’s most skilled achievement guild, the Red Sunset Knights, got on board their banana boat and headed out to sea.

“I guess that’s the ‘proper’ way of enjoying the game...” said Iris.

“Well, it’s certainly the method the designers planned for,” said Kirschwasser. “They did offer the swimsuits, after all.”

“I felt sorry for them getting mixed up in the fight between Itchy and Kiryuhito, so I hope they can get their proper fight this time,” Felicia whispered idly as she watched them sail away.

“My, my. Is that Sir Kirschwasser I see?”

The next thing they heard was a sticky, clingy, unpleasant voice. Iris noticed the previously-relaxing Felicia grimace at the sound of it.

When they looked up, they saw an attractive Elf man standing there alone. He was wearing chainmail underneath a coat, which was about as stuffy-looking as Kirschwasser’s outfit. Unlike the Red Sunset Knights, he didn’t look like he was here to enjoy the beach and the swimsuits in the ways the developers intended.

“...Who is this, now?” Iris asked in a whisper.

“...Mr. Matsunaga,” Felicia responded with a scowl.

It seemed he wasn’t someone she liked, but Kirschwasser didn’t seem to mind the man, and responded to him just as he had with Stroganoff before. “Well, well. Mr. Matsunaga. Thank you for your help before.”

“That’s my line,” said Matsunaga. “Did you receive my gift?”

“Yes, Tsuwabuki and I quite enjoyed it together.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Matsunaga, with little deference, sat down at their table.

Felicia’s expression grew more uncomfortable, and she scooted in Iris’s direction.

Thinking it was a familiar-sounding name, Iris searched back in her memory, and then remembered it was the name of the moderator of that aggregate blog which had come up several times in the past. She recalled that it had run an article about the Edward incident from the other day, and the content had not been favorable towards Iris... Well, more accurately, it had not been favorable towards the young heir. It was clear that Felicia openly disliked him, as well.

“Ah, so you’re Iris, eh?” Matsunaga broached the subject before she could properly figure out how to respond.

“Yes, um... hello.” Iris wasn’t the type to hold a grudge, but it was hard to be openly friendly to the person who had written an article like that.

Matsunaga’s face was attractive, and his roundabout way of speaking — not even trying to hide the unpleasantness in his voice — made her nervous. But when he sat, he left a space between him and Iris, and he didn’t look at them like he was undressing them with his eyes or anything like that. Either he was surprisingly gentlemanly, or he was simply not accustomed to being around women.

“This is our first time meeting in person... Ah, now I see...” He cast a glance at Iris.

“If you have something to say, could you please just come out and say it?” Iris snapped. Iris had a tendency to employ a needled tone in response to someone speaking in an insinuating fashion. She knew it was a bad habit, but she didn’t try to stop herself.

“No, nothing at this very moment,” Matsunaga said. “I was just wondering why it was that Mr. Tsuwabuki liked you so much.”

“I couldn’t really tell you. It’s just the kind of person he is,” she snapped back.

Although he wasn’t exactly looking at her body, there was still something disquieting in his gaze, which had Iris feeling more and more sour.

“Mr. Matsunaga, was it?” she asked. “Do you have some grudge against the young heir?”

“Nothing in particular,” said Matsunaga. “Writing interesting articles gets me more hits, that’s all. It’s a matter of life or death, you know. The affiliate blog is my livelihood.”

“Hmm...” Iris was reminded of another article about the young heir on Matsunaga’s blog the other day. It had described an event during the Grand Quest that had taken place while she was taking exams: a clash between the game’s two greatest players — the young heir and the young man in black, King Kirihito, whom she had met briefly the other day. That article must have earned him a lot of hits, too.

“And, well,” Matsunaga continued with a lurid smile, “your guild leader does create such fine material.”

“I’m not as interesting as he is,” Iris said defensively.

“I’m not sure about that,” he smiled. “I believe you have potential. My hopes are quite high... but, never mind that for now.”

Every word the man said was drenched with innuendo. Iris, who liked people to say things outright, found conversing with him very uncomfortable.

“So, what are you doing here, Lord Matsunaga?” Perhaps recognizing Iris’s growing discomfort, Kirschwasser stepped in.

“Looking for material,” said Matsunaga. “I had a feeling something interesting might happen here today.”

There was meaning hidden behind his words. He must have had more than just a feeling. He had some kind of lead. Something was going to happen on this beach today. Iris wondered if she could avoid getting wrapped up in it.

“Well, okay, but...” Iris narrowed her eyes, sipped her tea, and asked Matsunaga a question. “Why do you say everything in such a loaded... villainous kind of way?”

“That’s our guild’s philosophy,” Matsunaga said airily, as if he had been waiting for just that question.

“Ah, hey! If it isn’t Miss Felicia!”

The interrupter likely wasn’t trying to cut off the conversation, but that was

still the result, as Matsunaga and the rest of the group turned their attention to the new arrival.

It was a party of six or seven Fighters in short black swim trunks, all holding inner tubes and walking along the sand. They all had similar black haircuts, and they all were similarly handsome. In fact, they more or less seemed to have the same face, which made it a little eerie.

Iris looked at Felicia again, wondering if she knew them, too, but Felicia's expression was extremely awkward.

"U-Um... have we met?" Iris asked uneasily.

"Hey, don't joke! It's me! Kirihito!"

The man who was introducing himself in a cheerful voice looked very different from the King Kirihito they'd seen the other day, Iris thought. And yet...

"I'm Kirihito, too!"

"Of course, I am also Kirihito."

"And *I'm* Kirihito."

"Kirihito here!"

"Kirihito? That's me!"

"As a matter of fact, I am Kirihito, as well."

The six behind him also started mouthing off, adding another level to the confusion.

"Yes! I am... we are...!"

"That style of introduction is so worn-out, so please, refrain," said Kirschwasser.

"Fair enough."

Kirschwasser's gentle recrimination caused the leader-looking man to nod, before striking a precise pose. The six behind him posed as well, and despite them all having the same face and build, their poses all showed individuality.

“I see an unfamiliar face here, too,” the leader said. “We’re The Kirihitters, a guild that exists for those who love to play as Kirihito, the protagonist of our favorite anime. We hold deep respect for the strongest Kirihito of all, King Kirihito, and for Miss Felicia, who appears to be his real-life friend.”

“Ahh, I see...” Iris breathed. She was dealing with a lot of strong personalities today, and it was starting to get quite exhausting.

“Oh, yeah. I just remembered. I didn’t recognize you in those swimsuits, that’s all...” Felicia muttered.

“That’s what we thought! But there’s an ocean here, so we have to swim. I’m curious to see how it compares to the sea at Kagoshima!” Kirihito (Leader) gave her a big thumbs-up, and smiled as bright as could be. “We’re going to enjoy the summer. Miss Felicia, if you see King, say hello to him for us!”

“Um, sure thing.” Felicia waved with a half-hearted smile, and watched the seven Kirihitos leave.

Watching them jump into the ocean one by one, Iris whispered, “It takes all types, huh?”

“That is the nature of the online game,” Matsunaga said without a moment’s pause. “If I may say, you’re a peculiar one, too, Miss Iris. Trying to design original armor and accessories and sell them... It must be a lot of wasted money and effort.”

That line hit her where it hurt. She didn’t even have to think about it; he was dead right. She had the young heir as a patron now, but before she’d met him, it had been a long period of throwing her meager allowance away on nothing. If you had asked her why she was doing it, all she could say was, “because I want to.” It was far removed from the typical playstyle, so maybe she was a bit peculiar.

“But thanks to that peculiar hobby of yours, Tsuwabuki took notice of you,” Kirschwasser added.

Iris wondered if he was trying to make her feel better.

Matsunaga just shrugged, as if to say, “Yes, I know.” He added, “But of course, that would be the case...”

Iris tilted her head as he spoke once again in the manner he had described as “my guild’s philosophy.” “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Even under the recreation of the midsummer sun of Manyfish Beach, Matsunaga’s thin smile sent a chill running through her. Perhaps that, too, was part of his guild’s philosophy.

The curry shop that Ichiro and Azami arrived at was a cramped, quiet place. The prices were relatively reasonable, which, from Ichiro’s perspective, was rather refreshing, as well. He didn’t usually have a chance to enter little shops like this unless he was traveling.

“Should I have picked a more expensive restaurant?” Azami asked hesitantly as Ichiro pored curiously over the menu.

“Nonsense. I don’t care about the price. You have taken me to a restaurant you believe is good, so I shall refrain from comment until I can taste the food and judge it for myself. Isn’t that right?”

This last question was aimed towards the chef, who also seemed to be the restaurant’s owner, standing behind the counter.

The man had masculine, deep-chiseled features. In a grave voice, he said, “Yes, I won’t make you regret it, buddy,” and gave a winning smile.

“Now then, sir. What do you recommend most? It’s a digression, but my favorite curry is that made by my home chef. Though of course, if Azami recommends this place, I suspect the flavor will be just as good.”

Liking the master’s confident attitude, Ichiro had decided to tailor his words to challenge him even more.

The chef demonstrated a big personality of his own, and headed into the kitchen with lines like, “Heh, time to show my stuff,” and, “Fine, I’ll prepare my secret weapon!”



Ichiro watched him go, then nodded in approval. “He looks like a fine chef. I look forward to his curry, as well.”

“You like provoking people, don’t you?” Azami asked.

“It is not that I like it. But I will acknowledge that I so rarely find people who rise to my challenges that, in my delight, I often find myself saying provoking things,” Ichiro said gleefully, taking a drink of the lemon water set in front of him.

King Kirihito. Edward. Iris. They were all that way. Even Sakurako Ogi, though servile to him, often showed an indomitable strength that he enjoyed, as well. The way she would easily clean up the unreasonable amount of work Ichiro requested of her, then take a break with a triumphant expression, was somehow both invigorating and astonishing.

He wondered if they were having fun right now. It wasn’t impossible that they might get into trouble, given how Iris Brand (or rather, Ichiro Tsuwabuki) had been at the center of quite a bit of controversy as of late. Still, he wasn’t terribly worried. Kirschwasser could probably handle it.

“You’re a rather unusual person,” Azami said.

“I suppose I am.” Ichiro recognized that his personality was very different from that of the average person.

“Your actions in the game would suggest that you enjoy making enemies,” she added.

“That’s a misleading way of putting it,” Ichiro frowned. “But the reasoning is similar to what I explained, so I’ll admit that it’s true in a certain sense. It’s not a bad thing to have rivals in one’s life.”

“Even if you beat those rivals with less-than-mature methods?” she asked.

“Whether or not a method is immature, and whether or not it is wrong to use it, is a subjective matter, so I shall not comment. I merely believe that I should use everything at my disposal, and that is true all the more when it comes to things I want to do.”

His long-winded explanation would usually cause Iris to say something like,

“Young heir, you’re gross.” But his attempts to be as careful and fair as possible in his statements were just an attempt to prevent misunderstanding.

“That’s why you buy so many microtransactions?” Azami asked. “Of course, my company is very grateful for it...”

“Well, yes,” Ichiro said. “My money is an extension of my talents, after all. Seeing how far I can take it in an online game bound by numerical restrictions is, to be honest, quite a refreshing way of enjoying things.”

Azami Nono’s expression was mixed. *NaroFan* had earned nicknames like “Crap Game Online” for its poor game balance. But as a creator, she clearly wasn’t trying to upset people, so it was possible that Ichiro’s “paying to win” playstyle was frustrating to her, too.

Noting her expression, Ichiro decided to change the subject. “I tried to ask you this at Megumi’s party, but...”

“Yes?”

“The rock I ate at the Volgund Volcanoes. I never heard your answer for that.”

“Oh...” Azami Nono smiled wryly.

Once, Ichiro had picked up a rock he found in one of the game’s fields and tried to put it in his mouth. He hadn’t been able to swallow it, but the taste and texture had seemed entirely real. Considering the limitations on the data the servers could store, it was hard to believe that every single object in the game could have data individually programmed into it. Thus, he was curious.

Azami, seeming to prefer this line of discussion, immediately relaxed and answered him. “There are two systems: the recognition program and the collective intelligence system. If I may, Ichiro, have you read my thesis?”

“I have,” Ichiro said. “The recognition program, eh? I remember it mentioning something like that. The collective intelligence system refers to data analysis through machine learning algorithms and statistics, yes?”

“That’s right.”

In other words, most things in the game environment weren’t programmed in advance. The ability to send detailed data directly to the player about whatever

they were focusing attention on — the feeling of “this is like this” — came from the recognition system. The collective intelligence system used various crowdsourced information to bolster that ability. The Miraive Gear’s brainwave scanner could collect such recognitions from all players and unify them, in order to compile data regarding an average worldview.

The taste and texture of the rock that Ichiro had tried hadn’t been programmed into quantum signals by the designers; it had been the result of an average of unconscious recognitions taken from many players. A unified feeling of “I bet it tastes and feels like that.” Of course, the average might also have incorporated the thoughts of some people who really had tried eating rocks before... But regardless, the collective intelligence let people seamlessly experience all kinds of things the programmers had never put their hands on.

These two systems worked together to enhance Narrow Fantasy Online’s larger setting while reducing the burden on the server significantly.

“I see,” Ichiro said.

“We also have a council system run by AI, known as the Ten Sages.”

Ichiro offered an expression of mild, but genuine, interest, which encouraged Azami to continue.

“They’re learning artificial intelligences I developed in my time at MIT. Rosemary, Coriander, Cicely, Lemon Balm... I let them handle the maintenance duties.”

“All names of herbs?” Ichiro asked.

“It’s a bad pun — sages, sages...” Azami gave a shy laugh. “The collective intelligence system can also collect data on what players want, and what they’re not happy about. They amass it all together, then debate whether it needs attention or not. Of course, if it’s something the devs should be involved in, we’re the ones who make the final judgment. We’ll also review the issue directly if the Ten Sages Council can’t reach a particular majority either way.”

This was the first time Ichiro had ever heard of artificial intelligence running a game. But then, Azami’s major had been quantum physics, the foundation for quantum computers, so perhaps it was only natural that she would create such

a thing.

“That reminds me,” Azami said with sudden inspiration. “One of the Ten Sages, Rosemary, has shown interest in you.”

“An AI, interested in me?” he asked.

“Yes, she’s the learning AI I mentioned before... She has an algorithm to seek out collected intelligence, which allows her to have some degree of interest, and personal judgment. This is the first time she’s taken interest in an individual, though. I guess your actions in the game have been ‘interesting’ to her.”

“Hmm...” Ichiro said.

It was around that time that the store’s owner came out of the kitchen, carrying two dishes of curry rice from which wafted an absolutely heavenly smell. There was still an indomitable smile on the man’s stern, attractive face, but compared to before, there was a strange sense of weariness, which was in turn overshadowed by a proud aura of achievement. He must have been fighting a grand battle that the two of them would never know.

“Here you are.” After setting the curry dishes on the counter, the chef went back into the kitchen.

“Well, it does look quite delicious,” said Ichiro.

“I’ve been to this store a few times before, but I’ve never had this curry...” Azami murmured.

“He did say it was his *secret* weapon.” Ichiro picked up his spoon and returned to the previous subject. “Now, about this ‘Rosemary’ AI...”

“Oh, are you interested?” she asked.

“Yes, a bit.” Ichiro was the kind of person who found the progress of science very exciting.

What form would “interest” take in the artificial intelligence that Azami Nono had developed? How flexible were its thought patterns? That one simple statement had filled him with so much curiosity.

“Then after we get back to the company, let’s have a ‘talk’ with her,” said Azami.

“Are you sure that’s all right?”

“Yes, I think it’s good for Rosemary to have new experiences.”

A conversation with an artificial intelligence would be a new frontier, even for Ichiro. Recently, bot technology had produced various top-down conversation programs and chatbots, and most of those could be interacted with on the internet via SNS. But he’d never had a conversation with a “true AI” with both intelligence and reasoning ability.

“I’d be happy to join you, then,” Ichiro said. The thought of experiencing the unknown caused his heart to leap. Ichiro happily dug a spoon into his curry.

It was quite delicious, as befitting the owner’s “secret weapon.”

It was around that time that the beach started growing less crowded, perhaps due to much of the player base logging out for lunch. As the seaside population grew sparse, Iris and Felicia started feeling playful again and decided to spend some time with a beach ball.

“Face my fireball miracle pitch!” Felicia shouted as she jumped high, arched her entire body back, and struck the ball with one hand, sending it flying with amazing speed. Her impressive “Throwing” Skill — grinded to high levels on the advice of a friend — amplified her serve appropriately, causing her so-called “fireball miracle pitch” to indeed take on a violent spin and a wreathed-by-fire visual (though with no corresponding elemental property attached). “Hydrooo Blasteeeeer!”

“Eek!” Iris just barely dodged it. Spinning like a gyroball, the “fireball miracle pitch” smashed into the sand at her feet, and continued spinning even as it dug its way deeper, spraying fine particles all over the surrounding area.

Iris’s terror displayed itself in a game-amplified cold sweat visual as she gazed upon what Felicia’s ball had wrought.

“Felicia! I’m starting to think beach volleyball between a physical class and a spellcaster class may have a fatal flaw!” she cried.

“I’m starting to think you’re right!” Felicia agreed.

i

“And the ball being the property of one of the players would appear to make things even more unfair!”

“I’m starting to think you’re right!”

“By the way, what is ‘Hydro Blaster’?”

“It’s my miracle pitch in development,” Felicia said. “My coach named it.”

Just what kind of miracle pitch was Felicia’s softball coach trying to develop? Surely it wasn’t meant to spin at high velocity, get wreathed in flames, and dig a hole into the ground. Iris had serious doubts about this game serving as — as Felicia’s coach had apparently put it — “miracle pitch image training.”

She let out a small sigh and picked up the metal ball from where it had dug itself into the ground. It was exactly beach ball-sized, but when she picked it up, it gave a small tremble and then turned its face to look at her.

It was the second monster that the Beast Tamer Felicia had “tamed.” Its race was Iron Sphere, its name was Gobo-Two, and it could change its size to some degree. It and Felicia’s Power Golem, Gobo, were the gallant mechanical monsters that stood by her side day and night as she worked to develop her miracle pitch.

“Gobo-Two, come here.” When Felicia clapped her hands, the Iron Sphere fell out of Iris’s arms and rolled over towards its master. It had some degree of programmed personality, and the way it rolled around her feet like a scampering animal was the result of a combination of thought patterns.

Iris knew it was all computer code, but she was still a bit jealous of Felicia and her pet, even if the “pet” was just a lump of metal.

“He’s lost a few HP,” Felicia said. “I’m going to have Mr. Kirsch heal him up.”

“If he’d hit me, I would’ve lost more than just a few HP!” Iris exclaimed.

A direct hit from Felicia’s Hydro Blaster would probably have dropped her HP to 0 instantly, leaving nothing of Iris behind but her swimsuit, dropped in accordance with the game’s death penalty.

Her respawn point was her room in their guild house, and while she'd still be in her underwear and not actually nude, the thought of dying and leaving her bikini on the beach was still incredibly mortifying.

They took Gobo-Two back to the cabana, only to find Kirschwasser and Matsunaga scowling at each other across a game board.

"Mr. Kirsch, we're back," said Iris.

"Welcome back," Kirschwasser greeted them. "How did you enjoy beach volleyball?"

"Using Gobo-Two as a ball turned out to be... problematic," said Iris.

"Could you heal him?" Felicia asked.

"Certainly." Kirschwasser smiled gently, and a sparkling green light visual poured from his outstretched gauntlet as he cast "Heal." He was primarily a front-liner, so his healing powers weren't very potent, but it was enough for the low-HP Iron Sphere.

"So, what are you playing?" Iris asked.

"Shogi," Matsunaga said as he moved a piece across the board. "And if I may say, Sir Kirschwasser is quite skilled."

"Ha ha ha." Kirschwasser laughed and moved a piece in response. "My older brothers trained me on the game. As board games go, I am of course also skilled at mahjong."

"There are shogi boards in this game?" asked Felicia.

"I made it using the graphic designer," said Iris smoothly. "The pieces were all originally rings."

She had made it to pass the copious free time she'd had while waiting for customers to enter the guild house.

Iris herself was quite good at shogi, thanks to her late grandfather's influence, but she was still the least skilled player among the current membership of Iris Brand. She had asked for rematch after rematch in frustration, yet the young heir beat her easily every time.

Ah, but there was no point in dwelling on such infuriating things.

“Not a lot of people left on the beach, huh?” Iris asked. “I guess it’s because it’s lunchtime... Funny, I think of MMO players as people who forget to do things like eat and sleep.”

“That’s something of a stereotype... although I won’t deny its veracity,” Matsunaga responded as he studied the shogi board carefully. “However, this game monitors the player’s physiology and employs a built-in alarm system. If you ignore your hunger for too long, it will automatically log you out. The same goes for sleep, I imagine. The devs need their players in good health, after all.”

The words were logical, but Felicia tilted her head. “But isn’t there a player who’s said to have never logged out since the game started?”

“Tomakomai, you mean?” Matsunaga asked. “Yes, he is quite the mystery.”

“If he’s never logged out since the game started, shouldn’t he be dead?” Iris asked, knitting her brow.

It was a reasonable question, but the other three could neither confirm nor deny the suggestion.

“What do you think, Iris, Lady Felicia?” Sir Kirschwasser asked. “Shall we take lunch, as well?”

“Hmm, I’d like to enjoy myself while there aren’t as many people around...” Iris said.

“Me, too!” Felicia agreed, hugging Gobo-Two.

Felicia had her swimsuit, after all. Even if she couldn’t swim, she wanted to get her fill of the beach with as few people watching as possible.

“Then let’s take it easy a little while longer,” said Kirschwasser. “Ah, Lord Matsunaga, checkmate.”

There was a small, satisfying click, and Matsunaga winced. “Ah, well done...”

“Even so,” Iris said, “we can’t play beach volleyball, we can’t swim... what should we do?”

“Iris, they have Sun Oil Potions!” Felicia said, producing a suspicious-looking

potion she had acquired from somewhere.

“Do you drink it? Or apply it? I wonder if it has any mechanical effect...” Iris wrinkled her nose.

“Well, I guess sunbathing in the game isn’t bad...” Iris murmured.

“Iris, do you not like getting tan?” Felicia asked.

“Not a lot,” said Iris. “It would be nice to have a tan for summer, but it limits your clothing options. What about you, Felicia?”

“I’m in the softball club, so even if I’m careful, I can get pretty dark,” she said.

“Yeah, you said you’re an all-around sports girl, right?” Iris nodded.

The two girls were chatting and drawing pictures in the sand. They couldn’t make the pictures very precise, but Iris was addicted enough to her work that whatever she tried to draw always ended up as clothing designs.

“Hmm, designs... designs...” she murmured.

“Iris, do you go to a design school?” Felicia asked. “Do you need to do design croquis drawings for summer homework?”

“Yeah, I do,” Iris said wearily. “I do. Yeah...”

Summer vacation had only just started, so there was no rush to get through it all just yet. Still, Iris was in a constant struggle with her motivation. She didn’t have any ideas now, and there was no guarantee that she might have any soon, which made the month and a half ahead of her feel very fleeting indeed. It was a type of impatience unique to creators, which made it perhaps a little difficult for Felicia to understand.

“Well, like they say, ‘The worry’s always larger than the flask,’” Felicia said.

“It’s ‘The worry’s always harder than the task,’” Iris corrected. It was an old proverb, used to encourage those facing a difficult trial ahead, but it wasn’t useful in this situation. To be able to produce things without worrying required tremendous confidence in your abilities, which was a talent all its own.

Yes, just like...

The young heir's smiling face popped into her mind. She expressionlessly smashed the image with a backfist. She wanted confidence, but not that sort of confidence.

Yes, just like...

Like Megumi Fuyo, president and head designer of the cutting-edge fashion brand MiZUNO. Iris idolized her. She had had her own period of self-doubt long ago, it seemed, but she had overcome it, and now she stood at the vanguard of the fashion world.

At the vanguard of the fashion world, with no doubts about her own talent. She was the subject of Iris's envy, and her inspiration, as well.

Iris was also a personal fan of her designs. Whenever there was an interview with Megumi Fuyo involved, be it on TV or in a magazine, Iris never failed to take it in. Every time she did, she felt her dream — *I want to be like her!* — swell grander in her mind.

"Iris? Iris?" As Iris's thoughts carried her away, Felicia waved her hand in front of her.

Iris snapped back to the present. "Um — oh! Sorry, Felicia. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," Felicia said. "I was just thinking, you've drawn a lot of clothing in the sand..."

"Oh, you're right," Iris said. While daydreaming, she had drawn copious line drawings in the sands of Manyfish Beach. Gobo-Two dropped out of Felicia's arms to weave in and out between the lines.

"Well, I have a lot to think about," Iris said. "Dreams for the future and such..."

"That got deep," said Felicia.

"I guess it did. What about you, Felicia? Do you want to be a softball player when you grow up?"

"Hmm, my coach says that perfecting the Hydro Blaster won't be enough to make it in the pro world, so..."

"Just how demanding is Japanese pro softball?" Iris asked incredulously. She

was not the kind of person who could accept “insufficient talent” as a reason to give up. She gazed leisurely at the rolling Gobo-Two, and reached the vague conclusion that she had no choice but to keep trying her best.

That was when it happened.

Despite the beach being mostly deserted now, they heard some rather lively chatter nearby. Turning over to see, they saw a diminutive person walking towards them across the beach, drawing glances from all sides.

“Hey, I know her...” said one person.

“Yeah, the girl who has 2,000 or 3,000 friends...” a friend agreed.

Mixed in with the voices, Iris heard unreal numbers being spoken. But immediately, Felicia’s voice joined in.

“H-Hey, I think I know her.”

“Again?!” Iris couldn’t stop the thought from popping out of her mouth. “Felicia, you know a lot of amazing people!”

“Really?” Felicia asked. “Well, I was hanging out with Itchy and Kiryuhito, so I guess I ended up meeting them whether I wanted to or not.”

“Oh, I get it! Just like me with Ed and Bossman!” Iris exclaimed nervously. If this was someone else Felicia had met while hanging around with Ichiro, it couldn’t lead to anything good. Iris had a bad feeling about this. She was being swarmed by people the young heir knew today, and she couldn’t help but feel like some unknown problem he had caused was being foisted on her without warning.

Perhaps it was a baseless feeling, but it was still there.

“Er, so, Felicia, what is her name?” Iris asked.

“Ohhhh, Amesho! It’s me!” somebody called.

“You’re still the cutest in the world today!” another cried.

“Say ‘Me-ow do you do’!” a third said excitedly.

A horde of attractive but anonymous men had gathered on the beach, seemingly out of nowhere, just to praise the girl.

To be honest, Iris thought, they seemed less like friends and more like paparazzi.

“...So her name’s Amesho, then?” Iris asked, dryly.

“Yeah. Right...” Felicia nodded.

“Amesho” referred to... “American Shorthair,” then?

“That swimsuit looks great on you, Amesho!” a man called.

“Your belly button is so sexy, Amesho!” cried another.

“Even the summer sun must be jealous of you, Amesho!” praised a third.

“Me-ow do you do!” Amesho giggled back.

At last, the object of all the men’s compliments came into view.

The sight hit Iris like a lightning bolt.

That wasn’t a metaphor; in *NaroFan*, a significant shock to a player’s system was accompanied by a flashy lightning visual — yet another silly detail the dev team had wasted their time on — and if that player touched someone else afterwards, it dealt slight lightning attribute damage.

“What’s wrong, Iris?” Felicia asked. Despite standing next to her, she had been able to avoid damage thanks to her Iron Sphere’s enemy Skill “Lightning Rod.”

“Um, that girl Amesho...” Iris began.

“Yeah?”

“Her swimsuit’s an original design...”

“Ahh...”

“And it’s got much better fashion sense than mine!” Iris cried.

“I’ll agree with that...”

Yes, as the crowds parted and they saw the girl, they could see her petite, curveless body clad in a rather mature-looking high-fashion swimsuit. The delicate sunflower pattern spoke of the excellent taste of its designer. Despite the amount of skin on display, it didn’t look vulgar, thanks to a wholesome

pareo wrapped around her hips.

Truly...

“You look like the goddess of summer, Amesho!” a man shouted.

...indeed.

Iris couldn’t even speak; the best she could manage was, “Gnnngh.” She felt like her pride had been pounded into dust. At the same time, she was starting to feel apologetic about putting Felicia in that other, more questionable swimsuit.

“Oh, it’s Felicia! Meow-hoo!” Amesho called with an enthusiastic wave. Judging from her cat ears, she was an Anthromorph, and the tail peeking out from her pareo waved back and forth in sync with her hand.

“Hey-ho, Amesho!” Felicia waved back.

“You’re lookin’ good,” Amesho said cheerfully. “Is this a new beast?”

“Yeah,” Felicia said. “It’s Gobo-Two.”

“Aww, nice to meetcha!” Amesho crouched down and patted the Iron Sphere on the “head.” The groupies crowding behind her all let out envious sighs.

Amesho didn’t seem at all bothered to have the men look at her in a swimsuit. Maybe it was just that she was used to it, but either way, it showed considerable grace.

Perhaps noticing Iris and Felicia wincing over the men’s stares, Amesho let out a little cough and suddenly started squirming. “It’s a little mew-miliating, having you all stare at me...”

At once, the men dispersed with a unified cry of distress. Truly, her fans were well-trained.

“Feelin’ better?” Amesho asked.

“Ah, yeah,” Felicia said. “Thanks. I guess you’re pretty popular, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Amesho. “They’re all my precious friends! They give me rare items and stuff all the time!”

The words gave a brief glimpse into Amesho’s calculating nature.

The catgirl then turned her eyes to Iris — who had been silent so far — with a bright smile, affable enough to make even the heart of Iris, as a fellow woman, flutter.

Iris didn't think there were that many "smile" emotes in the game, but Amesho's smile in that moment felt optimized to get past a person's defenses.

"I'm Amesho. Are you Iris?"

"Y-Yeah," Iris said. "Um, you know me?"

"Maybe," said Amesho. "Hey, can I add you to my friends list?"

It was clearly a bit of a stock phrase, yet Iris felt no resistance to it. At the earnest-seeming girl's urging, she accepted the friend request.

"Hee hee hee, thanks!" Amesho giggled. "Now we're friends!"

"Ah, yeah. I guess we are..." Iris said. Something about Amesho's smile disarmed any sense of danger about it. Iris knew she was being grifted, yet she couldn't refuse her.

"Hey, Amesho. Did you make that swimsuit?" Felicia cut in with the question Iris was finding so hard to ask.

"Oh, nyah. It was made for me as part of a finder's fee."

"Made *for* you?" Felicia asked.

"Yeah," said Amesho.

"Um... by whom?" Felicia asked.

"Nem."

The word caused Iris to freeze.

That name was familiar.

Not just familiar. She didn't want to admit it, but it was a name she couldn't have forgotten if she tried. The woman who, as part of some conflict she was having with the young heir, had come in and picked a fight with her.

Iris remembered Nem's words well. *It's nothing.* Unlike the incident with Edward, Nem had been referring to her design sense, which had given the

words an extra sting.

Now, she found out that the swimsuit that filled her with such a crippling feeling of inferiority had been made by Nem.

Amesho giggled at the contortions in Iris's expression. "I heard what happened between you and Nem. You really are jealous of her purr-fect fashion sense, huh?"

"Yeah..." Iris murmured. It was a rather mean-spirited thing to say, but Iris wasn't so narrow-minded as to fly into a rage over it. She could admit it: the aesthetic ability required to offhandedly design something like the swimsuit Amesho was wearing was fatally lacking in her right now.

At the same time, she couldn't understand why someone with so much talent would bother picking a fight with her. The young heir had admitted she was being drawn into some kind of crossfire between him and Nem. But why Iris?

"Actually, Iris..." Amesho whispered into Iris's ear as the young designer scowled, deep in thought. "...Nem's here right me-ow. You wanna just talk to her?"

At those words, Iris looked up. "Nem is... here?"

"Yeah, I think it'd be best for both of you," Amesho said.

It was true that Iris had to find out once and for all what exactly Nem had against her. Judging from the woman's behavior, it didn't seem like a problem they could just talk out, but still, it was unsettling to have someone holding such a grudge against her and not to know the reason why. There was also a distinct possibility that Nem was just under a misapprehension.

But just as she was thinking that...

"There you are," a voice said. "I've been searching everywhere."

Iris didn't even have to wonder who it was.

"Whoa, speak of the devil," Felicia said.

"Excuse me," the woman rebuked Felicia for her rude exclamation.

It was Nem. She was standing there, arms folded. Although she had

apparently designed Amesho's bathing suit, she herself was still dressed the way she had been in the guild house previously. Either way, it was armor she had designed that put her taste on full display, and that was enough to inflame Iris's sense of inferiority.

"Meow-hoo, Nem!" Amesho cried. "I'm lovin' the swimsuit!"

"...I am happy to hear that," Nem replied tersely to Amesho's bright and cheery exclamation.

"Nem, you're not gonna wear a swimsuit?" Amesho asked.

"Yes, I'd prefer not to," Nem said.

"But the two behind you are wearing 'em..."

Just as Amesho had observed, there were a man and a woman standing behind Nem in swimsuits that looked like her designs. An Anthromorph man and a Human girl. The girl carried a parasol and wore a lace bikini with a flower pattern, while the man wore boomerang pants done up in white and indigo. Despite the little fabric involved, Nem's design sense still shone through.

They hadn't even been competing, yet Iris felt like she had lost. She only barely managed to remain in her right mind by focusing her eyes on the shark inner tube the man was holding at his side.

"Taker and Sorceress, you both look so good!" Amesho exclaimed.

"Our guild leader told us to wear them," Taker said flatly. "What could we do?"

"Well, I like mine," said Sorceress. "It's nice. I have so few opportunities to wear them in the real world."

The two players standing behind her, exchanging light banter, appeared to be more of Amesho's "friends." Hesitantly, Iris repeated one word that had caught her attention.

"'Guild'?"



“Yes, guild,” Nem confirmed. “I found it necessary to have one in order to settle things with you, Iris.”

“W-Wait a minute...” Iris panicked as she saw the challenge in Nem’s eyes. “I, um, I don’t see what I’ve done to earn your... wrath...”

It wasn’t that she was trying to back out. If this woman was going to throw down a gauntlet, she’d have no choice but to pick it up. But she wasn’t going to do that without understanding the reason why.

*No, that’s a lie*, Iris thought as she analyzed herself objectively. She did want to back out, a little. To be honest, seeing Nem’s design sense on display like this — with Amesho’s swimsuit, Nem’s outfit, Taker’s swimsuit, and Sorceress’s swimsuit all in a row — made her realize all the more acutely how distant the prospect of victory was for her.

“I feel no wrath towards you whatsoever,” Nem insisted.

It was hard to believe, though. There was something very black in the woman’s gaze whenever she looked at Iris. What could it be, besides fury or loathing?

“Then what’s your problem?” Iris asked. “It’s got something to do with the young heir, right?”

As Iris said that, Nem fell silent, and the emotion in her gaze grew even more intense.

“Just what did he do to you?” Iris pressed.

“He...” Nem began, staring intently at Iris’s swimsuit. “He likes the brooch and the clothing you design very much, doesn’t he?”

“Y-Yeah,” Iris said. “Well... Yeah.”

Iris’s noncommittal answer stemmed from her mixed emotions on the matter. The fact that the young heir liked her designs was one of the few things Iris could take pride in; at the same time, she was ashamed that the only one who liked them had to be someone so odious. She would have preferred to have the approval of the world at large, but that wasn’t to say she wasn’t happy about his approval. It was a complicated feeling.

But what problem, exactly, did Nem have with that?

Iris waited patiently for a response, but Nem said nothing more.

Just as she was beginning to find the silence unbearable, Felicia finally tilted her head, and spoke in Iris's place. "Um, is that it?"

Nem looked up with stern eyes, glaring first at Felicia, then at Iris. "It is a very serious problem for me!" Her frenzied cry caught the attention of the various men playing around on the beach. "After all, it's bizarre! And I am not the kind of person to criticize the design work of others!"

"But you said 'It's nothing' before, didn't you?" Iris asked.

"Because it *is* nothing!" Nem cried.

And yet, the fact that she had said that was far from nothing.

Iris was aware that the difference between her designs and Nem's was like the difference between a mud puddle and a cloud. But having the woman sneer like that to her face was a serious shock to her system. The force of it just left her with her mouth flapping uselessly.

"Um..." It was Felicia who ended up speaking for her. "So what you're saying is, you can't understand why Itchy likes Iris's designs?"

Nem fixed her eyes on her, then gave a single, emphatic nod.

"I d-don't know what you want me to do about that..." It took all of Iris's presence of mind just to wring those words out from her throat.

*Damn,* she cursed internally.

Nem was being utterly unreasonable. It should have made her furious, but when she tried to respond, that was the best she could muster. It was pathetic, yet the phenomenon she had seen so often in battle manga — where an overwhelming difference in power sapped a hero's will to fight — appeared to have some truth to it. After being shown Nem's polished design sense, and hearing words like that, there was no way that her soul could fail to break.

Nem probably had recognition from many more people than Iris did. She had the talent to earn the acceptance of herself and others. Why should she care so much about the opinion of the young heir? Why was she so obsessed with that

man, to the point of picking a fight with someone so far beneath her?

“Being judged on your talent is an awful, cruel thing...” Amesho said, almost as if to answer Iris’s question.

That was when Iris realized the true nature of the emotion she was seeing in Nem’s eyes. She had thought the blackness in her gaze was hatred or anger, but thinking about it rationally, it was an emotion much closer to Iris’s heart.

Jealousy.

In school, Iris herself had looked this way at girls who were at the same grade level, yet produced better work than her. At times like that, people lost the ability to look objectively at their work and became obsessed with their preconceived notion of “I’m supposed to be better than you.”

*Oh, no,* Iris thought. It was the Edward incident all over again. But this time, it was different. This time, Nem really was far, far better than her...

“Iris,” the woman said.

“Y-Yes?!” Iris shot ramrod straight under Nem’s unwavering glare. She knew how pathetic she must look right now. She was just glad that man wasn’t here to see it.

“What I want to know is, what is it that Ichiro likes about you so much?” Nem asked.

“H-How should I know? Ask him!”

*Damn,* she cursed internally once more.

Damn that young heir. Ever since he had told her that he knew this woman, she had had a bad feeling about what was to come. But she hadn’t thought it would be this severe. She knew what this was, now: some kind of mad infatuation.

*You take the reins of this madwoman!* she wanted to cry.

Of course, that assumption came purely from Iris’s own biases and preconceptions, but knowing it was the result of Ichiro’s totally lassiez-faire attitude towards everyone suggested she couldn’t be completely off the mark. Really, both women were victims here.

Iris's mind continued to churn, struggling to find a way out of this fire, either by running or breaking through it, when...

"A-Amesho..." Felicia asked the cat-eared girl, with an air of hesitance.

"Mmyeah?"

"D-Does this atmosphere seem a little dangerous to you?" Felicia asked.

"Mm, guess so."

A situation this serious, dismissed with, "Mm, guess so"? Iris looked spitefully towards Amesho. She was the one who'd proposed they "talk it out," yet here she was, watching the situation with only the mildest of interest.

Amesho wasn't going to keep Nem in line. There was no way of even knowing what she was thinking.

What about the two Nem had brought with her, then? Iris looked towards the two avatars, apparently named Taker and Sorceress. As usual, Taker was standing bolt-upright, holding his shark inner tube with a sour look on his bizarre, beast-like face. Sorceress was casually twirling her parasol, sipping a Tropical Potion she had picked up at some point through a straw. Frankly, neither of them could be counted on, either. They were on Nem's side to begin with.

"It looks like the situation has become rather complicated," a voice said.

Iris was just starting to think that if things got really bad, she could just log out, when help arrived from an angle she had previously completely forgotten. It was the tea-serving silver fox, the Knight Sir Kirschwasser.

Iris turned back to him, her expression suddenly brightening. Even the sight of that Full Plate Armor of his, so stifling under the hot summer sun, did not change how reassured she was to see his gentle smile.

Nem cast him a suspicious glance.

"Pardon me for interrupting, but I fear I cannot let this continue," Kirschwasser replied.

"We met before at Iris's guild house, didn't we?" Nem asked. "Who are you?"

“I am a servant to the house of Tsuwabuki. My name is Kirschwasser.” The clench of his gauntleted hand was accompanied by a heavy clink of metal. Then he smiled, a teasing smile of a sort Iris and the others rarely saw from him, and continued. “Oh, and I am his live-in servant in real life, as well.”

Nem was taken completely off-guard by his words. Her eyes opened wide, and she glared at Kirschwasser anew.

This reaction... yes, it was definitely infatuation. Iris felt a bit weary about it all. First Felicia, now Nem... didn’t any of them have proper taste in men?

Either way, Kirschwasser was male, and couldn’t be any kind of proper rival to her. Still, Iris was a little surprised; she hadn’t expected to see him say something that would further stir the pot.

“Me-*wow*,” Amesho exclaimed. “Kirsch, are you like a butler?”

“I am.” Whether he was aware of Iris’s surprise or not, Kirschwasser answered Amesho’s question calmly. “But all that aside...” He returned things to the main subject as he stepped in between Iris’s group and Nem’s. “...if we are to talk, it seems appropriate that we should cool our heads first. It seems to me that you are both failing to communicate with the other.”

“This is none of your business,” Nem snapped.

“That is untrue. Tsuwabuki himself told me that if anything was to happen, I was to keep things under control in his stead.” Kirschwasser’s words seemed to be especially directed towards Nem, who kept trying to label him as an outsider.

The emotion in Nem’s eyes grew more intense as she glared at the Knight. Kirschwasser’s in-game combat role was primarily that of a tank, and while that was more or less irrelevant here, he seemed rather skilled at drawing interpersonal aggro, as well.

“For now, it is just about noon,” Kirschwasser said. “Why don’t we have some lunch? I believe it’s necessary that we cool our heads, Lady Nem.”

His calm suggestion that they disperse for an hour seemed to be an attempt to diffuse the situation. Iris put a relieved hand to her chest, grateful to Kirschwasser. If the young heir had been here, he might have just poured oil on

the flames. How nice it was to have a mature man around!

Nem seemed less enthusiastic about Kirschwasser's suggestion, which must have seemed to her more like an escape plan. It was only natural; if she let them leave now, there was no guarantee they'd log in again.

But...

"Let's do as he says, Leader." The man who had been quiet the entire time — in other words, the strange Anthromorph, Taker, who was hugging the shark inner tube — said to Nem, without mincing words.

"I'm in favor, too," replied Sorceress, releasing the straw of the Tropical Potion in her mouth long enough to agree. "If they had just wanted to run away, they could have already logged out with the press of a button. I think we should be grateful they even made the offer."

Her two guild mates both seemed quite a bit more level-headed than Nem was. A more penetrating consideration of them would suggest that they weren't very deeply connected to Nem — they were in the same guild, but they were less like friends and more like hired hands.

"...Very well." It seemed Nem's two mercenaries had convinced her to show some restraint. "I agree to your offer. We'll meet here again in an hour and a half. Is that acceptable?"

"Certainly," Sir Kirschwasser said. "Does that seem agreeable, Iris?"

"Um, y-yeah. Yeah. I'll be here." Iris was rather taken aback by the question, since Kirschwasser had completely taken over the discussion otherwise, but she agreed.

Nem turned her eyes, still lit with malice, towards her once again, and spoke. "I shall take my leave, then. Good day, Iris, Kirschwasser."

"What about me?!" Felicia cried out hysterically, still holding Gobo-Two. Naturally, she received no response as Nem, Taker, and Sorceress all logged out.

The only ones left on the beach now were Iris, Kirschwasser, Felicia (with Gobo-Two), and Amesho.

Well, and also a few rubberneckers scattered here and there who had been watching the proceedings. After all, just seeing women in the game was rare enough, and here there had been tons of women in swimsuits all in one place.

“I have a feeling this isn’t going to go away...” Iris said immediately after Nem left.

“Indeed,” Kirschwasser said. “And from the way Lady Amesho and Lord Matsunaga were acting, I suspect that they wanted it to happen.” Kirschwasser cast a glance at Amesho, who was just flashing peace signs at them unconcernedly. “Is Nem your friend, too?”

“Hmm, nyota friend yet, I guess,” said Amesho. “Nem’s the kind of person who’s gotta be careful how she chooses her friends. I decided not to put myself in the running.”

Her tone was matter-of-fact, but also suggested some consideration for Nem. Which part better reflected the cat’s true nature? Iris, who had only been her “friend” for about half an hour, couldn’t say.

“Mr. Kirsch... Um, wh-what are we gonna do?” Felicia asked timidly. Iris was curious about that, too, but Kirschwasser just shrugged.

“I cannot say. If it comes to it, I shall bear the brunt of her wrath. But first, I feel we should hear her out. Isn’t that right, Lord Matsunaga?” Kirschwasser looked towards the smiling, nasty Elf who was eating a Shaved Ice Potion near the cabana.

“Now, why would you ask me that?” the Elf asked. As usual, there was something sticky in his smile. The strawberry milk concoction seemed painfully unsuited to him.

“Did she receive not only Lady Amesho’s sponsorship, but yours, as well?” Sir Kirschwasser asked.

“I won’t claim that she didn’t,” he shrugged. “But there’s not much that I can tell you... In the end, this is between Nem and Iris.”

Iris would have liked to raise an objection to that. It was the young heir’s fault that Nem was picking a fight with her, so how was she supposed to know what to do? If Nem had a problem with anything, she should really ask the young heir

about it.

It was all such a murky business.

Noting Iris's scowl, Kirschwasser smiled wryly. "Were you bothered by Lady Nem's attitude?"

"Yeah..." Iris said. "I mean, who cares that the young heir likes me?"

"I care!" Felicia insisted, hugging Gobo-Two.

Iris could understand the sentiment, certainly, but... "She's so talented compared to me. Why is she worried about that one minor thing?"

"That is another reason I wanted you to both reflect upon the matter with cooler heads," said Kirschwasser. "It is just as in the incident with Lord Edward. You are not at fault, and therefore, you may comport yourself with confidence. That is how Master Ichiro feels, as well."

"So who *is* at fault?" Iris demanded.

"It would not be my place to say," Kirschwasser responded. "Regardless of with whom the fault lies, I will follow my orders."

"I thought you'd say something like that..."

Kirschwasser's refusal to speak ill of his master stemmed from unwavering loyalty — an admirable trait, perhaps. But knowing Kirschwasser would shield her — literally — did made Iris feel better.

"Now, I believe it's just about lunchtime," said Kirschwasser. "Let us log out and eat. Cliché though it may be to say, one cannot wage war on an empty stomach."

"You think there's gonna be a war?" Felicia asked unhappily.

"It would only be responsible to prepare for one, although I wonder if it could be avoidable..." Kirschwasser murmured, all the while staring into the distance, knowingly.

# 4 - Noble Son, Tell

As expected, things had gotten quite bad.

Sakurako crawled out of her Miraive Gear Cocoon and gazed off into the distance, a recreation of Kirschwasser's gaze in the game. There was a dignity about her not usually seen in ladies in their late twenties. Sakurako Ogi had been through a few bloody battles in the first half of her life. Not as many as her master, but she had certainly had her ups and downs.

"Mmm!" Sakurako stretched her arms out wide to get her blood flowing, then left the game room. First things first: she needed lunch. With Ichiro gone, she didn't need to make anything too fancy, but one of the cup ramens from the stock in her room wouldn't be filling enough to serve as battle rations.

"Maybe I'll make udon..." She could take advantage of Ichiro's absence to make curry, but that would take a long time, and there would be a lot to clean up. She needed time to charge up her soul, so it would be best to make something quick. Tempura would be nice, but the effort of frying things...

Thinking it over, she entered the kitchen.

Nem's statements had made the situation clear enough. Ichiro had clearly treated her badly, but at the same time, her own devotion to him was excessive. For better or worse, she was a rich heiress.

If she was Megumi Fuyo, as Ichiro had said, then she should be about the same age as Sakurako. However, she also seemed to be a rather sheltered girl. She probably didn't know how to vent pent-up feelings of resentment. This likely would never have happened, had Ichiro treated her with more care... but that was one thing that was impossible to hope for.

But that was just fine; cleaning up after her master was a maid's duty. Being the self-declared "perfect life form," Ichiro didn't leave her many opportunities to clean up after him, which made this a valuable chance. As a loyal retainer, she could finally achieve one more of her longstanding desires.

“La la la, lalala, la la la...” Humming the theme song of her favorite robot anime, she came and went from the big kitchen. Just then, the landline phone suddenly rang, and Sakurako was forced to stop both her preparations and her humming. She flew out of the kitchen — liveliness she wouldn’t usually show when her master was around — and grabbed the phone.

She picked up the phone, steadied her voice to its usual tone, and answered. “Yes? Hello?”

“Oh, um... S-Sakurako?”

Sakurako narrowed her eyes at the unexpected voice. “Oh, Asuha. You call us so rarely... This is Sakurako, yes.” She could count the number of times she’d spoken to Ichiro’s cousin on one hand, but she still remembered her very well. “What’s wrong? You need to make sure you eat lunch, okay? We only have an hour, after all.”

“Y-Yeah... I guess you really are Mr. Kirsch, huh?” Asuha asked.

“Hah hah hah! How are you doing, by the way?” Sakurako returned to the kitchen with the receiver still in hand, more shameful deportment she would never show in Ichiro’s presence.

“W-Well...” Asuha said. “Um, she’s picking a fight, right? With us... I mean, with Iris.”

“I see. You’re worried about Iris?” Sakurako smiled as she went about preparing everything for her udon.

“Of course I’m worried,” Asuha said. “What are we gonna do?”

“Good question,” said Sakurako. “I’m sure I don’t need to say this, but we do want to try for a peaceful solution. Nem has something she’s unhappy about, something she can’t reconcile, I suppose. We need to find out for sure what that is, and—”

“She loves Itchy, right?” Asuha interrupted Sakurako’s meandering reply.

But of course, it was only natural that Asuha would be sensitive about that.

“We won’t know that unless she tells us...” Sakurako began.

“But, but... I know she does,” said Asuha. “It’s obvious. You’re an adult, right,

Sakurako? You must be able to tell!”

“One doesn’t need to be an adult to be able to tell.” Sakurako’s lips moved into a wry smile. She had been a late bloomer when it had come to 3D romance in her youth, so Asuha’s precociousness was a bit amusing to her.

“What about Itchy? Does he know? Is he avoiding her? Or does he have filters over his ears so he only hears what he wants to hear?” Asuha demanded.

“You know very well that that is not how Ichiro-sama behaves,” Sakurako said. “I’m sure he’s made his intentions clear to her, in the most heartless way possible.”

“Oh, well,” Asuha said on the other end of the phone after a moment’s pause. “Then he settled it, right?”

“Asuha, life is not like a romance manga or a dating game,” said Sakurako. “Such things cannot be ‘settled’ so easily. The ‘game’ will continue for as long as she wishes to pursue it. It cannot be called under the mercy rule.” Sakurako held the receiver between her cheek and shoulder as she swiftly chopped her ingredients. The chopping was a bit rougher than usual, but she was enough of an experienced chef to still make them roughly uniform and bite-sized.

“Oh...” Asuha sounded a little impressed. “Wow... That’s deep. You really do sound like an adult woman!”

“That is what makes it so cruel,” Sakurako continued, her voice carrying a note of sadness. “It would be fine if things could be clearly broken off, so you could just say, ‘Now it’s over.’ But first loves often linger.”

“Sakurako, did your first love linger?” Asuha asked.

“Yes, about as long as anyone’s did,” Sakurako replied.

“Oh, tell me! What was he like?”

“A soldier for the Principality of Zeon. An extremely talented mobile suit pilot who served the Sahalin family.”

“Uh?” Asuha asked.

“Oh, but never mind about me,” Sakurako said as she dropped the udon in the boiling water. “We don’t actually know for sure if this is Nem’s first love or

not, but one way or another, regardless of how Ichiro-sama has acted towards her, it is clear that she hasn't given up entirely."

"Uh-huh!" Asuha nodded.

"Then, before she managed to sort out her feelings, she found Ichiro-sama showing interest in a clearly inferior designer: Iris. It's only natural that she would find it upsetting. She may feel as though her very existence has been rejected." Sakurako quickly took the udon out of the boiling water, then plunged it into the ice water she'd prepared in advance. "I believe all of that is making it hard for Nem to come to terms with it. That's why I'm hoping she might calm down if they can discuss it with cooler heads."

"From the... um... way that you talk about her... do you know Nem?" Asuha asked.

"I've never spoken to her personally," said Sakurako. "I don't believe she knows of me, either." She was speaking only of what she knew from the fact that Nem was Megumi Fuyo, an acquaintance of Ichiro's, and something of a celebrity. Everything Sakurako was positing about the woman's personality was based on hearsay and conjecture. That was why she was hesitant to try to analyze any deeper, for fear of leaping to false conclusions.

"I see..." Asuha said.

"You aren't going to ask about her?" Sakurako asked.

"The Kiryuhito incident taught me that it's bad manners to reveal someone's IRL information."

"Precisely right," said Sakurako. "Good girl."

Asuha responded with a flattered laugh.

At last, Sakurako drained the water, poured the udon broth over the noodles, and then piled Japanese yam, egg, onion, and ginger on top. A rather lazy udon, in the end. She put the bowl on a tray and took it to the dining room.

"Hey, Sakurako, could I ask one more thing?" Asuha asked.

"Certainly."

"You sound like you hope that talking will calm things down, but if it doesn't,

then what do we do?”

A wrinkle formed on Sakurako’s brow. It was a reasonable concern. In fact, it was overwhelmingly more likely that that would be the case. “We’ll have to resort to force.” Her mixed feelings about the thought came through in her voice. “Of course, I don’t believe that will solve anything. But Nem having recruited two mercenaries is a sign that she’s either willing to resort to it, or is expecting it to be used against her.”

Fighting between players, also known as PvP, was “passively endorsed” by the *NaroFan* development staff. Players were permitted to settle quarrels through force if that was what they wanted.

Taker and Sorceress, the two players Nem had brought with her... Matsunaga and Amesho seemed to know them. Because they had been wearing swimsuits, it was hard to know for sure, but it was easy to imagine that Taker the Anthromorph was a combat-specialized front-line bare-fist fighter, and that Sorceress was a magic support character.

If Nem was bringing those two around with her, she was probably prepared to “resort to force.” But without knowing what Nem wanted to do, or what she wanted Iris to do, they had no way of knowing what might trigger the violence.

“If that happens, I’ll back you up!” Asuha declared. “With my miracle pitch, the Hydro Blaster!”

“I’m very glad for your support,” Sakurako said.

“Okay. I’m gonna eat lunch, too!” Asuha cried.

“Yes, I’ll see you later!” Sakurako agreed.

With a cheery goodbye, Asuha hung up her phone.

Sakurako found herself letting out a sigh. She returned the receiver to its proper place and faced her udon once again. Then, with perfect — or perhaps awful — timing, the phone rang again.

But she wouldn’t be a good maid if that was enough to frustrate her. Sakurako picked up the phone once more with a smile.

“Yes? Hello?”

This time, it was a very familiar voice. “Hello, Sakurako-san. It’s me.”

“Oh, Ichiro-sama.” Sakurako couldn’t help but smile wryly at the thought of getting a phone call from the person who was at the center of this swirling vortex. Even so, it was unusual for her master to call her in the middle of an outing. She wondered what had happened.

“Has something happened?” he asked her.

“Ah?” She was about to say, “That’s my line,” but Sakurako hesitated. Something *had* happened. She knew that Ichiro demonstrated striking intuition from time to time, but she wouldn’t have expected him to call just over a hunch.

He added, “I had a hunch that something had, but if not, I’m glad to hear it.”

It seemed he had called just over that.

“I’ve known you so long that any unexpected behavior becomes all the more surprising...” she breathed.

“Ha ha ha.” The man laughed, seeming to be overjoyed from the bottom of his heart. Ichiro Tsuwabuki was an easygoing man who was rarely in a bad mood to begin with, but today his mood seemed especially good.

*Just as long as he’s having fun,* Sakurako thought. “Has something good happened to you?”

“Not yet. But it might, I suppose,” he said.

“Oho...” Sakurako found herself intrigued. “May I ask?”

“Certainly.” Ichiro explained how he was going to get to talk with the artificial intelligence developed by *NaroFan*’s creator, Azami Nono, during her school days. Sakurako’s understanding of the term “artificial intelligence” was limited to what she had picked up from subculture — the robots of the *Brave* series, for instance. But in the real world, despite the promulgation of quantum computers, artificial intelligence was not really “intelligent.” If Ichiro was excited, regardless of that, then...

“It’s a smart AI, then?” she asked.

“A stupid way of phrasing it, but yes,” he agreed, his own phrasing a very

mean one.

“Well, I think I understand,” she said. “So you’ll be back late, right?”

“Even in the event of a very enjoyable conversation, I’ll be back by evening.”

“I see, Ichiro-sama,” she said. “By the way, today...”

“Yes?”

“Oh, ah. Nothing.” Sakurako was about to tell him what was on her mind, but she stopped herself.

“I see.” Ichiro was the kind of person who would not pursue if you said, “It’s nothing.” There were few men you could afford to be so careless around. “Now, Sakurako-san. Has something happened?”

“O-Oh, are we back to that?” she asked.

“It is the reason I originally called, after all. It’s Nem, isn’t it?”

The seemingly divine intuition that Ichiro demonstrated from time to time was enough to make one think that he wasn’t actually intelligent, but he just had an unwavering tendency to be right about whatever happened to pop out of his mouth. Ichiro had lived with the frustration of getting one question wrong on his university entrance exams when he was nine years old. But if he had determined all the answers with the roll of a die, he probably would have gotten them all right.

“Sakurako-san?” Ichiro prompted.

“Oh, um, yes sir?” she asked. There was nothing recriminating in Ichiro’s voice as he brought Sakurako back from her mind’s ridiculous tangent. “Ah, well, you’re right. I see I cannot hide anything from you, Ichiro-sama.”

In the end, Sakurako told him everything. That Nem had appeared while they were playing on the beach. That she had hired two mercenaries, Taker and Sorceress, and that Matsunaga and Amesho seemed to be helping her, as well. Nem had spoken provocatively to Iris, but they still didn’t have a clue of what, concretely, she wanted.

Then, as a dutiful maid, Sakurako also politely but concisely explained about the fact that they could not go swimming properly on the beach without Skills,

and about the friendly exchanging of conversations they had had with friends such as the Knights and the Kirihitters.

Ichiro listened to it all, and at last said, “I see.” That was all. “I had a feeling that Nem might try something, but this is outside the realm of what I was expecting.”

“I believe you underestimate maidens in love, Ichiro-sama,” Sakurako said.

“Indeed, you may be right,” he agreed. “I tend to underestimate the vitality of others. I’ll have to reflect on this.”

Sakurako sighed. His reflection would do nothing to repay Asuha or Nem for what he’d done to them.

“But if Nem is acting in this fashion, perhaps I should step in directly,” Ichiro put in. “It’s a shame that I’ll miss the AI, but I’ll return at once.”

Ichiro said this in exactly the same tone as he had said everything else, but the five years that Sakurako had spent with him had gifted her with hearing sensitive enough to detect the 0.0001-millioctave quaver in her master’s ever-cool words.

“Ah, Ichiro-sama,” the loyal retainer offered. “If you made a commitment, please see to that first.”

“Hmm?” he asked.

“I’ll figure out a way to deal with Nem,” Sakurako said. “She offered you that invitation. You can’t just blow it off, right?”

Sakurako doubted that Ichiro felt any sense of responsibility to them. But she did know that he sought aesthetic consistency in all things, and he needed things to be logical in his own mind. The erratic Nem was trying to cause trouble for Iris and their guild, so it was true that if he tried to intervene, he could probably solve it.

But on the other hand, she was sure that he had found President Azami’s proposal extremely appealing. When he had said, “It’s a shame,” before, his tone had been as emotionless as ever. And yet, he had seemed to genuinely find it a shame. Sakurako had been able to tell that much.

“I could reschedule with President Azami and do it tomorrow, though,” Ichiro offered.

“But you wanted to have the talk today, didn’t you?” Sakurako pressed.

For once, even Ichiro fell silent. She must have been right. Despite the way he presented himself, Ichiro could be very childish, indeed.

“You’ll be back by evening at the latest, right?” Sakurako asked. “Even if I can’t resolve it, I can at least hold down the fort. Please, believe in your maid.”

“I believe that I always believe in you,” Ichiro said. She felt she could hear his cool smile on the other end of the phone line. “Very well, Sakurako-san. Thank you.”

“Okaaay!” She struck an internal victory pose. She’d beaten him that time.

Sakurako Ogi’s life as a maid was an eternal battle. There was always an element of competition in her interactions with Ichiro. To borrow her master’s words, he “underestimated the vitality of others.” That was generally a defeat flag for a demon king like him, so she hoped he would fix that tendency at once.

All that aside...

Sakurako hung up after her discussion with Ichiro. He hadn’t given her many instructions, but he had taken her offer to stay where he was and enjoy himself, which meant she had to take care of things until he returned. In other words, to make sure that no one made trouble for Iris or Felicia.

Nothing else disturbed Sakurako during her lunchtime, so she was able to stock up on vim and vigor in preparation for her second login of the day that afternoon.

Incidentally, one misfortune had struck her during this long string of phone calls: her udon noodles had gone completely soggy. Of course, she still ate the entire thing, leaving not a single onion behind.

“Who was that?” Azami asked.

“My reliable servant,” Ichiro answered. He had called because he’d had a feeling someone might have started trouble, but he wasn’t sure if it had been

the right decision. Ichiro didn't like relying on his intuition. It was right so often that it made life less interesting.

Sakurako was acting very confident, so he'd decided to leave it to her for now.

Ichiro closed his cell phone, then walked back to Thistle's main building with Azami.

"Now, Azami," Ichiro began, looking up at the sky. "What sorts of algorithms did you use in this Rosemary?"

"I use subsumption architecture as the foundation for a knowledge accumulation database," she said.

"But it's not completely bottom-up, is it?" Ichiro asked.

"It's top-down in its ability to output multiple hypotheses based on the accumulated database, yes," said Azami. "Of the two, that one's more important."

"Oho."

From the way President Azami spoke, she was very proud of the work she had done with the Ten Sages, of which Rosemary was part. That was perhaps only natural, given that she used them to help run the game. If Rosemary was parsing all players' brainwaves as quantum information, and amassing them in a bottom-up format, then that really was impressive technology. Then, on top of that, she could actually suggest subtle changes to the system based on it. Almost like the mythical...

No, that was nonsense.

Ichiro was not an atheist, but he was a stubborn man who would not declare his allegiance even if he met God face-to-face. Whatever those artificial intelligences were in the game, it was nonsense to question their value.

Either way, one rarely had a chance to talk to such an advanced artificial intelligence. It was truly unexplored territory, a brush with the unknown, and Ichiro intended to enjoy it.

Just as Ichiro and Azami returned to the Thistle Corporation's main office, a man in a suit came out of the building, trailed by a woman who seemed to be

his subordinate. Azami immediately stiffened.

It was Shinya Otogiri, the CEO of Pony Entertainment whom they had run into on the way out. They didn't know what he was doing at the office, but it seemed he had been there for quite some time. He was talking energetically to the woman standing at his side, and he seemed to be in quite a good mood.

Ichiro could understand that Azami might not want to talk to this man, but the way she was trying to hide behind his back was certainly not behavior becoming of a company president.

"Why, it's Ms. Nono! So we meet again!" the man cried. Otogiri's senses seemed to be finely-honed, as he seemed to notice her immediately regardless. He waved with both hands, a bright smile on his face.

This, too, was unbecoming of a company president. The man was even more childish than Ichiro's father had told him.

"Junior's with you, eh?" the man asked. "How was the curry? Delicious, right? Jinbocho's curry town, after all! Though personally, I prefer ramen. I'm so happy we're seeing more of the junk food ramen that's awful for your health. You know, the kind that uses tons of greasy back fat? It's like eating solid lard. Of course, I prefer it to have a little kick, so thank goodness for the shops that leave chili oil and super-spicy paste on the counter, eh?"

With a big smile on his face and his hands held out on either side, he crossed the street at the crosswalk, despite the light being red. The honking of car horns suggested traffic was stopping abruptly.

"I dislike excessively greasy things, myself, but perhaps I shall try it some time, on your recommendation," Ichiro said politely.

"That's no good, being a light eater at your age," the man said. "You should eat things that are worse for your health."

Otogiri, clearly in better spirits than he had been the first time they met him, gave a "now, then" and walked behind Ichiro to address Azami.

"Hey, now, no need to be scared. I'm hurt," he said. "It's not as if I'm trying to take over Thistle."

“As I said before, your proposal is incompatible with my company’s mission statement...” Azami began.

“Yes, yes. I know, I know, that’s true, for now. But you’re just so bad at running your business,” the man said. “I’m worried that your company will fold, and the *NaroFan* service will be forced to shut down.”

He was certainly a talkative man, Ichiro thought, somewhat hypocritically.

“So, Mr. Otogiri, you *do* play *NaroFan*?” Ichiro asked.

“Me? Ah, I do,” the man said. “I was availing myself in a Cocoon in one of Thistle’s waiting rooms. Lots of fun!”

That sounded like an abuse of authority, but none of the people present would object to it. Even the secretary-looking woman Otogiri had brought with him had been spending the entire time silent and nearly invisible.

The summer sun beat down on the sidewalk. An old woman walked leisurely nearby, pushing a handcart.

The combined personal bank accounts of the three people debating there in the used bookseller town of Jinbocho was astronomical, yet no one watching would have known that. They simply looked like a disagreeable but attractive young man, an earnest female college student, and a goofy old man.

“Well, if Ms. Nono won’t talk to me, I suppose I’ll be on my way,” Otogiri said. “I have to look in on our newly-opening arcade in Akihabara.”

“Ah, I saw that on the way here,” Ichiro said. “It was very large. Does Pony run that one directly?”

He was referring to the arcade that the Thistle employee had mentioned had bought a lot of Cocoons. Apparently, they were trying to get it billed as an official *Narrow Fantasy Online* arcade, and it was the first amusement facility in Japan purely dedicated to online VR games.

“That isn’t fully settled, actually,” the man said. “The snap decision to start the construction was a problem, and with arcades declining now, there’s a risk associated with building something that big. An online VR game amusement facility is an unproven market at the moment. There are lots of companies

involved, including mine, and we all think that if we can succeed without taking the risk, it could be quite a lucrative venture."

"That's quite common," said Ichiro.

"Indeed, it is. Well, we're investing, but in the end, the authority lies with one of our subsidiaries. If the enterprise goes down in flames, we can just cut them off, like the proverbial lizard shedding its tail. Nothing personal against them, of course."

Otogiri's words were businesslike, and Ichiro did not find them especially cruel. It was natural for a top company to want to hedge their risks. Some might find it reckless for the man to talk this way out in the open, heedless of the ears of others. But Ichiro, as someone who also did not care what others thought, did not mind at all.

"Oh, I stayed around longer than I meant to," Otogiri said. "Well, once it's done, I hope you'll drop by and play. If you drop the money and get their business on track, they'll be spared the fate of so many sad scapegoats."

"I dislike crowds," said Ichiro.

"Hahaha, I thought you'd say that. Shall we, Ms. Hishoyama?" Still chucking, Otogiri took his leave, and the woman — who had not said a word the entire time — followed him.

It wasn't a long walk from Jinbocho to Akihabara, but it still took admirable nerve to forego a car in this blazing sun.

"He says he's looking after his health lately," Azami murmured after he was gone.

"Oh? How admirable." That was Ichiro's entire opinion on the subject. "It occurs to me that Otogiri is trying something of a hard sell on you."

"Well... yes..." said the usually lucid career woman with rare hesitance. "Pony seems to be quite eager to absorb us. As you know, Thistle's developers don't have a very good reputation..."

Discussion between deeply knowledgeable players like Kirschwasser, King, Edward, and Matsunaga often involved extensive criticism of *NaroFan*'s game

balance. The technicians were so obsessed with technical recreation that they put effort into things that didn't matter very much, all while ignoring the actual enjoyment portion of the game. From the perspective of the game itself, perhaps being absorbed by Pony, with its copious experience in such matters, really would be good for them.

"But you find that difficult to accept, Azami?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes. Because *NaroFan* is my baby, in a sense," she said.

"I see. Well, I think that's fine." Ichiro himself had no interest in interfering with her running of her own business, so if that was how she wanted to do things, he would accept it. He intended to enjoy the game as a player to the end.

In that regard, his agreement to the favor President Azami had asked him for was in something of a gray area.

Ichiro added, "But I would advise you to take care. Though I've never dealt with him directly, I'm told that Mr. Otogiri is quite shrewd. I don't mind if you use my name as backing, but I have no intention of investing directly in Thistle, or in giving you advice on how to run a company."

"R-Right..." The young female president nodded, grim determination on her face. She didn't say it, but Ichiro got the impression that they had had many verbal sparring sessions prior to this, and that man had always won.

"Ichiro, you're exactly as Fuyo described you," Azami said just before they entered the building.

"Am I? I do wonder what Megumi might have said about me," commented Ichiro.

"That you're someone who never does things the way one would expect."

"I suppose that's true," Ichiro said with a slight shrug.

"Anyway, Ichiro, let me take you to Rosemary," said Azami.

"Mm," he agreed.

"I told you before that the artificial intelligences I call the Ten Sages are connected directly to a knowledge accumulation system," Azami added. "But

Rosemary is the only one of them that has shown interest in you, Ichiro. She seems to have a harder time understanding you than the amalgamated average."

"I think it's good to not be able to understand the actions of a single person," Ichiro said. "But she's quite a discerning artificial intelligence, to have taken interest in me."

Ichiro couldn't count the number of times someone had taken interest in him. He'd been approached by numerous beautiful women, and he found some amusement with them, despite finding them all nonsense. But this was his first time with an artificial intelligence.

Most of the time, the suggestion that his behavior was outside the norm wouldn't bother him at all. "Normal" was a standard decided by others, and since he found the opinions of others to be nonsense, it was only natural that he would not fit within it. That was what he thought, and those who knew him well knew that, too.

The first floor of the Thistle building contained the reception area and the server room; the second floor was the office; the third floor was the meeting room and break room; and the Ten Sages Azami referred to were all stored on the fourth floor. It seemed that each program required the hardware of a supercomputer. Azami led him into the room, lined by ten sterile machines on either side.

One of the ten was Rosemary. It was the same name as one of the kinds of herbs Ichiro grew on his building's roof. The herb was native to the Mediterranean Sea, an unassuming shrub with small lavender, white, or pink flowers. Sakurako sometimes collected the leaves and dried them for use in cooking.

"Shall I just talk to it?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes," Azami said. "It understands spoken English and Japanese. Use this headset."

It was a cheap set that looked like it had probably been found in an Akihabara bargain bin, but Ichiro didn't mind. He'd had a few nonsense conversations with NPCs in the game, but very little experience talking directly to an artificial

intelligence like this. He was looking forward to seeing what kind of conversational capacity it had.

“Hello, Rosemary,” Ichiro said, deciding to start with simple pleasantries.

After a few moments of silence, a synthetic women’s voice responded over the headset. “Good morning. Please tell me your name.”

“I like the way you get right to the point,” he said. “I am Ichiro Tsuwabuki. President Azami brought me here claiming that you wanted to know more about me.”

“Ichiro. Are you the Dragonet avatar in *Narrow Fantasy Online*?”

“Yes, I am his player. But I am not talking to you through the game.”

“Understood,” said the voice. “I have insufficient information regarding you. I seek new input to resolve this problem.”

Expected thought it was, Ichiro couldn’t help but find it a mechanical, uninteresting exchange. But from what President Azami had said and from Rosemary’s own statements, it was possible to infer that she possessed an algorithm that directed her to “resolve” any “problem” she discovered that her artificial intelligence could neither decode nor hypothesize about. It was a simple, primitive thing, but one that could be called a “thirst for knowledge.”

Would that curiosity propel her to take humanlike actions? He couldn’t fully control his excitement. He was glad that he had taken Sakurako’s suggestion. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

“Then, Ichiro,” said Azami, “I’ll return to my office, so let me know if you need anything.”

“Mm, thank you,” he said. “You don’t need to stick around to make sure I don’t fill ‘her’ head with any wild ideas?”

“I trust you, Ichiro.” Azami gave him a slight grin. “And as Rosemary’s creator, I don’t want to lock her out from knowledge she’s seeking, either.”

Behind her thin glasses, the girl’s eyes blazed with quiet fire that belied her less-than-twenty years. It was a sign that she really was less of a game designer and more of a technician, a researcher.

After watching Azami leave, Ichiro turned back to Rosemary's server. "Good. I'll tell you what you want to know. Where shall I start?"

"I cannot understand your behavior in the game," said the voice. "I recognize your fundamental behavior puts priority on what is known as 'appearance.' But as the game's primary goal is to clear quests, I do not understand why you do not care about ability."

"Nonsense," Ichiro said, as if it went without saying. "I need not care because I am the strongest and the coolest, even without them. And I'm not the only one who seeks appearance over ability. Though there may not be many of them."

"I understand that," said the artificial intelligence. "But it is not right."

"Nonsense. I decide what is right," Ichiro said. What other response could he give? "It is important to act in accordance with what you wish to do, and what you believe. I'm sure not all humans are that way, of course. As most humans are swayed by emotion, societal norms are necessary. 'The way of things' is needed to a certain degree. But not in my own personal case. I do what I wish to, nothing more or less."


BOSS

“You are aware that your words and deeds have created a number of problems in the game?” the artificial intelligence queried.

“Living life as I wish to is bound to lead to rough waters here and there,” Ichiro replied. “Some fear that, and they check their actions so as not to cause such trouble. I take no issue with that way of living, but I personally dislike it.”

This was a sort of test by Ichiro to see how organically “she” was capable of thinking. Was it possible for him to get Rosemary, merely a quantum program in the end, to understand his creed?

Of course, this was not a form of disdain, or contempt for her as a mere program. He wished to challenge her because he found her worth speaking to; it would be the same with anyone else.

“What do you think, Rosemary?” he added to the AI, who had fallen silent. Her reply came a few seconds later.

“Currently processing new information. Please wait.”

“Mm, very well.” Ichiro smiled slightly to Rosemary (though she had no sense of sight) and sat down on a cheap-looking folding chair.

Now that he thought about it, Rosemary and the Ten Sages were monitoring the game 24 hours a day. She was collecting information in real time as they spoke.

He wondered how Kirschwasser was doing.

But a moment later, he drove that thought from his mind. Sakurako had told him to leave it to her. To doubt her would be poor manners.

Ichiro turned his attention back to Rosemary, and waited silently as she ran her long calculations in search of a conclusion.

By the time Kirschwasser logged back in, Iris and Felicia were already on the beach, anxiously waiting for the meeting to start. Quite a few others sat around them in silence, including Matsunaga, Amesho, and (for some reason) the Kirihitters.

It was a little after noon now, which meant there were more people on the

beach in general. The rare site of female avatars in swimsuits was attracting a lot of interest, and while that made Iris and Felicia uncomfortable, Amesho was actively bearing the brunt of the attention. Despite her childlike silhouette, she used her swimsuit to great effect, and her flirtatious poses and swishing tail appeared to be irresistible to a certain segment of male players. Watching the game's greatest damsel player in action was a truly impressive sight.

"Welcome back, Mr. Kirsch!" the players shouted out in chorus.

"Ah, thank you." Kirschwasser responded. "Has Lady Nem not yet returned?"

"Yeah, she's not back yet." Iris grimaced and folded her arms as she looked all around. "But..."

A crowd of obvious rubberneckers had formed around them. It wasn't clear where they had heard about the argument, but they had clearly come out in force to see what *that* Iris Brand had gotten up to this time.

Kirschwasser looked at Matsunaga.

"It wasn't me," the Elf man answered with his usual sticky smile as he took a calm bite of another strawberry milk-flavored Shaved Ice Potion. "Of course, I would be remiss *not* to write an article about something that's drawing this much attention, and it was in my own personal interests to introduce Nem to Amesho. Still, if I had gathered the onlookers myself, I wouldn't have shown myself to you."

"Oh, it wasn't me*ow*, either," Amesho said, turning back from posing for screencap requests to respond. "It's against my creed to tell on a friend. Unless, of course, it's in their best interest."

It was probably true. Matsunaga was one thing, but Amesho didn't seem like the type of person to lie about things like that.

"It just goes to show that you attract a lot of attention," the head of the Kirihitters, Kirihito (Leader) said with a warm smile as he hugged his inner tube. "The Glasgobara incident, the Delve Necrolands incident... I don't see Mr. Tsuwabuki here right now, but the rumors say that he's the one behind the trouble this time, too. Lots of people find his behavior galling, so they're excited to see what his guild, Iris Brand, will do when he's not around."

“They’re like vultures...” Iris muttered.

Felicia, cradling Gobo-Two, seemed to feel the same way.

“Well, the both of you can rest easy,” Kirschwasser said, maintaining a level tone. “I will do everything in my power to keep you from harm.” His silver armor clinked.

Sakurako Ogi had spent a year learning how to comport herself as this elder male avatar. To Felicia and Iris, she likely seemed the very picture of the quietly confident, reliable gentleman Knight. She was a true performer. It was in times like this that her cosplayer’s soul, first sparked when her two older brothers had put a maid costume on her at ten years old, could truly shine.

“Okay. I’m counting on you,” Iris agreed.

“If things get really bad, I’ll help, too,” Felicia said, hugging Gobo-Two. It seemed she really wanted to use her miracle pitch, Hydro Blaster, at some point.

“But what will you do, Sir Kirschwasser?” Matsunaga asked, pointing his slender spoon at him. “I believe you already know this, but Nem’s true issue is a matter of the heart. It’s not something you can solve by walling them off, is it?”

“In that regard, all that I can do is speak with sincerity and hope that she understands,” Kirschwasser said with a shrug. He wished it were something you could resolve by pitting your Will stats against one another, but regrettably, human interactions in the game were still just extensions of ones in broader society. His personal desire, as a gamer, was to keep real world drama out of the game, but if his master’s insolent attitude was the root of it all, then as a loyal servant, he had no choice but to do everything he could to clean up after him.

“Forgive the wait.”

And there it was. As Kirschwasser renewed his resolve, he heard Nem’s voice in his ears.

He turned to see the now familiar Elf woman, still dressed smartly in a suit, leading her two mercenaries, Taker and Sorceress, behind her. They were still dressed in their swimsuits.

“I have been waiting.” Determined to act as ambassador, Kirschwasser stepped forward and bowed amicably.

Nem scowled slightly. “Mr. Kirschweitzer... was it?”

“‘Wasser.’ It’s pronounced with a v.”

“Veitzer?”

“‘Vasser.’”

“Oh, whatever! Mr. Kirschwasser!”

“Yes, ma’am?” he asked, the very image of calm in the face of Nem’s red-faced frustration.

“My business here is with Iris,” she said. “Could you please step aside?”

Behind him, he could hear Iris suck in her breath.

“Iris is my guild’s designer, and I am here acting as her messenger,” said Kirschwasser smoothly.

“But she’s right there!”

“Yes, well...” It seemed it wouldn’t be easy to work around this. Kirschwasser decided to give up on that and just broach the subject frankly. “I was hoping to talk this out calmly, but as it appears you are still quite emotional, Lady Nem...”

“I...!” As Nem prepared to go off on a rant, a level voice whispered from behind her.

“It’s all right, Leader. I’ll take over.” It was Sorceress. A female avatar, childlike yet mysterious, with mesmerizing eyes the color of the deep sea. Of course, she was in a swimsuit.

There was a burst of excitement from the onlookers.

Sorceress offered her parasol to the tall Anthromorph standing next to her. “Taker, could you hold my parasol?”

“No,” he deadpanned.

“Oh? How uncooperative.” But Sorceress showed no signs of being hurt, and just stepped in front of Nem, twirling her parasol. With a gloomy smile that did

not suit her appearance, she turned those deep blue eyes to Iris. Guided by her gaze, Kirschwasser also turned. Iris swallowed hard.

“I’ll explain things simply,” said Sorceress. “I believe you more or less know this, but Nem doesn’t like Iris. Or perhaps I should say, she cannot accept her.”

Sorceress’s calm, so dissimilar to Nem’s own behavior, caused a new hush to fall over the crowd. The sound of the rolling waves could even be heard in the background.

“It might be damaging to her maiden’s sensitivity to say more, but I shall continue nonetheless,” Sorceress went on. “Nem is a fashion designer in the real world. She does what Iris does in the game. As you can see, she has excellent fashion sense, and she is acclaimed in her field. She owes her decision to enter that business to a man.”

A new buzz began to run through the crowd. They probably hadn’t expected this to start turning into a soap opera.

“He is mold-breaking and free-wheeling, but he has excellent aesthetic sense relative to the general populace. One day, this man came to visit her, wearing a devastatingly ugly brooch. Iris, the one that you made.”

No one would blame Iris for losing her temper in the face of such an unnecessary insult, but she decided to swallow it back.

Sorceress was describing real world events, but of course, nearly none of the onlookers were aware of that. Not even Iris would have expected Ichiro to wear that brooch in the real world.

“Nem, of course, found that unacceptable,” Sorceress went on. “She cares for him, despite his eccentricities. Yet he will not even look at the things that she designs, while a brooch made by a rank nobody gets the loving place of pride upon his lapel.”

“L-Loving?” Iris echoed, looking somewhat green around the gills. It was the face of someone begging someone else to stop joking.

Kirschwasser let out a cough, and started again. “That’s quite a selfish motivation, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yes, it’s selfish,” giggled Sorceress. “But your guild’s leader has been far more selfish, by shifting the consequences of his actions to someone else. Don’t you agree?”

Kirschwasser couldn’t argue. There was no player to whom the word “selfish” applied more than to Ichiro Tsuwabuki. He had never seen someone act so utterly unreasonable to nearly everyone he had met, and unlike his master, Kirschwasser had not yet mastered the impudence required to laugh that all away as “nonsense.”

“Of course, the responsibility lies with that man,” continued Sorceress. “But Nem has the right to take actions to work through the situation on her own, doesn’t she?”

Kirschwasser let out a groan and fell silent. Her argument was certainly convincing.

“Th-Then how do you plan to accomplish that, Lady Nem?” Kirschwasser asked. “What must you do to come to terms with the situation?” It took all the fortitude he could muster just to say those words.

The eyes of the onlookers all turned back to Nem. She was silent for a little while, and then, turning her gaze to Iris, said this: “First, I want to see Iris’s true design skill.”

“And if you do, you will be satisfied?”

“Yes. I want to know what it is about Iris’s designs that Ichiro likes so much.”

Kirschwasser cast a glance back at Iris. She was shaking her head fervently. It was understandable; even though it was not a competition, the conclusion felt obvious from the start. Nem had been right when she had declared Iris’s designs “nothing,” and there was nothing more to see.

*This isn’t good,* Kirschwasser thought.

It was almost exactly like the Edward incident. Seeing Iris at work wouldn’t satisfy Nem. The only one who knew why Ichiro liked that butterfly brooch so much was Ichiro himself.

“I just want to see what she can really do,” Nem muttered. “What’s so wrong

about that?”

At last, Nem had begun to grumble. Kirschwasser did understand how she felt, but he couldn’t see how her request would be to either woman’s benefit.

“I just... I really don’t think I can measure up to you, Nem...” Iris admitted.

“Yes, that’s more or less it,” said Kirschwasser. “Knowing the sort of person Tsuwabuki is, I doubt that inspecting her designs will give you any new understanding...” Kirschwasser was hoping to cool things down, but his words seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Knowing the sort of person Tsuwabuki is?!” Nem snapped, her voice suddenly trembling. “What would *you* know about Ichiro? Who do you think you are?!”

“As I told you earlier, I am merely his servant—”

“Then do not speak as if you know him!”

*Twitch.*

Sakurako Ogi was known for her warm personality. Her report cards at school read, “A quiet girl who rarely gets angry or starts fights.” Her specialties were housework, fighting games, and quiet smiles.

But in that instant, it was extremely difficult to hide her irritation. She would be hard-pressed to explain why, but Kirschwasser’s response to Nem’s grumbling was this:

“I know him much better than you do, at least.”

A loud *kpish!* echoed across the beach.

The sound of the slap resonated beneath the blue sky. The damage visual above Kirschwasser’s head read “0,” showing that no physical damage had been done. Still, it had sounded painful, and it caused Iris to cringe.



Nem had struck Kirschwasser's cheek. It was true that his words had been extremely provocative, and it seemed they had struck a nerve.

"I can't believe he said that..." Iris murmured.

"Y-Yeah..." Felicia had frozen up, too.

She wasn't sure why Kirschwasser had said it, but Iris quietly agreed that Nem didn't know much about the young heir as a person. Was it the rose-colored glasses of love, perhaps? Still, *ugh*. She just couldn't understand *that* one bit.

Nem's anger did not seem to have cooled, but she quickly withdrew her hand. Her dangerous aura swelled, as if powered by the rising emotions she no longer had a place to release. At this point, talking things out calmly seemed too much to hope for.

"That's enough, Leader." Taker, who had been silent up until then, tossed aside his shark inner tube and spoke. "We're not getting anywhere talking like this. We've gotta finish it."

Nem blinked at his words, then turned around. "B-But... Taker..."

"Hey, you." Taker ignored her and fixed his red eyes on Kirschwasser. "You still think talking is gonna do one damn bit of good?"

"I do not," Kirschwasser responded evenly. His back was now to Iris and the others, so she could not see his expression.

The majestic-yet-bestial Taker shrugged in agreement. "Yeah, I figured. But we're mercenaries, so we can't just call it quits here, either."

"Mmm," Kirschwasser agreed.

"Let's settle things now, two-on-two. If we win, you have to do what we say."

Felicia, standing at Iris's side, murmured, "I knew it."

"I knew this would happen," Matsunaga said, matching her sentiment. He seemed to have finished his Shaved Ice Potion, and he walked to stand on Iris's other side. Felicia hid behind Iris, as if avoiding him.

"What do you mean, you knew?" Iris asked.

"Precisely what it sounds like," Matsunaga said with a bright smile. "She

wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of bringing two combat-class players if this wasn’t going to be her final resort. It would have been happy for you if you could have talked it out, but that simply wasn’t the way the wind was blowing. Of course, verbal promises made within the game aren’t exactly binding, but a duel will get the onlookers on the winner’s side, and peer pressure can be a powerful thing.”

So just as in real life, in the game world, the last resort was always the use of force.

Of course, Kirschwasser could still refuse them. He had no reason to accept, and no one could force him into agreeing. On the other hand, putting off the resolution hadn’t solved anything so far, and the developers even encouraged powerful players to settle their in-game grievances with duels.

Kirschwasser turned back to Iris.

Iris didn’t know what to say. If she could just agree to Nem’s proposal, then Kirschwasser wouldn’t have to be drawn into this stupid fight...

“Very well. I accept,” the Knight responded, whether or not he knew what was going through her mind.

“Okay,” Taker replied simply. “So what’s the condition if you win? That we never bother you again, or something?”

“I do not know, as Iris seems not to have made up her mind yet,” said Kirschwasser. “Part of the reason I am agreeing to the duel is to buy time, you see.”

The onlookers seemed enlivened again as a duel seemed close on the horizon. VR games added a special up-close-and-personal quality to PvP, which made such fights very popular as spectacle. Some players pulled up video recording apps from the menu, and prepared to start broadcasting it live on streaming sites.

Taker and Sorceress stepped forward. If it was a two-on-two duel, then naturally, they would be the ones fighting. They opened their menu windows and called up their equipment, switching from swimsuits to battle clothes. In both cases, their armor seemed suited to their personalities; Taker was dressed

in a raggedy robe, while Sorceress wore a Gothic Lolita-style dress.

“Okay!” Felicia said from beside Iris as she took a big step forward. At some point, she had used “Shapeshift” to change Gobo-Two’s size into roughly that of a softball. “Looks like my miracle pitch, the Hydro Blaster, will finally—”

“Ah, Lady Felicia, please stand back.” Kirschwasser waved her away, without even turning back.

“Huh?! But, but, but, but, but... it’s two-on-two!”

“I promised Master Ichiro that I would protect the two of you,” Kirschwasser said, fortifying his defenses with his Knight template equipment, the Knight Sword and Kite Shield.

“Sir Kirschwasser, I’ll help you.” The head of the Kirihitters, Kirihito (Leader), who had been nearly invisible up until then, readied his light novel tie-in weapon as he took a big step forward.

“Ah... I appreciate the sentiment, but no, thank you.” Kirschwasser waved him away, as well, without turning back.

Downcast, Kirihito (Leader) returned to the cluster of his fellow Kirihitos.

“You sure about this, chief?” Taker asked. “It’ll be two-on-one.”

“As Master Ichiro would say: nonsense.” Kirschwasser raised his sword and shield, fixing his eyes on the two players in front of him. The spectators instinctively fanned out into a circle around them, forming an impromptu duel ring. Since the beach was not a city area, but a field area, fighting between players was allowed without the formal submission of a duel.

But Iris’s attention was focused on Nem. Nem was watching Taker and Sorceress with an almost chagrined expression on her face. It was almost as if this development was not what she’d wanted. Still...

“Taker, Sorceress, I’m counting on you both,” Nem said, at length.

Feeling a gnawing, formless agitation inside of her, Iris said to Kirschwasser, “Mr. Kirsch...”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry...”

“There is no need to apologize. I am doing this because I wish to,” Kirschwasser said with his usual calm smile.

But even that wasn’t enough to calm Iris’s growing anxiety.

“Okay, chief, let’s get started.” Taker’s tattered robe fanned out behind him as he turned to Kirschwasser, taloned fingers bared. “I am Taker, and I’m gonna steal your karma.”

“Ohh...” Kirschwasser let out an admiring noise, and after a pause, asked a trepidacious question. “Forgive my insufficient knowledge, but what are you quoting?”

“It’s original!” he cried.

Looking at the scarlet-faced Taker, Iris couldn’t help but feel like this was all a bit of a farce.

# 5 - Noble Son, Buy

Sometimes, she wondered what she was doing. Now was one such time.

Megumi Fuyo watched the fighters prepare for their intense battle in this fictional world made of quantum information, all the while consumed by a feeling of desolation. Would doing this really get her what she wanted?

Amesho had introduced her to these two players, Taker and Sorceress, and she had spilled her heart out to them. Taker hadn't said much, and Sorceress had just muttered, "How selfish of him," but they had both promised to help her.

It was said that to be judged on one's talent was a cruel thing. Megumi was a person fortunate enough to have talent — not only that, she also had the opportunities to put it to use.

She was the daughter of the owner of one of Japan's largest companies, and had been given the best upbringing imaginable. A true princess in an ivory tower. Her father Eikei had had her at quite a late age, so he had been quite overprotective of Megumi growing up. At the all-girls' private school she'd attended, she had attracted her own little clique to help shore her up, but her world had remained a small one, and she had had little contact with that which lay outside of it.

Fashion was one of the very few things that connected her to a world outside of her household. The fact that she was a high-society woman nearing marriageable age had helped her to convince her father that this was something worth taking an interest in; after all, she had to pay attention to her appearance. Though her school had been an expensive private one, attendees there had come from all walks of life, and a surprising number of members of her clique were from middle-class households. They'd showed her fashion magazines that depicted a world so bright and beautiful that she'd longed to be a part of it.

The years had passed, and around the time she'd graduated high school on

the Home Economics track, her clique had been talking about their future plans. Megumi had had her pre-determined future, but when she'd seen her clique speaking to each other about their dreams, she hadn't been able to help but feel something lacking in her own.

It was then that she had met Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

It was ten years ago; he would have been thirteen years old. He had graduated from college in America, and had just returned to Japan after spending some time overseas.

"A pleasure to meet you, Megumi," the boy said.

She had just come back from shopping with her clique, and he was there in her living room, speaking to her father. He still had much of the appearance of youth, and the innocence unique to that age, but none of that penetrated her mind. Despite being five years older, Megumi found him somewhat intimidating.

"That's good clothing you're wearing," Ichiro said, with the same cool smile he would continue to possess for years into the future.

Megumi knitted her brow. "Is it?"

Megumi was very interested in fashion, and she chose anything she thought looked good when she went shopping, rather than sticking to brand name items. What she was wearing right now was actually a rather cheap ensemble for a daughter of the Fuyo family. She had picked it out herself, and she felt that it *was* good clothing. But that didn't change the fact that it had been cheap. Megumi, assuming that he was just trying to flatter her, did not respond.

That was the beginning and end of their first meeting.

Their second meeting was soon after, at a party her father was throwing. Megumi had attended wearing an uncontroversial dress, and all the young industrialists present had praised her fashion sense.

By the time she was tired of dealing with them, she spotted Ichiro making small talk with her father. The boy cast a glance at Megumi and said:

“Hello, Megumi. I see you’re going for something different in your clothing choice this time.”

For the first time, Megumi wondered if he really could tell the difference.

“Which do you prefer, Ichiro?” The question floated naturally to her lips. It was an improper thing to ask, for Megumi was pinning all her hopes on his reply. She wanted to have her taste acknowledged. Fashion was her one link to the outside world, and she had a sort of lack of confidence in herself distinct to princesses in ivory towers.

But Ichiro’s response was not what she had hoped for.

“It’s not my place to say,” he said.

“R-Really?” Megumi slumped slightly.

“But I think that *you* preferred the one you wore last time,” he said. “Right?”

At that, Megumi looked up, silently, her slumped posture righting.

Ichiro’s comportment had a coolness about it that belied his mere thirteen years of age. He had one hand slipped into his pocket, holding his glass in his other. His striking blue eyes seemed to see the truth behind everything they looked at.



“But that one was cheap...” she said.

“Ah, yes. It looked like it was,” Ichiro said, with no sign of judgment in his words.

“Then why did you compliment it?” she asked.

“It seemed very suited to you,” he said. “I think the most important thing anyone can do is to know who they want to be. Right now, having made yourself uncontroversial to match the expectations of those around you, you are not as interesting.”

She didn’t really understand what the words meant. But she did find them vaguely inspiring. Raised so carefully in her ivory tower, taught to react to everything in one standard, accepted way, she had never met someone like this young man, nor heard anything like his perspective on the world. It was refreshing.

“You see, I like looking at clothing,” she began.

“Oh?” he asked.

With only that most minor of promptings from Ichiro, she found herself talking on and on. She told him how apparel was the one key she could use to escape her walled garden, to visit the world outside. She told him how frustrated she had felt, watching her clique from school all deciding on their own dreams, while she had none.

She told him of her hesitance to wear cheap clothing at a party where her father would be in attendance, that she hadn’t been able to wear the clothing that best suited her.

“Forgive me if this is trite, but...” Ichiro, who had been quietly listening, broke in. “Price is only one determiner of value. To adhere to it too strictly is nonsense.”

When she asked him what he meant, he continued.

“In the end, value is subjective. To some people, value may come in the form of design, or comfort. Value may change depending on different situations. When you get down to it, all of these elements are worthy ones. It is simply up

to each person to decide which elements they focus on."

"I understand what you're saying, but..." Megumi averted her eyes from Ichiro. Her walled garden was too small to acknowledge the myriad values that existed out there. In here, every reaction was predetermined.

"So why not fly out of it?" Ichiro said, simply. "You can never see the sky if you never spread your wings."

"My wings..." She turned the word over in her mind.

Megumi already knew what form her "wings" would take. That which linked her to the world outside of her walled garden could be used as a platform from which to fly. She would have realized that before if she'd ever thought about it, but she had willfully shut her eyes to such possibilities.

That conversation became the impetus for Megumi's decision to spread her wings.

Soon after, she humbled herself before her father and told him she wanted to go into a world where other values were appreciated.

Her father closed his eyes, was silent for a while, and then at last nodded.

That was how Megumi Fuyo became the woman she was today. She had the talent for it, too, and as she'd received recognition from the world at large, Megumi had begun to long to get Ichiro to say the words he hadn't said then: "I like this clothing best."

To be judged on one's talent was a cruel thing.

Megumi had seen Iris's design. She couldn't imagine that she had talent. Even if she did, Megumi couldn't imagine how long it might take to blossom. To put it bluntly, the girl was utterly lacking in taste. There wasn't even anything exceptional in her design; it was mediocre, at best.

So then... why?

In the end, it was just as Ichiro had said ten years ago.

"In the end, value is subjective." If, to Ichiro, that tacky butterfly brooch was what truly had value...

...then that girl, without any effort, had attained something she had sought after for ten years.

To be judged on one's talent was a cruel thing.

Megumi Fuyo could not understand what he found good about that brooch's design. That alone was enough to make her feel like the loser in the situation.

Taker and Sorceress worked brilliantly as a team. As many had expected, Sorceress was a specialized build who used support magic to enhance her ally's abilities. With her bolstering Taker's ferocious chain of attacks, even Kirschwasser's defense build was on the ropes in a flash. He could tell that, in both numbers and skill, they far outstripped most mid-level players.

The way Taker used the Anthromorph-exclusive Skill Beast Claw as a base to bolster bare-fist Arts was part of a typical Grappler template, but it wasn't clear what he had besides that. From the way he moved, it seemed likely that he had a Thief or Scout subclass, but it was also likely that he wasn't yet showing his full hand.

Iris and Felicia could do nothing but watch the fight in a cold sweat. Things were looking bad. They couldn't understand why Kirschwasser had entered into a battle with such obviously unfavorable conditions.

But if one thing *was* clear, it was that asking Felicia to stay out of the fight had been the right decision. It didn't look like a Hydro Blaster or two would have overturned the battle situation, and she would only have been a drag on Kirschwasser.

Kirschwasser raised his shield as Taker attacked for the umpteenth time. But Kirschwasser just couldn't seem to find the opening to shift back from defense to counterattack, it seemed. The battle had started only a few minutes ago, but the relentless chain of attacks, supported by Sorceress's magic, had shaved Kirschwasser's health down steadily.

"Oh, I think Sir Kirschwasser is holding out well," Matsunaga said, his expression unusually serious (despite holding a fourth Shaved Ice Potion in his hand).

“The ‘Regenerate’ he cast at the start of the battle is working well,” Kirihito (Leader) nodded in agreement. He also had an extremely serious expression, as well as a Shaved Ice Potion in his hand. “That and his high defense stat make him very durable. It’s a very prudent combination of Skills and Arts.”

Felicia glared at the two “color commentators” reproachfully. “Why are you acting like it’s none of your concern?”

“Because it is none of my concern,” Matsunaga replied calmly. “The same is true for the others. It’s not as if anyone’s life is truly on the line, so we might as well enjoy it.”

“It’s not like I’m not worried,” Kirihito (Leader) said, looking slightly hurt. “I owe Mr. Tsuwabuki for saving my life.”

“But it’s just a game, right?” Felicia asked.

“Even in the game, I am sincerity itself,” Kirihito (Leader) responded with total sincerity, then took a bite of his Shaved Ice Potion. Immediately after, he clutched his head, and groaned. “Ugh...”

“Ahh, you ate too fast and ended up with the status ailment ‘Headache’...” Matsunaga commented.

“You’ve got to be kidding...” Felicia said incredulously.

“W-Well, anyway, Sir Kirschwasser hasn’t lost yet,” Kirihito (Leader) said. “There are many secret techniques that a Knight may use to turn things around. ‘Pain Charge’ and ‘Counterstrike,’ etc.”

“Of course, it means no— that is, it’s meaningless unless it hits,” said Matsunaga.

Iris had remained silent throughout the laid-back discussion. She was staring past the battle, at Nem.

“Ah, are you concerned?” Matsunaga asked, leaving Kirihito (Leader) behind.

Iris nodded silently. She was worried about the look in Nem’s eyes. Every time she’d looked over at the woman, there had been jealousy burning in those eyes. It was ridiculous — Iris was the one who ought to be jealous.

But right now, Nem’s eyes were hollow. It was as if she felt completely

powerless. Why did she look that way? Iris really couldn’t understand it at all.

Nem was being completely selfish; she didn’t care about how Iris felt.

Kirschwasser, too... he hadn’t had to take up the challenge. They could have waited for the young heir to finish up his business and come back. He could have had a talk with Nem, and it would have all been over.

The young heir was selfish, too. It was his irresponsibility that had started all this nonsense in the first place. He knew Iris had no design sense at all. Well, she actually had been happy for all the times he had saved her. She could admit to that. But still, he was selfish.

They were all selfish, Iris thought, with indignation silently rising inside of her. Why had he accepted this challenge?

Kirschwasser smiled wryly to himself.

He did not expect to win. In a real-time action VRMMO, a two-on-one handicap was a disadvantage that no mere numbers could surmount. Even simple tactics, like swapping your fighters on the front and back lines, could allow a team of two to conserve stamina to a degree that a player alone couldn’t. Taker and Sorceress couldn’t actually use that tactic due to Sorceress’s clear disadvantage in endurance, but that just meant they had clearly delineated their roles. Taker could throw him into the fight without worrying about danger to life or limb, just as things should be in an RPG.

At any rate, Kirschwasser was at a considerable disadvantage. Not even his endurance-specialized build could hold up for long under such a ceaseless storm of attacks. What was more, it was slowly getting worse.

“You’d better start paying attention!” Taker shouted as he rained down on him from above with “Nail Slash.” It was a rare Art, and it sent a buzz running through the audience.

“Ergh...” Fortunately, Kirschwasser had reflexes good enough to let him avoid a direct hit. He brought up his shoulder armor to soak the damage, preventing a strike against his head, which he had set as his weak point. Then, despite knowing it was fruitless, he took advantage of the small opening that had been

created to unleash a Bash, which Taker lithely dodged.

An instant later, green light wreathed the Anthromorph's body, accompanied by a pleasant melody and a chain of numbers appearing over his head, all of which suggested an impressive buff effect. This was Sorceress's support magic at work.

The audience let out a collective murmur of awe.

"That's not exactly fair."

"How far are they gonna go?"

"They're really pulling out all the stops, huh?"

Such was the range of opinions. It really did seem rather immature to be using support magic at that level when you already had an overwhelming two-on-one advantage. But Kirschwasser felt no resentment towards his merciless opponents, nor gratitude to them for doing everything they could against him.

The world of dueling was not a sliding scale. The values were absolute. A win was a win. A loss was a loss.

Kirschwasser and his master Ichiro Tsuwabuki were opposites in personality, but in this philosophical approach to combat, they agreed. Whether it put them at an advantage or a disadvantage, this was the one thing in the world that remained rock solid.

"You're really taking your time," Sorceress said breezily, casting a glance at the noisy crowd. "Why don't you finish it already?"

"I'm trying... dammit," Taker cursed.

Seeing his opponents so at ease didn't shake Kirschwasser's determination for a second. He gritted his teeth, hefted his sword, took a wide step, and tried yet another series of attacks.

Of course, Taker easily dodged them all; a few of them caught the edge of his robe or grazed his skin, but none of the hits really landed. He was clearly an evasion-specialized build.

Since it was a game, a character's ability to evade was determined by their dexterity stat. As dexterity increased, the avatar's hitbox shrank, and they

gained more invincibility frames, making it easier for them to dodge attacks.

That was part of why Kirschwasser was having so much trouble making contact, but the skill of the user played a role, as well. At the end of the day, the modifiers only made attacks *easier* to dodge. They didn't guarantee it. The player's own talents could make an enormous difference.

This suggested that Taker had spent quite a lot of time honing these abilities in the real world. It was also possible he was simply a genius in that regard.

*But...* Kirschwasser spat to himself, *there can't be that many geniuses out there.*

With that thought in mind, the Knight fixed his eyes on the man once more.

"Sorry," Taker said, "but I guess I'd better finish you off."

"Oh?" Kirschwasser said. "Bold words..."

As Taker began slowly closing the gap, Kirschwasser retreated to maintain their current distance. The two gamers continued like that for a while, calculating, bargaining for timing and distance. Their stalking game carved out a ring on the small arena of the beach.

To make sure that Taker did not leave her too far behind, Sorceress took a few big steps of her own, though she made sure to do it without sacrificing her avatar's inherent grace.

*She doesn't appear to have attack magic...* Kirschwasser thought in relief as he watched Sorceress. If she hadn't unleashed an attack spell on him yet, then she likely was a full support-specialized build. His greatest fear had been the thought of a ceaseless attack barrage between the two of them; this could mean he still had a chance to win.

Kirschwasser had an array of Skill modifiers boosting his HP, giving him about 50% more than the average front-liner. The purpose of this was to make Arts like Pain Charge more effective. It came with some risk, of course, but in terms of sheer numbers, the damage it dealt was far superior to any other Art in the game (except for foolish methods like buying pay-to-download items, only to break them). His opponent, knowing he was a Knight, would probably be on the lookout for the technique, but thankfully, Kirschwasser hadn't been forced to

show his hand just yet.

Taker let out a grunt. His tattered robe fluttered. Kirschwasser knew that he was about to make his move.

An instant later, Taker's slender body was charging towards him at tremendous speed. The buff must have maxed out his dexterity.

He was moving too quickly for Kirschwasser to read his next move. He'd just have to predict it.

It was just like in a fighting game. Kirschwasser lacked the reaction speed of Daigo Umehara — to "counter a light kick with a shoryuken" — but he was good at calmly evaluating which of two options was best in a pinch.

He focused on accelerating his thinking time. His enemy had a variety of attack methods at his disposal: Nail Slash was swift and had a short cooldown time; Bash was the most basic physical attack Art; and "Hurricane Fist" came with a knockback property. His enemy's Grappler-exclusive Skill "Kick Proficiency" further allowed him to execute these various Grappler attack Arts with kicks instead of punches.

Counterstrike was a move from Kirschwasser's arsenal that he had not yet revealed. If he was going to attempt to counter with that, it was crucial for him to know what Art his opponent was going to use. Though it had a fast execution time, it could still miss if he misjudged his opponent's movement patterns, which meant he had to determine the exact timing of his enemy's attack Arts.

It would all come down to a few frames.

His master, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, despite lacking proper knowledge of the game, had dominated every duel he'd fought. As a gamer, Kirschwasser felt he had to keep up.

"Graaah!" Taker readied his fist with a battle cry. In response, Kirschwasser entered the stance for Counterstrike. There were only two attacks it could be now: either Nail Slash or Bash. But Kirschwasser had no time left to think about it. All he could do was strike at the place he thought his opponent would be standing a few milliseconds later.

"Hraaaaaaaaaagh!" Kirschwasser made his move. Pulling the trigger on his

counterattack, he unleashed Counterstrike. The system faithfully reproduced the exact strike he'd imagined.

Like a prophecy unfolding, Taker's body moved towards the tip of the Knight Sword. But the other man's reaction came just as swiftly.

"Tsk..." He clicked his tongue and twisted his body.

In order to stop an Art with automatic activation, you needed a combo-specialized Art called "Art Cancel". Most front-line fighters took it as a sort of insurance policy, to help limit their moments of vulnerability.

In this way, Taker forcibly canceled the Art he had activated, then reacted to Kirschwasser's counter.

The entire breathtaking exchange happened over the course of a few instants, and it sent the audience into a fervor.

"It seems you did not finish it," Kirschwasser said to Taker, who was now holding the Knight Sword between his palms.

This sort of close-quarters deadlock made for an extremely precarious situation. The slightest change one way or the other could decide the entire fate of the duel. As a gamer, Sakurako Ogi, a.k.a. Kirschwasser, loved this sort of mentally-taxing situation.

Kirschwasser and Taker glared at each other from extremely close range, neither attempting to put any further pressure on the sword. The longer the shared gaze lasted, the more the man's blood-red eyes looked like those of a monster.

"Mind if I ask you something?" Taker asked lightly, as if making small talk.

"If I can answer you, I shall," Sir Kirschwasser said.

"Why did you accept our challenge?" Taker asked. "And by yourself, for that matter..."

"You do not know?"

"It's a mystery to me."

"Hmm..." Something in Taker's tone suggested to Kirschwasser that this

wasn't simply a cheap trick meant to distract him. "Because of loyalty, I shall say," he responded.

"You're serious?"

"I shall leave that to your imagination." An instant later, Kirschwasser tossed his shield aside and thrust up his sword. Gripping the sword in both hands allowed him to invoke the effect of his Skill "Two-Handed Sword."

Taker was caught off-guard, and it left his chest exposed.

Kirschwasser threw a Bash at his unprotected side. The impact was audible, and he could feel in his hands that he had made contact with his enemy's hitbox. It kicked up a blood spray, accompanied by a damage value. The audience let out a cry of surprise.

"But what's the point of taking it all so damn seriously? It's just a game!" Taker scolded as he flew back, holding his side.

Kirschwasser gave a composed response. "I am earnest in everything I do, even if it is merely a game world. If we cannot take our play seriously, then what is the point of anything we do?"

Taker sounded bitter at being caught unawares, but he clearly still had more than enough health to spare. Kirschwasser could tell from the way he was standing that his blow had been far from decisive.

*He's not a gamer,* Kirschwasser thought. *All methods, talent, reflexes, and knowledge of the game aside, he's not a gamer.* In Kirschwasser's opinion, no one who would ask a question like that could ever be called a real gamer.

That being the case...

"May I ask a question, as well?" he asked, turning the point of his Knight Sword towards his opponent. "I do not understand the reason why you two are working with Lady Nem. Surely you are not her friends?"

"It's because we're mercenaries," said Taker.

"It sounds to me like you enjoy playing mercenary," Kirschwasser responded.

Taker fell silent, fixing a glare on Kirschwasser.

“Taker, I’m not sure you have the skill to hold down a conversation while you’re fighting,” Sorceress shot in dryly from beneath her parasol. “You’re always saying that actions speak louder than words, and that’s what suits you best. Why don’t you just beat him already?”

“Shut up! What happened to your support magic, anyway?”

“I was just about to use it,” she said. “See?”

A pale green light wreathed Taker’s body, healing all of the damage Kirschwasser’s blow had dealt to him. All of the fatigue he had built up from his chain of Arts returned to zero, as well. Taker was back to perfect condition.

“The two of you seem to get along poorly,” Kirschwasser suggested.

“Yes, that’s true,” smirked Sorceress. “He’s such a shy boy.”

“Don’t make it sound so damn suggestive...” Taker muttered.

The damage Kirschwasser had taken was also slowly healing thanks to Regenerate, but he couldn’t do anything about his buildup of fatigue. By this point, it had built up to a degree that it was reducing his speed and damage dealt. Little by little, he was being backed into a corner.

He cast a glance at Nem. She looked discontented.

If he could shake her with his words, it would render the fight meaningless. He wondered if that was what he should focus on... but both as a gamer and as a loyal Knight, this was a situation that set his blood burning.

“Taker, I expect him to still have a trick up his sleeve,” warned Sorceress. “Proceed with caution.”

“Stop telling me what to do!” Taker snapped.

Despite his response, the man showed no sign of rushing in right away. It seemed Sorceress served as his advisor, as well. Though superficially, they seemed prone to bickering, their teamwork was perfect. It was quite troublesome.

No, it was more than troublesome. It ensured that he could no longer win this battle. Still, Kirschwasser wasn’t one to give up without even trying.

What should he do?

Although Taker was being cautious, he wasn't about to give Kirschwasser a lot of time to think. He raced at him across the beach once more, kicking white sand into the sky, and lashed out with a straight punch.

Kirschwasser let out a hiss. He had already thrown his shield away, so all he could do was intercept the carefully aimed straight punch with his Knight Sword. He hadn't spent much time leveling his "Weapon Guard" Art, so the damage transferred through, tingling through his arms.

"M-Mr. Kirsch!" Felicia screamed.

Should he hit the man with a Counterstrike, or gamble on channeling all the damage he'd taken into an attack, with Pain Charge? His set of choices was too narrow, but at least the effect of Regenerate was still going. Even if his health was driven to the brink, he still had a chance to recover.

"Rrgh!" Taker shouted.

"Ngh!" The talons raked at him, and Kirschwasser blocked them with his sword.

But here again, Taker gave him no time to think. He sprang into the air, twisted, and lashed down once more with a kick.

Kirschwasser's vision was consumed by Taker's raggedy robe as the Anthromorph spun 360 degrees to strike him square in the chest yet again.

The series of clean hits knocked Kirschwasser out of his stance. A cheer rang out around them, even louder this time.

The Knight clenched his teeth, willing himself to stay upright, and just barely succeeded.

*A big kick like that should have left a big opening,* he thought.

He raised his head, and found Taker had really turned his back on him. If he could hit him in his weak spot with Pain Charge...

Kirschwasser gripped his Knight Sword in both hands, hauling his heavy body into motion, wreathed by a visual of a red aura. This would be his only chance to use it.

He covered the distance between them with one large step and slammed into his opponent with the heaviest attack in his arsenal, channeling all the damage he'd taken into one single strike.

"Hraaaaaagh!" A single strike, aimed at the head. No matter how many buffs he had stacked on himself, if this hit, it would be decisive.

Yet Taker reacted quickly, as if he had anticipated it.

"There it is... your trump card!" He turned back around and thrust out with his talons, which took a strange shape.

Kirschwasser had forgotten one important thing. He wasn't the only one hiding his trump card. Taker had seemed to be lacking in Arts and Skills relative to his level. Indeed, he had been waiting for a chance, just as Kirschwasser had.

Although he wasn't a gamer, he was clearly well-versed in the back and forth of combat.

A color visual ran over Taker's talons, indicating the activation of a special effect. It wasn't an attack-type Art, but Kirschwasser realized immediately what this "trump card" was, and why he had waited until now to use it. It was the origin of Taker's name, and the reason for his theatrical phrase, "I will steal your karma." He knew what Taker's build really was.

Taker couldn't fully dodge Kirschwasser's freight train of an attack, but he managed to take it in the shoulder instead of the head. The damage was serious, but not quite lethal. Kirschwasser then entered the lengthy cooldown time left by the attack, and Taker took advantage of it to slash at his opponent's forehead with his claws.

Was this the end?

It was just then that a black whirlwind appeared and sent Taker flying.

"...Hmm." Ichiro looked up suddenly.

He had a vague feeling that things had just gotten worse, and that he should, perhaps, hurry. It was just a baseless instinct, but those tended to be right. He took out his smartphone and gazed at it for a while.

“Ichiro!” Rosemary abruptly called his name.

“Ah, are you finished?” Ichiro asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I have concluded my investigation based on the information you submitted.”

“Let’s hear it, then.” Ichiro twined his fingers together and leaned forward. He wasn’t interested in what others had to say about him, but he was curious as to what sorts of calculations an artificial intelligence might come up with in response to what he had said. It might tell him how flexible Rosemary’s thought algorithms were.

“I have run the information through multiple thought processes sourced from users, and I have come up with multiple candidates for an answer,” Rosemary said. “Candidate one: Ichiro is ‘Selfish.’ Candidate two: Ichiro is ‘Freewheeling.’ Candidate three: Ichiro is ‘Extraterrestrial.’ All options differ from the information I sourced from Ichiro’s thought patterns. I also came up with a fourth candidate, which is that everyone except for Ichiro is incorrect, but as this causes remarkable contradictions in my knowledge accumulation system’s basic settings, I intentionally omitted it.”

“I see.” Ichiro rested a hand on his chin, and nodded. It was a more limited conclusion than he had been hoping for, but he wasn’t going to be dejected just yet.

“Please tell me if the correct answer is among these,” Rosemary said.

“That is for you to decide, not I.”

“I do not understand that answer.”

Ichiro was attempting to answer Rosemary’s requests in a way that counted, for him, as good faith. “It’s important for you to have confidence — whatever form that takes — in whatever conclusion you reach,” he explained. “That’s what it means to have personal standards. It’s how I’ve always lived my life. In the end, you’re the only one who can decide which answer is correct.”

Rosemary didn’t respond immediately.

Ichiro didn’t think he was saying anything terribly complicated, but perhaps

“confidence” was a difficult concept for a quantum program to grasp. The belief that stocking a computing unit with large numbers of quantum information chips could confer “will” upon it may have been in the realm of the occult from the start.

“And if I may say something more...” Ichiro continued. He wasn’t trying to make things easy on Rosemary, but he thought it would also be best if he explained his own point of view.

“Yes?” Rosemary asked.

“Any conclusion that requires you to compare me to others is nonsense,” said Ichiro. “Of course, it is an important ritual for understanding society in broad strokes, but as a conclusion about *my* behavior, it will be extremely shallow. You haven’t been able to understand why I act the way I do, right?”

“Yes.”

“I submitted information in response to that,” said Ichiro. “You produced a conclusion by comparing that with the thoughts of others, and you are trying to seek confirmation of that conclusion from an outside source, as well. Such actions could not bring you ‘understanding’ of your subject in any real sense of the word... and, ah, I suppose I’ll say no more.”

Perhaps, with no one around to stop him or reproach him, he had said too much. But Ichiro had measured his timing, and more or less managed to stop himself.

It took some time for Rosemary to respond. He didn’t consider that he was indoctrinating her with ideas he shouldn’t. If this would cause some kind of breakthrough, then sooner or later, Rosemary would enter that realm regardless; if it didn’t, then it meant nothing.

“I will require some time for investigation,” said the AI.

“That’s just fine,” Ichiro answered. “You should think about it very carefully. You’ve done a great deal of learning from others; you should try thinking for yourself for a bit.”

With that said, Ichiro slowly stood up.

Since Rosemary was always monitoring the game, he considered asking her about his hunch. But realizing that that would take him out of the realm of a “mere player,” he decided to refrain. To find out if his hunch was right, he’d have to see it with his own eyes, or check with his friends in the game.

He wondered if he’d make it in time.

“Well, Rosemary, I think I’ll be taking my leave now,” Ichiro said.

“You have given me information of interest,” said Rosemary. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Hmm, good,” Ichiro said. Was that a programmed response, or had it come from Rosemary’s own “mouth”? That he did not know. But maybe that was all right, for now. What mattered to him was that, at least, he had dealt with her on equal footing.

“Ichiro, before you go, I would like to offer you information which you might find of interest,” said the AI.

“Yes?”

“Your friend is in trouble.”

Ah, so he was right. Ichiro narrowed his eyes. “Thank you. Why did you think that would be of interest to me?”

“Friends are viewed as important under most belief systems,” Rosemary said. “I assumed that that belief system would apply to you, as well.”

“Hmm, I see,” Ichiro said. This was one thing he couldn’t call nonsense. He wasn’t just trying to meet Rosemary’s expectations; realistically speaking, friends were important to him.

“Thank you.” With that, Ichiro set down the headset and left the server room.

As he headed down the staircase, he ran into Azami Nono, who had just left her office with a worried look on her face.

“Oh, Azami,” he said. “Thank you for everything. It’s rather sudden, but I must be going.”

“Yes. Um, well...” Azami avoided his eyes, looking rather nervous. It seemed

she was also aware of what was going on. “Ichiro, a member of your guild...”

“...is in trouble, yes?” Ichiro said. “Rosemary told me.”

“Yes. As you thought, Megumi’s started a bit of trouble, and the situation’s gotten rather complicated...”

It seemed that by converting brainwaves into quantum data, it was possible to represent, numerically, what players in the game were paying attention to. Looking at the tablet terminal that Azami had offered him, he learned that roughly 8% of all the currently logged-in users were interested in a fight taking place on Manyfish Beach. The name “Kirschwasser” was involved.

The development staff of *NaroFan* — in part, because they were so shorthanded — generally chose not to interfere in fights between players. Their policy was to let players handle interpersonal disputes themselves. Yet perhaps Azami Nono felt responsibility for what the Nem avatar did, and this was why she had given this information to Ichiro, a “mere player.”

“Ichiro, if you want, um, you can use one of the cocoons on the third floor...” she said.

“Hmm...” Ichiro remembered the three Miraive Gear Cocoons installed on the third-floor conference room. It was true that he could log in immediately from there, and dash in gallantly to save Kirschwasser from the terrible peril he was facing.

But he drove that thought from his mind.

“Borrowing one of those would be going a bit too far against the rules, I fear,” he said. “Though I am grateful for the offer.”

The line between developer and user: it was the same as the line between master and servant that Ichiro and Sakurako were careful to maintain at all times. It was a line that had to be protected at all costs.

“But Ichiro, an accident in Daikanyama has the Shuto Expressway all backed up...” Azami said.

“Ah, a traffic jam?” Ichiro said. “That’s a shame...”

In that case, the subway? He could take the Tokyo Metro to the Den-en-toshi

line directly to Sangenjaya. It would be a fast ride, but adding in the time to get to and from the stations, he might not be home for thirty or forty minutes.

Then Ichiro remembered something.

Kirschwasser's already battered body was being assaulted further by Taker's claws.

Just then, the crowd parted. A black whirlwind appeared, slammed Taker in the side, and sent him flying. There was a commotion. Iris could hear Felicia and Matsunaga gasp on either side of her.

The new intruder was dressed in a coat that seemed out of place under the hot summer sun above. He held an unadorned straight sword in his hands, and glared at Taker.

As members of the crowd recognized this young man, cries of surprise began to ring out.

"K-King Kirihito!"

"I thought he was a myth!"

"Did he really show up just to kill-steal?!"

"What, is he helping Iris Brand?"

The black whirlwind — King Kirihito — stood wordlessly, paying no attention to the commotion around him.

Kirschwasser fell to one knee and supported himself on his sword, breathing heavily. He knitted his brow as he focused his gaze on King.

"King Kirihito... it's you, huh?" Taker grumbled bitterly as he picked himself up from where he had landed. "What do you want? What're you doing here?"

"Nothing personal," the young boy muttered, speaking for the first time as he toyed with the straight sword in his hand. "I just couldn't stand to watch two-versus-one. I hate seeing people bully the weak."

"King..." Kirschwasser whispered in a voice weak with fatigue. "I do not need your help..."

“Really?” King said. “Well, if you say so... I just figured I’d pay the old man back for what I owe him.”

*What a little brat*, Iris thought. And what a rude way to say it! Did “the old man” refer to the young heir? Iris knew she could be foul-mouthed, but she wouldn’t go so far as to call someone like him an “old man.”

Actually, she thought, wasn’t he Felicia’s classmate? She looked back at the girl standing next to her, and saw that her expression had become pensive.

“....graaaaaaaagh!”

Taker let out a howl and charged directly at King. He brandished his talons and let his hands dance in the same set of strikes that had so effectively mauled Kirschwasser many times before. But King just let out a small sigh, dodged each attack with the most minimal of movements, then swiftly hit him in the stomach with a counter.

The strike came so fast, it was easy to miss. If you had blinked, you might have thought that Taker had just flown back for no reason.

The crowd around them was starting to get worked up again. King Kirihito was once the game’s strongest player. Technically, he was only the second strongest right now, but since the strongest was a total weirdo, his popularity remained deeply rooted.

Or so it seemed. Iris didn’t actually know for sure, but as Felicia had demonstrated proudly to her the other day, if you looked at Matsunaga’s blog, there were an exhaustive number of articles about King.

“I’m not the kind of jerk who’s gonna force my help on someone who says they don’t need it, though,” said King.

“That’s right, Taker. Control yourself.” Sorceress, who had been silent for a while, spoke up. There was a hint of nervousness in her voice. “You can’t beat him by yourself... though I understand how you feel.”

“Rrrk...” Frustration was written clearly on Taker’s face. It suggested he had some kind of longstanding grudge against King, but there was no way to tell anything more than that.

King silently sheathed his sword, then stepped back.

Kirschwasser slowly stood up and glared at Taker.

“Darn it, Kiryuhito!” Felicia cried out from right beside Iris.

“Oh, Felicia...” King, who had turned around for some reason or other, quickly averted his eyes when he saw her.

“Why did you leave Mr. Kirsch like that?!” Felicia exclaimed.

“H-He said... he didn’t need help... so...” King stuttered.

“What are you blushing about?!” she shouted.

“You’re in a swimsuit, Felicia...”

The game’s second-best solo player also seemed to have lost some face in front of his classmate. In addition, the mass-produced Kirihitos of the Kirihitters — also in swimsuits — were raising their hands and whooping at the sudden appearance of King among them. One of them even seemed to be moved to tears.

“Hey, King.” Matsunaga raised a hand to greet King Kirihito with his usual disagreeable smile. He pulled out a Tropical Potion from his item window and offered it to King, then asked him a question with an air of great importance. “What do you think of the match?”

He sounded like a commentator character in a manga — which, admittedly, was already more or less the role that Matsunaga always took.

“What’s there to say?” King popped off the cap of the Tropical Potion bottle

with one hand (how cool!) and gave the traditional response. He, too, had entered commentator mode. “The raggedy coat suggests that Taker specializes in copy-type Arts and steal-type Arts, though it’s an unusual build for them. I think the purple visual we saw earlier was ‘Speed Learning,’ which he used to copy Pain Charge. He can only use it once, but he probably built up a lot of damage from the other guy’s Pain Charge attack, probably enough to deal a killing blow of his own. Just like his name... Taker, right? Just like his name says.”

King Kirihito was being quite talkative, which surprised Iris. He had seemed like a sullen introvert the first time they’d met.

“What does ‘Taker’ mean, again?” Felicia asked.

“Taker. *ˈteɪkə* Noun. Definition: a person who takes something,” said King.

“Wow, good one...” she responded, impressed.

“It was one of the first questions on our summer homework, actually.” King gave Felicia a reproachful look, which she responded to by looking away.

If what he’d said was right, though, there was no way for Kirschwasser to win, no matter how he struggled. Of course, Iris had known his chances for victory were slight from the start, but now it seemed like only a matter of finishing him off...

Iris balled her hands into fists.

“Don’t get so worried,” King said with a shrug. “The old man’ll be here soon.”

“How can you tell?” Iris demanded.

“Just got a feeling.”

As they watched, Taker took a stance across from Kirschwasser once again. Kirschwasser had recovered his shield in the earlier chaos, but it seemed unlikely to prolong his life much longer.

*Young heir, if you’re coming, you’d better do it fast...* Iris gritted her teeth, and watched the situation with intense concentration.

A smile formed on Taker’s lips. Was he going to come at Kirschwasser with Pain Charge? Taker had failed to land the finishing blow despite having the

overwhelming advantage for so long. But now, he had finally gotten the power he needed. There was no way he wasn't going to use it.

"I've gotta say, you did pretty well for yourself, holding out this long," Taker commented.

"Taker, finish him already," Sorceress said.

"Shut up! I'm doing it!" Taker readied his fists. But then, in that instant, a buzz arose among the spectators.

"What... is that?" one of the onlookers whispered as he looked up at the sky.

There was a point of light in the cloudless sky above Manyfish Beach, moving towards them at top speed. The distance grew shorter by the second, and soon enough, it was in visual range.

The spectators began to call out.

"What is it?"

"A bird?!"

"A plane?!"

"No..."

The point of light smashed into the crowd, accompanied by a flashy visual. The onlookers began to scream and run around in panic as the impact released a shockwave through the area.

The shockwave carried a plume of sand upon it, which passed over the crowd in an instant, then faded.

At the center of the impact site stood a smiling young man.

"Hey, it's me."

"What... the..." Taker croaked.

Iris watched Sorceress clap a hand to her forehead.

The person who had just appeared was (in Iris's opinion) the undisputed holder of the title "most unlikable man in the world." It was the Dragonet, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. As usual, he was wearing the suit and brooch that Iris had

designed, and he looked infuriatingly elegant and cool in it as he stood there.

With intensity sufficient to burn holes in him with her eyes, Iris stared at him and whispered: “See? My designs aren’t as bad as they say.”

“Oh, singing your own praises?” Matsunaga asked.

“Anything looks good on Itchy!” Felicia declared.

Iris glared the two critics back into silence.

“So, including the time from login to the beach, it was about twenty minutes,” Ichiro murmured. “Either way, what matters is that I made it in time.”

“Master Ichiro...” Kirschwasser murmured, eyes glassy. “I have been awaiting your arrival, my lord.”

“And you’ve done very well,” Ichiro said.

Kirschwasser’s manner was reverent and servile, and Ichiro seemed satisfied with what he’d accomplished. In his usual flowing microtransaction style, he produced a fatigue restorer, which he offered to his loyal servant. Kirschwasser hesitated a moment, then at last took the proffered bottle and brought it to his lips.

Taker seemed shaken by the sight. He turned back to Nem and shouted in anger. “Hey, what the hell? You said he’d be logging in late today!”

“Y-Yes, well...” Nem averted her eyes, flustered.

“Yes, and I was late,” Ichiro said, remaining aloof in his manner, one hand in his pocket. “My lateness ended up putting Sir and Iris in danger.”

*He never changes*, Iris thought. It sounded like he’d rushed to finish up his business and return. But it was suspicious that Nem and her cohorts knew about that, too.

Regardless, Ichiro had made it in time. She knew how strong he was, and that wasn’t the only aspect about this that was reassuring. The young heir was the main person of interest in the Nem incident, which meant that he was the best person possible to placate her. Indeed, Nem herself seemed to be the one most flustered by his appearance. If Ichiro would just break things off with her already, perhaps that could be the end of it.

But the moment that thought went through her mind, Iris felt a sudden tightness grip her heart.

For now, Taker and Sorceress couldn't do anything. They just stared at Ichiro, as if they'd just come face-to-face with their mortal enemy. Kirschwasser used the downtime to recoup via the myriad recovery items that Ichiro had summoned.

"Isn't that the..." murmured someone in the crowd.

"They say he spends a million a day on microtransactions..."

"Are you kidding me?" a third person asked.

Amidst the chaos, Iris could hear the onlookers speaking about Ichiro in hushed tones. "A million" might not be accurate, but it didn't sound far off. She didn't know the precise amount he was spending on his microtransactions — nor did she want to — but what sounded like a lot of money to her might be pocket change to Ichiro. Thus, she couldn't tell if that estimate was too high or too low.

"The old man's moving pretty slow..." she heard King whisper to himself.

"Really? He looks normal to me..." Felicia said.

"I think he's lagging," said King Kirihito. "He's probably running on a machine with a lower processing point than usual. A narrower pipe. It's speculation, but I don't think he's logged on from his home machine."

How would King know all that just from looking? Who was this child? Were all "gaming junkies" capable of the same feats?

Felicia just tilted her head in surprise, while Matsunaga murmured "I see..." meaningfully. The Kirihitters were beyond speech, as they were too busy being reduced to tears at the thought of hearing King Kirihito's commentary firsthand.

Taker fixed his glare on Ichiro once more. "Damn... Quite a time for the final boss to show up..."

"Yes, prepare yourselves," Ichiro replied. Apparently, he wasn't going to deny the title of "final boss."

While they spoke, Kirschwasser finished his recovery, then took up his

position directly beside... or rather, beside and one step behind Ichiro. His expression was placid, the face of the loyal lackey who always accompanied the final boss.

“Master Ichiro, I am restored,” Sir Kirschwasser said.

“Mm, good,” Ichiro said. “Well, could you hold out for five more minutes?”

“Yes, sir.” Kirschwasser nodded in perfect understanding.

It was the rubberneckers watching them who didn’t understand. The manners of Taker and Sorceress were questioning — the former annoyed, and the latter shocked.

In the midst of it all, King Kirihito alone said, “Aha...” which just annoyed Iris all the more.

“What, you know what’s going on?” she demanded.

“Yeah.”

“Tell me.”

“Huh? No way,” said King. “Why bother?”

What a nasty little brat.

“You’re just like the young heir...” Iris muttered.

“Am I?” he asked.

“You look a little happy about that,” Felicia commented.

“Fine, I’ll explain.” King looked over at Felicia with a shrug. “He told the Knight to hold on while he logs out for five minutes. When you log out in a field, your avatar is defenseless for three minutes.”

“But why is he logging out?” Felicia asked.

“Probably to move to a machine with better specs. Or maybe he’s got something else to take care of.”

Were King’s words the truth or not? Iris couldn’t know for sure, but what she could see was that Ichiro was indeed opening up a window to log out.

Taker seemed baffled by this development, but Sorceress just spoke to him

calmly: “They’re planning something, Taker.” There was no particular panic, nor confidence, in her words. “You still have the Pain Charge you copied, don’t you? If you can finish him in five minutes, it’s all settled.”

“Yeah... got it.” Taker nodded. He drew into a ready stance once more, his talons regaining the red aura visual that signified the activation of Pain Charge.

A murmur ran through the crowd. Could Kirschwasser tank the hit or not? A green visual ran over Taker’s body, suggesting a considerable stat boost.

Kirschwasser showed no sign of being cowed by it. He merely readied his shield and sword to stand in front of Ichiro.

“I’ll crush you in one hit!” Taker declared.

“Oh? Try it, if you can!” Kirschwasser shot back.

The tips of Taker’s talons sent whirlwinds through the air. He took a deep step in, his hands trailing a visual of a flash that suggested a tremendous damage modifier. Rending the empty space, the Pain Charge he’d stored up ripped out at Sir Kirschwasser’s silver armor.

“Is this supposed to be a joke?!” the man shouted.

“Nonsense,” Ichiro responded placidly to the man shouting at him on the other end of the phone line. “I treat everything in life with utmost seriousness.”

The workers around him were watching with fearful expressions, but he reassured them with a wave of his hand.

Ichiro was in the electronic leisure center, Akihabara Cybertown, that would be opening in autumn. His conversation partner was the man he had been exchanging words with just a few hours ago: Pony Entertainment CEO Shinya Otogiri. The man’s earlier calm was completely gone, his manner now angry and threatening.

“Are you picking a fight with me, then?” the man snapped.

“I’m trying to be considerate both to you and the goods we’ve exchanged,” said Ichiro. “I am still a businessman, after all.”

His way of speaking, despite sounding like provocation, was actually Ichiro’s

way of being sincere. In actuality, he was feeling quite fed up with the entire conversation. He wanted to end the call and get back to the game. No matter who he was dealing with, he didn't like to be kept waiting.

"Really, Mr. Otogiri," Ichiro said. "I just needed a place where I could log into a game as swiftly as possible."

"So you bought an arcade just before its opening?!"

"You described the small company running it as a mere lizard's tail, a decoy," said Ichiro. "But you should have staffed it with more loyal people. The minute I offered them the proper development funds and urgent upkeep costs in advance, they happily ceded ownership to me."

In the end, that was all it had taken. If it had seemed like the negotiations would be more time-consuming, Ichiro would have just given up and gone home on the subway. Instead, it had all gone surprisingly smoothly, and minutes later, Ichiro had had his own arcade. As a result, the login he'd thought might take between thirty and forty minutes had been accomplished in just about half the time.

But because the cocoons were still being set up, just to be safe, he had temporarily logged in using a Miraive Gear X he'd bought in Electric Town.

"That's an extremely expensive twenty minutes!" the man shouted.

"It's cheap from my perspective," said Ichiro. "Even if it is in a game, it meant that I saved Sir from death."

The fact that that statement wasn't a joke was part of what made Ichiro Tsuwabuki so terrifying.

It was around then that a worker came by, likely to tell him that the setup of a cocoon was complete. Ichiro silenced him with one hand, then said in his usual leisurely way to his companion on the other end of the phone, "Now, I really must be going. If I spend too long talking to you, it will defeat the purpose of my buying this arcade. I do not intend to tell you how to run your business. I'll be bearing the cost burden, but if you still want to drink the most succulent juices off of the arcade business, they're yours. Goodbye."

"Hey, wai—"

Ichiro hung up the phone.

The worker who was waiting in front of him removed his hat and greeted him again. “We finished setting one up.”

“Mm, excellent work. I’m going to be using it for about twenty minutes.” Ichiro opened the hatch set into the cocoon, and slipped into the seat with a practiced motion.

Watching him, one of the employees whispered, “Rich people are really something, huh?”

Of course, not all rich people were like this.

Kirschwasser held up his shield, putting everything he had into soaking the enormity of the power his opponent brought to bear. Taker had attacked so many times by now, but at the core of Kirschwasser’s finely-honed focus was the soul of a true protector.

Taker’s Pain Charge hit Kirschwasser’s shield, letting out a crack so loud it caused the air around them to tremble. The finishing move, enhanced with considerable buffs, sent Kirschwasser’s health into a downward spiral, and a tingling sensation spread throughout his body.

Kirschwasser gritted his teeth, enjoying the feel of the shockwave passing through the shield. There was no pain, but this hair-raising sensation was the only way to really feel “alive” in this inanimate virtual world. Within Kirschwasser, the eccentric gamer Sakurako Ogi let out a howl of joy.

The damage number surged, then suddenly stopped. Kirschwasser skidded to a halt on the sand, and a smile appeared on his lips.

“Hmm... felt like a passing breeze...”

He had said it. One of those breathtakingly cool lines he had been longing to say. It had been a hard-fought year since he’d begun playing *Narrow Fantasy Online*, and at last, he was able to say that line. Joy swelled up inside of him.

“What’s with the damn grin?!” shouted Taker.

“You wouldn’t understand. Heh heh heh...”

It was just then that space warped once more, and the storied young heir, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, completed his login.

Taker winced.

“Welcome back, Master Ichiro,” said Kirschwasser. “Is your business complete?”

“Yes,” said Ichiro. “And I see you’re looking rather pleased, Sir Kirschwasser.”

“Could you tell?”

Ichiro and Kirschwasser were now in total control of the mood of the scene. When the two of them were together, Taker was reduced to a clown — an object of mockery.

Ichiro stepped forward, with Kirschwasser just one step behind him.

Yet Taker still, apparently, intended to fight. “D-Damn...”

If that was how he wanted to act, Sorceress wouldn’t spare on the support magic, either.

Ichiro made only the most minimal of movements. He opened the menu, went to Config, and with flowing, effortless motions, performed a virtual item transaction. He summoned a 1,200-yen sword into his hand: the Legendary Blade Arondight. It was widely considered to be an item whose abilities weren’t worth the cost.

“Mr. Tsuwabuki. Are you going to do *that*?!” Kirihito (Leader) called out in a voice trembling with excitement.

“I am. So?”

“Okay, you heard him!” the man cried. “Everyone, shockwave/microtransaction defense positions!”

In response to his call, civil representatives The Kirihitters closed their eyes and covered their ears in a stance as old as civilization. Felicia did the same thing. They all knew what Ichiro was about to do.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but...” Taker cried out as he began his charge, “...that weapon’s mine!”

Taker's fingertips brushed the Monetary Blade that Ichiro was holding. Immediately, the sword disappeared and reappeared in Taker's hands.

"Oh, is that 'Steal'?" Matsunaga murmured, impressed.

"Getting a success against the old man... he's impressive." King agreed. But there was also a sense of pity in the voice.

Ichiro, seeming unfazed, just spent another 1,200 yen to summon another Monetary Blade. Taker's eyes widened in shock, but his expression immediately hardened, and he executed Steal again. His talons brushed over the second Monetary Blade, and he stole it.

Silently, Ichiro summoned a third sword. Taker stole that one, too.

"Um, Master Ichiro..." Kirschwasser interrupted timidly, with an expression that suggested a sinking feeling in his stomach.

And so, "microtransaction theater" began.

"D-Damn you... How many are you going to buy?!" Taker finally shouted in exasperation after roughly twenty blades had been bought and stolen.

Ichiro answered lightly, "To defeat you? As many as I have to."

"How freaking bourgeois can you get?!"

Ichiro did not answer the question; he just called another Monetary Blade.

One bought, the other stole, until at last, Taker exceeded his inventory limit. This final blade fell with a plop onto the sand as he stole it, and the momentary distraction provided a fatal opening.

"Now..." Ichiro said. He readied his sword, stepped in, and activated his Art, Breaker. Raised to an absurdly high level, the Art unleashed the hidden potential of the weapon, channeling its durability into attack power unthinkable for a single strike. Above the head of the defenseless Taker, the ruthless Monetary Blade let out its final shine.

"Ah!" The strike let out a roar as it bisected his face. Though far too effortless to be called a proper finishing move, the strike still extinguished Taker's hit points in a split second.

In lieu of an announcer voice declaring Taker's death, all of his inventory items scattered on the sand below. The vast majority of them were Monetary Blades he'd stolen from Ichiro. The shine they let off, too dull for something that was 1,200 yen per strike, made them look like a lot of dud fireworks.

"Now..." Ichiro picked up the Monetary Blades fallen on the beach, then turned his eyes to the other mercenary. At the time of Taker's "death," he had regained ownership of the stolen items. "...you want to fight, too?"

"Certainly not. I concede," Sorceress said with an indifferent shrug. "We lose. Right, Leader?"

Sorceress turned towards Nem, whose eyes were pointed towards the ground.

"....."

That was right. There was still Nem. What resolution would she allow to all of this? Everyone who knew the story, standing in that place, were probably thinking the same thing. It was down to Nem and Ichiro, the ones who had started all of this.

Ichiro probably hadn't seen exactly how things had gotten to this point, but...

"I think I can more or less guess what happened," said Ichiro. "I do not particularly wish to say this, but I had better do it, to keep you from causing any more trouble for Iris and Felicia in the future."

Iris could see Nem's shoulders begin to tremble. Perhaps she could sense what Ichiro was about to say. It was probably going to be like a death sentence to her, but Ichiro likely thought that if the way he had behaved had caused problems, he had better not leave any question of it.

"Nem."

"Y-Yes?"

"I..." he began to say, but somebody stopped him.

"Wait."

Ichiro turned to see who it was. It was Iris. Her words were enough to cause another slight stir in the hushed audience.

“Nem, next time you come to me with a challenge, I’ll accept it,” said Iris. “You want to beat me, right? Right?”

“Iris...” Nem looked up.

“I don’t know what you like so much about this arrogant, selfish, freewheeling, rude, charmless, wasteful, reckless, stubborn know-it-all, but...”

“Impressively said.” Ichiro shrugged.

“I’ll take you on,” Iris said. “If you think you’re better than me, then you should prove it in front of the young heir. That’ll solve everything, won’t it?”

Iris stared hard at Nem. Nem had no response at first, but she raised her face slightly when Sorceress tugged her sleeve.

“I know the young heir doesn’t hate you or anything, so don’t do things that will make him dislike you,” said Iris. “There’s no need to be underhanded. Right?”

“Mm. Yes, I agree,” said Nem. For once, the jealous girl did not object.

“Well then, Nem,” said Ichiro. “If that is what Iris wishes, then I take back what I was about to say. Forgive me.”

Nem still did not say anything, except one last word, barely whispered. “...Thanks.”

Then, led by Sorceress, she quietly left the beach.

“Okay, okay. It’s all over now. On your way, all of you.” Kirschwasser clapped his hands together, and the audience dispersed with much chatter.

The battle was over, for now. It had ultimately been a pointless one, but at least it was resolved.

“Long day, Iris and Felicia,” Ichiro added.

“No kidding!” Iris snapped back loudly. “You really need to get some control over the women you hit on!”

“I never intended to hit upon her, and I thought I had made my feelings clear,” said Ichiro. “But because my behavior did lead to this incident, I cannot fully call your accusation nonsense.”

“Good for you, admitting to it!”

“I do that, sometimes.”

A frown appeared on Felicia’s face as she hugged Gobo-Two. “Watching her, I started reexamining a few things, myself...”

“About your taste in men?”

“No way! Itchy’s great!” Felicia gasped in shock at her own shameless exclamation, then lowered her voice again. “No... I mean, that she wasn’t really enjoying the game, either... I only started playing to look for Kiryuhito, and I feel like her outlook is too narrow, in the same way mine is.”

“Well, that’s okay,” King Kirihito, who had previously been silent, threw in. “Once she gets over what’s eating at her, her outlook’ll expand, too.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” Matsunaga asked, joining in.

“Yeah, I guess so,” said King. “You’ve been through it too, right, Matsunaga?”

“Indeed I have.”

If Iris had needed to accept Nem’s challenge in order to break the other woman from her depression, then King’s words suggested that she’d had a responsibility to do just that. But all Iris said was, eagerly, “I guess I’ll just have to do it.”

“One’s own self is a difficult part to play,” Kirihito (Leader) said, his comment tone deaf in a way that suggested he didn’t fully understand the situation. The other Kirihitters seemed to share his ignorance.

“Well, it’s all settled for now,” Kirschwasser said once everyone had offered an opinion. “Why don’t we have a cup of tea?”

“Good idea.”

“Yeah, that’s a good way to finish it.”

“I love Mr. Kirsch’s tea.”

“Same, actually.”

As they walked their way back to the beach house, Ichiro gazed at Iris. A rare occurrence.

“Wh-What?” Iris, suddenly feeling self-conscious, tried to hide her body with her arms.

Ichiro responded in grave tones. “I was just thinking... You really do have no design sense.”

“Like I care what you think!” Iris lashed out with a full-power punch. Naturally, he dodged it, and she and her design sense-free swimsuit went plunging into the sand.

It was around that time that the Red Sunset Knights returned from their quest to defeat the boss monster off shore. The drop items they had received were primarily seafood. They gave these out for free to the other players on the beach, and everyone ate with relish all together.

# 6 - Epilogue

A man sat on a bench in the park, alone. His ragged clothing almost made him look like a homeless man. His appearance by itself would be enough to invite pity, but added to the melancholy aura around him, there was no sorrier sight in the world.

“Oh, hello there, Taker!” a voice called to him, addressing him by his internet handle.

Taker slowly lifted his face and turned towards the sound of the voice. A petite girl wearing the blazer uniform of a nearby middle school was running up to him energetically. There were two plastic convenience store bags in her hands.

“Shoko, huh?” he said. “Just call me Trash.”

“Aw, are you in gloom mode again?” Shoko promptly plunked down next to the self-styled “Trash,” head tilted. “Why? Because Tsuwabuki beat you up?”

“That’s part of it... Actually, you disappeared at some point, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Heh heh! Invisibility Technique!” Shoko shot him a cheerful and carefree smile. “But y’know, you oughta stop asking people to call you ‘Trash’ when you’re feeling low! It’s de-purr-essing!”

“Better than someone who uses cat puns in real life...”

“Aw, so mean!” Shoko laughed, seemingly without a care in the world.

She pulled out a number of rice balls from the convenience store bags, and handed them to “Trash.” At first, he tried to demur, but Shoko quickly pointed out the sound of his rumbling stomach, and he took them without further complaint.

Shoko was truly insightful for her age. He’d heard she’d had a complicated past, but he had never pressed further on it. Having a friend so far from his own

age had been helpful to him, so as pathetic as it was, he was grateful to have her around.

“So, Trash, what’s bothering you?” she asked.

“Leader.”

“Ah, Nem.” Shoko nodded as she munched on a rice ball.

“We couldn’t help her with her problem,” Taker sighed.

“Hmm, you were taking it pretty seriously, huh?” Shoko asked.

“Of course I was,” he replied. “We’re the friends of the less talented.”

The sight of Nem growing even more depressed than she had been before had tanked “Trash’s” self-confidence. He couldn’t help but feel that his attempt to resort to force had made things worse. At the same time, he didn’t know what else he might have done.

“Talent isn’t something you can unlock with some magic key,” Shoko said. “You have to work for it, right? And at the end of the day, the only person who can help a person is themselves. That’s how people work.”

“Oh?” he asked.

“It’s true! That goes for your problem too, Trash,” Shoko said in a laid-back voice, pulling out a pudding cup from her plastic bag.

The man who called himself Trash watched her, then whispered, “Shoko, where’s my pudding?”

“You don’t get one!” she declared. “You always just use them to make fake boobs.”

“Happy birthday, Sakurako-san,” said Ichiro.

“Ohh...” Sakurako gasped.

As Sakurako logged out, Ichiro came to meet her. The table was lined with foods she hadn’t made herself.

They seemed to have been sitting out for a while, which made Sakurako scratch her cheek self-consciously.

“So you did remember...” she said. “You completely ignored it this morning, so I felt a little sad.”

“I felt that a surprise party might be an interesting thing to try,” he said. “Well, have a seat.”

“If you insist...” she answered. “You always do cook Italian or French, don’t you? I suppose it’s because you have an image to maintain.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “It’s because you always make Asian food for me.”

Yes, Sakurako Ogi’s birthday was July 20th, and it was the one day of the year that he cooked for her. Ichiro took a bottle of wine made in the year of her birth in one hand, then voiced a question off the top of his head.

“I was wondering, why did your parents name you after cherry blossoms, when you were born on the former Marine Day?”

“I don’t know,” Sakurako said. “My parents never told me when I asked. Maybe they just picked it out of a hat?”

“Oh? Well, here’s your present.”

Ichiro handed her a small package. It was the one that had been sent to him last week, the same day he’d received his brooch. He hadn’t told her what it was when she had asked, but she would never have dreamed it was a present for her. Sakurako Ogi was overcome with emotion.

“Though I suppose it wasn’t much of a birthday, thanks to me,” Ichiro added.

“Not at all. I enjoyed it quite a lot!” cried Sakurako. “I got to say a line I’ve been waiting to say for a long time... Oh, Ichiro-sama. Please, allow me to pour the wine.”

“Oh, nonsense, nonsense,” he retorted. “You sit there.”

Sakurako was just about to stand up in her usual manner, but he stopped her, and poured the wine into the glass.

Sakurako squirmed a little, fretfully, then looked up at the ceiling. “You were about to break things off with Nem, weren’t you? That gave me chills.”

“I didn’t want to do it, either,” Ichiro said. “I think of her as a good friend. I

don’t think it would have been good for either of us, so I’m grateful to Iris for sparing us that.”

Iris had expressed regret that, in her words, “if I’d made up my mind sooner, Mr. Kirsch wouldn’t have had to fight,” but Sakurako, as Kirschwasser, had reassured her with the same words she had spoken to Ichiro just now. She really had enjoyed the fight.

Of course, it was no time to be saying things like “all’s well that ends well” or “thank goodness that’s behind us,” either. If Iris and Nem competed, Iris would clearly be at an overwhelming disadvantage, and it was possible that not even that would resolve the issue in Nem’s heart.

“Well, Sakurako-san, let us eat,” said Ichiro. “Happy birthday, once again. I look forward to another year with you.”

“Ah, yes. To another year, Ichiro-sama,” she said.

He poured wine for each of them, then sat down. Their glasses let out a sharp, cool sound as they clinked together.

“Oh, Ichiro-sama,” she said. “There’s something I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Ichiro-sama, you must have been enraged during that last fight. Summoning all those Monetary Blades...”

Ichiro’s hands stopped on their way for his knife and fork.

“Was that for my sake?” she asked, in a joking way.

Ichiro just laughed. “Nonsense.”

She had thought that he would say that, but the ease with which he dismissed it still gave Sakurako a slight sting of pain.

“Does this mean you’re now three years older than me, Sakurako-san?” Ichiro asked.

“N-Nonsense! It’ll be back to two years again very soon!” she exclaimed.

Incidentally, two days after this cheerful conversation transpired, Ichiro got a

call from Azami Nono.

The main subject was a clear change she had picked up in Rosemary's thought patterns, that "she seems to be quibbling with a lot of things" and "she's frequently using the word 'nonsense.'"

When asked what on Earth he had put into her head, Ichiro merely replied with his usual phrase.



# Afterword

Hello, everyone.

My editor (what a hottie!) asked how many pages I was going to write for the afterword. I told him I was going to write ten or twenty pages, but shameful creature than I am, I ended up panting for breath after only seven.

Ah, this afterword is an exciting one.

We've reached volume three.

Volume three is a milestone for light novels, isn't it? You often hear people say, "It starts to get interesting around volume three!" And the author begins to feel the excitement of, "Will I be able to keep the series going?!"

This story is almost completely original; there's no corresponding episode in the version on *Shosetsuka ni Narou!* It's a focus on some sub-characters who lost the spotlight in the rewrites of volumes 1 and 2, and on Sakurako-san, who's been shuffled to the background, too. Readers of the web version will know this, but I've also introduced characters unique to the published version.

Amesho, Matsunaga, and Stroganoff are important, of course, but it all comes down to Sakurako-san. Like most of the characters, she's led around by the nose by Ichiro, but she has to clean up for him even as he's treating her that way. She was a popular character in the web version, but she had no episode painting her as a main female lead, so I wanted to give her more presence while I was rewriting for the print version.

So volume 3 lets a lot of colorful sub-characters get attention, and Sakurako-san gets to put her own charm on display. As long as I was doing that, I decided I'd also make it a swimsuit episode, but the character in question, Sakurako-san, does not get to wear a swimsuit. I couldn't bear to make Kuwashima draw a picture of Kirschwasser gallantly trying to hide his embarrassment. What can you do?

The web version has a scene where she's making paper in the buff, so you can read that instead.

One point of concern when I did the published version was Sakurako-san's age. She was 25 at the start of volume one, and the birthday episode would make her 26, and I was aware that even in a work without much love comedy, this would strip away some of her appeal as a female lead. As her creator, I was determined that she had to be three years older than the young heir, so if my editor (what a hottie!) had told me "make her younger," I was prepared to go to war.

When we were having our first discussions, I casually asked, "Is Sakurako-san's age okay?" and he replied, "26, you said? Hmm, she's right on the line." Which meant that Sakurako-san safely made her female lead debut right on the line at 26.

And when a friend of mine read this story, he said, "I think it's because Sakurako-san's lifestyle is right on the line." I guess it's common knowledge that she's borderline as a female lead.

If Sakurako-san is already on the line, that means that the upcoming episodes are going to get her in even more trouble. I'm not sure if we'll get to that episode in the print version, but Sakurako-san has more "on-the-line lifestyle," as my friend put it, waiting in the wings. I hope I can bring it to you.

One character in this volume who got a lot of focus was Megumi Fuyo, a.k.a. Nem. This is the first time in the print version that we're diving below the surface on who she is. If the 26-year-old Sakurako-san is on the line, the 28-year-old Fuyo is out by a nose, I guess. But let's not talk about that. I feel like I'm touching on a painful subject. It doesn't matter who's on the line or who's out. They were all young once.

Right? Um, so yes... let's talk about Amesho and the others.

I made up sub-characters like Stroganoff, Matsunaga, Amesho, and The Kirihitters on the spot when I was writing the web version, and slowly brought them to life. But as they kept on acting in the background and I decided on the

final direction of the web version, I realized they were important to have around. Their appeal lies in the fact that they don't get involved in the main thread of the story, so I didn't make much chance for them to appear, but since this was an original episode for the print version, I wanted to give them a chance to shine. I'll add them in anytime I get a chance in the future, too.

Um, I guess I've finally run out of page space...

No, I still have some left...

Why did I say I could write ten pages of this? What did I intend to write for ten pages? I can't even keep the energy up. I want to go back to three days ago and kick myself.

Now for acknowledgments.

I made a lot of trouble for K, my editor (what a hottie!), again this time. It's the third volume since my debut, and... um... I'm sorry I made you jealous. My progress, getting later and later, makes me feel more like trash. I need to get better at planning, next time. I'm also going to store up more of that gelatin drink with the weird name that you told me about in my fridge.

Next, Rein Kuwashima, who did wonderful illustrations once again! It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the reason I made this a swimsuit episode was to see Kuwashima draw Iris in a swimsuit. Of course, I wanted to see swimsuit Felicia and swimsuit Amesho, too! You have my most humble thanks! I'm happy that there was so much Sakurako-san, too!

And the proofreaders! I'm sorry for the unprecedented amount of typos that were present when it went around for copy. You've always been of such help to me, but the scale this time around wasn't very cool, I guess. Thank you very much.

Of course, the editors, the printers, the booksellers, and all the people who enjoy the story on *Shosetsuka ni Narou!*, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! And thanks to you, the person reading this book, too! I'll work hard and put out volume four! If you're standing here reading this now and you're hesitant, take this book to the register, please!

Okay, that’s six pages! Yes, I finished! Yahoo! I can do it when I try! Next time I’ll write ten or twenty pages of afterword!

See you later! Take care!

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Paying to Win in a VRMMO: Volume 3

by Blitz Kiva

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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