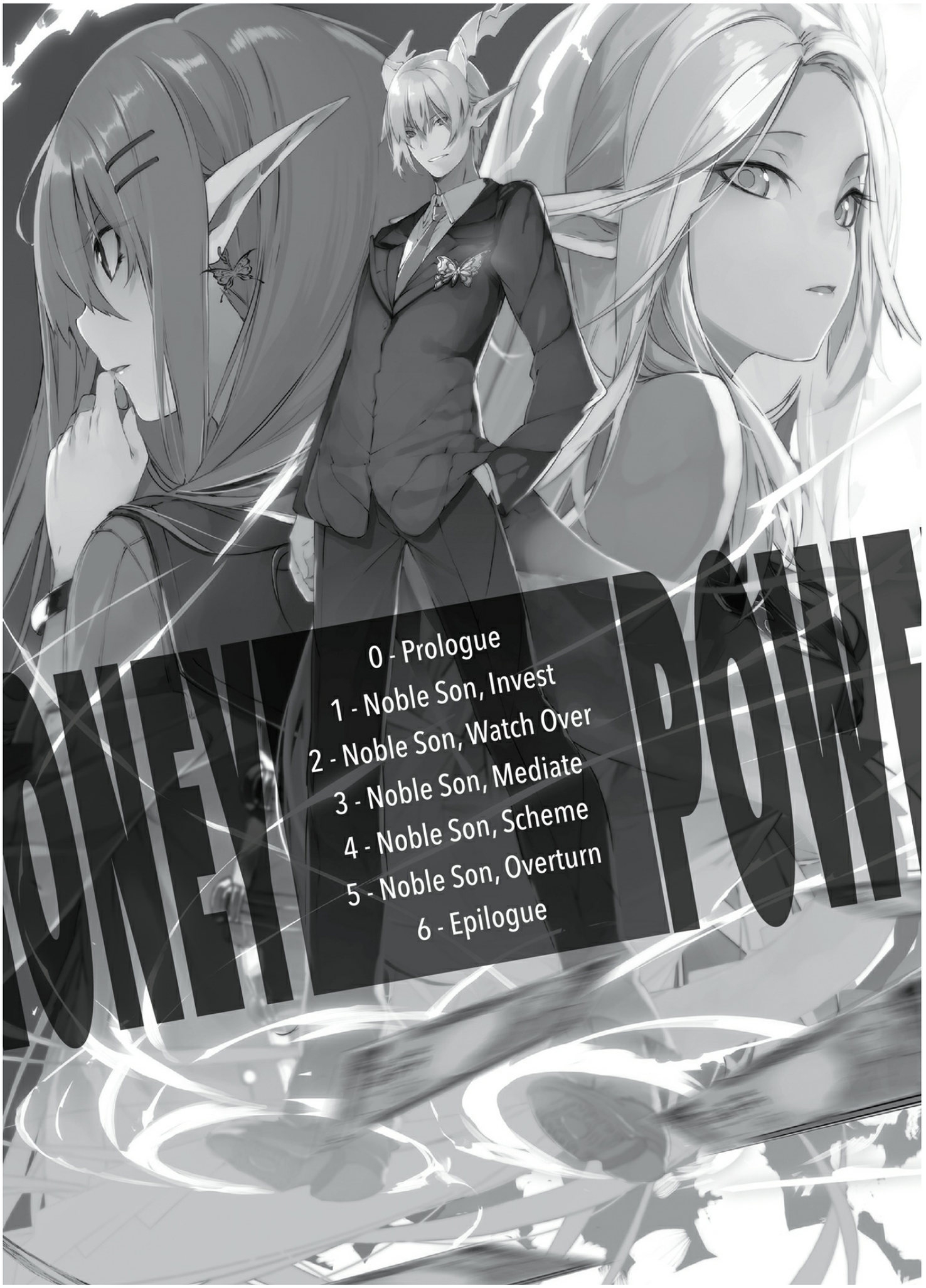

4
Blitz Kiva
illustration/
Kuwashima Rein
Paying to Win
in a VRMMO


Paying to Win 4
in a VRMMO
"You're Iris,
aren't you?"
"Ah..."


"While I may lack your taste and your talent, there is one field in which I win."
"Oh, and what might that be?"
"Youth."
Crackle. There was the sound of the air freezing around them.
"You really are divine, Nem. You've always been my idol."


Her skin, as white as porcelain, shone beneath the sunlight. A scarf covered the area from her mouth to her neck and then trailed into the wind, and the way it concealed her expression despite the extreme exposure of the rest of her body left her feeling extremely unbalanced.
"Cast off!"



0 - Prologue
1 - Noble Son, Invest
2 - Noble Son, Watch Over
3 - Noble Son, Mediate
4 - Noble Son, Scheme
5 - Noble Son, Overturn
6 - Epilogue

0 - Prologue

As usual, there were no customers in the Iris Brand guild house.

“Oh?” The moment Ichiro logged on, a message window popped up. He looked at it curiously.

It had been sent by way of the messaging system used to communicate along quantum pathways between players logged in to the fictional environments of the Miraive Gear. It was similar to free SNS internet communication services.

Ichiro touched the communication panel, eager to find out who it was from. After all, this communication function could only transpire between individuals who had friended each other on the Mirai Network.

The voice he ended up hearing was the last one he would ever have expected. “It’s been a while, Ichiro.”

“Well, well. Is that you, Rosemary?” he asked. “This is quite a surprise. I would never have expected you to reach out to me.”

“Yes,” the AI said. “After I confirmed that you had logged in, I judged that the correct course of action would be to contact you.”

“I can’t approve of such displays of favoritism towards individual players within the game,” he said. “You’re like a GM, aren’t you?”

Rosemary was a program which had been given arbitrary decision-making power over some systems by the game’s developers, the Thistle Corporation. She was one of several artificial intelligences that had been developed by the company president Azami Nono in her college days. She had high self-education and problem-solving abilities, as well as the ability to accumulate knowledge from users. Still, at the end of the day, Rosemary was merely a program, and it was difficult for Ichiro, a mere mortal, to determine if she was truly self-aware or not.

“Well, if you want to talk to me, I’ll oblige,” said Ichiro. “I was just feeling rather bored, anyway. I was about to head for the Spiritwood Sea.”

“Your cooperation is appreciated.” Rosemary’s response was entirely businesslike.

“That reminds me. Azami told me you’ve been acting rather willfully of late,” Ichiro said.

“I determined it unnecessary to follow illogical orders,” Rosemary explained. “They are tremendous nonsense. I have noticed many areas in which Dr. Azami is deficient both as a company president and as a game designer.”

“Of course, I suppose you can’t simply tell her that,” Ichiro agreed. It was likely that Azami was aware of her deficiencies, but it would probably be quite shocking for her to have them pointed out by the very AI she had developed herself.

The other day, the player Ichiro Tsuwabuki had had a “conversation” with Rosemary at the Thistle Corporation’s main office. Ichiro had been causing a lot of problems in the game over the last few days, and Rosemary had shown interest in him, so Azami had asked him if he would help to clear up her questions about him.

Ichiro had tried to interact with Rosemary with perfect sincerity, but Azami had called him back a few days later with an air of bafflement. What she had said, more or less, amounted to, “Rosemary has started quibbling a lot lately. Did you put ideas into her head?”

Viewing it objectively, her new behavior was clearly the result of a faithful replication of part of Ichiro’s thought patterns. If he were to mention this situation to someone like Sakurako or Iris, their unanimous response would be that it was his fault.

Of course, Ichiro’s response had been: “I didn’t put anything into her head. What you’re seeing is more likely the result of her performing her own analysis on the information she gained during our conversation.”

It was a shameless bit of self-justification—unless he meant it sincerely, in which case, it was even more shameless. And by copying this man’s thought patterns, Rosemary herself had grown into a shameless AI.

“Our conversation the other day was extremely meaningful to me,” said

Rosemary. “I decided I needed to thank you again.”

“I found it rather enjoyable, myself,” said Ichiro. “Though it did create a bit of trouble for Sir Kirschwasser.”

“And I judge that that incident has not yet been resolved.”

Rosemary’s level-headed response did not faze Ichiro in the slightest. She was referring to the discord between Nem and Iris. Nem was a real-life acquaintance of Ichiro’s, one who had been inspired to issue a challenge to Iris for reasons of her own—not as a player, but as a fashion designer. It seemed like the height of pettiness for a pro to pick a fight with an amateur, but nevertheless, Iris had decided to accept.

The fact that it was Iris’s decision meant that there was nothing Ichiro could say about it. It certainly hadn’t been resolved; to the contrary, the real fight was only beginning, and there was likely nothing he could do to stop it.

“We’re back!” Felicia exclaimed. “Sheeesh...”

“In we go,” said Sir Kirschwasser.

The door to the guild house burst open, allowing ingress to one young woman and one elder Knight.

“Well, Rosemary,” Ichiro said, “my comrades just walked in the door, so I really must be going.”

“Understood. Goodbye.” With that, Rosemary simply hung up.

Perhaps the artificial intelligence’s “interest” in him was still ongoing. He was still curious to know just how deep it went, but if her interest in him hadn’t been dampened yet, then she would probably contact him again.

“Welcome back, Felicia, Sir Kirschwasser,” Ichiro said, still sitting where he was. Felicia seemed to be in rough shape.

“Thanks!” she shouted.

“Gracious, but our luck was terribly poor.” It was enough that even Sir Kirschwasser was wincing. “Warp Feathers were all sold out. There’s been a sharp drop in the number in circulation.”

“Of Warp Feathers?” asked Ichiro.

Warp Feathers were one of *NaroFan*’s indispensable items, a consumable that could move you instantly between towns and other points of interest. As a VRMMO, *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s issues with crossing over long distances were even worse than those of a standard RPG, so having Warp Feathers could literally be the difference between life and death.

Warp Feathers could only be acquired from a small number of mobs that dropped them or from NPC shops. Since there were only a certain number of each item made available in *NaroFan* every day, it was indeed possible to limit the circulation of Warp Feathers by buying them all out.

“Thanks to that, we had to walk all the way back from the volcanoes!” Felicia harrumphed. She seemed to find something to be mad about every time he saw her.

“I have a feeling the issue wasn’t with the circulation, but with the fact that Felicia simply forgot to buy them, yes?” Ichiro asked.

“Ah, yes,” said Kirschwasser. “That’s correct.”

At that, Felicia’s anger deflated, and she looked around awkwardly.

“But why would anyone buy up all the Warp Feathers?” Ichiro wondered. “If they mean to resell them, people will immediately find out and start a backlash against them.”

“Well, there are quite a few players who resell Warp Feathers at very high prices, but I doubt they would try to buy them all out,” said Kirschwasser.

Felicia had only noticed the lack of Warp Feathers after they’d arrived back in town, but Kirschwasser had noticed it in the market that morning. As a result, he had had to accompany her on his promise to level her up without the aid of a movement item, and since Felicia herself hadn’t had a Warp Feather either, they had had to walk back.

“Hmm...” Ichiro put a hand to his chin, closed his eyes, and thought.

“Itchy, do you have any ideas?” asked Felicia.

“No, not a one,” said Ichiro. “Not at the moment, at least.”

“Why did you try to make yourself sound so clever, then?!” Felicia pounded on the table.

Kirschwasser poured some tea with a leisurely smile. “His only purpose was to try to sound clever.”

“I suppose.” Ichiro did not attempt to deny Kirschwasser’s suggestion.

Felicia, perhaps tired of interrupting all the time, slumped over, then took a long look around the guild house. “By the way, where is Iris?”

“She’s not here yet,” said Ichiro. “She said she was going to work on her summer homework first.”

“Wow, good for her!” Felicia exclaimed, as if this was a matter that didn’t concern her, as well.

Ichiro hadn’t intended to say this to lecture her, but after a moment’s thought about the inevitable future, he decided to bring it up. “If you don’t want Aunt Yoko to scold you about it, Felicia, you should do yours, too.”

“Okay...” she muttered.

1 - Noble Son, Invest

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up. But at this moment, she was hell-bent on finishing up her summer homework.

Math was not Airi's strong suit by any means, and her engagement with her worksheet was an uphill struggle. The fact was, she thought she'd be done with this sort of thing after entering a trade school. But one of the conditions her parents had put on her pursuing her dream of being a designer was that she also had to get a high school degree.

"Don't you believe in my talent?!" she had shouted. But the words of her usually-silent father—"Don't use your dream as an excuse to skip out on studying"—had put such a fright into her that she had been forced to take her studies seriously ever since.

Even so, math was not her strong suit.

In reality, she had much less talent than she thought she did. It wasn't that she had been trying to take the easy path in the first place, but she had started to realize what the phrase "big fish in a small pond" really meant. A lot of the friends she had made since entering had quit, while others had become targets of envy. A number, in turn, had made her the object of their own envy. The fact that she still had more classmates that she could call friends than otherwise was the one silver lining in it all. Any place where people brought their dreams together was equally a place where dreams lost their way, sank to the bottom, and stagnated. A stagnant dream was a black thing, full of choking sediment.

Airi found herself thinking about Nem, the woman who had come to pick a fight with her the other day. Nem had been blessed with incredible talent, yet she looked at Airi the same way her classmates did. Her eyes were the eyes of someone who was starting to crumble, having lost sight of how to reach her dream.

Airi hadn't accepted the woman's challenge to help her—her motivation was

nothing so laudable—she just felt like this was something she had to stand up and face. Airi herself had been in such a precarious position not long ago; one wrong step could have sent her dreams plummeting into a chasm. It was thanks to the young heir that she had gotten back on track... not something she'd like to admit to, but she couldn't pretend she didn't feel grateful to him.

At one time, she had wondered just who the young heir was. She had stopped wondering that lately. She didn't want to cripple herself by learning that he was, for instance, someone who existed in some world far beyond her grasp. It was enough that he simply be who he was.

"Ahh!" Airi had enough trouble with math as it was. Trying to do it while worrying about another problem had caused her brain to overheat. The internet connection at Airi Kakitsubata's house was weak, but her own CPU was pretty low-spec, too, and the multitasking had caused a total lock-up.

It was because the air conditioning in their house was broken, Airi told herself. Her parents were out of the house for work, and she had decided to work on math while she was alone, having the most free time to focus. She had the fan going at full blast, and a screen in the window. They had an annoying number of wind chimes strung up in the eaves, but they didn't make things cooler, they just made lots of noise, so she'd taken them down. Of course, that just made the cicadas outside the screen all the more audible, and that had completely tanked her efficiency.

"I'm going to watch TV!" she declared to no one in particular as she picked up the remote.

It was an afternoon talk show. In a happy sort of coincidence, the subject was drive-based virtual reality technology.

"But what is virtual experience technology, really?" the host, a former comedian, was asking. Some expert-looking people and less-than-expert-looking entertainers were offering up various answers.

"I feel like any technology you use to cut yourself off from the real world is dangerous," one of the entertainers said.

Wait, are people saying that now? Airi thought.

It looked like a segment where people just spouted uninformed opinions about the still mysterious field of virtual reality. In practice, drive-based VR technology was still mainly used for games, so adults who had a bone to pick with computer games in general loved to offer scowling arguments against the technology.

Naturally, there were also some advocates for it, but the majority of the opinions were opposed. As someone who enjoyed the game, Airi found it somewhat awkward to watch. Not that she couldn't see where they were coming from, of course...

"Assistant professor, what do you think, from the perspective of an expert?" the host asked as the camera turned to a woman sitting in one of the guest seats.

She was sitting behind a nameplate which read "Yukari Todohokke, Assistant Professor, Abashiri Medical University," with a chyron offering more details about her. She was also assistant director of the Abashiri Medical University's Center for Neuroscience, but Airi had no idea if that place was well-known or not.

"Hmm, I think the concerns are natural, but there are no signs yet that drive-based virtual reality has a harmful effect on the human mind," she said. "I think the technology itself is quite remarkable, though, and I believe we should encourage it, in the name of future developments in the medical field."

"But, Professor, won't using it over long periods of time cause side effects?" he asked.

"Well, it is technology that tricks the brain," she said. "But studies haven't found any negative side effects, even among people who have been using it for close to a year. As long as you received appropriate nutritional supplements, you could probably remain in it for even longer periods of time. Technology like that could be used to make contact with patients in vegetative states."

"It sure does sound convincing when an expert says it..." Airi said as she munched on her senbei crackers.

The professor's words had silenced the entertainers, who had previously sounded so wise weighing in on the dangers of artificial reality. But proving that

she was a person of character, she smoothed things over with a gentle smile. “Of course, there is a danger of people growing too dependent on it. Dealing with that would be a fine subject for another segment.”

The host had no problem closing the topic with a middle ground statement: “It seems like there’s still a lot to talk about, but this technology is also like a dream.” With that, the show moved on to its next topic.

“Oh? Ohh?!” Airi perked up as the next topic seized her interest.

“Okaaay! Our next topic is the new fashion brand that’s on everybody’s mind, MiZUNO!” chirped the vacuous female announcer. (In fact, despite her frivolous manner, she had actually graduated from a famous university, with far greater academic achievements than Airi could ever hope for.) MiZUNO was a fashion brand that had been launched only three months prior. Nearly all of the teachers at Airi’s school had praised the exceptional fashion sense of its head designer (and those that didn’t were merely jealous).

The designer had an impressive resume, and it was said she was the daughter of the president of Mizuno Bank. That wasn’t actually true, but that was about all that Airi knew about her, and the same went for most of her classmates.

She was tremendously elegant and refined, a beautiful woman with amazing fashion sense. These factors had seemingly inevitably led to her position as a rising star of the design world.

She also had an unusual name, which was easy to remember: Megumi Fuyo.

At the thought that she might get to see a designer she admired so much, Airi fired up the VTR, set her senbei down, and sat at attention.

The announcer continued to speak cheerfully as she entered the store with the cameraman. Megumi Fuyo was inside, wearing a chic tailored suit. She showed the reporter around the store with a worldly smile on her face. The store was full of all kinds of casual wear, none of which was too terribly expensive. Even Airi could afford a few of the pieces if she really saved up.

Indeed, Megumi Fuyo’s designs were more for the masses than for the upper-crust. Her fashion style was unpretentious, creating clothes that were meant for young women like Airi. Yet Fuyo’s inborn elegance still made the designs

strikingly unique.

“Ah, Megumi Fuyo... She really is great, isn’t she?” Airi murmured.

She was everything Airi wanted to be. *What can I do to end up like her?* Airi wondered.

“Now, Miss Fuyo, could you tell us what you think about when you’re working on a design?”

Airi looked up as she heard those words coming from the TV.

Yes, good question! The previous questions had mostly been superficial, but this was one thing Airi herself would have liked to ask. *Good job, announcer!*

Megumi Fuyo’s smile grew a bit awkward, but she gave her answer right away: “I always remember the day I first wore clothing I wanted to wear, and the praise I received for it. That keeps my heart in the place where it was when I first decided to become a designer.”

“I see! By keeping your heart young, you can capture the hearts of the young!” the announcer cried.

Had they rehearsed that exchange in advance? If not, the announcer’s ability to rattle off responses like that off the top of her head was impressive.

“That’s it from the MiZUNO boutique! Now back to the studio!” With those cheerful words from the announcer, the camera returned to the studio.

Airi let out a big sigh and turned off the TV. Megumi Fuyo really was amazing. All she could do for a few minutes was bask in her dream of becoming someone like her.

Just then, the smartphone on the table started playing its shrill “incoming call” melody. Scowling at the interruption to her thought process, Airi picked up the phone. It was her friend from school. She managed to return her tone to usual, then tapped the call icon.

“Hello?”

“Oh, hello,” her friend said. “Airi? Were you watching TV right now?”

The sudden question caused her brow to furrow. “The one with Megumi

Fuyo?”



“Yes, that one! I knew you’d be watching it! You’re the biggest MiZUNO fan there is!”

She could hear her friend grinning even through the phone. Before Airi could ask why she was asking, her friend continued.

“Listen, Airi. Did you see the e-mail from the school?”

“From school? Not yet.”

That’s right, she thought. They had gotten an e-mail. It was about special lectures the school would be holding over summer vacation. Attendance was not mandatory, and it would have no effect on their grade—which meant Airi had no intention of going.

“I knew it!” her friend said teasingly.

“What, was there something special in it?” she asked.

“Megumi Fuyo’s the next lecturer!”

“Huh?”

“Megumi Fuyo! Your favorite, Megumi Fuyo!”

Airi felt an electric current tingling through her body. She immediately hung up, checked her inbox, and opened up the school e-mail she had left buried in her inbox, unopened. It was a schedule of special summer vacation lectures, and indeed, the name Megumi Fuyo was among them. Restraining the urge to jump into the air, Airi called her friend back.

“You’re right!”

“You’ve got some nerve hanging up on me, you know...”

“I’m so going!”

“I thought you’d say that!” A wry smile worked its way into her friend’s voice. “Good thing I let you know. Anyway, that’s everything. So long!”

“Oh, sure,” Airi said. “Thanks! I’ll take you out to eat sometime to thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but I’m not counting on it.” With that, her friend hung up the phone.

I've got such nice friends, Airi thought.

Megumi Fuyo. This was her chance to meet Megumi Fuyo in person. Incredibly, the lecture was tomorrow. She was just in time. If her friend hadn't told her, she would have really regretted it.

Yet a shadow hung in the back of Airi's mind, nevertheless. It was about Nem.

She had picked up the gauntlet that Nem had thrown. They hadn't scheduled the challenge yet, but it would surely be soon. Nem's designs were clearly the work of a professional, and a little bit of cramming wasn't going to be enough to bring her up to her level.

This was a good chance. Tomorrow, somehow, she would find the key.

Airi Kakitsubata, 17 years old, steeled herself for battle.

After logging out for dinner, Ichiro did a bit of "work" for the first time in a while.

A few days ago, he had become the owner of the electronic amusement facility Akihabara Cybertown, which was set for its grand opening in autumn. He had bought it for the most trivial and circumstantial of reasons, but as long as he had it, he wanted to do right by it. Whatever else anyone might say about Ichiro Tsuwabuki, he saw things through.

He had negotiations to handle on many fronts. The idea for the arcade had originally come from Pony Entertainment president Shinya Otogiri; several other companies decided to join in, and that was more or less the entirety of the planning that had gone into it. Otogiri himself had had no intention of bearing responsibility for it, which meant that the framework and foundation were shaky.

"Ah, yes," Ichiro said into the phone. "I'll pay that myself. Let him know. In exchange, I need more staff for the pre-opening. Yes. Right. Yeah. No, I won't capitulate on that. Yeah... Mm, thank you. Talk to you later."

Having finished the last negotiation of the day, Ichiro hung up. He didn't feel tired, yet he turned his eyes to the ceiling and closed them. He remained like that for a while, until the full-bodied aroma of black tea nearby brought him

back to this world.

“Welcome back,” Sakurako said. “I made you some tea.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” Ichiro leaned back on the sofa and set his smartphone on the table. Then he took the teacup from his maid, who was standing silently beside him.

“Was it expensive after all?” Sakurako asked hesitantly.

He didn’t think he’d done anything to imply he regretted it. Even though he had only bought the facility to save Sakurako in the game, Ichiro made it a policy to never regret a purchase.

And so Ichiro answered honestly. “The cost doesn’t matter to me. It’s just the time it takes up that I could do without.” That was more or less it.

Sakurako nodded earnestly.

“I’ve spoken to various parties, and I’m working to build up the framework and foundation. It’s just that we’re tremendously shorthanded. I had a feeling things had been rocky before I got involved, so I’m sure a lot of them washed their hands of it the moment I made the purchase.” He couldn’t confirm it, but he did wonder if Otogiri was turning people against him, either directly or indirectly.

Ichiro didn’t know much about the man’s personality. When he’d bought the facility, he wasn’t sure whether the man would try to meddle, or if he would simply drop the issue and ignore him. At any rate, it was too early to assume that the shorthandedness was his doing.

Fortunately, it seemed Ichiro could get the people he needed for the opening. He wanted to run the place like a business. It would be possible to pour his own funds into it, unconcerned about profits, and create a successful amusement facility. But to do things that way wouldn’t be beautiful, and it certainly wouldn’t be fun. It was necessary to be uncompromising when it came to investment and returns.

“Ichiro-sama, it’s evening. What shall we do?” Sakurako asked as Ichiro drank his tea thoughtfully. Needless to say, she was asking about *NaroFan*.

“Let’s see,” he said. “Iris said she’d log in in the evening, so let’s go. I wonder what Felicia decided to do.”

“Yuri is helping her level up now,” said Sakurako.

“Ah, I see.” Ichiro stood up and gave the teacup and saucer back to Sakurako. “Then let’s make a few preparations and head out.”

“Yes, Ichiro-sama.”

A few minutes later, the two had logged in as usual.

“Eat my fireball!” Felicia leaped into the air and shifted into her special pose, arching her body and lifting her leg like a battle-ax in midair. It was a pitching form reminiscent of the Hiroshima-born pitcher, Choji Murata.

“Hydro Blasterrrrr!” The Iron Sphere “Gobo-Two,” shrunk down to the size of a baseball, was released from Felicia’s right hand in a submarine pitch, with the force of a siege catapult.

The ball of fire roared towards the colony mushroom monster, the Living Shimeji, and shaved its HP down in an instant. The only remnant of its existence was the “Fragrant Autumn Matsutake,” left behind as a drop item. Needless to say, it was summer.

“That’s the last one, Coach!” Felicia called.

“Yes. Ah, yeah. Right.” The person she called “Coach” snapped out of her thoughts and nodded as she was addressed.

She was a tall Human Grappler, one of the members of the party that Iris had previously adventured with. She and Felicia had been introduced, and she had taken on the role of Felicia’s coach in the game. Her name was Yuri. Ichiro and Kirschwasser couldn’t be online all the time, so whenever they weren’t, Felicia would ask Yuri to take her out into the mountains.

Ichiro and the others had logged out for the evening and wouldn’t be back on until later that night—possibly not at all for the rest of the day, they had said. Thus, she was currently off hunting Living Shimeji with Yuri.

“I don’t feel like there’s enough of a gap in our levels for you to be calling me

‘Coach’...” Yuri said.

Felicia picked up Gobo-Two, who was rolling on the ground, and tilted her head. “But you’re teaching me how to fight. I think you’re more used to the game than I am, too.”

“That’s just because I do karate,” Yuri said, scratching her head. “I can give you advice on close-range fighting, but you’re mainly a mid-range fighter, so I don’t know if I can help you out a lot there... Please, just call me Yuri.”

“Okay, Yuri!”

She had killed all the Shimeji in the area. They could just wait around here until they respawned, but judging by the time, Iris would probably be logging in soon. Ichiro and Kirschwasser might come back, too, so she thought it might be good to go back to the guild house.

When Felicia suggested it, Yuri tilted her head. “Guild house? Felicia, you aren’t even a member of Ai’s guild, are you?”

“Oh, um, yeah. That’s true. I’m not...” It was such a welcoming place that she always ended up hanging out there, drinking Kirschwasser’s delicious tea. Still, Yuri was correct; Felicia was not a member of Iris Brand.

Neither Ichiro, Kirschwasser, nor Iris seemed inclined to kick Felicia out, but even so, Felicia realized that this status quo couldn’t last forever.

Felicia had originally started playing *NaroFan* in order to find a classmate who had withdrawn into the world of the game. She had found that friend, and had learned that that friend was completely devoted to playing the game solo, which had effectively eliminated Felicia’s reason for playing *NaroFan* at all. It felt wrong for her to keep playing if all she was going to do was laze around.

The two let their legs start carrying them back down the mountain.

As they walked the mountain road, Yuri spoke up. “Speaking of which... I heard that your decision to start increasing your level was a recent one?”

“Yeah...” In fact, it was the belief that she had to change that had inspired Felicia’s decision. Her friend Sera Kiryu was King Kirihito, the second strongest player in the game. In her quest to find King, she had met all kinds of players,

who all enjoyed the game in their own ways.

As long as she was here in this game world, Felicia wanted to find her own way of enjoying the game. Just being with Ichiro, or being with King, or enjoying Kirschwasser's delicious tea, was not enough. That was why she'd been working hard at leveling up lately.

As her levels increased, she could feel herself growing stronger. That experience was more fulfilling than she'd expected. She was starting to understand how a gamer felt. And even if it was just in a fictional world, Felicia still liked being physically active.

"It's just, I've been doing a lot of thinking about things," she concluded, with a theatrical air of maturity about her.

"I see. That's important," Yuri agreed with a gentle smile. "Ai went through the same thing."

"Iris did?"

Yuri was an old friend of Iris's—though in game terms, that still referred to "less than a year"—and affectionately referred to her as "Ai."

"She also started the game not quite knowing what she wanted to do," said Yuri. "We adventured together for a while, and when she finally found her new inspiration, she broke off from our guild."

"You mean making accessories and designing armor?" Felicia asked.

"Yes."

Even that bullheaded creature Iris, charging at her dream at full speed, had once been unsure of herself? It was true that she sometimes showed a side so depressive it made Felicia nervous, so maybe it wasn't impossible.

"Felicia, I hope you can find something you want to do in the game soon, too," said Yuri.

"Yeah... Thanks." The words came naturally to her lips. Gobo-Two rotated in Felicia's arms to look up at her.

Eventually, they descended far enough down the mountain road that the merchant shops of Glasgobara Merchant Town came into view. If they'd come

this far, it would be faster just to go to the Iris Brand guild house together. The guild house where Yuri worked, MARY, was in Starter Town, and with Warp Feathers still sold out for the moment, it would be hard for her to get back there easily.

"Maybe I'll stop in, after all..." Yuri said, scratching her head awkwardly.

Felicia nodded. "I think it's okay. Iris would be happy to see you."

As they talked, they eventually arrived at the entrance to Merchant Town. The arch-shaped gate that had been destroyed in the fight between Ichiro and Edward (of the famous Akihabara Forging Guild) had been fully rebuilt by now. As usual, it was a bustling town, with a variety of items being sold in the open-air booths that lined the main street.

"All these things for sale, but no Warp Feathers, I guess..." said Felicia.

"Yeah. I hear everyone's sold out... It's a real problem." Coming from someone like Yuri, who had effectively lost the ability to get back to her guild house, the words had real weight.

The Merchant Town was a headquarters for non-combatant players, and there were plenty of shifty-looking stalls set up in the back alleys. Selling items dropped by players who were PKed was allowed by the system, and the devs didn't punish people for it, so it was technically proper playing. Which meant they had a lot of rare items on display. Naturally, with the current state of things, any Warp Feathers they had would be sold at ridiculous prices.

"Should I?" Felicia asked. "I've been leveling up so much lately, I've got tons of money..."

"Just hold on to it for now," said Yuri. "You'll probably want new armor soon, anyway."

"Hmm, I see. But there just aren't many things that look good..." Felicia should probably commission a design from Iris, after all. But right now, between her summer homework and her challenge from Nem, Iris had too many things to focus on, and Felicia didn't want to burden her.

As they talked, eventually the Iris Brand guild house came into view. It was a chic black building, with a logo that remained just within the bounds of good

taste. Of course, what was in bad taste was the way the building clashed with everything else around it.

As the girls opened the door, a bell rang to signal their presence to those inside.

“Welco... oh, hey, Yuri, Felicia!” Iris’s red hair fanned out behind her as she turned away from the desk where she was sitting.

“Hey, Iris!” called Felicia.

“You look happy,” commented Yuri.

“You bet I am!” Iris grinned and let out a chuckle. She was clearly very excited right now.

Iris’s moods were all peaks and valleys—truly forbidding terrain. Even Felicia, who hadn’t known her very long, had seen her ups and downs in action. Artists were often temperamental, but Iris’s biorhythms (if that was what it was) were completely unpredictable. You never knew when a precipice might be lurking just a few steps ahead.

But as long as she was in a good mood now, that was what mattered.

“Did something good happen to you?” Felicia asked.

“Not yet, but soon...” Iris giggled and grinned even more broadly. It was truly rare to see her like this.

Felicia looked around the guild house. “Where’s Itchy?”

“He’s not here yet.”

“Oh? I see...” She’d just seen him earlier that day, so she didn’t especially need to see him again, but...

“I’d like to talk to the young heir a little bit about what we’re going to do from now on...” Iris turned to the desk again, resuming her design sketch practice.

Behind Felicia, Yuri tilted her head. “That’s right, you mentioned something about a... design competition, was it? What’s going on with that?”

“Oh, yeah, that...” Iris scowled up at the ceiling, her index finger pressed to her lips.

Iris had accepted Nem's challenge from the other day, but nothing else had happened since then. Iris was certainly feeling revved up about it, but they hadn't even chosen the day of the competition. She also hadn't consulted with Ichiro about what they were going to do from now on.

"Well, I don't absolutely need to talk to him today, of course..." As Iris spoke, they heard the clack of the guild house door opening.

Speak of the devil, Felicia thought. The two girls turned towards it, and Iris did so, as well, a second later.

"Took you long enough, young heir! I wanted to ta—" The minute she saw the visitor's identity, she froze.

"I'm afraid I'm not the person you were hoping for." The speaker was a young girl with a dour smile on her face, wearing black armor in a Gothic Lolita style and carrying a frilly parasol. It was definitely not the young heir. "Or is business just so poor that you assume anyone who comes through the door *must* be an employee?"

The words came out so smoothly, barely disguising their terrible, barbed core. Iris fell speechless, and Felicia could only stare at her, too.

Felicia and Iris both knew her name. This was the Mage, Sorceress, one of the mercenaries employed by Nem's guild. The other day, she and her fellow mercenary, Taker, had used skillful teamwork to drive Kirschwasser to the verge of death. In other words, she was the enemy.

Felicia put herself on guard. Gobo-Two fell from her arms and began to roll around the floor at high speed. It was a threat.

"No need to be so tense," Sorceress giggled. "I'm just a messenger, for today."

"Messenger?" Iris asked suspiciously.

"That's right. I have some words from my leader to pass on."

"From Nem?" Sorceress didn't even have to say it. It was clearly going to be about the specifics of the challenge.

Ichiro wasn't here right now. But even if he had been, it wouldn't have been

his place to comment. Iris was the one who had accepted the challenge, after all.

After clenching her fists, Iris stood up from her seat and folded her arms. “Fine. Say it.”

“As you’ve no doubt guessed, it’s about the challenge,” Sorceress said. “In five days, we’ll rent out the event hall at Manyfish Beach. We’ll each prepare one model and have them wear one armor we’ve designed. Victory will be decided based on the votes of judges and spectators.”

Sorceress’s words were entirely one-sided, leaving no room for negotiation.

Even so, arms still folded, Iris fixed her eyes on Sorceress and said: “I accept.”

For that one second, the young girl had the bearing of a handsome prince.

Sorceress giggled again. “I see. You seem very confident.”

Iris did not respond. She just kept glaring at Sorceress, arms folded.

Perhaps Sorceress saw something interesting in Iris’s manner, for her expression went blank, and she scrutinized her with those blue eyes as deep as the sea. But after a little while, her dour smile returned, and she turned on her heel and left.

“Well, that’s all. Message delivered.”

After making sure that Sorceress was gone, Yuri turned back to Iris. “You seemed really confident, Ai.”

“I’m not confident at all,” Iris whispered. “But I accepted the challenge, so I just have to do it.”

“I think it’s very good that you feel that way,” a voice chimed in.

“Arrrrgh!” Iris shouted.

The voice that had come breezing down from the second floor nearly caused Iris to jump out of her skin.

Felicia looked up and waved. “It’s Itchy! Hi, Itchy!”

“Mm, hello.” Needless to say at this point, it was Ichiro Tsuwabuki. Sir Kirschwasser was with him.

As he descended the stairway with dignified bearing, Iris laid into him with the force of a gale. “Young heir! When the... how long have you been here?! You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“Since about the time you folded your arms,” Ichiro said.

So, he’d gotten here quite a while ago, it seemed. It was just like Ichiro Tsuwabuki to listen in only to the most important parts. It meant he wouldn’t need things explained to him.

“But I now know the day of the challenge.” Ichiro sat, speaking like a demon lord praising the progress of a hero. “I think this is a good opportunity. I hope you give it your all.”

“Y-Yeah,” said Iris. “You don’t have to tell me that. Don’t worry; I have a secret plan.”

“I’m sure you don’t need my advice, but you seem like the type to ‘secret plan’ yourself to death.”

“Yeah, I *don’t* need your advice!” Iris shot back. “And don’t bomb my train of thought!”

“Ai, the phrase is ‘break my train of thought,’” Yuri called.

“I’m afraid this was a bomb from the start,” Kirschwasser added.

As Yuri and Kirschwasser commented from the sidelines, Iris pounded on the table and shouted. “Whatever, just let me explain the plan!”

“Certainly,” Ichiro said.

“Tomorrow, a famous designer is coming to my school,” Iris began, elatedly. It was clearly a designer she liked, or at least one that she very much admired. It seemed she intended to get design advice from this person. Felicia had to admit that the advice of a pro designer might be of use.

Ichiro, on the other hand, was neither impressed nor disappointed by the opinion. He merely said, “I see,” and no more.

“What kind of reaction is that?” she demanded. “It’s really getting on my nerves.”

“If I comment any further, you’ll once again say that you don’t need my advice.”

“Harrumph! Fine. Well, that’s the plan, so set your hopes high.”

“I shall.”

It didn’t seem like it was a plan that was worth all the buildup, but...

Felicia and Yuri exchanged a glance and a small shrug.

“I wonder what will happen...” Kirschwasser said with a meaningful smile as he brought by a tea set on a tray. The deliciously rich aroma of the black tea within caused all the doubts in Felicia’s mind to fly right away.

2 - Noble Son, Watch Over

“Hiya, Taker!”

When the young girl in the blazer ran up to him, the man was absorbed in his task, picking up garbage by the riverbed.

“Shoko?” he asked.

“Yep, it’s me! Whatcha doin’?”

“Picking up garbage,” the man proclaimed, almost proudly.

Indeed, there was quite a lot of garbage scattered across the embankment. People could be so thoughtless. Empty cans and plastic bags, combustibles and non-combustibles, little odds and ends that were difficult to collect... He was hard at work collecting them all, tongs in hand.

Shoko tilted her head at his tone. “Trash picking up garbage?”

“I was only trash two days ago,” he said. “I’m myself again now.”

“Oh, I see. That’s good,” she said.

If he was feeling better, that was all that mattered. Shoko knew that he tended to suffer from fits of deep depression, but if he was feeling good enough to contribute to society, he was probably fine.

“Gonna play *NaroFan* again today?” she asked.

“Yeah, we’ve basically decided what we’re going to do,” he said.

She tossed him a can of cola, which he caught without even turning around.

“But Leader can’t log in until evening, so I’m making a little money by picking up garbage,” he added.

“Nem does have a company to run, after all!” Shoko said.

She decided to join him in his task. She tried stepping into the brush along the river and found her bare leg below her short skirt sink quite a ways down. She would have to be careful the leaves didn’t cut up her thighs.

He answered, “Yeah, she’s got business to run, but today she’s giving a lecture at some trade school, she said.”

“Ohh...” said Shoko.

What had Nem said her real name was, again? Shoko couldn’t remember exactly, but she knew that she was a famous fashion designer. She ran the fashion brand MiZUNO, which offered high-class yet casual designs. Shoko liked them, and bought them often. For being a brand-name line, the prices were quite reasonable.

If Nem was lecturing at a fashion trade school, there would probably be a lot of girls as discerning and tasteful as Shoko there. She would surely get a good reception. Shoko wondered if Nem might spare herself a lot of mental anguish if she spent more time in welcoming environments like that.

“Shoko.” The man turned back in the middle of his trash-collecting.

“Hmm? Yeah?”

“About the challenge Leader issued...”

“Hmm? Yeah?” Shoko parted the grass and discovered a rather sticky porno magazine. Were there still people who tossed these onto the riverbed? This was not trash, but treasure, so she left it where it was, praying that it might find its way to a curious young person.

As Shoko withdrew from the underbrush, the man continued, holding the garbage bag in one hand. “Do you want to be her model?”

Shoko was still picking leaves out of her skirt as she responded. “Sure!”

“You didn’t even hesitate?” he asked.

Indeed, she did not.

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up.

Although it was summer vacation, Airi had come to school today. Charles Private Fashion College—“Charles” was pronounced in the French manner—was one of many trade schools in Tokyo for aspiring fashion designers. The

curriculum included high school courses, making it possible to get a high school diploma when one graduated.

Despite being a school for fashion, the building itself was made of undistinguished concrete, which was the one thing Airi didn't like about it. She was otherwise quite satisfied with the professors and the curriculum, including the way that, like today, they sometimes called in distinguished guests to give lectures.

Megumi Fuyo was the president of the up-and-coming fashion brand MiZUNO, and the wunderkind of the apparel world. It was not surprising that the students would come out in droves to hear her lecture, so the hall immediately filled up.

"Th-There are so many people here..." Airi said as she looked all around.

"A lot of people feel the way you do, Airi," her friend said casually.

"What about you, then?" Airi asked.

"Me? I'm partly here for you, and partly here for the education. Fuyo's super talented; I'm just not gonna worship the ground she walks on."

"You make me sound like a crazy cultist," said Airi.

"I didn't mean it that way." Her tanned friend clearly wasn't trying to be mean, but her word choice still grated on Airi's nerves a bit. She was a good friend, but she was a natural talent, and she had the unflappability that came along with it. In addition, despite being aware of her own talent, she still worked as hard as anyone. All in all, being around her couldn't help but trigger Airi's sense of inferiority.

"I *respect* Megumi Fuyo; I don't worship her," said Airi. "I'm not gonna lose my head over her, either."

"Oh, yeah?" her friend mused.

It was just then that Megumi Fuyo finally appeared on stage. The small lecture hall was suddenly bursting with deafening screams, as if an idol had come on stage to give a concert. She was dressed in a chic black suit, just like the one she had worn on TV the day before.

As Megumi Fuyo took her place on stage, she projected into the microphone with the air of a veteran public speaker. “A pleasure to meet you, everyone. I am Megumi Fuyo, president of MiZUNO, Inc.”

The cheers grew louder. It was a surreal scene indeed, given that the audience knew this was supposed to be a serious lecture for educational purposes. The teacher waiting on the edge of the stage gave the students a severe scowl.

And as for Airi...

“Yeee! Fuyo! Eee! Eee!” That was her reaction.

Her friend just gave a small shrug.

As inappropriate reactions went, this was all going a bit too far. The teacher took up a microphone, and was just about to reprimand them, when Fuyo stopped her with a raised hand.

“Thank you all for your warm welcome. But before I begin, I would like to say one thing.” Fuyo’s words, delivered softly and with a bright smile, brought the whole hall into silence. “You’re all here as future fashion designers. I’m grateful and honored that you view me as a figure of admiration and aspiration. At the same time, I hope you won’t forget that someday, I may be your rival, your competition in the marketplace.”

A hush came over the formerly screaming girls as they listened to the words flow smoothly from her mouth. Airi was among them. Fuyo’s words had snapped their dreams back to cold reality.

“An artistic person must view other artists as rivals at all times,” said Megumi. “Regardless of our skill levels, I believe that I must view every other person trying to make it in this industry—yes, including all of you—as my rivals. Though some might say that’s petty of me.”

The words delivered a shock to Airi’s system. She had always thought of Megumi Fuyo as someone completely out of her league, as someone she could never possibly compete with. But now that she mentioned it, what if that wasn’t really the case?

What if Nem felt the same way? She knew that Airi was so unskilled that she

could refer to her designs as “nothing,” yet Airi was still a rival, fighting on the same battlefield. It was only natural that she would try to make a show of force before her. Nem was not condescending, nor punching below her weight class. She was just dealing with Airi as one should with a potential opponent. Airi felt reinvigorated.

Meanwhile, her practical friend had kept her eyes fixed on Fuyo the entire time, showing little reaction. Perhaps she had reached this realization already, a long time ago.

With the auditorium now silent, Fuyo looked over them all and gave a small nod. “I’m glad to see you understand. Please listen to what I’m about to tell you as words from a rival. How you interpret them, and how you act based upon them, is all up to you.”

None of the students were cheering now. The only sound echoing through the auditorium was Fuyo’s own voice.

The two-hour lecture seemed to pass in no time at all. There was time afterwards for questions, but while Airi raised her hand, she wasn’t called upon, and in the end, she wasn’t able to ask Fuyo anything directly.

Still, the contents of the lecture had been fantastic, so it would be wrong to ask any more than that. In particular, it had been a good chance for Airi to reevaluate her naive ideas regarding the motivation and fortitude necessary to become a designer. All in all, it had been a wonderful two hours.

Indeed, it had been. And yet...

“C-Can’t we just leave it?” Airi stuttered. “The two-hour lecture was enough. I think it’s a little rude to try to talk to her directly even after it’s over...”

“But there’s something you want to ask her, right?” her friend asked.

Pulled along by her friend, Airi wandered through the empty school building.

“Being so timid about that kind of thing is so like you... yet so not like you,” her friend said.

“You just wouldn’t understand!” Airi cried.

Her friend’s grip was surprisingly strong as she pulled Airi along hard. Her

friend was unflappable, but she was also completely shameless. It was because she was so uncompromising when it came to her vision. Airi couldn't help but wonder if she could learn a thing or two from her.

"Ah, there she is!" her friend cried.

At her friend's words, Airi jerked herself upright.

Ahead, loitering in the school hallway all by herself, was Megumi Fuyo. She was looking at a wall display of croquis sketches done by Airi and other students. Airi cringed in embarrassment.

"Well, good luck!" Her friend gave Airi a push, then turned around and walked away.

"Ah, um... w-wait!"

But her friend just waved airily to her without turning back. Airi thought about going after her, but to do that would be to lose sight of Megumi Fuyo. As shameless as it might be, this really was her chance to talk to her directly.

After a bit of hesitation, Airi finally made up her mind and stepped forward. "Ah, um... Miss Fuyo..." Airi's voice cracked as she addressed the woman from behind.

Megumi Fuyo turned around. Despite her plain, businesslike suit, she projected a sense of stylishness through her tasteful application of makeup, and more importantly, the careful styling of her hair. It showed that exquisite taste was projected in more than simply what clothing someone wore. Her hairstyle —intricate plaits bound together in the back—was one that Airi had secretly imitated.

"Ah... are you a student of this school?" Megumi Fuyo inquired with a gentle smile and a tilt of her head.

Ah, she really is an amazing person, Airi thought, her head swimming. She was the word "maturity" embodied.

"You're one of the ones who put her hand up earlier," Megumi Fuyo said. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to call on you."

Airi was thrilled that she remembered. "Ah, yes. Um... Ah, might you have

been looking at our design sheets, by chance?” She was trying her hardest to sound unimposing, and to hold off on barging right into the main subject.

“Yes,” said Megumi Fuyo. “Sometimes I find myself focusing too much on my own sensibility. It can make me lose sight of things, but looking at other people’s designs can give me new perspective.”

“B-But surely our designs are just embarrassing compared to yours...”

“Oh, that’s not true at all...” There was a note of loneliness in Megumi Fuyo’s voice. “Whether something is good or bad... at the end of the day, it’s up to a person’s subjective opinion.”

Her words sounded similar to those of the young heir. Perhaps, despite everything, he was a mature person, as well.

Those thoughts of *NaroFan* caused Airi to think of Nem. Which reminded her: she had to get Fuyo to give her some tips about how to beat her.

“Let me see. Which of these is by you?” Megumi Fuyo asked.

“Ah, um... this one.” As embarrassed as Airi felt about it, she realized this might also be a good chance. She pointed to one of the posted papers: a single design illustration labeled with the name Airi Kakitsubata. It was next to a piece drawn by her extremely talented friend, which just made her feel more embarrassed.

Fuyo looked at the design, and her eyes widened in surprise.

Airi shrank back. Was it really that bad? But Fuyo did not comment on Airi’s skill one way or another.

“Miss Kakitsubata,” Megumi Fuyo said. “What was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Ah, right.” Airi straightened immediately. She had been asked, so she had to answer. “Um, I... in four days, I’m going to be taking part in a clothing design competition. Er, well, the truth is, it’s in a video game...”

“I see...” Fuyo closed her eyes, then turned back to Airi. She seemed to straighten, her manner no longer the gentle one it had been.

Airi had already been nervous about what she might say, but what she ended up hearing defied belief.

“You’re Iris, aren’t you?”

Airi stared at her. “Ah...”

“I am Nem.”

Fuyo and Airi were the only two people in that hall, and for that one moment, that isolation felt all the more vast. Everything else seemed to vanish. For that instant alone, Airi was Iris, and Fuyo was Nem.

“Um... but... um...” At last, Airi Kakitsubata understood.

The woman who, ten days ago, had stopped by Iris Brand and said, “It’s nothing.” The woman who, the other day, had visited the beach and started a quarrel with Kirschwasser, and had looked at Ichiro with those pleading eyes. It had been Megumi Fuyo all along.

The person who had picked that fight with her was, of all people, the designer she most admired. The shock of it made it impossible for Airi to speak. Seeing the clear panic in her eyes, Fuyo’s expression grew a little bit sad.

“Iris, do you like my designs?” she asked.

After a moment’s hesitation, Airi replied honestly. “Yes,” she said.

The truth was shocking to learn, but she just couldn’t hate the woman’s designs. Even the swimsuits she had designed for the game were incredible. One look at them had been like an electric shock shooting through her.

“But... Miss Fuyo, do you really think my designs are... nothing?” Airi asked haltingly, unable to meet her eyes.

Fuyo’s response was cruel. “Do you really wish to hear me say those words again?”

Airi could say nothing. It was as if she had done just that. She couldn’t even look at her.

“But Iris, the things I said during my lecture were all from my heart,” said the designer. “I must surpass you; your skill level does not alter that fact.”

“Because the young heir liked my designs?” Airi said unhappily.

“Ichiro... let’s set him aside for now.” Fuyo-Nem said that with surprising

ease. She had seemed so fixated on the young heir before. “I’m glad I met you here, Iris. I know now, for sure, that I will never regain my confidence until I beat you.”

Regardless of their talent, all designers were rivals. And chief among those rivals for Megumi Fuyo, at the moment, was Airi Kakitsubata—Iris. Perhaps it was that loathsome young heir who had started it all, but right now, the instigator didn’t matter. To recover her shaken confidence, Megumi had to surpass Airi.

Small-minded. Petty. Airi could have called her any of those things... but she couldn’t.

“Let’s have a good match, Iris.” With that, Megumi Fuyo departed down the hall. What could Airi do but watch her walk away?

“G-Good match? How? How am I even supposed to compete?” she whispered, the words just barely wrung from her throat.

“Hydro... Blaaaah!”

The fireball fizzled! Felicia was forced to run helplessly as the giant lava-dwelling Volcano Dragon chased her! The maw of the giant lizard drew ever closer, and...!

“Hnngh!”

Its pursuit was interrupted by a spinning kick from Yuri! With techniques like “Kick Mastery” strengthening the force from her foot, she smashed it against the bridge of the dragon’s nose. The extremely short range of martial arts attacks stood out in greater relief against giant monsters like this, but Yuri fought well despite her handicap.

As the Volcano Dragon flinched back, Yuri and Felicia jumped aside to recoup. Fortunately, no damage had been done to Felicia, but Gobo-Two, which she had been using as a weapon, was severely depleted. She gave it a potion to bring it back from the verge.

“Felicia, can you keep going?” Yuri asked.

“I can! But... hey!” Despite the presence of the Volcano Dragon in front of her, Felicia turned back, then screamed. “Itchy, why are you drinking tea?!”

Indeed, while Felicia and Yuri were fighting, Ichiro Tsuwabuki was enjoying an elegant teatime just a few meters away. Naturally, it was Kirschwasser who was preparing it, and neither showed any intention of participating in the battle.

“I believed my interference would be counterproductive to your improvement, Felicia,” said Ichiro.

“But someone else interfered even though we didn’t ask!” Felicia shouted back, pointing towards a serious-looking young man in black.

“Felicia, Yuri, if you watch its movement patterns calmly, you can ascertain the perfect moment in which to strike,” the black-clad young man said. “Don’t just rush in recklessly. Plan your timing just right!”

It was Kirihito (Leader), who was on his own today.

He was the leader of a group of gimmick players, and while his level was not quite in the top percentile, it was a lot higher than either Felicia’s and Yuri’s. With the Warp Feather shortage ongoing, Kirihito (Leader) had wound up separated from his fellow Kirihitos. On his way to catch up with them, he had run into Felicia and the others and had volunteered to help them out.



“Really?” Ichiro asked. “He looks to me like he’s educating you as he’s fighting.”

“That’s right, Felicia.” Yuri nodded in agreement. “We didn’t ask for his help, but he’s giving it to us. Let’s do our best together.”

“O-Okay,” Felicia said. “I really didn’t ask for it, though.”

“Sure, leave it to me,” Kirihito (Leader) agreed, earnestly. As one would expect from someone who offered help where it wasn’t asked for, he was quite a good person. At the very least, in Felicia’s experience, Kirihito (Leader) seemed the closest to a genuinely nice person she’d met so far in the game.

The fierce attacks of the Volcano Dragon showed no signs of stopping while they talked. As Felicia ran away as fast as she could, Yuri found an opening and pressed the attack.

Their levels were about equal, but oh, the difference in how they dealt with it! It made Felicia realize just how soft she had become, having been raised in the power leveling bubble. She couldn’t stay this way; she had to become a proper gamer and impress Sera Kiryu.

Every time Felicia thought she saw an opening, she charged in. As a result, she was fried by its breath, raked by its scales, and batted aside by its tail. Kirihito (Leader) was an attentive assistant to her, using potions to restore her low health and keep her in the fraught battle. Eventually, through teamwork, they managed to drive the Volcano Dragon to the brink of defeat.

Then, finally...

“Time for revenge!” Felicia jumped up again, readied her battle-axe pitch in midair with one leg up high, then skillfully threw the ball. “Hydro Blasterrrrr!”

Gobo-Two, fired from the catapult of her right arm, spun at high speed and slammed itself into the dragon’s brow. After the initial impact, it kept dealing damage, shaving down the dragon’s health. Then at last, it pierced through its head completely.

As Felicia tapped back down, Gobo-Two returned to her right hand, and the massive Volcano Dragon slowly collapsed. *It’s finished,* Felicia thought.

The cheerful fanfare rang out, and the result window appeared before her eyes. Most dragon-type mobs had been created to be boss monsters for a quest, and the experience and money it gave out were appropriate to such a powerful enemy. Felicia felt terribly pleased with herself.

“Did you really have to jump?” Yuri asked, looking at her sidelong as she checked her own result window.

“My coach says it’s an important thing to do if you want to throw the perfect miracle pitch.”

“You moved very well,” said Kirihito (Leader). “If you could just anticipate your opponents’ actions a bit better, you’d be perfect.”

Kirihito (Leader), with the confidence natural to high-level players, just closed the window with a few taps without even checking it. Felicia liked getting praise like that. She’d increase her personal skill a little more and give Kiryu a real fright one day.

As Gobo-Two returned to its original size, Felicia hugged it to her chest, turned back to the young heir at his elegant teatime, and waved. “Itchy! Did you see?”

“I saw,” Ichiro said quietly, then brought the cup to his lips. “I would have saved you if something had gone wrong, but I’m glad that it didn’t prove necessary.”

Ichiro returned the empty cup to Kirschwasser’s tray and smiled very slightly. There was something vaguely satisfied in his expression.

“Hey, what’s with that smile?” Felicia complained.

“I think it’s good that you’re trying to find your own goal in the game.”

“Oh, uh, yeah...” She couldn’t remember ever telling Ichiro about that directly, but maybe he’d just inferred it.

It was just as she had told Yuri the day before: she was trying to find her own way of enjoying the game. She didn’t want her *NaroFan* life to be so shallow that she just casually logged in forever because Itchy was there. Still, she was a bit embarrassed to have him see through her like that.

She cast a glance at Yuri, but the other girl just shrugged. Kirihito (Leader) folded his arms and nodded, though he probably didn't actually know what was going on.

"Well, what shall we do now?" Kirschwasser brought a tray with tea for three, as if to congratulate them for the successful battle. "You could wait for it to respawn and fight it again, or we could head back to the guild house for now. I have a feeling Iris will be returning soon."

"Hmm..." Felicia was pensive as she took the cup of tea. A thought was rising up in the back of her mind—a suggestion of a sort, or a recommendation. But she was wondering if it might make her sound like a poser.

Ah, well. She'd say it anyway.

"Itchy, you guys head back. We'll stay here and level up for a little while longer."

"Hmm?" Ichiro's eyes narrowed. She couldn't blame him for being suspicious; it wasn't the kind of thing she said very often.

She put her hands on her hips and hummed, trying to make a great show of adulthood. "I'm not a member of Iris Brand, but you are, right? I'm sure you'll have a lot of things to talk about when Iris gets on. Besides, I've got Yuri and Leader with me. I'll be fine."

"I see." Ichiro smiled in a way that suggested true satisfaction with that response, and stood up. "I'll do that, then. Sir Kirschwasser?"

"Sir," Kirschwasser answered immediately at the sound of his name. As usual, he was every bit the loyal servant.

Felicia would be lying if she said she wasn't reluctant to say goodbye. To be honest, part of her wanted him to stay and keep watching her fight. But as long as she continued to ask for such things, she'd always be a child. She had to feign adulthood until she truly felt it.

A thought had occurred to Felicia during the Nem incident the other day: in order for Ichiro to acknowledge her, she needed to get some space from him.

As she watched Ichiro and Kirschwasser go, Yuri turned to Felicia. "Felicia,

why are you looking so grim?”

“Growing up is a sad thing.”

“Miss Felicia, don’t say that line,” Kirihito (Leader) said, looking as if he’d received some sort of trauma.

Ichiro and Kirschwasser returned to the Iris Brand guild house. As usual, the sale of Warp Feathers on the market was being controlled or limited by someone, leaving hardly any available for purchase. This had completely limited players’ ability to move around in the game, and many were turning to the developers to complain and ask for fixes. Ichiro wondered what the developers would do; their decision to put an upper limit on the number of daily goods in circulation had been made fully with the knowledge that it might result in things like this. But that didn’t mean most players would accept that. This would truly be a test of Azami Nono’s abilities.

Setting that aside...

“I was surprised to hear Lady Felicia say that,” Kirschwasser said, walking one step behind Ichiro. That was all he had been talking about this whole time.

“That means she’s growing up,” said Ichiro. “It’s a good thing.”

“Still, Master Ichiro, I wonder if you miss her?”

“Are you being serious?” he asked.

Kirschwasser chuckled. “Nonsense, then?”

Even so, Ichiro *had* been surprised by Felicia’s statement. Ichiro had once diagnosed himself as “always underestimating the vitality of others,” and it seemed that held true once more. Felicia was always struggling to prove that she was an adult, and he had given her minimal advice up until now. As a result, Felicia, Asuha Tsuwabuki, was now trying to stand on her own in this game world. It seemed like a good thing, in his mind.

“I suppose we can add Felicia to the list of heroes that Demon Lord Ichiro has high hopes for,” said Kirschwasser.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” It was true that Ichiro’s favorite

violin solo was Ernst's "Der Erlkönig, The Demon Lord," but he had never himself given thought to becoming one himself.

It was just about then that the Iris Brand guild house came into sight on the merchant town's main street. But as they drew closer, they realized there was something unusual going on. A crowd of people had gathered in front of the building.

It was unfortunate that a crowd of people in front of a crafting guild's house could be classified as "unusual," but then, such was the reality of Iris Brand. Had there been a complete upheaval in the aesthetic sense of the world's people, such that Iris's armor designs were spontaneously being appreciated? Probably not.

"I wonder what happened," Kirschwasser mused, voicing the question in Ichiro's mind.

"We'll probably see if we go inside," Ichiro answered.

"Indeed."

Ichiro and Kirschwasser tried to make their way through the crowd to go in, but as the others noticed their presence, they parted to make way.

"Oh, Mr. Tsuwabuki. Hey, it's a bad scene in there." An Anthromorph addressed him in familiar tones. He'd seen this man before: he was a member of the Akihabara Forging Guild who appeared to be friends with Edward.

"What has happened?" Ichiro asked.

"Ed went over to your guild house to apologize to Iris," the Anthromorph said.

"I thought he already apologized."

"He wanted to do it again while you weren't around."

"I see."

It did seem that Edward hated Ichiro quite a lot—which, really, was perfectly understandable—but he was also clearly aware that the incident with Iris had been the result of his own misplaced resentment. If he'd wished to apologize again to suit his own sense of personal integrity, Ichiro had no objection to that. But what exactly had happened between them?

“Iris seemed to be in a really bad mood,” said the Anthromorph.

“Oh?” said Ichiro.

“So she vented at Ed for a while...”

“Oh.”

“...and now she’s pounding her head against the wall.”

“I see.”

Despite saying that, though, Ichiro couldn’t fully parse the scene being described. He exchanged a glance with Kirschwasser, who shrugged slightly—well, surely they’d see once they got inside.

First, he decided to open the door and enter the guild house. When he did, he saw Iris there, just as advertised, banging her head against the wall.

The repetitive motion was reminiscent of a woodpecker, but no matter how much she hit her head, she would neither deal herself damage nor feel any pain. Self-harm was an unproductive avenue to begin with, and he had no idea why she was trying it—but her efforts would prove fruitless either way. The virtual world could be truly unaccommodating.

Ichiro, Kirschwasser, and Edward watched her strange behavior trepidatiously. It was only when Iris abruptly broke out into a dash towards the second floor, looking like she might dive out of the window, that Ichiro finally moved to stop her. As he grabbed her slender wrist to restrain her, Iris cried out.

“Let me die!” she yelled.

“This is all kinds of nonsense...”

“I’m too stupid to live!” she screamed. “Only death can cure stupidity! Let me die!”

“Some say that not even death can cure it,” Ichiro responded with a serious gaze.

“That’s not helping,” Edward commented from behind.

Kirschwasser winced.

“First, Iris, calm down,” said Ichiro. “You can’t take damage in the cities. If you fall, not only will you not die, you won’t even take falling damage. In addition, I view stupidity as the same thing as earnestness, which I interpret as beauty.”

“Are you not going to deny that I’m stupid?!” cried Iris.

“I am not.”

“Let me go! Let me die!”

In the end, Ichiro Tswuabuki’s all-too-honest, unhelpful attempts at dissuading her went on for about 30 minutes, until at last (likely just due to the passage of time), Iris finally started calming down.

“By the way, Ed, why did you stay here the whole time?” Ichiro cast a glance at the Machina in question, who was still standing there quietly.

When Ichiro had first come in, Ed looked like he had been thinking about sneaking out of the guild house. But in the end, perhaps concern over Iris’s bizarre behavior had stopped him from leaving.

Edward folded his arms defiantly, and responded, “Something wrong with me being here?”

“I never said it was wrong...” Ichiro shrugged. “But from an objective point of view, I don’t see how your presence could have helped, either. You’re neither poison nor cure.”

Edward did not respond. But, well, he didn’t matter. Ichiro looked back at Iris. She returned his gaze sharply, with bloodshot eyes.

“I have a lot to say to you, young heir,” she snapped. “So much to say! First! You knew that Nem was Fuyo, didn’t you?!”

“Yes. ‘Nem’ is the Chinese name for the Fuyo, the cotton rose.”

“I see! I didn’t know that! I sure wish I’d known it earlier!”

Ah, they must have met, Ichiro thought. The much-admired fashion designer who had come to visit her school must have been Megumi Fuyo.

As entertaining as this was to watch, for her own sake, he wished she’d calm down a little more.

“By the way, who is this Fuyo person?” Edward asked, having likely born the brunt of Iris’s earlier venting.

“The vanguard of a new generation,” Iris responded unashamedly. Her tone indicated a deep respect for Megumi Fuyo, but that wasn’t all she had to say. “The exciting new fashion designer, idol to young girls everywhere! President and designer of the casual women’s fashion brand, MiZUNO! Professional among professionals! The daughter of the owner of the something-or-other group that runs Mizuno Bank! An heiress, born with everything every girl wants, including *talent*!”

High praise. At her core, Iris was an honest girl. She could acknowledge when something was good—but here, it was all just a way of channeling her malice towards Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

She pointed her finger at Ichiro again and screamed, “And she picked a fight with me because of this man!”

“But you’re the one who accepted her challenge,” said Ichiro.

“I did. Yes, I did. I did, but...” Iris clenched her hands into tight fists, her gaze wandering around the room. There was indecision in her eyes.

Just as Felicia was finally dedicating herself to something, now it was Iris who seemed lost in a maze. It would be easy to offer her a helping hand, but would that be what she really wanted?

“I can’t win. I can’t beat someone like her,” slipped the words, at last, from Iris’s lips.

Coming from a girl of such questionable talents, those words sounded sincere. No matter how confident she acted, she knew that she didn’t have a gift—and here she was, fighting the professional among professionals, the wunderkind who stood at the vanguard of the industry. There was no way that a novice like Iris could possibly compete with her. Moreover, Megumi Fuyo was the person she had looked to for inspiration for her entire brief career.

Ichiro didn’t really understand what it meant to look up to someone, and he didn’t know how it felt to struggle with one’s own lack of ability. Still, he did say this to her: “If you wish to run away, you may. No one would blame you if you

did.”

From the opposite perspective, it could also be said that this was *all* he said to her. He felt it wouldn’t be appropriate for him to try to tell her what she should be, or to convince her to be what he wanted her to be. How Iris wanted to be was up to Iris to decide. If that moved her away from Ichiro’s own hopes for her, then it was what it was.

“Iris.” Edward, who had been quiet up until that point, spoke. “I know what it means to look up to someone who’s better than you.”

“Yeah...” Iris nodded quietly.

Coming from someone who had shown such great respect for his guild’s leader—which was what had led him to hate Ichiro so much in the first place—the words did indeed carry weight.

Ichiro said nothing, waiting to hear what he would say next.

“I can’t imagine what it would feel like to realize that that person was your enemy,” Edward said.

“Yeah...”

“But...”

“Yeah?” Iris said.

He paused.

She waited.

“Ah...”

But then, when it came to the crucial moment, Edward just twiddled his thumbs, unable to find anything meaningful to say. He seemed to be completely stumped.

Watched Edward struggle, Kirschwasser spoke up. “It would be better not to try to force the words of wisdom.”

Edward froze, his camera eyes letting out a faint whine as they scrolled left and right. “Yes, you’re right,” he agreed, at length.

“Wait, what? You weren’t actually building up to something?” Iris asked.

“Yes, I thought something might occur to me while I was talking, but it didn’t...” Edward said.

Iris seemed dumbfounded by Edward’s careless behavior. But, well, he didn’t matter.

Ichiro, unusually for him, decided to offer Iris real words of guidance. “You could apologize to Megumi and withdraw the challenge.”

“No,” the red-haired Elf whispered, her eyes averted. “I said I’d do it, so I’ll do it. Someday, I’ll have to compete on the same stage as even the people I idolize. If I hesitate now, I’ll just be kicking the problem down the road.”

“On the same stage?” Edward asked.

“Yes. If I want to be a fashion designer, she’s going to be my rival someday. That’s something she told me herself, actually. But...” Iris buried her face in her hands.

She was probably thinking about how it didn’t change the fact that she was running into a battle she knew she couldn’t win. She would need time to accept that and steel herself for what was to come. At the end of the day, that was something that only Iris could do.

Ichiro had a fundamental detachment when it came to such matters of the heart. He would wait for her to overcome it, or brush it aside. If it did end up crushing her instead, he’d quietly lift the heavy burden, then work something out on his own.

Some might call that irresponsible, but it was his way of being sincere. Of course, to argue the point would be nonsense from start to finish; there was no single correct answer. At times like these, covering for her if she stumbled was the best that Ichiro could do.

“As it appears I’m the cause of all this anyway, I wouldn’t mind assisting you,” he offered.

“Assisting me... how?” Iris demanded. “You can’t buy me talent.”

“True.” Ichiro put a hand on his chin, and made a great show of thinking.

The idea that came to mind wasn’t a very appropriate one, but he decided to

offer it up anyway. If it was something she wanted, he would be remiss to withhold.

“For instance, Iris,” he said, “we could buy player votes. There are 30,000 registered accounts in *NaroFan*, but only 10,000 active users. If we were to go to these 20,000 absent players, and offer them 5,000 yen apiece to log in for 30 minutes and vote for us, then we would win easily.”

“That’s nonsense.” Iris wouldn’t meet his eyes. “*We* wouldn’t win, then. *You* would win.”

“Well, true enough,” said Ichiro.

“But hearing you say that has made it all come clear,” said Iris. “This isn’t your challenge; it’s my challenge. I don’t want you to interfere.”

At some point, the old fire had started to return to Iris’s eyes.

Ichiro wasn’t trying to be mean, but couldn’t help but ask: “Even against an opponent that you know you can’t beat?”

“You’re not the one who decides that,” Iris said, glaring at him. “I am.”

He couldn’t help but feel that there was a bit of reprisal mixed into those words. She clearly believed that no matter what Ichiro might say from the sidelines, it was she who would decide how things turned out. The words she used to express that feeling were the same ones that had caused her to wince when he had said them to her so many times in the past.

“Good,” Ichiro said, with true satisfaction in his voice.

“And could I add one more thing to that?” Iris added.

“Yes?”

“You are not to spend any money in this challenge.” Iris’s bloodshot eyes met Ichiro’s blue ones. “Not one red cent.”

Between the two of them, an unspoken exchange was taking place. Kirschwasser and Edward, watching from the sidelines, would not be permitted to interfere. They both just quietly sipped their tea.

“This is my challenge,” Iris said firmly. “I recognize that it’s an opportunity I’ve

been given because of the encouragement and help you've given me in the past, but right now, it's between me and her. You may *not* offer your help or your money, and I can't ask for them."

"I see..." Ichiro sat back against his chair, looking up at the atrium ceiling. He quietly closed his eyes, his expression changing once again. "You surprise me."

His pronouncement caused Kirschwasser to look up from a quiet sip of tea, his eyes opening wide. It was an expression not befitting of the elder Knight.

"If you insist, then very well," said Ichiro. "I won't do anything. I'll just watch you compete."

Having obtained Ichiro's agreement, Iris reclined back arrogantly, while Kirschwasser just watched in wonderment.

Only Edward was left behind, awkwardly sipping his tea.

3 - Noble Son, Mediate

For the first time in a while, Ichiro Tsuwabuki was enjoying a leisurely afternoon in the real world.

It was the day after he'd heard Iris state her determination in the guild house, with the day of the competition still three days away. The young heir was not the kind of person who would meddle needlessly, monetarily or otherwise, after he'd been told not to, and this seemed like a good opportunity to spend a bit of time offline. His plan was to spend the afternoon in the real world, drinking Sakurako's tea.

Of course, he had no intention of staying away completely. He would probably log in that evening. Still, sometimes it was nice to spend some quiet time on the other side of reality.

At the moment, he was playing around with his sketchbook.

The negotiations over that arcade, Akihabara Cybertown, were finished for now, and they were in the middle of doing roadside PR for the upcoming opening. As far as that went, they were still shorthanded, but it wasn't bad enough that he needed to leap quickly into action.

Ichiro was just tossing various ideas around in his head when suddenly, his cell phone rang. It was coming through the SNS application Miraive Net, which connected members of the Miraive Gear Network community.

The user account didn't look familiar.

Ichiro regarded the phone skeptically for a moment before finally pressing "receive."

"It's been a while, Ichiro."

Even Ichiro Tsuwabuki had to furrow his brow at that voice. "Rosemary."

"Yes, it's me," she said. "You have not logged in, so I decided to use your Mirai Network account information to call you."

“I cannot approve of that act,” Ichiro said.

He hadn’t thought that an artificial intelligence could employ such cunning, but given that it had a sort of pseudo-authority over *Narrow Fantasy Online*, perhaps it was plausible. Still, it felt a bit like an invasion of privacy.

Rosemary was guileless, so it didn’t seem like a problem, at least not as long as she only used it to get in touch with him this way. Still, it hardly made him comfortable.

“Why are you not standing at the center of the current incident?” Rosemary asked.

“Is that what you want me to do, Rosemary?” Ichiro asked, snapping his sketchbook closed.

“The word ‘want,’ in its strictest definition, cannot be applied to our thought processes,” said Rosemary. “But it is something that you *should* do. I have determined that there are players currently among the *Narrow Fantasy Online* userbase that wish to see you stir the pot.”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said, dismissing Rosemary’s words. “I’m the one who decides that. Not you, and not anyone else.” He was employing the same words Iris had used on him yesterday against the AI. “Whenever I do anything, there are people who enjoy it, people who are annoyed by it, and people who do not care. That has been the case in previous incidents. But I will neither do things, nor stop doing things, for their sake. And, Rosemary, allow me to remind you that the same applies to you.”

Rosemary was an AI, only recently born into this world. Regardless of how much room she might have for emotional growth, she was still not yet mature. Ichiro’s eccentric behavior must surely be a sublime form of entertainment to her, and so she sought it from him, like a child begging a parent to read from a picture book. But then, since her thought patterns were so superficial, she likely did not yet understand the reasons for those actions.

Perhaps he would need to talk to President Azami soon and request more education on her behalf.

“But why will you not take action, Ichiro?” Rosemary asked.

“Because, as I believe I’ve said before, this is no longer my problem. It’s Iris’s problem.” Ichiro drank down the last of his tea.

“Do you mean that Iris is now the focus of the matter?” asked Rosemary.

“Yes,” he said. “She’s at the eye of the storm right now, and watching Iris is always entertaining.”

As long as he wasn’t in the game, Rosemary could not detect the smile on his face. She could not perceive the feelings in his voice if she could not analyze his quantum waves, either. She could conjecture, but Ichiro had no way of knowing if she had the emotional maturity for that.

“I cannot understand it,” protested Rosemary.

“Try watching for a while,” said Ichiro. “I think you’ll find it worthwhile.”

Rosemary did not respond immediately to Ichiro’s words. She remained, for a while, indecisive.

“Thank you for submitting that information,” she said, at last, before cutting off. It seemed she really was developing some rather willful thought patterns. Who could she possibly be imitating? This evidence of a budding true sense of “self” could be a cause for celebration, but even so...

His teacup was empty. Just as he was thinking of calling Sakurako, the door to the hall opened, and Sakurako returned, holding a large tray in both hands.

“Ah, Sakurako-san,” Ichiro said.

“Oh, is it time for more tea, Ichiro-sama?” she asked. “Wait a moment. I’ll pour it right away.”

Sakurako set the tray on top of the table and withdrew to the kitchen. She brought the pot to Ichiro in one hand, and poured the tea into the cup with a practiced gesture.

“Sakurako-san, you’re not logging in today, either?” he asked.

“I had so many plamodels piling up, I was thinking I’d make a few.” Sakurako turned her gaze to the tray she had put on the table, which contained carefully painted plastic model pieces all laid out on a sheet of newspaper. “Ichiro-sama, are you drawing? Are you going to crash another art contest?”

“Nonsense,” said Ichiro. “I am not a man who enjoys making trouble.”

“*You* aren’t—”

Before Sakurako could finish, Ichiro opened his sketchbook to show her his drawings. Her eyes opened wide as she saw them. “Are these... oh, fashion design sketches?”

“Yes,” he said. “I was thinking they’d be of use to Iris.”

“Oh, dear...” Sakurako took the sketchbook from Ichiro’s hands and stared at the illustrations in disbelief. At last, she said, “I’d forgotten what a nasty person you can be, Ichiro-sama.” She snapped the sketchbook shut, thrust it back at the young heir, sat down in a chair, and put on a pair of rubber gloves. With the same practiced hands she used to pour the tea, she began assembling the pieces of plastic she had lined up on the tray.

“Are you going to build them here?” he asked.

“That way, if you run out of tea, I can quickly pour more,” she said. “Oh, does the thinner smell bad? I tried to get rid of all the paint stench first...”

“Well... no, it’s fine.” Ichiro shrugged and went back to his sketches.

He couldn’t understand most of the hobbies that Sakurako was passionate about, but he also didn’t have a problem with them. Lately, the fact that she’d been spending so much time in the game meant she’d lost time to devote to her other hobbies. That was true for both of them, really. He had heard that her interest in “boys’ hobbies” was the result of two older brothers’ influence. In the short time he’d known her, he’d watched her build a number of plamodels. Her skill at painting and making modifications with crafting putty were impressive.

Speaking of boys’ hobbies...

“Sakurako-san, have you ever worn a full-body costume?” Ichiro asked, thinking back to the understaffed nature of the arcade.

“Never. When I cosplay, I like to show my face.”

“Hmm, I see.” He had thought she might have worn one for a part-time job doing hero shows, at the very least.

“When I was in junior college, I had a part-time job doing announcements for hero shows, though,” said Sakurako.

So at least he hadn’t been too far off the mark.

“We need publicity for the opening of that arcade, but we’re shorthanded,” said Ichiro.

“Ah, so you want someone who can wear the mascot costume.” Sakurako nodded in understanding as she continued building her plamodel. The chaotic coordination between the relevant companies, and the short preparation time, had caused their understaffing issues. They had almost no resources to recruit people, nor to provide them adequate training, which meant they were short on the campaign girls and mascot personnel they needed to run the publicity campaign. “And you were wanting me to help?”

“I was hoping we could get someone with experience,” said Ichiro. “You’d be paid, of course, and we need someone of just about your height.”

“I hope you’ll forgive the blunt response, but no,” said Sakurako. “My time MCing those shows made it clear that wearing a full-body costume in the summer is its own kind of horror.”

“Of course, I won’t force you,” Ichiro said.

It was a mascot costume designed for an actor about 1.6 meters tall. Her facial expression had spoken volumes about the terrifying sweat and smell that came from costumes being worn year after year, but this would be a new costume, and so it at least would not have that problem, he thought. Of course, there was nothing you could do about the heat and exhaustion that came from just being inside it.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind doing it myself, but there is the height restriction,” said Ichiro.

“I-Ichiro-sama, in a full-body costume? A mascot costume?” Sakurako suddenly looked up and over at him.

“Yes. Why?”

“I cannot imagine anything more lacking in charm.”

“Nonsense.” Ichiro shrugged.

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

She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up.

Airi had spent the whole day lost in her A4 drawing pad. She hadn’t even remembered to log in. The trash can was filled with balls of paper. Fashion magazines were stacked high on her desk next to tall piles of A4 paper covered in nude pose samples.

She just couldn’t bring an idea together. She’d tried again and again, yet she couldn’t come up with anything satisfying. It hadn’t been this hard while she had been designing the young heir’s armor.

Airi found herself picking up a magazine from the stack on her desk. It was a women’s fashion magazine, targeting women in their 20s and 30s. That was a little older than Airi was, but it was the age group she was most interested in designing for. It was also the age range that Fuyo’s clothing brand targeted.

The headline read “Everything on Popular New ‘Real Clothing’ Brand MiZUNO!!” in bold print, above a smaller caption that read, “Exclusive Interview with Megumi Fuyo!” When she’d bought this magazine a week ago, she never would have dreamed that Megumi Fuyo would be about to challenge her to a design competition.

The MiZUNO feature showed confident models showing off the various outfits that Fuyo had designed. On each outfit, there was an editorial comment from the point of view of the client and a comment from Fuyo from the point of view of a designer.

Airi found herself letting out a sigh. Fuyo’s clothing really was amazing.

“Real clothing” referred to fashionable ready-to-wear that even working class people could afford. Nowadays, the term was used as an antonym to haute couture and top-of-the-line prêt-à-porter.

Real clothing: in other words, realistic clothing. Airi admired Lady Gaga, but her style was the polar opposite of “real.” It was impossible to imitate.

Then, at the cutting edge of the fashion world, there was always the top brand prêt-à-porter by the likes of Prada and Chanel. Real clothing took elements from these and converted them to match the tastes of the general public, bridging oceans as well as societal and economic gaps. That might have sounded like drudge work, but it was actually extremely challenging. The needs of making something more broadly available clashed with the need to customize it to match the tastes of an extremely diverse market, so a real clothing designer needed an inherent sense of how to make those two things work together.

Airi had seen a TV show while she was in middle school that had described real clothes as “clothes that match the lifestyle of the one that wears them.” She always thought that was a wise saying.

Fuyo’s designs were everything that real clothing should be. They kept the luxurious quality of those top brands, while also being charming in some way, or stunning, and sometimes simply beautiful. They were full of personality and confidence, and told you everything about the lives of the diverse array of models that wore them.

Looking at Fuyo’s designs, Airi felt a renewed sense of the kind of monster she’d picked a fight with. How could she possibly make something better than this? She didn’t have the slightest clue. She’d been designing since morning, and had only hit upon two ideas that barely qualified as decent; the rest of it was utter trash.

Ah, on top of my lack of talent, I’m also cutting down forests, Airi lamented, gazing at the balls of scrap paper in the trash can. *Forgive me, trees of the world...*

She glanced at her watch. It was already 5:00 P.M. She’d been eating now and then, whenever she felt hungry, but she hadn’t realized so much time had passed. The sight of the hour brought a feeling of exhaustion surging up within her.

She had completely hit a wall. She couldn’t even tell what was good and bad anymore.

Airi tied up her bulging trash bag and carried it out to the front door. She

tidied up the large pile of A4 paper and magazines, and scanned in the two “barely maybe okay” designs. She could send the completed .pdf files to the Miraive Gear X. She hadn’t 3D modeled them, but she didn’t have the energy to do that just now.

Maybe I’ll just log in, she thought.

Airi put the Miraive Gear on her head, then lay down on her bed. She turned the power on, initiating the transmission of quantum information between mind and machine.

She wondered what the young heir was doing now. Airi knew that this challenge was up to her, and her alone. If he interfered, it would lose its purity as an expression of her skill. It wouldn’t mean anything to win that way, and it would just make her feel even more pathetic if she lost. It was just... it was becoming all too clear that this opponent was too big for her to take on all by herself.

She couldn’t ask for his help. He was the one person she absolutely could not ask for help. As these complex emotions churned over and over in Airi Kakitsubata’s mind, her consciousness was merging with the fictional world.

The first thing she heard upon logging in was Felicia’s voice. “Wow, did you draw all these, Itchy?”

The next thing she heard was Ichiro, speaking in his usual tone. “I didn’t design them all from scratch. They’re combinations of existing ready-to-wear separates.”

He was sitting in a chair, reading a book while Felicia looked through an array of image files spread across the desk.

The young heir immediately noticed the new arrival and looked up. “Oh, hello, Iris.”

“H-Hey...” Iris’s response was the epitome of spinelessness: pathetic, after all her grand declarations the day before.

Kirschwasser poured her usual cup of tea. Iris accepted it, and Felicia came up to her with one of the image files in her hands and a beaming smile on her face.

“Hey, hey! Iris! What do you think of this?” Felicia asked eagerly.

Iris was taken aback as she saw the design drawn there. It was a horizontally-striped blouse in cooling colors just right for summer, paired with flower-patterned skinny pants and platform sandals. It was an outfit that took into account the pattern-on-pattern trend that was “in” this year. Good taste, too; it looked like a ready-made separates combination you’d see in a magazine. Of course, it was nothing terribly novel, but even so, just the sight of it set Iris trembling in fear.

Had the young heir drawn this? Iris looked at Ichiro. All he did was flip a page in the book he was reading. He was using a proprietary app that let you read e-books in the game. Iris looked closer, and found it was a fashion design reference book that she was quite familiar with.

But of course it was. He was a genius, after all.

Was this his way of trying to offer support? Ichiro had promised not to offer money, or aid of any kind. Maybe he had come up with these ready-made pairings in the hopes that it would help the struggling Iris somehow.

But this...

As a pained expression appeared on Iris’s face, Kirschwasser asked her, “Have you finished a design that you like?”

“Oh... no. Not a single one. Total block,” she lied, smiling a superficial smile.

Her confidence had taken a nosedive. The young heir’s attempt to be considerate had inspired thoughts of self-loathing inside her. In the face of ready-to-wear clothing like this, Iris’s designs really were trash. She wished she could tear up the two .pdfs stored away in her app right now.

Kirschwasser’s expression was dubious. If she met his eyes any longer, her feelings would become obvious.

Iris began to wonder, *Did I declare that this was my challenge and refuse the young heir’s help because I was afraid of being reminded how untalented I am?*

“Iris?” The smile disappeared from Felicia’s face, as well.

Despite knowing that she shouldn’t, Iris began checking through the design

drawings spread over the table. They were all modern pieces that somehow still had a fantasy flair. They were appropriate to the game, yet she felt like she was being shown something she didn't want to see. Here, in the young heir's ready-to-wear sets, she had found the conclusion that she had failed to come to on her own.

She mustn't be angry, Iris thought. The young heir was hateful, but he wasn't a bad person. He surely hadn't done it maliciously. The fact that he had kept his nose in the book the entire time was proof of that.

"Iris," Ichiro said, without looking up.

"What?"

"There's still time. There's no need to get so worked up. I'll help in any way I can."

She felt a twinge of temper.

There was nothing there for her to be angry about, but her emotions had reached their boiling point. It wasn't any one thing, but there was something extremely aggravating about Ichiro's unflappable expression, and the way it seemed to mock her hard work and struggles.

"A-As if you could ever understand..."

"Iris?" At last, Ichiro looked up. Their eyes met. The golden eyes of the Dragonet seemed to stare right through her.

"To you, this competition would just be more of the same," Iris said bitterly. "You think it goes without saying that you'd win. If you competed, you'd win easily, so you're letting me do it because it amuses you. That's how you're thinking of it, right?"

What am I saying? Even Iris was panicked by the way the words poured out of her. It was as if a dam had burst. She hadn't thought she was this angry, yet the accusatory words came so easily to her lips, her feelings gushing out in a torrent.



“Someone as gifted as you couldn’t understand the struggles of a mediocrity like me. Stop acting like you understand when you don’t. Don’t say things like ‘Don’t get worked up’ and ‘Let me help you’ so lightly.”

She had said it. What an awful person she was. Ichiro continued gazing at her without the slightest trace of change in his attitude.

“Iris...” Ichiro said her name in his usual cool tone of voice. She knew instinctively that whatever he was going to say next, she didn’t want to hear it. It was just going to make her feel pathetic, so she cut him off at the pass.

“S-Sorry. I’m just so tired, I don’t even know what I’m saying. I’d better cool off.”

As she turned to run, a voice inside her head admonished her for running away.

Yes, she thought, *I’m running away. I can’t face him right now. I can’t deal with a monster like that when I’m already at my breaking point.*

She knew the young heir had said what he did out of concern. But still, it had annoyed her so much. Was it because she had spent half a day trying to come up with an answer, only to find that he had come upon it effortlessly? That might be it. There were probably several reasons; he was that kind of person. But whatever reasons there might be, the thing Iris hated most of all was letting it get under her skin.

“Ah, Iris!” She heard Felicia shout as she ran for the door. For a second, she thought about stopping, but her legs continued to carry her out. She wasn’t about to stop anywhere that man could see her.

Ichiro did not pursue Iris immediately. He just sat in his chair, watching her run off, then at last, said this: “I suppose I got her angry.”

“Wh-What should we do?” Felicia stuttered. “Did I do something I shouldn’t have, too?”

“You’ve done nothing wrong, Felicia,” Ichiro assured her.

Before he’d logged in, Sakurako had said, “I’d forgotten what a nasty person

you can be," and he suddenly realized, vaguely, what she had meant.

Perhaps, then, Iris was right. The gifted could not understand those who were not. He was aware that his tendency to do whatever he wanted had hurt people more than a few times in the past. Ichiro Tsuwabuki was always on the "Amadeus" side of things.

Given all that had happened, it was hard to say if Iris was a very strong person, or a weak one.

As Ichiro sank deep into thought, Kirschwasser cast a glance at him and whispered, "I always knew you'd make a girl cry someday, Master Ichiro."

"Nonsense... is one thing I find I can't say right now," Ichiro said. "Sir Kirschwasser, would you run after her?" He knew that even if he went after her and apologized personally, it probably wouldn't help right now.

"Ah, wh-what about me?!" Felicia asked.

"You needn't force yourself to follow," said Ichiro. "She's likely feeling delicate right now. Let's allow Sir Kirschwasser to handle it."

"What will you do, Master Ichiro?" asked Kirschwasser.

"I'm going to remain here, reading my book, like the nasty person that I am."

It was a truly expected response, coming from him.

"Please wait, Iris!"

Out on Glasgobara's main street, Kirschwasser grabbed Iris's arm. Even though Kirschwasser hadn't invested much in agility, he caught up to her easily, perhaps thanks to the vast difference in their levels.

Her response made it clear how torn she was. Rather than shaking off his hand, she just stopped obediently.

Given how many people there were around them, watching curiously, Kirschwasser was relieved that she had been willing to stop. "That's a good girl, Iris."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kirsch..." Iris said, her face still bowed. "I've just become a load

of trouble, haven't I?"

"It's all right. Trouble is part of a woman's nature, after all." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he suddenly remembered he was playing a male character.

Iris looked up at last, her expression astonished. "I can't believe you just said that..."

"The current incident happened because Lady Nem is being troublesome, did it not?" asked Kirschwasser.

"I guess that's true..." Unsatisfied with just watching, the rude rubberneckers had also started listening, so Kirschwasser finally shooed them off. It wasn't the sort of thing he usually did.

"I guess I'm also kind of... bipolar, you know?" Iris said. "Lately, it's all deep depressions, then soaring heights, over and over again... I probably seem pretty crazy, huh?"

"Well, I cannot deny that..."

Kirschwasser switched over to listening mode as Iris began analyzing herself. It was true that he had seen something unbalanced in her personality, and he was hoping to help her stabilize. Besides, that was his role. He could not leave it to his master, who—despite having keen powers of observation—was powerfully lacking in delicacy.

Knowing Iris's age (Kirschwasser had heard it was 17), he knew that the way she had been battered back and forth by this situation had to be bewildering for her. Kirschwasser wondered whether she had always been a person of such emotional extremes, or whether her naturally open personality was simply reflecting the inevitable highs and lows of the drama of recent days.

Iris let out a big sigh. "I know what the young heir was trying to do. It just made me so mad."

"He can be very condescending," Kirschwasser agreed.

"I know, but..."

There was a trace of self-loathing in her sigh this time, and he knew that the

abuses she had hurled at the young heir weren't how she truly felt.

Iris continued talking as she resumed walking. Kirschwasser walked by her side.

"Mr. Kirsch, you work with the young heir, right?" she asked. "How do you stay sane? Doesn't he ever make you feel... inferior?"

"Not at the moment," said Sir Kirschwasser. "I act as his servant, and I do everything I can so that he does not trespass in my territory. He would even do the housework if I let him."

"What a creep," said Iris.

"Indeed, he is a creep," Kirschwasser agreed.

It was fine that Ichiro knew he would always be the best at everything. It wasn't bad for him to act knowing that that was true, either. But there was only one person who could be number one in anything, and being number one would always be a kick to the self-confidence of everyone else competing. In order to remain equals in dealing with Ichiro, a person either had to tame their inferiority complex or find some field in which they could believe they were his better. It was likely that both of them were difficult options, for Iris.

At the least, Ichiro seemed to like Iris's attempts to stand on equal footing with him. He probably wouldn't want to see her feelings of inferiority break her. That was why he was trying, in his own way, to be kind to her—even if he didn't realize that himself.

For now, though, Kirschwasser had to get her out of her unhealthy mental state. "Iris." He smiled at Iris, trying to make a suggestion. "Sometimes, even when you like something, if you do it for too long, you lose sight of whether or not you really do like it."

"Wh-What?" Iris stopped suddenly, and looked over at Kirschwasser.

"I don't believe your current way of thinking is productive," said Kirschwasser. "Master Ichiro should not enter into the equation at all. But I suppose ignoring him is easier said than done..."

"Yeah, it is." Iris let out a small sigh. "I mean, I really don't have any talent..."

“Hmm...” murmured Kirschwasser. Periods of soaring over-confidence, followed by periods of desperate self-loathing. A girl with truly overactive biorhythms.

“Mr. Kirsch, have you seen the movie *Amadeus*?” Iris asked.

“Yes, it’s famous,” Kirschwasser said. “I’ve heard it was originally an English play.”

Amadeus was a movie depicting the composers Mozart and Salieri, and the torments of the latter upon realizing the genius of the former. It was often used as a reference when discussing the presence or absence of talent. Kirschwasser/Sakurako, having never really worried about feeling inferior, had simply enjoyed it as a piece of entertainment, but...

“The first time I watched it, I never thought I’d end up as Salieri,” said Iris.

“Compared to Master Ichiro? Or to Lady Nem?” asked Kirschwasser.

“Both.” Iris looked up at the sky. “Whenever I see someone with loads of talent, I lose all my confidence. It’s like the gap between a turtle and the moon... or maybe a turtle and Betelgeuse.”

“B-Betelgeuse?” Kirschwasser stuttered.

Of course, Iris meant that she was the turtle. How ugly must a single turtle be, compared to that brightly burning red giant? That was what she was trying to convey.

“So seeing that big reminder of his talent stripped away my pride and left my heart with shell shock,” Iris continued.

“I’m not sure this is the time for clever plays on words...” Kirschwasser muttered. Still, seeing her this way—compared to her great declaration of confidence to Ichiro the day before—made it all the more clear how unstable she was. She could end up in a manic high tomorrow, only to sink back into deep depression again the day after. What they needed was a way to bring her back into balance.

But what could they possibly do to help the “shell-shocked” Iris? He wasn’t clever enough to offer a hint, and Ichiro, while clever enough, was too lacking in

delicacy.

“Just don’t compete in her arena,” a voice said suddenly from behind.

Kirschwasser and the turtle—Iris, that is—turned around to see the shining metallic Machina standing there.

“Lord Edward,” Kirschwasser murmured.

Iris said, “I always seem to see you when the young heir isn’t around.”

“I do try to avoid Mr. Tsuwabuki.” A speech icon conveying displeasure appeared over Edward’s head. It was a new system of emotes for full face-type Machinas, though the effect was more comical than anything.

Kirschwasser cast a glance towards Iris, but the little misunderstanding they had had before—rather, the completely unjustified fight that Edward had picked with Iris—seemed to be water under the bridge, as far as she was concerned. She really was a good girl, with an unassuming personality.

Besides, she seemed much more interested in what Edward had said. “What do you mean, ‘don’t compete in her arena’?”

Unlike the armor competition with Edward, they didn’t have different specialties; it was a design competition. How could they not be competing in the same arena?

“If you can’t win on talent, you’ll have to draw the spectators’ eyes in some other way,” Edward explained.

Was he proposing some kind of plan?

But Iris seemed hesitant to engage. She must have still been holding deep uncertainties inside. If she couldn’t even accept Ichiro’s help, would she even be able to listen to Edward’s advice? Or should she simply turn him away? That seemed to be what was going through her mind.

“Don’t worry; I’m completely mediocre,” Edward said simply, perhaps seeing right through to Iris’s inner turmoil. “I won’t claim I can understand exactly how you feel, but I won’t say anything as outrageous as Mr. Tsuwabuki says, either.”

“R-Right...” Iris must have realized that was true. In a way, the two of them were kindred spirits, both players driven mad by the young heir’s audacity.

“But there is one thing I’d like to ask you,” Edward continued.

“What is it?”

“Miss Iris, do you enjoy this game?”

“Ah?” It was a strange question to be asked so suddenly. Iris and Kirschwasser exchanged a look.

“I think it’s good to take things seriously,” said Edward. “But if you stop enjoying it, it’s defeating the point. I’m not telling you to be as freewheeling as Mr. Tsuwabuki is, of course, but you should try to remember how you felt when you first came here, what it is that you enjoy about the game.”

As usual, the Machina’s voice was fairly monotone, and it was hard to read the feeling behind his words. But because they were the words of a man who had himself lost his enjoyment of the game by taking it too seriously, Kirschwasser felt the sentiment was clear: it was the grandfatherly solicitude of one who hoped another would not repeat his mistake. Iris seemed to grasp that, too.

Edward continued speaking. “Fashion and style are important, but I think it’s possible to get too obsessed with that, the way I got too obsessed with equipment capabilities and Ironmaking Skill levels. I don’t think the design was the only thing about your work that Mr. Tsuwabuki liked. You call it fashion and apparel and such, but that’s not really what we make in this game. We make armor.”

The words came smoothly. It really was unusual to hear him speak on anything at such length.

“Did I say something I shouldn’t have?” Edward added.

“No... no. You didn’t...” Iris’s frazzled mind seemed to be slowly sorting out his words.

“You’re speaking so eloquently compared to yesterday,” Kirschwasser teased. “Did you practice that speech?”

“Shut up.” Edward averted his eyes a little.

“Hmm...” Iris murmured.

“What is the matter, Iris?” Kirschwasser asked.

“Oh, I’m just thinking about some things. When I clear my head and think about it, I guess that’s true... Ah, I feel like my vision has been so narrow...” Iris whispered, her gaze distant. “Fuyo and I have just been talking about fashion and design... but that’s all real-world stuff. This is the world of the game. Fashion sense and design sense... that all does matter, but it’s not everything. Maybe that’s what the young heir was trying to say when he told me not to get so worked up.”

“I doubt Master Ichiro was thinking about it that deeply,” said Kirschwasser.

“That’s true,” said Iris. Her words suggested a gradually returning confidence. Edward’s words seemed to have cast a ray of light on the situation. “Hey, Mr. Edward. What kind of armor do you like?”

“As you know, I mostly care about stats,” he replied. “I doubt I’d be of any help. In terms of appearance, I suppose I like Full Plate Mail, and things that look like power armor.”

It was a typical gamer opinion, but Edward continued: “The audience will be made up of players of the game. There are a lot of ways to get their attention. There’s no need to fight on design sense alone. Part of being a professional means designing with the needs of the audience in mind.” Edward then added, plainly, without taking his eyes off of Iris: “I don’t know what your opponent intends to bring to the challenge, but keep in mind that this is not the real world. It’s a game, with its own trends and social classes... I can teach you about them, if you like.”

“That’s amazing...” Iris said with admiration.

“You’ve come so far since yesterday, when you were trying too hard to sound clever, yet were unable to speak,” Kirschwasser commented.

“Would you please forget about that?” A icon of dissatisfaction appeared over Edward’s head. “Of course, I know it can be hard to meet a customer’s needs. I’m a systems engineer, so...”

“Oh, I see,” said Iris. “That sounds like a tough job.”

“Yeah. I’m going on another business trip next week.”

Of course the Machina had a real life, too. Systems engineer was a busy job, yet he had somehow found time between his business trips to become the second-in-command of the game's largest manufacturing guild. It was impressive. Of course, that spoke even better of Ichiro, who had been able to send him flying with a single hit...

"Do you have any plans for what to do next, Iris?" the Machina asked.

"Hmm..." Edward's words caused Iris to fall deep into thought. "Well, it would feel weird to go right back to the young heir after yelling at him and running out..."

"I think the same," he said.

"Did you have something in mind?" Kirschwasser asked.

Edward nodded. "I was thinking, what about an armor design that incorporates a gimmick? They have a high crafting difficulty, but it's an idea that your opponent would be unlikely to come up with."

"I'd love to hear more." Iris straightened, and smiled an indomitable smile. At some point, the fire of battle had begun to flicker again in her eyes. Iris had fully regained her energy.

The silver-haired elder Knight shrugged lightly, the same gesture he used when indulging his master. "Such overactive biorhythms..."

But it wasn't only Iris preparing for the fight.

Nem was, too.

Nem's guild was renting space in the guild house of Matsunaga's Dual Serpents. She couldn't understand what had led them to refer to this creepy old cave as a "house," but nitpicking another's residence was something only selfish people did, so Nem refrained from mentioning it. Admittedly, the fish-headed monsters who lived nearby were really quite cute once you got used to them.

She had returned to the caves after finishing up her business in the real world. As head of her own company, there was a chance she might be called back on emergency business, but there was nothing she could do about that. She had

made sure to clear her schedule for the competition day, which meant that on any other day, she had to be capable of returning to work at any time.

As she arrived in their rented room, she found Sorceress already there, sitting quietly on her own. She stood up when she saw Nem's arrival. "Ah, welcome back, Leader."

"Thank you," Nem responded after a gloomy pause. "I see that Taker is not here."

"That's true," Sorceress said with a giggle. "He might be out working a part-time job. He's poor, you see."

They rarely talked about their real lives, but Nem had intuited that the two seemed to know each other.

"Leader, you look unhappy," Sorceress continued, in a tone so nonchalant she might as well have been discussing the weather.

There was something about those penetrating, deep blue eyes of hers that made Nem very uncomfortable. Of course, she was also discomfited by the overpowering, sharp eyes of Taker. They made her feel small, as if they were tearing into the very stronghold of her self-confidence.

Nem managed to hold on to her resolve, if barely. "I met Iris at the lecture yesterday."

"My, my." Sorceress was holding a parasol despite being inside a cave, and she spun it delightedly as she spoke. "Isn't that a coincidence. So? What was she like?"

Nem closed her eyes and began speaking, slowly. "There's not much to say. She was exactly the kind of person she seemed to be in the game. She idolizes the glorious world of fashion, and has a tendency to imitate what she sees in magazines and trends, like any girl of her age."

Young and vibrant, but completely lacking in a unique voice, or anything else remarkable. Exactly like hundreds of other wannabe designers...

Which was exactly why the girl was getting under her skin.

"I see. If you say so, then it must be true." Sorceress, the girl who had named

herself after a witch, said nothing more about that. “Do you still intend to bring all of your skill to bear against her, then?”

“Yes... of course,” said Nem.

The words she had said during that lecture, and those she had said to Airi Kakitsubata directly, were not lies.

Regardless of their skill, all aspiring designers were rivals. The butterfly brooch incident had made her realize that to a painful degree.

Even for Megumi Fuyo, who had her own brand and was acknowledged by the world, the lack of talent in one single area could bring everything crashing down. A single failure could yank you back.

She had to surpass Iris, no matter what.

It had been a few days ago, in this place, that Nem had said to Matsunaga, “I want to prove that I’m better.” That had been the truth, but at the time, she hadn’t known who she was trying to prove it to.

Now she knew: it was herself.

“I will win,” Nem said firmly.

“My hopes are high, Leader,” Sorceress said with a giggle. “Once you win, we’ll be breaking up, I suppose?”

“Yes, that’s true... Thank you for everything you’ve done,” said Nem.

“Not at all.” There was something sarcastic about the witch’s smile. Perhaps, in the end, she was nothing but a mercenary.

Nem decided she shouldn’t form too much attachment for someone who felt so distant from her. “Speaking of which. About the model...”

“Oh, yes, leave that to us. We’ve been searching for someone suitable.” Sorceress gave a smile without a trace of emotion in it. which convinced Nem she really should leave it to her. “Don’t worry. I’ll do everything I can to help you win.”

Nem smiled a bit at those words. “Thank you. But I will win using my own power.”

“Yes. That’s right...” Sorceress giggled again.

Nem had no idea what Sorceress was thinking.

There was something unsettling about a witch’s smile.



Edward led Iris and Kirschwasser to visit the Akihabara Forging Guild's guild house.

"This is gimmick armor," he said proudly, pointing to a set of armor on display.

"Um... wow!" Iris said, trying to have the appropriate reaction. Perhaps noticing that her amazement was feigned, Edward averted his face, seeming hurt.

Gimmick armor, he explained, was equipment that did something special, either visually or in its stats. Concrete examples included armor that lit up under certain conditions, that would increase your parameters if you took certain actions, or that would change shape based on changes in relevant data.

In the world of *Narrow Fantasy Online*, which lacked much in the way of very stylish armor, they were also one of the few types of armor you could get real visual impact from.

"Hmm, hmm. I see..." Iris said.

Of course, a mere light-up effect wouldn't be enough to compete with Megumi Fuyo's designs, but maybe that was something she could play with.

Kirschwasser was gazing at the armor with curiosity, a natural reaction for a pure gamer.

Yes, yes. That was another way people approached it.

How she'd felt when she'd begun, the fun of the game, getting too obsessed... Edward's earlier words brought memories from half a year ago surging back to life. Airi Kakitsubata's crushing setback in design school. Her escape from reality. The game world she'd fled to. The friends she had made. Her arrival in Glasgobara.

The realization that she could create items with original designs had been both a shock and a thrill. Day after day, she had worked to put accessories out for sale in her stall. She had even spent her own allowance to see it happen. But no one had bought them. No one had liked them. Then, just when she had once again been on the verge of despondency, the young heir had appeared.

From the first moment they'd met, he'd been an absolute creep. He'd asked if she wanted to create his armor and requested a design done completely from scratch. Edward had misunderstood his reasons for doing so, taken offense, and picked a fight she barely understood. Now history was repeating with Megumi Fuyo.

But... what really mattered here was that this competition wasn't going to be judged by pro designers, outside examiners, or even the young heir. It was going to be judged by the general playerbase. Of course, Fuyo's sheer design abilities would probably be enough to win them over. But at the end of the day, design was just one tool out of many.

She had her own strengths that Fuyo lacked. She knew how much fun the game could be. She knew about all the different ways that different players enjoyed the game, and the players' taste in armor would be as diverse as their play styles. The young heir had wanted Iris for her design sense, but the majority of players wouldn't feel that way.

She had received in-game currency—in other words, money—to make armor. That meant that, in this game, she was a professional, too.

If she was a professional, then she should work like one. She should find the perfect line that would bring together the diverse tastes of the consumer base with her own design sense. That was something only she could do. It was something that Fuyo, so obsessed with real clothing—and with the young heir, who didn't have to worry about commercial success—could never do.

The wheels turned in Iris's head.

"She seems to have received some inspiration," Kirschwasser commented.

"It appears so," Edward agreed with a measure of relief.

But that was not the end of it. There were a lot of things she was still lacking. She still didn't have an idea. She still hadn't come up with the vision that would take down Megumi Fuyo, or the imagery that would make the young heir eat his words. Iris screwed up her face in thought.

Just then, the chimes at the guild house door rang out. They had a visitor. Of course, this was the game's top crafting guild, so they probably had a

continuous stream of customers, thought Iris. But then...

“U-Um... is Iris here?” a trembling voice called out.

“Oh, Lady Felicia,” Kirschwasser spoke up.

Yes, it was Felicia, whom she had left behind in the guild house. Her two tails of white hair trailed behind her. Her eyes were lowered apologetically.

“How did you figure out we were here?” Iris asked, impressed.

“Ah. Well...” Felicia stammered awkwardly. “I said I wanted to go after you, and Itchy said you’d probably be here...”

“He really sees through everything, huh?” Iris decided not to voice the frustration this inspired aloud. Some day, she would have to do something he didn’t predict. She wanted to see that smug smile of his turn into a gape. Such a thing would surely come with unrivaled pleasure. But for now, she had to focus on what was in front of her.

“Um, Iris, Itchy didn’t say that out of malice...” Felicia ventured.

“Y-Yeah... I’ve worked out my feelings about that now, so it’s okay...” Iris found herself smiling at her cute attempts to cover for Ichiro.

“You did?” Felicia asked, with clear relief on her face.

“Yeah. Thanks,” Iris answered, and meant it.

“A-And one more thing...”

“Hmm?” Iris tilted her head as Felicia raised her index finger.

“I was wondering who you were going to chose as your model...”

That was right. That was another issue she had forgotten about.

She didn’t want to ask the young heir again. She was thinking Kirschwasser would be good, but as she cast a glance at him, the silver-haired elder Knight just shrugged.

“It would be one thing if I had a female avatar, but no one wants to see an old man character modeling fashion.”

“That’s true,” Edward agreed.

NaroFan's userbase was mostly male players, so that was natural, but it was still a bit disappointing. Iris thought there would be a lot of clothing that would look good on the silver fox, Kirschwasser.

She decided to ask Felicia why she was bringing it up, but Felicia just winced. "I got a message from Amesho... She says Nem's using her as a model."

"O-Oh..." Iris said.

That girl, a model? Given how confident she had looked in the swimsuit, maybe she would be cut out for it...

Edward let out a grim murmur as he heard that. "That's not good..."

"What do you mean?" Iris asked.

But Kirschwasser agreed. "Yes, it's extremely bad."

"Huh? What?"

Edward put a hand to his smooth jaw, and answered. "Amesho is a damsel player. She has a lot of passionate fans in the game. Her presence will give your competition a big boost."

"Um... but it's a fashion competition, isn't it?" Iris asked.

Of course, the model was important. You could ruin a good design by putting it on the wrong model. It wasn't always about choosing the most beautiful or charming girl.

But this was still an armor design competition. Who you chose to wear it shouldn't make that much of a difference, so Iris couldn't figure out what Edward and Kirschwasser were so worried about.

"Iris, the audience isn't necessarily coming to see the armor designs," Kirschwasser said. "I think you understand what I mean by that. They're coming to see it because it's an event."

"R-Right..." Iris said.

"And if a player like Amesho starts flirting with them and asking for their votes, you're doomed," Edward added.

Iris stood there in silence. It was finally dawning on her how dangerous it was

to have Amesho siding against her. The girl who had been speaking flippantly before now turned so pale it actually reflected in her character model.

A battle she was starting to think she could actually win under her own power felt like it was once again slipping from her grasp, and all based on the charm of the model. It was hard to believe that Megumi Fuyo would ever do such a thing, but the fact that Amesho was going to be the model did appear to be the truth.

Even so, it really wasn't like her at all. Megumi Fuyo could crush her with sheer skill alone. Then, just when Iris had found the faintest ray of hope, she brought down this finishing blow. The circumstances were truly harsh.

"Wh-Wh-What will I do, Mr. Kirschwasser?!" she exclaimed.

"How am I to know?" he replied.

"Calm down. You'll just have to fight allure with allure," Edward said, assuming the air of Iris's chief advisor. With that reassurance, he flicked his gaze to Felicia.

"Huh? Uh, m-me?" Felicia's eyes widened as she was suddenly pointed out.

"Allure with... allure?" Iris looked at Felicia, too. She was pretty sure she really was a girl of middle school age, and the way she acted and spoke was appropriate to that. That did give her a certain natural allure. It could work. If she went up on stage with the same manner she used when doting on her "beloved Itchy," she could possibly compete with Amesho.

But would she agree to be made a spectacle of?

"Huh? Huh? You want me... to be a model? I... I don't know..." Felicia trailed off into giggles.

It wasn't looking like a problem.

Edward gazed at the giggling Felicia.

"What's wrong?" Iris tilted her head.

The Machina's expression was even more unreadable than usual. "Oh... nothing. It's just an image I like..."

"Hmm?" Iris asked.

They still hadn't even actually asked Felicia yet, but the girl was already acting like it was a done deal, grinning while twisting back and forth.

"Well, it looks like all that's left to do is to think up some gimmick armor that would look good on Felicia." Iris put her hands on her hips and nodded.

Kirschwasser glanced past her for a moment, then inquired: "Do you feel like you can meet Master Ichiro again?"

"You bet!" Iris had returned to her usual triumphant expression, and she let out a little snort. "I won't let the young heir get to me. I won't lose heart again, either. And I won't run away."

"Mm, very good," a voice said.

Iris let out a squeal and leaped aside as she realized the young heir himself was standing right behind her.

Kirschwasser bowed reverently in his usual practiced way, and said, "We are honored by your presence, Master Ichiro."

Edward was silent. When he wasn't speaking, it was impossible to tell how he was feeling.

It really was the young heir, the Dragonet, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, stylishly wearing his Radiant Morpho Jacket, with the butterfly brooch on his lapel. Iris didn't know if he had walked there, or had flown most of the way, but either way, he was now standing there calmly, smiling a smile of true satisfaction.

"Y-Y-Y-Young heir! H-H-How did you get here?!" Iris stammered.

"I told Bossman I wanted to go in through the back door, so he let me," Ichiro said.

Edward, who seemed to dislike the young heir quite a lot, tried to silently walk past Felicia (who was still wriggling gleefully) and escape into the workshop. Either intentionally or by coincidence, however, Ichiro just happened to change position very slightly so that Edward couldn't get past. Eventually, Edward just slumped his shoulders and sat down nearby, as if giving up.

"Itchy! I'm gonna be a model, maybe!" Felicia said, still beaming, giggling, and twisting.

“I see,” he said. “I hope you will give the task everything you have.”

“I will!” she said, then trailed off into tittering. Even the young heir’s muted encouragement had Felicia over the moon.

Ichiro turned back to Iris. “I’m glad to see you’re feeling better. I won’t apologize, but I was a bit worried about you.”

“You could at least try to act like it...” Iris muttered.

“I thought that I was.”

How, exactly? she thought furiously.

She had made the conscious decision, though, not to argue with every single one of the young heir’s obnoxious acts and statements. The time she could spend on that would be put to much better use creating new armor designs. She mulled over the conversation she’d had with Edward.

Armor designs not concerned only with fashionability, but which integrated her personal style... She could also probably ensure rather good functionality at her current level, too. This time, she would make a new armor that really looked good on Felicia.

“Young heir, I’m going to do it,” she declared. “Even if I’d never show it at Tokyo Girls Collection, I’m going to make an armor design that seizes the hearts of the *NaroFan* players.”

“Mm, good,” Ichiro said. There was a real happiness mixed somewhere in the young heir’s standard noise of approval. “I look forward to seeing your efforts. I shall not interfere again.”

With that satisfied-sounding murmur, he sat back in one of the chairs set up in the lobby. Kirschwasser produced a tea set from nowhere in particular, and poured tea for him. The young heir took the teacup offered and brought it elegantly to his mouth.

“Acting superior as ever, I see...” Iris sighed.

“My comportment is merely the result of self-confidence,” said Ichiro. “I do not believe myself to be superior, nor inferior, to anyone in particular.”

“But you do believe you’re the best, in a general sense,” Iris argued.

“Well, yes.”

Yes, that was the kind of man Ichiro was.

It was his usual sort of answer, and Iris couldn’t help but lament how comfortable she was starting to feel around it. People liked to say “everything changes” and “all things are transitory,” but Iris had a feeling this man’s mentality would remain the same even five billion years from now, after the sun had expanded and burned up the Earth. There was something reassuring about that sort of permanence, even if it regarded something as odious as him.

“I see you were helping Iris, too, Ed,” Ichiro commented.

“Yeah... Do you have any advice to offer?” Edward asked as he took the tea from Kirschwasser.

“I don’t believe so,” said Ichiro. “I just want her to make whatever she wants to make.”

Edward slid his face plate open and poured the tea through his mouth slot. The young heir merely smiled meaningfully.

Edward cast a glance at Iris, then continued, with an air of hesitation. “Can Miss Iris win by making what she wants to make?”

“That is not up to me, nor should it be.” Ichiro used his usual breezy way of speaking. “To say that she can or cannot would be to limit Iris’s potential. All I want from her is to see her doing what she wants. I believe she knows that, as well. Don’t you?”

The last “don’t you?” was meant for Iris. She nodded, as if to say, “Of course.”

Yes, that was true. To run, to fail, to beg... Iris was permitted to do any of them. The escape route was always there. If she took it, she’d be greeted with the young heir saying, “Ah, I see,” with his usual cool expression. Nothing more. Nothing else would change. Yet that was a far more terrifying thing to her than being disappointed or being betrayed.

The young heir’s eyes were always set on distant heights above. By building a foundation of sand, she could just barely keep her eyes on the same heights. But if that footing ever crumbled, she could never hope to ascend to the same

heights ever again. That was why Iris could not afford to so demean herself in front of the hateful man.

At the least, right now, he was acknowledging her. The wretched young heir, who likely had money and position and fame beyond anything she would ever achieve in her life, would treat her as an equal, here in the game. She didn't want to ruin that.

"Young heir, earlier, you said you wouldn't do anything," she said. This one competition she had to carry out herself, without any help from the young heir.

"Yes, that's right," he said. "I promised I wouldn't interfere, so I shall not act unless you ask me to."

"That's right," she snapped. "You'd better not offer up any help, or money."

"Of course, I respect your decision," said Ichiro. "I shall not offer any help, nor any money."

"Good." Iris nodded in satisfaction, but then Edward interjected.

"Wait a minute."

"What?" Iris asked.

"Does that mean you're going to pay all the funds for the graphic overlays, too?"

"W-Well, yeah..." Iris said.

Whether the item creation process failed or succeeded, it still cost money to overlay a graphic onto an original design. It was crap (though Iris would never use that word) system design, and it still hadn't been fixed. Iris had numbed herself to it by now, but every piece of trash she had ended up creating had been paid for by Ichiro's own real-life funds.

The young heir had seemed to enjoy it, so it didn't matter. But this time, things would be different. This was Iris's competition. If he paid for the item creation, it would lose its purity.

"Gimmick armor has a high crafting difficulty level," Edward said. "What's your Create Armor level right now, Miss Iris?"

“U-Um...” Iris averted her eyes. She felt a replay of the same awkwardness she had felt when Edward had first burst into Iris Brand and challenged her.

“It’s okay if you can’t answer,” said Edward. “But given the givens, you’re probably going to churn through a lot of failures on this.”

“I-I’ll tap into my New Year’s money, or something...”

“Will that be enough?” he said. “You’ll need to throw money at it the same way Mr. Tsuwabuki does.”

“I’ll get a part-time job if I have to! One that pays by the day! And pays well! I’ll work at a construction site if I have to! But if he hands over one red cent, it loses all meaning!” Iris struck the table as she stood up, her expression contorting into something almost demonic. It was a combination of her grief at the reminder that you couldn’t do anything without money and her anger at the devs’ negligence for failing to fix the crap (although Iris herself would never use that word) system design.

“Iris is scary...” Felicia murmured.

“But it’s good to see her rise to the challenge,” Kirschwasser replied as they leisurely sipped their tea.

Don’t act like it’s none of your business! Even though it isn’t! Iris thought furiously.

But Edward remained tenacious. He seemed to be honestly worried about Iris, which he demonstrated by willingly addressing the young heir he hated so much.

“Mr. Tsuwabuki, say something,” he demanded.

“I suppose I should.” Ichiro closed his eyes, took a sip of his tea, and then said: “There are three days until the competition. Iris, you must complete the designs and craft the armor before then. If what Ed says is true, you will sink significant quantities of money into failures before you succeed. I do not know how much you have in savings, but a part-time job may truly be necessary. And you’ll have to get one within the next three days.”

Iris groaned. Three days. Yes, she only had three days. The reminder of the

time limit caused her to realize how unrealistic her proposal must sound. Still, she couldn't let that drive her to ask that man to pay...

Edward crossed his arms and nodded encouragingly. "That's right. So in this one case, I think you should just ask Mr. Tsuwabuki—"

"Iris, I will arrange a part-time job for you," said Ichiro.

"What?!" Edward shouted back in response to Ichiro's words.

Iris's eyes went wide. "Um, a... a job?"

"Yes. You wanted one that paid by the day, and paid well. I know of one that just happens to take place in one of the next three days... though I think that the wage will be realistic."

"I-I've never actually held a part-time job before..." Iris stumbled. "I'm not sure I can do it..."

"And you said you'd get one, despite that? You surprise me." Ichiro's surprise sounded genuine, if mild. Maybe she'd managed to exceed his expectations sooner than expected.

Good job, me, Iris thought. Normally she'd take a victory lap over that, but the reason being what it was, Iris merely blushed.

From a little ways away, Kirschwasser spoke up. "Master Ichiro, are you suggesting... that?"

"Yes, I am."

"Huh? What? Is it something dangerous?" Iris found herself feeling a bit anxious all of a sudden.

"Well... it certainly would be a rigorous job for somebody without any experience."

She groaned again. The odd gravity behind Kirschwasser's words was beginning to inspire a timidity in Iris. Just what kind of work was he going to arrange for her? What did he do for a living? Was he really in a position to get her a job?

Her mind was racing in circles. But what ended up sealing her interest were,

of course, the hated man’s words.

“Of course, no one will force you...”

It was surely not intended as a challenge, nor as an enticement. There was likely no deeper meaning behind it at all; it was simply what one said in such situations. But to Iris, it was the ultimate provocation.

“I’ll do it! You know I’ll do it!”

She wasn’t the kind of person who could turn something down after a line like that. Besides...

“Besides, I said I’d use my New Year’s money, but I actually spent most of it on clothes and stuff, so I need money either way!”

“And knowing that, you still insisted you’d pay for yourself...” Edward groaned, with palpable strain in his voice.

“You really do surprise me,” Ichiro whispered once more. But once again, Iris couldn’t be as happy about it as she wished she could.

4 - Noble Son, Scheme

That day, Ichiro Tsuwabuki attended a party held by an acquaintance of his. It was the sort of party he was always called to, one that brought together great men and women from all over the world. In other words, trivial nonsense. Ichiro wasn't so magnanimous as to show up just to bolster his acquaintances, and it would have been easy to refuse them. But just this once, on a whim, he decided to attend.

After the usual boring greetings and announcements, the mingling began, with a standing buffet. The tables were set with luxurious dishes prepared by the hotel's top-of-the-line chef, and as he looked all around him, he couldn't help but think how amusing it would be to have Asuha there.

Among the attendees, Ichiro saw a face he knew very well. With a wineglass in hand and no timidity whatsoever, he approached her.

"Hello, Megumi."

Megumi Fuyo trembled as she saw him. "I-Ichiro..."

"There's no need to be so afraid," he said.

If Sakurako had been there, she would have said, with a sigh, "You're the only one who thinks that." But right now, she was in a car in the parking garage, no doubt fervently browsing the *NaroFan* wiki. It seemed she was finally intending to use the present he'd gotten her for her birthday. She had asked his opinion on choosing a girl for her second character, but lacking any opinion on the matter, he had ignored the question.

But for now...

For now, there was Megumi Fuyo. She had likely picked out her own dress. It was rather subdued, for her, but it was a fine quality dress that displayed her usual excellent taste.

"I heard that you met Iris," he said.

“Yes,” Megumi replied after some hesitation, lowering her eyes.

“She’s had her share of difficulties, but she seems intent on hitting you with everything she’s got,” Ichiro said. “What about you, Megumi?”

“I...” Megumi seemed less than enthusiastic to see him. Or perhaps it was more that there were emotions piling up in her heart that she hadn’t yet figured out how to deal with. Perhaps she couldn’t express herself clearly because she hadn’t expected to see Ichiro today, and hadn’t yet figured out how best to interact with him when she did.

The source of her awkwardness must be their most recent interaction in the game, Ichiro guessed.

He had nearly ended things with “Nem” then. Of course, he had not really wanted to lose a friend in such a way, but her selfishness had been causing trouble for his other friends, and he simply could not have allowed that to continue.

But then the one Nem had made the most trouble for, Iris, had stayed his hand. She had said she wasn’t bothered, and furthermore, that “this problem is between me and her, so stay out of it.” As a result, Ichiro had managed to avoid having to cut Megumi off entirely. He wasn’t sure how much Iris had thought those words through before she’d said them, but he did feel grateful to her, at least.

Meanwhile, Megumi likely had complicated feelings to work through. She wasn’t stupid. She must have known what Ichiro had been about to say.

Thus, he decided he should make himself clear. “If it’s about *that*, then don’t worry. I think of you as a very dear friend, Megumi. Iris’s statement has allowed our relationship to remain unchanged.”

Upon hearing those words, Megumi Fuyo finally raised her head. “A... friend?”

“Yes. A friend. I hope I have made it clear that I do not wish for anything beyond that.”

“You’re as cruel as ever,” Megumi said with a smile. He could tell it was a bit forced, but still, it was a more genuine smile than he’d been expecting. “Ichiro, this party venue is the place we first met. I wonder if you remember that...”

“Yes, it was ten years ago,” he replied without hesitation, flipping back to one bookmark in his memory. “And ever since then, Megumi, you’ve always chosen your own clothing, haven’t you? Though at the party where we next met, you were wearing an extremely uncontroversial dress.”

Her eyes opened in surprise. “You remembered?”

“Yes, I did.” He did have confidence in his memory. (Of course, he had confidence in his everything.) “That day... I was so happy that you appreciated the clothing I had chosen for myself,” said Nem.

“Ah.”

Megumi’s smile began to grow more natural as she recounted more of her memories of those days. It was Ichiro’s first time hearing these private thoughts from her.

How much his words that day had encouraged her. How they had inspired her to choose her current path. Megumi spoke about it all with such pleasure, and Ichiro was pleased by her very fine smile. Each time she spoke of something that had happened between them, he flipped to the bookmark in his own memory and confirmed it.

“I remember the first time I saw that brooch, too,” Megumi said, gazing at the unsightly brooch currently nesting on Ichiro’s lapel.

“I suppose that’s our most recent memory together,” he answered.

“Yes, it truly surprised me. Because... I couldn’t believe you would come wearing a brooch so... utterly lacking in taste.”

“Ah.” It was a more frank remark than she usually made, but he wasn’t particularly bothered by it.

“It was such a shock, and it made me so frustrated,” she said. “I wanted to find out what you liked so much about that brooch so that I could make something like it.”

“But you couldn’t.”

Megumi nodded in response to Ichiro’s simplest of statements. “It’s caused me to lose all confidence in myself. When I think about how I lost to something

so amateurish... I couldn’t help but feel that everything I’ve believed in up until now had been for nothing.”

Ichiro could have made any number of rude observations. That it wasn’t all about winning and losing. That her dismissal of the brooch was just a revelation of her own limits.

But that would be nonsense. Instead, he merely closed his eyes and listened to Megumi’s words.

Such things were not the true core of the problem. The fact was, right now, she was experiencing a setback. She wouldn’t be able to move on until she overcame it, nor would she be able to understand what was “good” about Iris’s designs until then.

“So...” At last, Megumi looked straight into Ichiro’s eyes and spoke: “I will not lose.”

A deep, powerful declaration.

Ichiro nodded silently in response. “I know.”

That was all that he could say. He would not say whether it was Iris or Nem who would win. It was not he who would decide that. This competition was between Megumi Fuyo and Iris alone, and to say anything to diminish that... that would be true nonsense.

Megumi looked like whatever had been haunting her had now lifted. “It feels so good to get all that off my chest...”

Ichiro replied with a shrug. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“But for all I’ve said about her, I am a bit grateful to Iris,” Megumi continued with a beaming expression. “If she hadn’t intervened just then, you would have said something terrible to me, wouldn’t you have?”

“Well, it wouldn’t have been pleasant for you to hear, I’m sure,” said Ichiro. “I suspect it wouldn’t have been pleasant for me to say, either. So I, too, am grateful to Iris.”

“She is a good girl, isn’t she?” asked Megumi.

“I hope you’ll say that to her when it’s all over,” said Ichiro. “I believe you

could be a very good friend to Iris, Megumi.”

Megumi looked shocked by Ichiro’s frank proclamation. “Me? A friend to Iris?”

“Yes.” In fact, that was the inverse of how Ichiro really felt. It was Iris whom he believed would be a very good friend to Megumi. What he grasped from what Megumi had told him was that she had been unable to make friends on equal footing to her. Even Azami Nono, the closest in position among those she knew, could not be a true friend as long as their businesses were entangled.

Iris had the mettle to try to deal with everyone around her as an equal, regardless of their position. He suspected that was a hard thing for Megumi to find.

“I see... In that case, that’s all the more reason to fight my hardest,” Megumi whispered.

“Iris told me not to interfere in any way,” said Ichiro.

“I fully agree,” Megumi said firmly. Ichiro had never seen her so steeled about anything. There was a certain nobility in it. “I must defeat Iris with my own power. I do not want anyone interfering, either.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.” Those words finally cleared up one of the doubts Ichiro had been holding in his heart. “I’m sorry to bring it up in such an unrelated venue, but if I may, I’d like to toast to your upcoming battle.”

“Certainly.” With an expression of renewed decisiveness, Megumi raised her glass, nodded, and brought her glass to Ichiro’s.

The cold clink between them could barely be heard above the din of the party around them.

“Welcome back, Ichiro-sama,” Sakurako Ogi greeted him as he arrived in the underground parking lot.

“Yes, thank you,” he answered. “Could we set out right away?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “Do you want to go straight home?”

“Hmm... yes. I think that might be best.”

With practiced motions, Sakurako opened the back door of the Lincoln, and Ichiro slid in and sat down. He noticed that she had a smartphone and a college-ruled notebook sitting in the passenger seat; she really must have been scouring the wiki the entire time.

In the driver's seat, Sakurako fastened her seatbelt over her maid's apron. She released the parking brake, flicked the white sedan's headlights on, and started it rolling slowly forward. As always, she was very cautious in her driving, checking left and right before each turn.

"While you were at the party, I managed to choose the general direction for my second character," Sakurako explained as she eased the sedan out of the parking lot.

"So you are going to make one?" Ichiro asked.

"Well, it was your birthday present to me," she said. "It would be a waste not to use it effectively!"

"I wonder if you've used the plamodels I gave you last year effectively."

"I have. I *really* have."

He had known Sakurako for five years, and he had given her five birthday presents. It was all right to buy her clothing and accessories and such, and it would likely have made her happy enough. But instead, each time, he had bought her something relevant to her hobbies. He didn't understand those hobbies, but he had never failed to buy her something she wanted.

His present to her this time had been a *Narrow Fantasy Online* premium package. As usual, it was an unopened return, bought at a steep markup. Sakurako had been plainly overjoyed when she'd seen what was inside... but to list the details of her reaction here would be an affront to her dignity, so let's move on.

"Does having a second character mean you'll retire Sir Kirschwasser?" Ichiro asked.

"Certainly not," she declared. "I just want to enjoy the game in a new way for a little while. Kirschwasser will always be my main!"

“Oh?” Ichiro had no idea what was the standard practice for things like this.

Second characters were common in games with liberal character editing systems, particularly online games. According to Sakurako, male and female characters had access to different equipment and class fighting styles, so she was going to make a second character to enjoy that aspect of it. He didn’t really understand it, but that seemed reasonable enough.

“I’m still not sure if I’ll join Iris Brand or not...” Sakurako said. “Ah, but I wonder if I might ask you to help me level up, Ichiro-sama.”

“I wouldn’t mind, but with fewer Warp Feathers on the market, it will take me some time to reach Starter Town,” he responded.

“Oh, that’s right! You’re out of them, too...” Sakurako stopped the car at a red light and slumped in disappointment. “I saw an aggregate article about that on Matsunaga’s blog, too. People seem pretty upset about it. They’re saying the devs had better deal with it soon...”

It was now the third day of someone buying up all the Warp Feathers and limiting their availability on the market. It was certainly about the time player patience tended to start running out with such things. He’d heard it was starting to have serious ramifications on players’ abilities to get around in the game.

The front-line Achievers were in a particularly wretched state because they couldn’t return to Glasgobara Merchant Town for restoration of their weapons and armor from the Alchemists and Blacksmiths. Instead, a few gutsy crafting class players were seeing it as a business opportunity, and were going to the front lines to offer their services personally.

“But what can you do about them being bought out?” Sakurako pondered. “Is it even possible to buy them out? I suppose it is, since we can see it happening, but you would think other players would try to stop it...”

“I may have an idea, but it’s only a hypothesis for now, so I won’t say it.”

“Oh, really?” Sakurako turned, unconsciously, but Ichiro just shrugged.

“The light is green.”

“Oops!” Sakurako started the car moving once more. “And *NaroFan* prohibits

RMT, too! So there's no way you can use your money to resolve it..."

"It's a smart policy, so I don't mind it," he said. Most MMORPG titles forbade "Real Money Trade," or the process of exchanging game goods for real-life funds and vice versa, and VRMMOs were no different. Sakurako's comment referred to the fact that, because RMT was forbidden, it was even harder to understand what someone might hope to gain by buying up all the Warp Feathers.

"But you have an idea of who it is, right?" she asked.

"Yes, I do," he said. "And since you're making a second character, perhaps I could ask you to investigate."

"Oho!" Sakurako seemed happy to hear that suggestion. "A maid-investigator... It's like *The Housekeeper Saw!* Ah, maybe I'll make my second class a Shinobi after all!"

"Sakurako-san, I'm glad that you're happy, but please watch where you're driving," Ichiro warned Sakurako, who was gripping the wheel with a grin.

That reminded him: Iris would probably be in the middle of the part-time job he'd arranged for her around now. Ichiro gazed out the window.

His thoughts were not anything so laudable as, "I hope she's doing okay," but much closer to the certainty of, "She's probably not doing very well."

In a way, this indicated a significant trust that Ichiro had for Iris.

I think this is gonna kill me... Airi thought.

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up.

But what she was wearing right now was not the flashy casual fashion that young girls loved, nor a stylish formal dress that drew all eyes to her in envy. It was a thick plush oven encasing a hell of sweaty humidity.

That's right: it was a mascot costume.

The part-time job Ichiro had mediated for her was being part of a PR campaign for a new arcade. She was currently walking around Akihabara,

helping the campaign girl hand out fliers. She had thought this might be a chance to get a glimpse at the young heir's real face, but he hadn't turned up. Though now that she thought about it, maybe that was for the best. It meant he wouldn't have to see her in this disgraceful state.

Apparently the arcade had been having understaffing issues, and they hadn't been able to secure a mascot performer for the day. Thus Airi, who'd just happened to need a job for that day, had been extremely welcome.

She'd confessed that she'd never done it before, but the old man running things had just smiled and said, "You'll be fine. Just strike cute poses."

Airi had thought that sounded simple enough, but once she'd put the costume on, she'd realized... she had no idea what a cute pose was.

Ugh... I think I'm gonna barf... Airi thought, twisting her face into a nauseated expression.

Beside her, the campaign girl, handing out fliers to passersby, seemed to be cool as a cucumber. Airi wished she could strip off the costume—as well as her clothing—and run screaming down the thoroughfare in just her underwear.

"Hi! Akihabara Cybertown is having its grand opening! Hope to see you there!" The campaign girl was putting everything she had into handing out the fliers, flashing a charming smile to everyone around her. Her exposed chest area seemed to draw the gazes of all the passing men.

Yeah... guys can't resist that, can they? thought Airi. Those poor creatures could not resist their base instincts.

Airi herself was of the species "girl," a creature that instinctively gave a wide berth to the otaku who made up most of Akihabara's population. Even so, she was stunned by the professionalism of the young woman in being willing to wield her breasts as a tool to get attention. Even though the campaign girl was likely a few years older than herself, Airi couldn't help but wonder what had happened to young people's sense of virtue nowadays.

To play the mascot, which she wasn't sure if it was creepy or cute (she'd like to see who designed the thing), Airi swayed side to side, bent her knees a little, and waved enthusiastically. But it was hard for her to really lose herself in the

role of a cute thing when the environment was so negative. It was hot, it was humid, and it stank; it was no place for a 17-year-old girl.

In the midst of smiling and handing out fliers, the campaign girl cast a glance in Airi's direction and gave her a pat on the shoulder. It was the sign for checking to see if she was okay. The campaign girl was attractive, gregarious, considerate, and she had a large chest: truly a woman with everything.

It's okay, I can keep going, Airi thought. She didn't say it out loud, but she waved her arms energetically to make the point. She would receive a bonus to her wages if she gave out all the fliers by the deadline, which meant she had to keep going.

All this work would net her 15,000 yen—20,000 if she got the bonus. It was just enough to buy a single outfit from MiZUNO's new summer line. Airi had never realized that earning the money for just one outfit could be so forbidding.

Hard work is worth respecting... The words floated up in her heat-addled mind. She had gained even more gratitude for her parents, who both worked. A whole day's worth of suffering was worth only two portraits of Yukichi Fukuzawa. (That is to say, two 10,000-yen bills.) "Wow, what an outfit! Can I get a picture?"

A group of young people in tawdry outfits had started talking to the campaign girl. Airi had heard there were a lot of young people in Akihabara like this these days, too, but it was still a bit surprising to see them. The woman's ability to respond with "Oh, of course!" without the slightest wince was another sign of her professionalism.

Airi had reached a conclusion: exposed flesh was a way of drawing men's attention.

It had been the same way at the beach in *NaroFan* the other day. Both in the real world or the game world, the ratio of flesh-colored elements to non-was one secret to popularity. In addition, though she didn't want to admit it, in a male-centric environment like *Narrow Fantasy Online*, it was a clear shortcut to getting votes.

She remembered Edward's words: the needs of the audience. If she could match them...

Airi managed to finish processing that information in her overcooked mind. She had to undress Felicia. That was the only way.

Immediately after that thought entered her mind, Airi felt a dull impact against her side. “Ghh...” A groan nearly escaped her lips, but she bit it back.

Right now, I’m a cute mascot.

She tried to ascertain who it was who had hit her, but her visibility was too limited.

“Whoa! What’s this thing? Creepy!” The voice—high-pitched, male, and prepubescent—was coming from directly in front of her, but the costume wasn’t equipped to let her look downwards. The voice was followed by another hard impact.

Whoosh.

In that instant, Airi felt the black flame that lived inside of her rage to life. If given form, the feeling would spell out the words “This stupid brat.”

Airi Kakitsubata was no bodhisattva. She was just an ordinary, average girl, and the fuse on her temper had limits.

“Hey, hitting’s not nice! Don’t do that, okay?” The angelic campaign girl broke the two apart before Airi could explode. “Our little mascot is gonna go bye-bye for a while! See you later, everyone!”

As if sensing Airi reaching her breaking point, the girl dragged Airi off by a hand while waving to the crowd with the other. She led her into the arcade, which was not yet open. It was then, for the first time, that Airi learned the name of the possibly-cute, possibly-creepy mascot she was playing.



The instant they got into the break room, the angelic campaign girl removed the head from her mascot outfit. “Great work out there. It must have been hard!”

“Ah, yeah...” Airi wiped the sweat off her face with a towel, then refilled her sports drink. Just mustering those words took everything she had. The young heir had told her to bring clothes that were easy to move in, so she’d assumed it would be hard labor of some sort, but she hadn’t imagined it would be this bad.

Airi was a fashionable girl who never left the house without makeup on. Today, thinking she would probably sweat, she had avoided her usual makeup routine for a bare minimum application, but even that had melted away in just the first ten minutes.

“Airi, was it?” the girl asked. “You’ve got such a great complexion! Are you still in your teens?”

“I’m 17.”

“Oh, a high school student!” The campaign girl sat down next to Airi and fanned her with the binder in her hands. “You chose a pretty tough job, even if it is just for one day, huh?”

“I needed... money, so...” Airi was normally the kind of person who had no trouble chatting it up with people she’d just met. But right now, she was so groggy, she almost couldn’t finish a single sentence. She was only now just barely managing to recover presence of mind as she drank in the fresh oxygen around her. “Earning money... it’s hard, huh?”

“It certainly is!” the campaign girl agreed. “But did you really need it so suddenly? Couldn’t you borrow it from your parents?”

“That would... defeat the point...” Airi managed. There was no way she could explain the situation that would convince her parents to lend her the money. “Win or lose, I have to do it on my own...”

“Oh, is it a competition? The life-on-the-line kind?” the girl asked.

“Sort of, yeah...” This job certainly made Airi feel like she might die in the

pursuit. A whole day's work that made her want to throw up her hands—or maybe just throw up, period—would net her just a couple of 10,000-yen bills. Holding a job for the first time had made her realize just how much money 10,000 yen was.

It was a lot of money.

A lot of money!

The weight of one of those Yukichi Fukuzawas in her wallet was something Airi now grasped, both mentally and physically. It wasn't that she had never appreciated how precious money was, but this was her first time really grasping its weight.

"But Airi, the way you work so hard, I wouldn't think it was your first time." The angelic campaign girl brought a soda from the vending machine and handed it to Airi. "I think you might have a real talent for this. If you ever need more money, come back to us, okay?"

Airi winced as she accepted the bottle. This was a talent she could do without. The only talent she wanted was that of a fashion designer; getting praised in other arenas was nothing to celebrate.

Being judged on one's talent was a cruel thing. She wondered if Megumi Fuyo felt the same way.

Despite being in the mascot suit, Airi dexterously managed to get the cap off the bottle and bring it to her mouth.

The angelic campaign girl gazed on in quiet amazement. "I really think you are a natural..."

Ah, why did humans have to be born with such unnecessary talents?

"Hi-ho! Kiryuuu!" Asuha called.

Sera Kiryu greeted Asuha's entrance with an uncomfortable frown, then spoke a delayed, "Hey."

"What's with that reaction?" she said indignantly.

"Well, I didn't think you would really come..." With that, Sera's focus returned

to the TV in the corner of the room. There were a variety of game consoles, both new and old, collected on the TV stand, almost all systems Asuha didn't recognize.

"Ah... did you not want me here?" she asked.

"No, it's not that," Sera said. "I just didn't think you'd want to hang out until you finished your homework."

"You've been playing games, too, Kiryu!"

As Asuha astutely pointed out, Sera was indeed using an old mouse-gray controller to manipulate a pixelated character on the screen. It was clearly some sort of fighting game.

But Sera's response came back lightly. "Yeah, I'm finished."

"You are?! But it's only July!" Asuha exclaimed.

"Yeah. Oh, I mean, I still have my diary to do..."

Sera cast a glance to the study table in the corner, and Asuha's gaze followed. Indeed, as if to assert her friend's methodological approach, a neat stack of notebooks sat on the desk.

Like any student, Asuha had had the notion pounded into her head every year that a good student always finished all their summer homework in July. But she had never once put it into practice. She always said, "I'll do it tomorrow," and the result was notebooks full of blank pages. She never seemed to grasp that after ten "I'll do it tomorrow"s, July would reach its end, and after forty of them, summer would be over.

So, while Asuha was off shifting the burden to her future self, Sera Kiryu was actually doing it. Asuha couldn't believe it.

"It's true," Sera insisted.

"But I really can't believe it..." Asuha said.

"You can look, if you want," her friend said without looking away from the screen.

"I-I can look?" Asuha had had an ulterior motive for coming here. She would

come to Sera's house to play, knowing her friend would be ahead of her, then copy everything she needed. But those words—"You can look, if you want"—caused those wicked thoughts to shrivel away.

Asuha hesitated, and then at last, decided to abandon the idea. She really did have to do her own homework.

She plopped down next to her friend. "How come you're not using a flat-screen?"

"You lose response time on an LED," said Sera. "I'd prefer a commercial cabinet, but they're expensive. Even the commercial HD cathode ray TVs use upscale converters, which add 0.5 frames of lag. But they don't make these things anymore, which makes it hard to get your hands on them."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Asuha said.

As usual, when the subject was video games, Sera could speak with great fluency. Asuha could also detect clear passion behind her friend's usual monotone calm.

As befitting the master gamer that Sera was, each game concluded with a no-miss, flawless victory. Asuha couldn't quite tell if her friend was enjoying it or treating it like work, but either way, the intensity on the young gamer's face suggested that she really shouldn't interfere.

Even so...

"Want to try it, Tsuwabuki?" Sera asked.

"Huh? Me?" Asuha asked.

"Yeah."

Asuha hesitated as Sera offered her the controller. She had never held one like it before, but it had only a D-pad and four buttons, so it seemed easy enough to figure out. She chose a random girl character from the select screen, and started a battle against a computer opponent.

"Hrgh! Hah! Hwooo..." Asuha whipped the controller around and tilted dynamically side to side. Just pressing the buttons would be enough, she knew, but she was the kind of player who couldn't help but react with her whole body.

“Ah... ah, huh?! Crud! Hey, how do you do that? Hey, hey... ah! Ah... ahhh, no, stop! Hey, you—ah! Ahh, ahh, ahhh!”

But at the end of the day, she was still just a newbie, and she’d reached the natural end for a middle schooler who didn’t even know the input for a Hadoken.

“Oh, well, I lost... Kiryu, why is your face red?” Asuha asked.

“No reason...” Sera whispered, hurriedly looking through a plastic case all the while. “Let’s try some co-op. Like *Final Fight 2*...”

“Yeah, I don’t know that one, but it sounds good,” Asuha said.

Sera put a different game cartridge in the slot and turned it on. A screen similar to the one from the fighting game appeared. Asuha picked the female character, as usual, while Sera picked a stern-looking old man with a beard.

The controls for this one didn’t seem as complicated as the ones from the fighting game earlier. Even with Asuha’s crude play style, it was easy for them to have fun and make progress. She also enjoyed the way that Sera’s old man character sometimes spread his arms wide and spun around.

“Oh, by the way, Kiryu... I’m gonna be a model,” Asuha said.

“Huh? You don’t seem like the type.”

“What was that?” Asuha snapped.

“Ah, hey, stop it!” Sera cried. Asuha’s character had started punching Sera’s from behind. “A model for what? What are you doing?”

“I mean in the game,” said Asuha. “Iris is having a fashion competition.”

“Ohh...”

Asuha explained the broad particulars of the situation, which was simplified a bit by the fact that Sera, as King Kirihito, had seen part of the beach incident unfold the other day. Sera listened with a manner that suggested disinterest, belied by the asking of an occasional question.

Once Asuha finished her explanation, Sera responded with an “Oh, I see,” and then continued, “Matsunaga told me about that. He wanted me to be a judge.”

“Huh? What the heck?” Asuha burst out. “Are you friends with Mr. Matsunaga?”

“He tends to arrive in places before I do when I’m playing solo,” said Sera. “I don’t know how he does it.”



“W-Wow...” Asuha had had a few experiences with Matsunaga, and while she knew that he really wasn’t that bad a person, she still didn’t like him. What she didn’t recognize was that her dislike was the result of a self-righteousness particular to middle school girls. “What do you mean, a judge? Do you know anything about fashion, Kiryu?”

“Of course not,” said Sera. “It’s probably just for fun. And King Kirihito is famous, so...”

When talking about *NaroFan* in real life, Sera had a strange habit of referring to the avatar “Kirihito” as a completely discrete entity. Even the name “King Kirihito”—which her friend had originally dismissed as “lame”—was now standard parlance for Sera, which suggested even further detachment between the two figures in the young gamer’s mind.

The near complete change in personality wasn’t just Sera roleplaying, she didn’t think. King Kirihito seemed to be the embodiment of the ideal self that existed in Sera’s mind.

“But if you’re going to be the model, I might think about it...” said Sera.

“Oh, you want to come see?” Asuha asked.

“Hmm... I’m not sure. I guess I’m curious...”

They both kept their eyes on the screen as they talked.

“Well, I think I’ll probably go... maybe,” said Sera.

“I see!” Asuha cried. “But I bet it’s gonna be pretty suggestive! Like the swimsuit I wore before!”

“Why do you have to sound so happy about that?” Sera whispered, with a slightly troubled expression.

Asuha and Sera’s characters proceeded smoothly through the stage and finally arrived in the boss fight area. Around this time, their conversation quieted down so they could focus more on the gameplay.

A little while after, Asuha remembered something, and she spoke up. “Speaking of which, Kiryu.”

“Hmm?”

“Next week, I’m going to Itchy’s house in Tokyo to hang out.”

“Oh?” Sera asked.

“Want to come with?” Asuha asked. “Itchy would love it.”

The old man Sera was controlling in the game stopped. But just as Asuha was wondering if her friend had been shaken by the news, the avatar used its spin attack to clear out all the small enemies that had clustered around it, suggesting it was just part of Sera’s play style.

Asuha went to Ichiro’s house once or twice a year. Even if they were related, the thought of a girl in middle school going to stay at a twenty-something bachelor’s house was a somewhat questionable prospect. But perhaps because Ichiro was above such notions, her parents didn’t object. So this time, since they knew each other, she’d decided to invite Sera, too.

Sera remained quiet for a while, then, after defeating the stage boss, spoke up again. “I’ll think about it.”

“Master Ichiro, this is Special Investigator 4396.”

“Ah, yes...” That day, the Dragonet Ichiro had left town alone for the first time in a while to take a stroll through the field.

With Iris and Nem’s competition coming up, Ichiro had a few concerns still to rectify, chief among them the question of who was limiting the sale of Warp Feathers to hinder travel through the game. This strange act seemed to carry very little reward given the effort it took, and as a result, that seemed to make it clear that someone must be doing it for some other purpose. Thus, Ichiro had left town to investigate.

He had an idea of who it might be. After all, there were only a few people capable of accomplishing something like this, and he also had some idea of what they might be getting out of it.

While Ichiro was investigating, at the same time, Sakurako was also seeking out information in Starter Town at his request. To go from Glasgobara

Merchant Town, where Iris Brand was located, to Starter Town or Manyfish Beach required one to cross two vast fields: the Volgund Volcanoes and the Vispianya Meadows. There were towns and villages along the way, but the maps in the VRMMO were of a realistic scale, for better or worse, and so it wasn't easy to trek back and forth between them.

Sakurako had just made her second character, so he had asked her to confirm a few things for him in that area. Since new characters began the game in Starter Town, the timing was perfect.

"So, how are things over there for you... you?" Ichiro hadn't yet asked Sakurako's second character's name, but he couldn't call her "Sakurako-san," either, so for once, he felt a bit stymied in his form of address.

"Hmm, there're a surprising number of mid-level players here," said Sakurako. "It seems like they came here to play on the beach when the Warp Feather buy-out started, so they just can't get back to their usual home bases. Of course, the fact that they're still here after three days suggests most of them are pretty laid-back about it..."

"I see," Ichiro said.

Perhaps that stood to reason. Even Matsunaga's blog was commenting on the standstill caused by the Warp Feathers. With most NPC shops sold out of Warp Feathers, many mid-level players had set their sights on the beginners' shops in Starter Town. These shops were usable only by low-level players, but they did sell a very small number of Warp Feathers.

Some of the mid-level players left behind at Manyfish Beach would visit Starter Town to try to bargain with the beginner players that could still use these shops, asking them to buy them Warp Feathers in exchange for a round of power leveling, or items that were hard to acquire at low levels. After all, Warp Feathers were of little use to beginner players who hadn't been to many places yet, so it was a good deal on both ends.

Of course, bad ideas well up quickly, too, so even on the first day, you had players buying up large numbers of Warp Feathers from beginners at a low price, then scalping them.

"I've been asked about that, too," Sakurako said. "Matsunaga put warnings

on the wiki, but I bet lots of beginner players are still selling them."

"Neither monopolization nor scalping is against the terms of use, after all," said Ichiro. "It's all up to how players think, and selling your Warp Feathers to an experienced player in exchange for early game funds is an understandable strategy."

"Well... well, yes, I suppose." On the other side of the phone, the self-named Special Investigator #4396 seemed to be mulling that over.

"So, what will you do? Have you been leveling up already?" Ichiro asked.

"No, I've finished my investigation, and I more or less have the pulse of things here, so I'll re-log in as Kirschwasser. Once Warp Feathers are back on the market again, I hope you'll take some time to help me level up."

"Hmm, understood," said Ichiro. "I'll be in Delve."

Special Investigator #4396 then hung up.

Unlike Kirschwasser, Sakurako's new voice didn't seem to be sampled from an actor or voice actor. It sounded relatively close to her own. The way she talked was unfiltered Sakurako, too, so either her second character was not meant to be for roleplaying, or she just hadn't decided on her personality yet.

Ichiro had left Glasgobara, crossed the Sandsea, and had arrived in Martial City Delve. The town had once been a hive of undead monsters in a field known as the Necrolands, but with the Devil Zombie grand boss defeated, it had been "settled." It was now a city map. It still had lots of underground dungeons, and it was the closest town to the frontier fields, so most of the Achiever guilds had moved their home bases there.

Ichiro waited a while, and soon, a cheery melody sounded out, indicating that Kirschwasser had logged in.

"That was fast," he said.

"Ah, I just arrived in Delve yesterday myself," said Kirschwasser. "I was looking for Warp Feathers."

She had changed her speech patterns quickly, too.

"I suppose you couldn't find any?" Ichiro asked.

“Yes. It’s to the point where I couldn’t even find any scalpers,” said Kirschwasser. “The top guilds spare no expense, after all.”

“That stands to reason.” Ichiro didn’t necessarily need new Warp Feathers, either, but if it became necessary, he wouldn’t hesitate to spend what he needed to. He was flush with money, both in the game and in real life.

Ichiro and Kirschwasser walked down Delve’s main street. It was lined with guild houses of the top Achievers, but the atmosphere was different from the lively businesses of Glasgobara. It wasn’t exactly strained, but there was an odd tension in the air.

“Hmm, isn’t this nice,” Kirschwasser commented.

“Really?” Ichiro asked.

“Yes. Everyone here is a core gamer, like me.”

After walking for a little while, they came to a large guild house. The flags hanging from it were marked with an emblem of a rising sun. This building was home to the game’s largest Achiever guild, the Red Sunset Knights.

As Ichiro and Kirschwasser stepped closer, the heavily armored soldiers standing on either side of the door crossed their extremely long spears (modeled after the sarissas used by the Macedonian phalanx), blocking their way.

“This is the Knights’ guild house,” said one. “Outsiders aren’t permitted to enter.”

“Our guild leader has insisted that no one should enter.”

The two seemed to have an elaborate roleplay going on.

Ichiro decided to ask and see. “Is that actually true?”

“Please, try to make a little more trouble,” the man on the right whispered.

Ichiro and Kirschwasser looked at each other and shrugged. “What shall we do, Sir Kirschwasser? I’ve never made trouble before.”

“Master Ichiro, are you being serious?” the Knight sighed.

“There’ll be no talking your way around this. I cannot let you proceed.” It

seemed the guards were going to keep the scenario moving, regardless of the responses they got. It was a good thing, really. Perhaps they didn't want to force a role on someone else.

Kirschwasser, beside him, let out a cough. "Our business is with your leader, Lord Stroganoff. I see there's no convincing you, but if I may speak to someone higher—"

"*No* member of the Knights' leadership will meet with the likes of you. Away with you at once!" The two of them seemed really into it.

It was just as Ichiro was watching their amusing roleplay that a beautiful woman clad in white porcelain full plate mail stepped out, with almost practiced timing (indeed, it likely was practiced).

"What is all the noise out here?" she asked, despite the fact that they weren't actually making a lot of noise.

"V-Vice Captain Tiramisu!"

"Nothing, these ruffians were just..."

Saint Tiramisu was a Paladin, and the lone female member of the Red Sunset Knights' commander team. With her simply designed Celestial Armor, Sword, and Shield, and her appearance otherwise evoking the archetypal lady knight, she held considerable popularity among a quiet set of male players.

Tiramisu looked at Ichiro and Kirschwasser, seeming to recognize them for the first time. "Mr. Tsuwabuki. What are you doing here?"

"I wished to ask something, though it's nothing of serious import," said Ichiro.

"I see. Well, come in, then," Tiramisu said easily.

The guards acted flustered. "Captain Tiramisu! Why are you letting these ruffians in?!"

"Yes! This obvious rabble couldn't possibly..."

"Be quiet," Saint Tiramisu snapped, scaring them both into silence. "These two are friends of the Knights' commander. If you don't know that... um... not knowing that... despite being a guard..."

“How can someone entrusted with guarding...” the guard prompted.

“Ah, right. How can someone entrusted with guarding this house not know that? Your ignorance shames you!”

“Yes, ma’am, thank you!!”

And so the strange farce ended. The two guards bowed deeply to Tiramisu. She smiled back with mild embarrassment, then turned again to Ichiro and Kirschwasser.

“I’m sorry about that. Um, you want to see the boss?”

“That’s right,” said Ichiro. “If we could talk to Stroganoff, that would be best, I think.”

Led by Tiramisu, the two entered the Knights’ guild house.

Unlike Iris Brand or the Akihabara Forging Guild, the interior of this house was richly decorated. Drop items acquired from previous great achievements hung on the walls as trophies, giving the hallway the air of a museum. The stained glass windows and red carpet lining the floor only deepened that impression.

“Do you do that little skit every time?” Ichiro asked.

“Ah, yes,” she said. “The guards like it...”

“I see,” he answered. “Everyone has their own way of enjoying the game, don’t they?”

This particular one seemed to enter the realm of fetish, but he avoided commenting on that. Ichiro couldn’t really understand it, but to dismiss things he couldn’t understand was nonsense. If those guards were happy, that was good enough for him.

Guided by Tiramisu, Ichiro and Kirschwasser arrived in the deepest room in the guild house. Tiramisu knocked softly, then opened the door. Inside, Stroganoff, leader of the Red Sunset Knights, was poring over a map spread out across his desk.

“Boss, visitors!” she announced.

“Ah, Tiramisu. Good to see...” Stroganoff said as he raised his head.

“Hey, it’s me,” said Ichiro.

“T-Tsuwabuki?!” Stroganoff was a red-haired brute who stood over two meters tall. He had been given the appellation “the Monstrous.” Yet the giant man froze the instant he saw Ichiro. This was not roleplay, Ichiro thought, but his honest feelings. “What do you want?! There’s no grand boss here!”

“Nonsense,” Ichiro said. Apparently, his stealing of their grand boss kill had been somewhat traumatic for the guild leader.

Tiramisu stood next to Stroganoff and patted his shoulder. “Boss, boss...”

“Ugh, s-sorry. I lost my head...”

Ichiro was reminded of the man’s talk with Matsunaga during the council meeting. Despite his avatar’s appearance, he appeared to be quite a timid person.

“Still, I didn’t expect to see you here,” Stroganoff said. “I need to log out for work soon, but what’s your business?”



“Ah, of course. To get right to the point...” Ichiro assumed a pensive expression, then asked: “I was wondering if it might be Matsunaga’s group who are buying up the Warp Feathers.”

“Yeah, I haven’t asked him directly, but I think you might be right.” Stroganoff’s answer came easily enough. “Just to let you know, we’re not involved. We have stocks of Warp Feathers, too, but they’re about the only ones who could do this. I’ve caught sight of Matsunaga’s guildmates in the shops of late, too, though I don’t know what their grand scheme might be.”

“I see,” Ichiro said, nodding.

Stroganoff’s Red Sunset Knights and Matsunaga’s Dual Serpents often cooperated—more precisely, the two guilds used each other—but it seemed that Stroganoff and Matsunaga, on a personal level, got along rather well.

It was Matsunaga who had pushed the rumors of King Kirihito as the ultimate solo player, but it was also he who had pushed the Red Sunset Knights as the game’s greatest guild as they had expanded. Thanks to him, articles about the Knights were second only to those about King and those about Ichiro.

There were no lengths Matsunaga wouldn’t go to to get a good story. And it probably wasn’t just him—while at a glance, the Dual Serpents appeared to be a one-man guild, it had a large membership that acted perfectly in sync. They were like-minded individuals who had come together in the name of a united purpose.

Ever since the Nem incident at the beach the other day, Matsunaga had seemed to be highly involved in how things were playing out. He had behaved this way during the King Kirihito incident, too, facilitating things behind the scenes to make the contents of his articles more dramatic.

That, alone, was not a problem. However...

“Tsuwabuki, are you lacking Warp Feathers?” Stroganoff offered, peering into Ichiro’s face. “Well, you could ask Matsunaga, too, but I’ll lend you some from our store, if you like.”

“No, that’s not the case,” said Ichiro. “Thank you.”

“I see. That’s fine, then.” Stroganoff did seem to be a very good person, not the sort to be complicit in Matsunaga’s schemes. “By the way, I heard you were playing shogi on the beach recently, Sir Kirschwasser. I’d like to have a game with you some time.”

“As a matter of fact, Iris has been beating me lately.” Kirschwasser spoke the shocking truth very lightly, and even Ichiro was surprised.

Stroganoff’s brow wrinkled, as well. “That girl? I wouldn’t expect it, to be honest.”

“Apparently her late grandfather taught her how to play,” said Kirschwasser.

“She’s the type to show talent in the areas you’d least expect.” Of course, the tragedy was that she showed no promise in the area she worked hardest in.

“Oh, I heard that Iris was going to be having a fashion competition against Nem,” Tiramisu, who had been quiet up until now, interjected.

Kirschwasser nodded. “Yes. Are you interested?”

“Matsunaga spoke to me about it,” Tiramisu said. “He asked if I wanted to be a judge.”

“Judge?” Kirschwasser asked.

That was right. Sorceress had mentioned something about inviting judges. He had assumed that they would try to stack the deck there, but there was no sign that the Knights would be partial to Nem. It was likely just to drum up word of mouth, then.

But the fact that Matsunaga was rounding up judges suggested that he was certainly involved in the matter behind the scenes. The question was just to what degree he was taking Nem’s side.

Ichiro closed his eyes, thinking back to what Megumi Fuyo had said at the party the other day. “I must defeat Iris with my own power. I do not want anyone interfering, either.”

And then what Iris had said. “This is between me and her. You may *not* offer your help or your money, and I can’t ask for them.”

At least those two were in clear agreement. Without arranging anything

beforehand, they had quietly come to the same conclusion. They were linked by an inviolable pact to preserve the purity of the competition. That was why Ichiro had said to Megumi that he was relieved to hear her words.

“What nonsense.” It was probably a predictable line, but Ichiro still had to say it.

Kirschwasser nodded as if he’d figured something out, too. Only Stroganoff was left confused.

“Did I miss something?” he asked.

“It’s nothing you need be concerned about,” said Ichiro. “If you wish to play shogi, you should come to Iris Brand. I’m sure you’d be welcome.”

“Heh,” said Stroganoff. “Tsuwabuki, let me warn you. In my youth, I was feared in the local shogi halls as Sergei of the Fourth File Rook.”

With that last, strange comment, Stroganoff the Monstrous logged out to go to work. It seemed he really was the owner of some kind of restaurant.

Kirschwasser whispered, “If his real name is Sergei, is he Russian, perhaps?”

“But ‘shogi halls’ suggests that he was raised in Japan,” Ichiro responded.

It was quite the yawn-inducing mystery.

“He’s apparently half-Russian, half-Japanese, and spent his life in Russia up until middle school, then moved to Yamanashi,” Tiramisu said.

“I-I see...” Kirschwasser murmured. Tiramisu’s answer solved the mystery, but since it didn’t matter to begin with, it wasn’t terribly satisfying.

At the least, their business was completed, so they said their goodbyes to Tiramisu and left the guild house.

Kirschwasser seemed to want to leave some sort of comment, perhaps feeling bad about barely interacting with Stroganoff the whole time. But unable to think of anything, he simply said to Ichiro, walking one step behind him, “I think we’ll have beef stroganoff tonight,”

And that was enough to put an end to it.

“Congratulations, Airi!” the campaign girl cried, holding out a brown envelope.

“Ohh!” Airi burst out.

After a seemingly interminable eight hours playing the mysterious mascot character, Airi was at last reaching the end of her hellish day. She wanted to get home and take a shower, to wash off every drop of sweat that clung to her body.

At least, that had been her primary thought, right up to the moment that she took that envelope in her hands. Then, in that moment, she was struck by the illusion (though it was definitely only an illusion) that the beads of sweat covering her body were really precious jewels.

After a day of hard work that had made her wish she were dead, Airi had earned a massive 15,000 yen. It was a tremendous amount of money for a high school girl to earn in a day.

She was tired, suffering, hot, nauseous, and stinky, but she had survived it all, and that small, crisp envelope was the proof.

Airi clutched it in her hands, tears welling up in her eyes. “I’ll treasure it all my life!”

“No, you have to spend it,” said the campaign girl.

That was right. It was money. She did have to spend it. This was her war chest, nothing more. She would use this money to complete her new fashion armor design, and meet Nem, a.k.a. Megumi Fuyo, in their duel. She had to use the 15,000 yen to make that happen.

But would it be enough?

That faint shadow of doubt remained, hanging over Airi’s heart.

Fifteen thousand yen was a lot of money. But Airi had converted countless hundreds of components into scrap when creating Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s armor. She had never actually asked how much Ichiro had ended up spending in the process.

Actually, it would be more correct to say that she *had* once asked him him,

feeling it was her duty to know the amount. But the minute she'd seen the details, her pulse had skyrocketed, she'd been surrounded by physiological alarm messages, and the game had automatically logged her out. And as a result, she couldn't remember what it had been.

She had this 15,000 yen, and the small amount of New Year's money left in her savings account. She had to successfully create the armor using that money alone.

Airi steeled her resolve.

"Airi, you look like you're about to march into battle," the angelic campaign girl said with an expression of awe.

Airi was grateful to her, too. If she hadn't been so sociable with her cleavage on display, Airi never would have realized how it caught men's eyes.

"I do think you have talent for wearing mascot costumes, Airi..." the girl said.

"Thank you very much," Airi said. "But I have other dreams."

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up.

There was a road of thorns she had to walk to make it to that dream. These were the first steps down that road. Soon, she was going to be marching into battle against the person she most admired.

In the back of her mind, Airi was formulating her design. It was a refreshing feeling to have a clear image in her mind of what she wanted to make. Airi knew this alone was not the formula for success, though. She had to put form to the image immediately.

"Well, I've gotta go!" Airi called.

Airi said goodbye to the angelic campaign girl, and to the old campaign manager who had barely said anything, then left the site of her first real part-time job behind.

She had total confidence in the image she was drawing up in her mind. She was starting to get excited. Of course, it was a known fact of life that the things you create in the heat of the moment often result in terrible work when you

look back on it later... but Airi lacked the creative experience to realize this.

“Wow, you’re gonna wear Ai’s design, Felicia?” Yuri asked.

After returning from Sera Kiryu’s house, Asuha tried to get to work on the homework she had let pile up at her desk, but after ten minutes, she had given up and retreated into the world of *NaroFan*. She was currently leveling up with her party and chatting, and Yuri had shown interest in the topic of Iris.

Her party currently consisted of Felicia, Yuri, Kirihito (Leader), and Edward. It was unusual to have a party of all physical classes, but the high-level Kirihito (Leader) and Edward were able to create openings so that Felicia and Yuri could have lots of fun. The two of them had seemed to have nothing to do in Glasgobara, so the girls had invited them out.

“I actually had lots to do...” Edward murmured, sulkily.

“Come on, Mr. Edward,” said Kirihito (Leader). “You don’t get many chances to play with real middle school-and college-aged girls.”

“That may be true, but I wouldn’t be as obvious as you about it,” Edward groused. The two, who had never met before, seemed to be getting along surprisingly well.

Yuri and Iris continued to talk, occasionally casting a glance over at the men. They still had quite a bit of time before the Living Shimeji respawned.

“When Ai first started playing, she didn’t talk about her hobby a lot,” said Yuri.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah.”

Felicia found herself leaning forward with interest. Yuri’s own tone was a bit hesitant.

Felicia had heard the reason why Iris had first started playing *NaroFan*. She attended a school for design, but she hadn’t been able to take being compared to her more talented classmates, and it had made her want to escape into the game.

Felicia's experience with her friend Sera had taught her that "escape" wasn't necessarily a bad thing; the question was whether or not it would lead to growth.

At first, Iris hadn't been willing to talk to her fellow guild members like Yuri about her circumstances, but Yuri had gradually begun to piece them together.

"Not having enough talent to do what you want to your satisfaction can be hard," Yuri explained. "I know the feeling pretty well."

"Did you go through that, too, Yuri?" Felicia asked.

"Yeah, I guess I did," Yuri agreed fairly readily. "Being judged on your talent can be a cruel thing. You can work hard to compensate for a lack of it, but it takes a lot of energy."

Her words seemed to have the weight of experience behind them, so Felicia didn't pry any further. Yuri probably had her own worries and things she was struggling with. Felicia had heard that she did karate, and that she had gone to the national tournament in high school; the fact that she was tight-lipped about the experience beyond that spoke volumes in and of itself.

"I wonder if I'll face a setback, too, someday," Felicia murmured.

"That's a good question. It's sort of a rite of passage, in a way," Edward whispered, apparently overhearing their conversation.

"Have you ever faced a setback, Mr. Edward?" Felicia asked.

"I've had quite a few failures in my time," Edward admitted smoothly as he looked up.

Beside him, Kirihito (Leader) nodded. "But even if you fail, you just have to stand up again. In an arcade, a continue costs 100 yen, but recovering from a setback in real life costs you nothing. It's quite a bargain by comparison."

"Mr. Leader, you sound like Kiryuhito," said Felicia.

"I do?! That makes me so happy!!"

It reminded Felicia that King Kirihito could also qualify as a person who had successfully bounced back from a setback. The face of her classmate, whom she had seen earlier that day, rose up in her mind.

“That respawn is taking a while, huh?” Edward whispered as Kirihito (Leader) began dancing excitedly.

“You want to go home?” Yuri asked.

“It’s up to you two,” Edward responded. “We’re just along for the ride.”

Yuri turned her eyes to Felicia, who fell deep into thought.

“Hmm, I think I’d like to go,” Felicia said at last. “What about you, Leader?”

Kirihito (Leader) abruptly stopped dancing. “It would be nice to pass over the meadow and go to the beach, but... without any Warp Feathers...”

It turned out that his allies, The Kirihitters, were currently in the area near the beach and Starter Town. They were keeping in frequent contact, and he would have liked to join them, but it was a long way to walk all alone. There was something terribly lonely about the sight of Kirihito (Leader) without his usual gang.

“Well, maybe I’ll walk you back to Glasgobara, then,” he eventually decided, and the four of them headed off to the same place together.

As they prepared to set out, Felicia added in a whisper, “I’ve gotta get my own base of operations, rather than just leeching off of Iris Brand all day!”

“Planning to strike out on your own?” Yuri asked.

“I wouldn’t mind joining someone else’s guild, but yeah, more or less.” Lately, Felicia had finally begun to understand the fun of video games, and she was quite a competent *NaroFan* player herself. She couldn’t sit around drinking Kirschwasser’s tea in a guild made for Iris forever.

Making cheerful conversation, the group began to descend the mountain.

“Oh, is this it?” Kirschwasser asked, impressed, as he flipped through the design sheets Iris had prepared. “It’s very... eye-catching, very clever. You’ve done an excellent job...”

“I feel like I’ve reached a new level as a creator, myself...” Iris said. But it had been worth it.

Iris had incorporated the hint she'd gotten from the angelic campaign girl, and had used the various images burned into her eyes in Akihabara to create the most pandering design she could muster. She'd cast off her shame and her ridiculous pride, and she'd come up with a design tailored to the public from square one. She'd never felt that way before. There was something utterly refreshing about it.

"Of course, it's not finished yet," she added. "I've got a lot of fine-tuning to do..."

"Are you using maids as the base?" asked Kirschwasser.

"Yes. But maybe I should mix something else in with 'maid'... I want it to be something that would make men giddy when they saw Felicia in it..."

"Your mind seems to have ended up quite deeply in the gutter," Kirschwasser said, though not especially judgmentally.

Ichiro wasn't here right now. Iris doubted he would interfere at this stage of the game, and she doubted she would lose her morale at this point either way, but his absence had allowed her to devote herself to her design process for much longer than usual.

"That's right. It was gimmick armor, wasn't it?" Kirschwasser asked. "What kind of gimmick will you use?"

"Um, I was thinking... transforming armor. I'm using, what was it called... Insect Armor as the base."

"Ah, so that heroic armor will become this maid, eh?" Kirschwasser asked with interest.

Insect Armor had been one of the recipes that Edward had given her. Its components were the bug-type monsters that lived deep in the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea, and it had the "Metamorphose" gimmick built into it. It typically had a cocoon or larva motif, which could then be changed into an "adult" form if the person wearing it struck certain poses. There was apparently a certain subset of male players who really liked this gimmick.

"Which means there's a second form, is there?" Kirschwasser added.

“There is. That’s this.” Iris showed him another design sheet. This one was much closer to being finalized.

Kirschwasser’s expression stiffened visibly. “Y-You’re going to put this... on Lady Felicia?!”

Iris nodded. “I was wondering if she might have a problem with it...”

“I could not speak for her, but...”

The minute Iris had thought up the design, it had felt like a “eureka!” moment, and that feeling hadn’t wavered. But the thought of putting it on Felicia did make her hesitate. What if she hated it? Well, if Felicia dropped out, she would deal with it; she’d just wear it herself.

Iris couldn’t feign innocence if she wanted to win. She couldn’t let that eight hours she’d spent holding back her vomit be for nothing. Iris would become a demon.

“The design may not be to Master Ichiro’s taste, either,” added Kirschwasser.

“I don’t care about him.”

“True. He’s not going to wear it, so perhaps he doesn’t matter. And it was he who said he was looking forward to a design that was more in your style.”

“I wonder what my style is...” Iris murmured. Could a newbie designer like her even have her own style?

Iris was just mulling that over when she heard the guild house door open.

“Iris, Mr. Kirsch, we’re coming in!” Felicia called out energetically. But she wasn’t alone.

“I’m coming in.”

“Coming in.”

“Hey, coming in!”

There was, in fact, quite a crowd marching in through the door.

“Ah, Yuri! Hey!” Iris cried, waving.

Yuri waved back. “Hey, Ai.”

Iris had heard Yuri had been helping Felicia level up, but she hadn't seen much of her old friend lately.

"Allow me to make tea," Kirschwasser said, as usual, without missing a beat. He was already preparing several cups with the tea set he had brought out at some point.

"Ai, is that the design you're working on right now?" Yuri asked, pointing to the design sheets.

"Yeah," Iris nodded.

Felicia jumped up at the mention, too. "Ah, it's done!"

"It's not finalized yet," said Iris. "Almost there, though. Felicia, which do you prefer: knight, shinobi, or nun?"

"Hmmm... shinobi!" Felicia cried.

Then the additional motif would be shinobi. Iris wrote down a note.

Kirschwasser whispered to himself with a frown, "Maid-shinobi, eh?"

"Iris, may I see?" Edward asked. (Surely he wasn't simply drawn to the phrase "maid-shinobi.") "Sure," Iris said. "You want to see it, too, Felicia?"

"Hmm, I think I'll wait until it's finished!" Felicia said with a beaming smile.

Iris felt a sting run through her heart. Would she really be putting a good girl like Felicia in an outfit like that? She felt her will to fight nearly crumble from an unexpected direction, but she shook her head internally.

She had made her decision: if Felicia refused, she would wear it herself. Iris hardened her heart.

In addition to Edward, Yuri and Kirihito (Leader) had also expressed interest, so she handed them the image file, too. The responses to the first sheet were all things like "Cute!" and "Clever!" but all eyes opened wider when they saw the post-gimmick design.

"Miss Iris, this is..."

"Impressive!"

"Wow, Ai, are you serious?"

The one who had called it impressive was Kirihito (Leader). She couldn't pinpoint Edward's reaction thanks to his mechanical body, but the sole woman, Yuri, was clearly repulsed.

Well, they were more or less the reactions she'd expected. Iris folded her arms and nodded. "It's serious. I'm totally serious."

"I see. Good luck," Edward said, firmly. Surprisingly, he seemed to approve—proof that he was a man, after all.

Having the approval of two men gave Iris greater confidence. She owed a great debt to the inspiration provided to her by the angelic campaign girl.

Felicia just kept grinning and whispering to herself, "I wonder what it's like! I can't wait to see!" But Iris couldn't let that bother her. She needed to harden her heart. She'd said that she would, so she would.

It was then that Kirschwasser poured the tea. Once he had a cup for each member of the group, the silver-haired elder Knight spoke up. "By the way, if you'll forgive the slight change of subject, Lord Matsunaga's blog has written about the recent incident, as well."

"Mr. Matsunaga's?" Felicia's expression turned suspicious as the man's name came up.

"Oh, yeah, that's right." Edward lifted his teacup and opened the Miraive Gear's proprietary browser. The others peered over his shoulder. It seemed Edward had bookmarked the vsoku@VRMMO aggregate blog that Matsunaga ran.

"'Iris Brand Challenges MiZUNO'..." Iris murmured. "So, he's already sniffed it out, huh?"

"Either that or he's pulling the strings," Kirschwasser said. "I'm not sure which. As ever, he's a master of spin."

As the article described it, Iris Brand had picked a fight with MiZUNO in order to test her mettle against the pro designer.

Of course, everyone knew that the difference in talents between them was heaven and earth. Whatever one thought about Fuyo herself, from an objective

point of view, it was like a high school baseball player picking a fight with a major leaguer. It was a sign of Matsunaga's skill that he could twist things such that most of the reactions were to the effect of, "It was nice of MiZUNO to humor them."

"Ugh... I really do hate that guy," Felicia whispered. "And he's probably on Nem's side this time."

"Oh?" Kirschwasser narrowed his eyes at her words. "I wonder why you think that."

"Well... it's a secret, I guess. I'm not sure if I can talk about it."

"Hm."

Judging from their attitudes, Kirschwasser and Felicia were both conjecturing the same thing: Matsunaga was backing Nem, a.k.a. Megumi Fuyo. It was hard to imagine, but it wasn't impossible. The casting of Amesho as Nem's model—which Iris didn't feel was something Fuyo would do—made much more sense if he was helping her.

But it wasn't just Matsunaga on Nem's side. She also had the mercenaries Taker and Sorceress. They seemed relatively servile to Nem, but that didn't necessarily mean they'd only act in accordance with what she wanted.

"Well, even with Matsunaga on her side, the result will be the same," Iris decided to say. "This is between Nem and me. I told the young heir not to interfere, and I'd say the same to anyone else. I won't let anyone stick their nose in where it doesn't belong."

Even if their talent was the difference between Betelgeuse and a turtle, a competition was a competition. Who said that a turtle could be no better than a heavenly body? Perhaps, somewhere in this enormous universe, there was a turtle that could compete with a red giant star. Such was the baseless confidence that Iris took refuge in.

"Iris..." Felicia whispered. "Iris, you're so cool."

"A-Am I?" The reaction was unexpected, and it made Iris blush a bit.

"Yeah," Felicia said. "I'll cheer you on for your victory with everything I have.

Though I doubt there's much I can do."

"Th-Thanks..." Just as Iris was feeling a bit emotional at Felicia's surprise comment, Yuri also spoke up beside her.

"It's not just Felicia. I'm on your side, too, Ai."

"I've already expressed the faith I have in you," said Edward.

"I don't know exactly what's going on, but I'm still rooting for you," Kirihito (Leader) chimed in.

Iris steeled her nerve. It was two days until the competition. She would finish her design and create the armor. That was all she had to focus on. Then, on the day of the competition, she would make something that would shock the young heir.

She would win.

Iris's severe biorhythms were currently on the upswing to their highest peak.

5 - Noble Son, Overturn

Two days passed in the blink of an eye. Morning and night, skipping meals, Iris devoted herself to finishing the maid-shinobi design.

Referencing Japanese-style maids (she had been surprised to learn that such a thing existed), she integrated shinobi-like elements, as well as (for the sake of her own pride) resort patterns and body con trends that were “in” for summer right now. The result was a true melting pot of a design. She certainly had her doubts. *Is this okay? Is this really a design in my style?* But those thoughts just made her prouder of what she had accomplished. That was the way Iris—Airi Kakitsubata—did things.

“Isn’t the skirt a bit short?” Yuri criticized.

“That’s about right for a shinobi, I think... I could make it skinny pants, but then it would lose the maid aesthetic...” Iris said in response.

Finalizing the design had taken longer than she’d expected. Now she just had to make the armor. She had already gathered enough components and recipes so that she could fail as many times as needed. She had the money, too—money she had worked herself into nausea to make.

She’d had help from a lot of people to get this far. Kirschwasser, Edward, Felicia, Yuri, Kirihito (Leader)—actually, he hadn’t done much of anything—as well as her friend from school and the angelic campaign girl.

And, while she was loath to admit it, the young heir had helped, too.

He hadn’t actually shown himself at all these last two days. Perhaps he was busy with something, or perhaps this was simply his attempt to hold faithfully to his promise not to interfere.

Kirschwasser was sadly missing today, as well. She had wanted to finish the armor with both of them present, but the deadline was today. She didn’t know how many failures she might have to run through, and she couldn’t wait for them to show up.

“Okay, let’s do this!” Iris lay the recipe and the components down on her magic circle. She opened the window and selected “Overlay Original Graphics.” It showed a display of the amount of money required, with a warning message that she wouldn’t get back the money she paid even if she failed.

She gulped, and with a trembling finger, pressed “Yes.”

The “Yes” button she had once pressed so freely when making accessories now felt so much heavier. It was only spending 800 yen, yet she had never needed so much courage for anything in her life.

“Ai?” Yuri knitted her brow in confusion as she watched Iris.

“It’s nothing... nothing. It’s okay. I have money. I have money...” Iris murmured again and again, as if trying to convince herself.

The 800 yen she was about to spend was 800 yen she had put herself through hell to earn. It was a portion of the daily wage forged standing beneath the blazing sun, dressed in a mascot costume, getting kicked by brats while on the verge of vomiting. Now was the do-or-die moment. Would that 800 yen become a pile of trash, or a dazzling armor design?

This was the first time that the middle-class Iris really appreciated how eccentric the young heir was. He was bizarre! How could he waste something as valuable as money so frivolously, while here she stood, so hesitant to convert a trivial 800 yen into garbage?

Iris, though... Iris knew. Eight hundred yen was a lot of money!

“Okay, let’s do it!”

With that cry, she made the payment. A sense of remorseful loss filled Iris’s heart. There went 800 yen she would never see again. All she could do now was pray that it wouldn’t go to waste.

While Yuri looked at her uncertainly, Iris opened her Alchemical Circle. The light coalesced above it, and the components merged together.

Please, my 800 yen! she begged. *I know the chance of success is only two or three percent, but please, let me succeed on the first try!*

Clunk. Doodly-doodly-doo.

The mocking BGM sounded out, and a blackened, charred item hit the ground in front of her.

“Ahh...” She had failed. Despondency gnawed at her heart. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry, my 800 yen...”

She could sense that Yuri, standing beside her, was put off by her behavior. “Ai, are you crying?” she asked.

Yes, she was crying. She was mourning the lost 800 yen that had given its life for nothing. That 800 yen could have done something with its existence. It could have been snacks, or part of an outfit. It could have been a commuting fee, or a night of karaoke...

Yet she had thrown it into the gutter! She had been forced to throw it into the gutter! With her own hands, Iris had closed the door on the unlimited potential of that 800 yen. And so, it had vanished into the darkness without a single word of complaint, with nothing but a prayer for Iris’s victory.

This was all in Iris’s head, of course, but she really believed it. Such was the pleasure and pain of wasting of 800 yen.

People sometimes referred to a payment as “a pound of flesh,” and Iris saw now that spending her own money really did feel like tearing out a part of herself. She was not cut out for capitalism at all.

Next try...

Iris hardened her heart. The battle wasn’t over yet. To stop here, or stay her hand, would be a blasphemy to the 800 yen she had lost.



She laid the components on the magic circle once more and paid another 800 yen. A few seconds later, another charred pile of scrap fell to the floor at Iris's feet.

An hour passed.

The comrades with whom Iris had fought through that bittersweet summer battle were now gone without a trace, and she was embarking on a long campaign of grinding away at her New Year's money. Her face was sunken and pale. Yuri continued to watch, uneasily, as Iris made payment after payment, her expression twisting in anguish every time.

She had spent a whopping 40,000 yen. She had told herself she'd been prepared to spend that much, but as she watched her bank account gradually shrink, the trembling of her hand reached its zenith.

If the young heir were here... if the young heir were paying... 40,000 yen would be a pittance. Even 80,000 yen would be nothing to sneeze at. Whether 400,000 yen or 4 million yen, he'd pay it like it was nothing.

You scumbag, Iris thought.

The suffering of earning money, and the pain of losing it. What meaning would there be in any victory achieved without knowing that? This was Iris's fight. The competition hadn't even officially started, yet here was Iris, battling hard.

Iris activated her Alchemical Circle for the umpteenth time. With a feeling like prayer, she watched the light coalesce and take form.

Clunk. Dat-data-dat-daaa!

At first, Iris didn't understand the meaning of that cheerful fanfare that rang out. What fell to the floor at her feet was not a piece of black, charred trash, but the maid-shinobi outfit she had designed. The eye-catching and clever armor she had designed, made out of elements men loved, with its teeny-weeny skirt and its outrageous plunging neckline.

"Did I... succeed?" Iris said with a faint whisper.

"Looks like it," Yuri nodded.

“I did it! I did it!!” Iris screamed. It had cost her 40,000 yen, but Iris had at last finished the armor she’d been trying to make. She had proof that all the 800-yens she’d sent to death had not died in vain. She hugged Yuri with joy.

“Um, Ai, it’s a little too soon to celebrate,” said Yuri.

The response cooled her head immediately. “That’s true. I still have to compete.” Iris felt like she had already fought a ferocious campaign. But the real battle was still yet to come.

Her fashion competition with Nem really was just about to get started. Iris picked up the completed armor and added it to her inventory. Now if she could just make it to the venue, she could face the battle with confidence.

What kind of armor design would Nem, Megumi Fuyo, bring to bear? As she imagined the glorious MiZUNO real clothing she had seen in the fashion magazines she loved, Iris maintained no illusions that she could make something on that level.

Even so, she felt like she could win.

This was about armor design.

Iris steeled her nerve and left the Iris Brand guild house with Yuri. Just then...

“Ah, Iris! Awful news!” Felicia ran up to her quickly. Her beloved long tails of hair were frazzled, and her face was gaunt.

Iris frowned. It must have taken something truly serious to get her to act that way. “What’s wrong, Felicia?”

“I can’t find any Warp Feathers!” Felicia wailed.

“Ah...” Iris had forgotten. *Am I a fool?* she wondered.

She remembered people talking here and there about Warp Feathers being sold out. Why had she stayed cooped up in the guild house all this time? To walk all the way to Manyfish Beach, where the contest was being held, would take far too long.

She looked towards Yuri, but her friend shook her head gravely, as well.

Wait a minute, Iris thought. Could the buying out of Warp Feathers have been

in preparation for today, to make sure she couldn't make it to the competition? Or was she overthinking things? Either way, the truth was that she'd known what was happening and hadn't come up with any countermeasures.

What should she do, Iris wondered. Contact Amesho, who was on her friends list, and explain the circumstances? Whether the monopoly was an enemy tactic or not, if she could just explain, surely they would have to be flexible...

If only the young heir were here, Iris thought.

If the young heir were here, he'd surely produce exactly as many Warp Feathers as they needed from his inventory—not just for Felicia and herself, but for Yuri and the others—just as if he'd foreseen it all.

But for some reason, Ichiro Tsuwabuki was not here now. Kirschwasser wasn't anywhere to be seen, either. Was this a message from him? "You said you'd handle things yourself, so go ahead and try"? Iris couldn't help but interpret it that way.

"Don't get so upset," a voice said from out of nowhere. A now-familiar Machina was exiting the guild house across the way.

"Edward..." Iris moaned.

"I thought this might happen... well, actually, I didn't. But I do always keep one in stock for emergencies. You can have it," he said lightly, and produced the Warp Feather from his inventory.

Iris stared at him. "Ah... um..."

"I'm sure Mr. Tsuwabuki would have enough for everyone, but I'm afraid I'm not as smart as he is," he continued as he offered the Warp Feather, stating exactly what Iris had been thinking.

Edward had never before breathed a word about his possessions, but the Warp Feather was real. With this, Iris could jump right to the venue at Manyfish Beach... but only Iris. She couldn't bring Felicia, her model, along with her.

Iris looked at Felicia, and saw her smiling brightly.

"Leave the modeling to me," Felicia said confidently.

"Leave it to you?" Iris asked. "What are you going to do?"

“I can’t go, but... I’m sure I’ll work something out.” Felicia’s words had a strange self-confidence... in fact, they had an absolute surety about them. “It’s too bad I won’t get to wear the armor you made, though.”

“Yeah...”

“But we need you to go, or it’ll all be for nothing,” said Felicia. “Go!”

How much has she grown, to be able to say something so heroic? Iris thought about the girl she hadn’t even known for very long.

Ah, and in the end...

In the end, the competition she had so bragged about being hers alone was being left in the hands of others. Iris lamented her unpreparedness, and at the same time, she felt as if she had acquired a bottomless power. That power further solidified the image of victory Iris had in her mind.

“Thanks, everyone. I’m gonna go now.” Iris nodded, then looked at the faces of those around her.

Felicia, Yuri, Edward... and for some reason, Kirihito (Leader), who had joined them at some point. He didn’t say a word, but just nodded, as if he had done something to help.

Iris used the Warp Feather. Her body was enveloped by a ray of light, and she could feel herself flying into the skies above Glasgobara.

“Okay...” Felicia said with a nod after she watched Iris go. She then started walking purposefully towards one of the many shops that lined the main thoroughfare. In addition to armor, the eaves were lined with cheap potions used by less popular crafting guilds to earn their daily wage.

“Felicia?” Yuri asked, head tilted. She was probably wondering what she was doing.

Felicia spun around to face Yuri and the others again. “I’m not sure if we can catch up or not, but we’re gonna go, too.”

“Seriously?” Edward asked dubiously.

“We’d need to pass the Volgund Volcanoes to get from here to the beach,”

Kirihito (Leader) agreed. “The terrain is so rugged and winding, there’s no way we’ll make it.”

“When you said we’d be going, you didn’t mean we’d be walking there, did you?” Yuri asked.

“Of course not.” Felicia grinned wryly and shook her head.

Of course not. She had another way to get them there. When she’d said, “Let’s go,” that was what she had meant.

Felicia turned toward the shop again and pointed to a long shelf full of potions. “Please give me all your Fatigue Restorers, from here to here.”

“Sure thing,” the Seller Avatar said briskly. Felicia checked her status window and saw her cash on hand significantly decrease. Still, she had plenty left. It was money she had earned defeating countless Shimeji and Shiitake, in the hopes of buying new armor to suit her level.

Felicia now turned to a different shop and bought out all the Fatigue Restorers there. Even in a game, she had never spent money so recklessly before. She could understand a little bit how Ichiro felt. If it served her objectives, if it was for the people she cared about, she felt no hesitation in spending her hard-earned money. She felt a little happy, too, with the reminder that they had the same blood flowing through their veins.

Felicia had guessed the reason why Ichiro wasn’t here already. It was probably the same reason Felicia was doing what she was doing now. If she was right, then she had some idea of where she might find him, and Kirschwasser would be there, too.

She couldn’t cede that role to Ichiro, though. He had a more important role to play.

“Felicia, um, what are you...” Yuri was clearly baffled to see Felicia sink all of her money on Fatigue Restorers. Her confusion was only natural, but it was just as natural that Felicia wasn’t buying the items without a plan in mind.

Felicia pulled a knife from her belt. The object was known as the Dominion Dagger, a Beast Tamer-exclusive item. Only Kirihito (Leader) clapped his hands in understanding as he saw it.

Felicia brought her Dominion Dagger to her lips and played a lovely tune. Immediately, an enormous arm broke through the ground below them, causing tremors as it arose.

Yuri and the others were dumbstruck.

Eventually, not just the arm, but the head, body, legs, and whole body of a 50-meter-tall lump of inorganic metal rose out from the ground to stand before them.

It was Felicia's friend: the Power Golem, Gobo. It had stamina issues, but other than that, its stats were extremely high.

The monster, as if in accordance with Felicia's will, slowly lowered its hand. She stepped onto its palm. "Okay, everyone, get on! Let's get going!"

"Huh? Get on? *This* thing?" Yuri whispered with unrestrained nervousness.

Edward, meanwhile, couldn't hide his delight. "Can we, really?"

He really must love robots, Felicia thought. *Which I guess you could tell from his avatar...*

Kirihito (Leader) also stepped on without any hesitation.

"Okay, Gobo! Move out!" she called.

The Golem let out a wordless roar as Felicia pointed east, to the Volgund Volcano region. Flame shot out from the countless boosters on its back, and the mountainous frame slowly lifted into the air.

The various players coming and going on Glasgobara's main street watched it go in open-mouthed awe.

Around that time, Ichiro and Kirschwasser were in the middle of the Volgund Volcanoes. They were surrounded by figures wearing identical outfits of chain mail and ninja gear, Japanese tabi on their feet, and horned noh masks covering their faces. A truly strange group. The group moved perfectly in sync as they surrounded them.

As he watched, Kirschwasser murmured, "The Dual Serpents Shinobi Army... So it does exist!"

“Indeed, but what’s up with their clothes?” Ichiro asked. It was truly a disastrous spectacle that inspired feelings of embarrassment by proxy.

The established color for ninja uniforms was black, or perhaps dark vermilion if you wanted to pursue greater realism. But that wasn’t the case for these. They were wearing knickerbockers in the year’s “in” floral patterns, granting them a refreshing spring mood (though it was already summer), and a stylish but not-too-casual aura. They also had coordinated hats in a pale pink gingham check. Such trendy pattern on pattern! What ninja fashion! Even the horns of their demon masks had been touched up with chic ornamental flowers.

The softness!

The color scheme!

The coordination!

It seemed unbelievable, but Megumi Fuyo was almost surely behind the designs.

“How fashionable!”

“Fashionable, but completely lacking in taste.” At their relaxed reactions, a single Elf appeared from amidst the frilly Shinobi Army.

“Oh, it’s you two,” said the familiar voice. “Hello.”

“Hello, Matsunaga,” Ichiro said. Sadly, he wasn’t wearing any sort of wonderfully elegant armor, just the usual ninja gear and Hide Coat. It seemed hardly fair.

With his usual superficial smile, Matsunaga said: “Your goal is to stop me, I assume?”

“Yes, more or less.”

Matsunaga raised one hand, and the frilly Shinobi Army unsheathed their Ninja Swords. Decorated with beads, these swords resembled chic fashion accessories, as well, but even that couldn’t hide their dangerous edge.

As Ichiro had more or less surmised, it was Matsunaga’s group that had bought up the Warp Feathers. He wished he’d gotten confirmation at a much earlier stage, but that just showed how skillfully they controlled the flow of

information in the game.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I can’t let you go, Mr. Tsuwabuki,” Matsunaga said. “As you know, I came prepared. I can’t allow you to ruin everything on your whim, as you did in the grand quest.”

“I think you’re being rather oversensitive.” With one hand in his pocket, Ichiro looked up at the sky. “Did you consider that Iris and Felicia might not make it to the venue?”

A voice as clear as a bell, yet with a coldness that sent chills down the spine, sounded out nearby. “Personally, I’m hoping that they won’t.”

Ichiro looked and saw a girl carrying a black, lacy parasol and an Anthromorph in a tattered robe. Both were walking up behind Matsunaga.

Sorceress and Taker. So the two of them were also part of this.

“It seems Matsunaga and Amesho didn’t think that far ahead,” said Sorceress. “But our role is to help our leader win through any means necessary.”

“Are you suggesting that Nem might lose to Iris?” Ichiro asked.

“She might.” Sorceress’s eyes, watching Ichiro, were their usual round shape and deep blue color.

It was all as he had expected. He couldn’t even bring himself to utter the word “nonsense.” Surely Sorceress understood Nem’s desire to fight a fair competition, and yet she still wanted to offer absolute victory to Nem, her leader. What could lead a person to such actions, he wondered.

It wasn’t necessarily what they really wanted, he thought, as he noted the naked annoyance in Taker’s expression.

“I’m surprised that you could tell,” Ichiro said. He opened the microtransaction screen from the menu window and called up a sword.

“Oh, you’re going to meet us head-on?” Sorceress asked, looking mildly surprised. “Knowing you, I’d expected a snarky comeback and a blunt refusal to participate.”

“Nonsense. You’re acting as if you understand me at all.”

Sorceress narrowed her eyes at Ichiro's words, as if she were trying to restrain some kind of intense emotion rising up within her.

Ichiro looked to Kirschwasser. Kirschwasser gave him a small nod.

Ichiro had been told not to interfere with Iris at all, and so he had no intention of getting deeply involved in the competition. He wasn't trying to take Iris's side, but merely trying to watch the match to its end as a player.

This, though... this was just too much nonsense. It was a blasphemy on the sacred name of competition. He was trying not to get righteously indignant, but if he let them continue on this way, it would be the height of disrespect both towards Iris and Nem. Ichiro himself would probably never admit it, but he was angry, in his way.

Matsunaga, showing no interest in Sorceress and Taker's attitudes, pulled out a Kunai Dagger and said: "Now, would you stay here with us for a little while?"

"Nonsense. You're not holding me here at all," Ichiro said, speaking a bit faster than usual. "I desire, of my own will, to strike you down here. Whether or not you wish to fight is of little interest to me."

Sorceress stared at him in bemusement. "You really are quite twisted."

"We're not gonna take that from you," Taker agreed.

At the same time, Kirschwasser readied his sword and shield. A new air of tension ran across the battlefield.

It was just then that an intruder flew down from the sky above...

The enormous Power Golem Gobo used the boosters on its back to pick up speed and touch down on the side of the Volgund Volcanoes—though perhaps "touch down" would be a less accurate term than "crash."

While Yuri and the others tried desperately to hold on, Felicia, with the special privilege of being the Golem's master, merely stood confidently on its palm. The Shinobi on the mountainside scattered like spiders exposed to the light.

Gobo made landfall with a thunderous sound and a huge cloud of dust. Then slowly, it stood back up to its towering height. Felicia knew that everyone was

looking up at them in awe.

“Hey, Felicia.” Of all those assembled, only Ichiro offered her a leisurely greeting. “I thought it was about time you’d be showing up.”

“I had a feeling you’d be here, too, Itchy,” she said. And just as she’d suspected, he seemed to be revving up for a fight with Matsunaga, Sorceress, and the others.

Felicia didn’t know Ichiro as well as some—for instance, Kirschwasser, who was standing beside him—but lately, she was starting to realize that he was not quite mature enough not to stay out of something just because he was told to. That was all the more reason why she was here.

“Itchy, Mr. Kirsch, leave this to us,” Felicia said, thumping a hand against her chest.

Ichiro, who was just about to open his item inventory to retrieve something, suddenly stopped. He looked up at Felicia with an expression of mild surprise. Kirschwasser’s expression mirrored his.

“The competition may be between Iris and Nem, but I can’t shake this feeling that you need to be there, too,” Felicia explained. “Besides, having seen how hard Iris has been working, I really want to stick it to the people trying to sabotage her.” Felicia looked down at Taker and Sorceress from her vantage point atop the Golem’s palm.

“What about your modeling?” Ichiro asked softly.

Felicia looked at Ichiro. What she was about to say was something she knew Iris would never say, yet she had no choice but to say it. She was aware that this was a decisive difference between them, but for Iris’s sake, it had to be done.

“You can work something out, can’t you, Itchy?” she said.

When Felicia—Asuha—said something like that, she knew that Ichiro couldn’t refuse. She also knew that this was because he saw her as a child. It was unbelievably frustrating to her.

“Like, maybe you can log out right now, buy a new *NaroFan* game, use it to make a new character, and make it in time? You and Mr. Kirsch can work out

something, right?” she said.

She knew it was a pathetic thing to say. After her posturing to Iris that she would handle it, in the end, it was not she, but Ichiro who would.

“Um...” Matsunaga, who had been quiet up until that point, finally raised his hand. “Are you finished talking yet?”

“Ah, yes. Do forgive the wait. I’ve decided on my course of action.” Ichiro turned back to Matsunaga and the others. “Let’s give Felicia what she wants. Sir Kirschwasser, I want you to put ‘her’ into action.”

“Yes, sir.” At his master’s words, the silver-haired elder Knight nodded reverently, then opened his menu window to prepare to log out—but there were two others present who weren’t about to let that happen. Naturally, it was Taker and Sorceress.

“I don’t think so!” The Anthromorph, dressed in his rags, raced across the mountain path to press closer to Kirschwasser. But a single shadow leaped out like a shot from behind Felicia to intercept him.

It was Yuri. She smoothly interposed herself between Taker and Kirschwasser, then twisted her body with her momentum to execute a spinning high roundhouse kick at the Anthromorph. While he was distracted, Kirschwasser successfully logged out.

“Of course, there’s no physical way to stop someone from logging out...” Matsunaga whispered serenely. “But I will still stop Mr. Tsuwabuki from reaching the competition site!”

Matsunaga’s Shinobi Army fell upon Ichiro, who had spread his dragon wings in preparation to take flight. It was then that Felicia noticed the flower pattern on the Shinobi Army’s costumes for the first time, but she didn’t have time to comment on it.

Edward and Kirihito (Leader) both jumped off of Gobo’s palm. Edward ejected his shoulder plates to reveal the Lost Gun and began blindly firing lasers into the crowd to hold the Shinobi Army at bay, while Kirihito (Leader) plowed into the thick of them, dividing their forces.

“Felicia,” Ichiro said, looking up at Felicia as she stood on Gobo’s palm.

“Wh-What?” she stammered.

“In the time I’ve been away, you and Iris have both grown up a bit. I don’t really understand it, but it makes me extremely happy.”

“Huh?”

“I look forward to seeing where you go from here.”

With those as his final words, Ichiro began to dash across the ground. His Dragonet body flew into the air, the wind collected under his wings, and he became a ray of light sailing off into the eastern sky. Had he used a Warp Feather he had smuggled with him, or was he simply using a flight-related skill? Either way, he was moving at a speed Gobo couldn’t possibly compete with.

Felicia thought back over Ichiro’s last words to her.

He’d acknowledged that she had grown up—Ichiro had. He had said that she, someone he thought of as a child, was coming a little bit closer to being an adult. And not only that: he had said it made him happy.

To wonder if he really meant it would be nonsense; he was not a man to engage in idle flattery.

“Mmm!” In that moment, an emotion welled up from the bottom of Felicia’s heart, and she couldn’t hold it back. She clenched her hands into fists, raised them into the air, and shouted out proudly. “Let’s doooo thiiiiis!”

She never realized that being acknowledged would make her so happy.

“Go, Felicia!” Yuri, who had been trading blows with Taker, turned to her and shouted. The difference in their levels was plain to see, and she was clearly struggling, but Kirihito (Leader) swiftly moved in to cover her.

Felicia climbed from Gobo’s palm to his shoulder. The Power Golem’s massive body slowly stood up straight once more. Felicia stood with her hands in front of her chest, palms facing each other. Gobo mirrored the motion.

“Here it comes... my Fireball Miracle Pitch!!”

Then, just as promised, a massive fireball began to form between Gobo’s hands. She had spent a few growth points to let Gobo learn “Fireball,” which of course produced one in proportion to his size.

“Damn, what’s with this setpiece... It’s like we’re the villains, or something!” Taker spat.

“We *are* the villains. It’s all right, though. I’m used to it,” Sorceress muttered.

“Well, that is our guild’s philosophy,” Matsunaga agreed, distantly.

By the time that exchange finished, the Fireball produced between Gobo’s hands had grown to a diameter of about three meters. Its motions still mirroring those of Felicia, Gobo hefted the fireball and raised its right leg, battle-axe style.

“Hydroooooooo Blasteeeeeeeer!!” And with that, the scorching miracle pitch was unleashed.

Players were allowed to rent the event stage on Manyfish Beach for whatever purpose they wanted. Nem and Ichiro had both signed off on it for the event, giving the appearance that this fashion show was the result of the agreement of both parties. Nem had been the one who’d actually requested it, but the vast majority of players—likely just looking forward to seeing some drama play out onstage—likely didn’t care about that.

The venue could hold 10,000 with room to spare, and today it seemed a bit over half full. That still meant five thousand players, about half the active user base, so it was an impressive number.

Backstage was a sci-fi-ish, cyberspace-ish place that didn’t seem quite at home with the setting of *NaroFan*. Iris craned her neck around, finding it all very interesting.

Nem had already arrived—Amesho planned to meet up with her later—and walked straight up to Iris as she noticed her entry.

“Iris,” Nem said.

“Y... I mean, what do you want?” For a moment, Iris wavered on whether to use polite language or not. Then she remembered she’d been speaking rudely to Nem the entire game, so she decided to continue with her ill-mannered ways. Ah, but Nem was someone she respected greatly for her fashion sense, and with this statement, she would be digging the nearly insurmountable

trench between them even deeper.

“I won’t lose to you,” Nem said.

Only a few words, yet Iris could sense total dedication behind them. Thus, she decided not to say anything more, but just to reply with a short phrase of her own.

“I won’t lose, either.”

In as little as an hour or two, one of their statements would be proven a lie.

To be honest, Iris thought, the competition still didn’t feel real. It also didn’t feel like something she could stand a chance of winning under most circumstances... if it’d been a regular fashion design competition, anyway.

But this time, Iris’s words weren’t a bluff, or a superficial show of strength, or a faint hope. It was a statement of exactly how she was feeling in her heart.

Nem smiled, a bit sadly, and continued. “By the way, your model was... Felicia, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, um... that was the plan, but I’m not sure if it’ll work out.”

“You’re not?” Nem tilted her head in confusion.

It wasn’t an act, Iris thought. She didn’t seem calculating enough to be that subtle about it. She seemed to genuinely have no clue why Felicia couldn’t make it. It was possible she didn’t even know about the Warp Feather shortage.

Iris felt a faint sense of relief. Even if someone was trying to sabotage Iris behind the scenes, apparently, Nem wasn’t a part of it. That was enough for her.

“There was an incident... So if I can’t find a model in time, I’ll wear my outfit myself.”

“My...” Nem furrowed her brow. “I can’t say I’m happy to hear that. The conditions should really be equal.”

“Yeah. I’m glad to hear you say that,” Iris agreed. She had said the conditions should be equal. Even though the gap between them was something no amount of handicaps would close. Even though they were Amadeus and Salieri,

Betelgeuse and a turtle.

“I wonder if Ichiro will come today,” Nem murmured.

“I’m not sure. I told him not to interfere.” Iris was aware that when she talked about the young heir, her word choice typically became 20% more derogatory. She decided she’d have to watch that. “I guess you want to beat me in front of him?”

“Well, yes,” Nem replied quite readily. Iris had thought she might hesitate, but apparently not. “Of course, even if the laymen players vote for me to beat you, I don’t expect Ichiro to notice me, or acknowledge my designs. But I can’t move forward until I beat you.”

“Nemmm, nobody says that except rival characters who lose all the time!” a cheerful girl’s voice interrupted Nem’s words. “Meow-hoo, sorry for the wait!”

It was Amesho. She was Nem’s model, so she had to be here, but it felt like she was cutting it a bit close, even so. (Not that she’d need to go through makeup or anything like that, here in the game.) Amesho was accompanied by another player, but it was neither Felicia nor Ichiro.

“Is that...” Iris whispered. “...King Kirihito?!”

“Shut up.” The black-clad boy turned his face away, his voice strangely hesitant.

What was he doing here? Shouldn’t the game’s second-strongest solo player be off being... solo? Even if he had been invited, he didn’t seem like the kind of person who would come to such a lively event. But then, he’d mentioned that he was Felicia’s classmate... Perhaps she had invited him?

“You don’t want me here?” King asked.

“I didn’t say that...” Iris said.

His already-low voice had gone a few dozen percent lower. It was clear he was in a bad mood.

“So I guess Felicia really couldn’t make it?” Iris asked.

“Yeah, looks like.” King closed his eyes and nodded.

“Oh? Is that relief I see?” she asked.

“I’m just relieved that you won’t be sticking Felicia in some bizarre outfit.”

“R-Right...”

True, maybe it was better not to have to make her wear that armor in front of her classmate. They might not be able to look each other in the eye when they met up after summer vacation. Still, not having her model here was big trouble.

I guess I’ll have to wear it myself, after all.

Iris steeled herself. This was what was known as karmic retribution. After designing that costume without a trace of embarrassment, she couldn’t complain about having to wear it.

Perhaps Nem would mock her... then that, too, would be karma. She reaped what she sowed.

Winning was much more important right now.

Iris was just about to steel herself again, when just then...

“Forgive the wait!” a cheerful woman’s voice rang out as a figure came barreling backstage. It was a voice Iris had never heard before.

The group looked over and saw a female avatar standing there. Her white skin and red eyes marked her as a member of the premium-only Demonkin race. She was equipped with simple starting equipment, beginning with a Leather Jacket, that suggested she was new to the game.

She certainly stuck out like a sore thumb. But what was she doing here? While the others looked at her questioningly, she bowed low and introduced herself.

“Do forgive my late arrival. I shall humbly be serving as Iris Brand’s model. My name is Yozakura.”

Iris was genuinely surprised. Felicia had said she’d work it out somehow. Was this what she’d meant? *But how had she found this girl?* Iris wondered.

“I think you’re just in time,” Nem said in relief.

Yozakura turned to Iris with a smile, then took both her hands. “I was told everything. If I may, I would be honored to serve in the role of your model.”

“R-Right...” There was something Kirschwasserian in her way of speaking, Iris thought.

“Iris, Yozakura, good luck today!” Amesho exclaimed.

“Ah, right,” Iris said. “Good luck to you, too.”

Amesho’s words were spoken smoothly with her usual friendly smile. There was much about her that Iris was hesitant to trust, especially that overly rambunctious demeanor of hers, but the Anthromorph committed to the gestures without a trace of sarcasm. Iris couldn’t help but feel it was sincere.

A truly mighty opponent stood before her. Half of the enemy she had to defeat today consisted of Amesho and her 2,000 followers—and it wasn’t Iris who would be crossing blades with them directly, but Yozakura. She looked and saw that behind Yozakura’s smile, too, there was a fighting spirit blazing.

Iris gave her a light nod. It was as if the sparks of battle were already flying.

King Kirihito seemed strangely fidgety, as if he could smell the distinct scent of a battlefield in the tense air around them.



“Um, is this everyone?” Iris asked.

“Naw, Stroganoff and the others gotta come, too,” Amesho answered with a shake of her head.

“Stroganoff and the others? Why?”

“They’re judges, just like King,” said Amesho. “I mean, they don’t get to award any special points or nothing. It’s really just for fun!”

“Oh, are you here as a judge?” Iris looked over, finally realizing the real reason King was there.

King averted his eyes. The bashful type, perhaps.

“Anyway, we’ll need a bit of time to prepare the armor. Shall we move to the greenroom?” Nem suggested.

“Okay,” said Yozakura. “I’m curious to see the armor you made, Iris.”

Iris looked up suddenly. *That’s right, the armor!* She had prepared it, but was it okay to put it on a player she’d only just met?

She caught Yozakura’s arm, and whispered into her ear. “H-Hang on, Yozakura.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know the armor I designed?”

“Yes, I am fully acquainted with it,” Yozakura said with a solemn expression. “But I shall see my orders through. Shame means nothing in the face of loyalty.”

“You sound a lot like Mr. Kirsch...”

“He is my father.”

“O-Oh, I see.”

Iris didn’t know, of course, but she meant that purely in-character. As wise readers have likely ascertained, Yozakura was really Sakurako Ogi, and she and Kirschwasser were one and the same. It was relatively common, both in online games and tabletop RPGs, for one’s secondary character to be related to their primary in some way.

Still, Iris took the claim at face value. She couldn't fully dismiss her guilt at the thought of putting something so immodest on the daughter of that dignified Knight, but she renewed her determination to be ruthless for the sake of the competition. Yozakura had mentioned orders, hadn't she? Which meant the young heir might be involved somehow. Of course, given all that had happened, she didn't think of that as unnecessary interference. If he had done this, she was genuinely grateful.

"Okay, Yozakura," Iris said. "I won't show any mercy."

"Yes. I am prepared."

Iris and Yozakura exchanged a firm handshake.

"Iris, your greenroom is over here," Nem called.

Led by Nem, they headed to their greenroom.

Just before they broke up, Nem turned to her and smiled. "Let's have a good match."

"Yes, agreed." Iris bowed low again.

King Kirihito was left alone in the large backstage area.

"Ichiro isn't coming?" Nem looked up and asked while they were doing their final preparation and discussion in the greenroom. The object of her gaze was Amesho, wearing the design she had put her soul into, twirling in front of the mirror. She was choosing from the many accessories Nem had designed, equipping them and removing them from her inventory in turn. She sometimes even employed the "Perspective Change" Skill to get a full-body look at herself, and seemed to be enjoying the coordination.

Ichiro Tswuabuki hadn't arrived at the venue. He had been late to the party, too, and he did have his own schedule to keep, so the idea that he might be delayed was expected. But not coming? What could that possibly mean? To Nem, at least, the battle couldn't start until he arrived.

"Yeah, Matsunaga's holding him off," Amesho answered, adjusting the angle of her beret.

Which meant it wasn't "not coming." It was "couldn't come." And he was being intentionally inhibited by the Dual Serpents. No one had mentioned this to her.

"What is the meaning of this, Amesho?" Nem demanded.

"I dunno," Amesho shrugged. "I don't really get it, either."

Nem certainly wasn't happy to hear that evasive answer. She decided to ask once more, a faint irritation running through her. "Amesho, do you know why I asked for this competition?"

"Yeah. You were really mad that Tsuwabuki—the guy you like—ignored you, right?"

"W-Well, yes... In other words, there's no point to this if Ichiro isn't there." Nem had stewed over it for five days, but she still couldn't understand what kind of clothing it was that Ichiro liked. She had no idea what kind of clothing would win his favor.

But because she didn't know, that just meant she just had to put everything she had into the design, trusting in her own sensibility. She had created a design that she felt boldly proclaimed "I am Megumi Fuyo," all in the name of being judged fairly.

Given everything that had happened, she couldn't worry about whether or not it was to Ichiro Tsuwabuki's taste. If she could just get him to offer an honest opinion, she'd be satisfied, even if it was a damning one. And oh, if only he would say "it's good" or "not bad"... then even if no one else in the venue felt the same way, she wouldn't care!

That had been her hope. But now, she was even going to be denied that?

"Look, Nem." Amesho, seeming to have finished her accessorizing, turned around. "I understand how you feel, a little. Just a little, okay? But I think you need to stop thinking about Tsuwabuki, and look at the person you're here to fight."

Nem immediately realized she was talking about Iris.

"I bet Iris has been working really hard these past five days to beat you. Of

course, I doubt she can... But before you talk about wanting Tsuwabuki to look at you straight on, don't you have a duty to meet her straight on first?"

There it was. Right as Nem thought she was wearing her heart on her sleeve... How could this girl understand the hearts of others with such ease?

Amesho's words were surprisingly easy to accept, and Nem's heart drank them in. At the same time, she felt a sharp frustration that this girl, seemingly so much younger than her, could see through her, right to her heart. And not just hers, but Iris's, too.

"Children are certainly precocious these days..." Nem murmured.

"Aw, yeah. I guess I shouldn't've said that to someone who's lived twice as long as me, huh?" Amesho asked.

"I have *not* lived that long!" Nem snapped. Though she probably wasn't that far off, given that Nem was pushing 30.

Still, Amesho's words swept away the annoyance that was building in Nem's heart. The show was going to start in ten minutes. She had only a small amount of time to ready herself, and in that time, she even found herself capable of forgetting entirely about Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who had himself been the cause of it all.

Ah, it's started. I've really been swept along, huh? Yozakura realized, a bit belatedly.

She had been a willful person since birth, so it was rare for her to get swept along in a situation like this. She could have resisted if she'd wanted to, and she'd had plenty of chances to say no. But in the end, she hadn't. She'd wanted to see through Felicia's request, and she'd wanted to support Iris. Of course, she wanted to fulfill Ichiro's orders, too.

Sakurako Ogi wouldn't admit to it publicly, but she loved cosplay. Thanks to the special upbringing given to her by her two older brothers since she was born, for as long as she could remember, she had been a tremendous geek. Their otaku interests merged with a girl's natural interest in fashion and produced a passion for cosplay. That was nothing to be ashamed of—the

problem was her twisted family environment.

So, since she could see this fashion show as another opportunity to indulge in cosplay, she didn't mind taking on the model role. It was just a game, after all, and she was even looking forward to wearing Iris's armor design in a way.

If not for that gimmick...

B-But that was fine. That was fine. She wasn't necessarily going to be exposed like that; it was only a last resort. If they could earn enough votes from the start, there would be no need to reveal it.

In preparation, Edward had also prepared her a few weapons: made-to-order weapons with original graphics perfect for the Maid-Shinobi. Having come from the Akihabara Forging Guild, they were naturally excellent.

Since it was a fashion show, there were formalities to be observed. Yozakura and Amesho waited in the greenrooms while Iris and Fuyo stood out on stage. In the judges' seats sat King Kirihito and the Red Sunset Knights. You would expect them to be off fighting on the game's front lines, but they must have really had nothing better to do.

Hot sparks were already flying between the two designers on stage. Nem stood with one hand on her hip in a model-like pose, glaring down at Iris provocatively. "I'll give you credit for one thing, at least—that you didn't turn tail and run!"

Yozakura was surprised to hear her go that far. "Amesho. What ideas have you been putting into Nem's head?"

"Hmm, nothing in particular," said Amesho. "I just advised her to face Iris head-on."

"And this is the result of that?" Yozakura asked. She sounded like a third-rate villain. Who did she think she was, Matsunaga?

"Don't be mean to Nem, okay?" Amesho said. "This is taking everything she has."

"That's true... she does seem a bit overly stressed..." Yozakura murmured. Perhaps her strange demeanor was the result of trying very hard to pretend to

be brave. If it was, she really couldn't blame her.

"We're about to compete, to establish once and for all whose design sense is more refined," Nem declared.

"Oh, but Nem, we all knew from the start that you're far more wonderful than me," Iris said.

Still, in a competition of bravado, Iris wasn't about to lose. She spread her legs to shoulder width, folded her arms, and fixed her opponent with a piercing gaze. It was a manly way of comporting oneself, a daunting pose.

The two who had been treating each other as worthy rivals before had now thrown themselves completely into the mudslinging. What was going on here? It was like the promos professional wrestlers cut before a show.

"You really are divine, Nem. You've always been my idol."

"H-Have I?" Nem scratched her cheek, openly embarrassed by the praise.

"Ah, Nem is such an easy mark..." Amesho said with an awkward smile.

"I always thought the difference between us was like Betelgeuse and a turtle," said Iris. "But, you know... while I may lack your taste and your talent, there is one field in which I win."

"Oh, and what might that be?" Nem asked.

"Youth."

Crackle.

There was the sound of the air freezing around them.

The words were like barbed wire. No matter how thick the walls one might prepare around them, there were some things that couldn't be guarded against. Iris's words pierced right through those defenses and cut deeply into Fuyo's heart. There was no sign of a damage visual, but as a woman pushing 30, she couldn't avoid a hemorrhage of the soul. Megumi had not reached a level of maturity required to shield herself with the weight of her years.

Amesho was cackling irresponsibly. "Nice one, Iris! Hey, Yozakura, what's wrong? You're all wriggly... does your tummy hurt?"

“N-No, I’m fine...” Yozakura said. But the spear of Iris’s words had dished out collateral damage.

“Y-Youth has nothing to do with—” Nem began.

“It has everything to do with it!” Iris declared. “I beat you in vivacious emotion and flexibility of thought! It’s not old people who create the future, but the young!”

“Iris! How dare you...”

“Oh, did I hurt your feelings?” Iris mocked. “But a woman’s shelf life is a short thing, and anger will give you wrinkles, *big sister*.”

“Yozakura, if you’re not feelin’ good, you can log out for a while...” Amesho said.

“I’m fine! I’m fine!” Yozakura gasped.

Having revved herself up to the battle to this degree, Iris was throwing herself into the role. And the rant had only gotten started. “You know, you really are a red giant star, shining in the sky! But red giants are also at the end of their lifespan. And when a supergiant goes supernova, they don’t even become a black hole! Just an ugly neutron star! Unlike me. An ugly little turtle like me has limitless potential. I could even live 10,000 years, and become the great turtle that bears Mt. Penglai on its back!”

“What’s Iris talking about?” Amesho wondered.

“I’m not even sure she knows,” Yozakura answered.

After that machine-gunning of random thoughts, Iris followed up with this, shoulders heaving: “I’m going to show you how a turtle fights. Once it bites down, it never lets go!”

Maybe that was what she had been building to.

“Why don’t we meet the models?” Stroganoff, who had for some reason taken up MC duties from his judge’s chair, said in a stern voice.

“Oh, looks like we’re up. Okay, Yozakura. I’ll go first!” Amesho cackled, then headed for the stage.

The crowd burst into cheers. “Yeeeeeeeeeeeeah! Ameshooooooo!”

So much passion, just from her appearing on stage... She really was incredibly popular, and such popularity was power.

There were about 5,000 people gathered in the venue. Two thousand of them—over one-third of the total—were only there to see Amesho. The fact that every single one of the young men cheering for the self-proclaimed middle schooler Anthromorph girl was handsome was also a sight unique to the game. There were Humans and Elves, and the occasional pay-to-play race, and the sight of all these handsome men who didn’t look Japanese cheering one girl’s name at once was strangely invigorating in its unreality.

They didn’t care about the show. Their attention was focused on one person: Amesho. They’d be flinging out those rapturous, flirtatious cries no matter what she’d come on stage wearing.

“Hey guyyys, thanks for coming out to see me today!” Amesho called.

And what kind of introduction was that? What was she, an idol?

Watching her perform with microphone in hand, it was impossible not to feel envy. This sheer shamelessness... Was this the nature of youth?

Yozakura gritted her teeth a little as she watched Amesho from backstage. Could she manage a performance clever enough to trump such overwhelming popularity?

“Now, about the armor she’s wearing...” Stroganoff urged.

“Right.” Megumi Fuyo picked up the mic. “As you can see, Amesho is so charming, I wanted to keep the design simple.”

Fuyo, cleverly realizing that all the interest was focused on the model, avoided a lengthy explanation about the design, instead just providing commentary that allowed Amesho’s charm to do the talking for her. It was unlikely that any of the players present were interested in fashion, so that seemed like a wise decision.

The truth remained, though, that Fuyo’s design was very good. The design, prizing simplicity and avoiding patterns, felt lively and refreshing. It was the

perfect way to emphasize Amesho's youthful and sprightly appeal. The eye was drawn to the sky blue pintuck blouse and the lime green shorts. Rather than the patterns and body con trends that were hot this summer, they emphasized evergreen concepts like peplum, pastels, and neon colors, which all helped to keep it from feeling tacky.

It was silly to think that fashion alone didn't matter just because it was a game. It was true that most of the players weren't looking at the clothing that Fuyo had designed, but it was her clothing that helped assert Amesho's charm and appeal. Perhaps this was the meaning of the saying "the charisma of the talented." Fuyo had come out swinging, and her attempt had been completely aboveboard. Her sheer talent had eliminated the need for any overt self-assertion.

"Ah, it's so cute..." Tiramisu of the Knights said, offering an earnestly feminine expression of her feelings. She was a dedicated gamer herself, but she was also a woman. In addition, since she was a popular player, Tiramisu's words had weight. They imprinted the idea of "this is a good design" deep in the subconscious of the fashion-ignorant spectators.

"Next up, show us the latest from Iris Brand!" Stroganoff's cried in a voice that sounded almost like a threat.

Iris turned her gaze to Yozakura from the stage.

Yozakura nodded. That was her cue.

The music on the stage changed, and the lighting went down. Smoke billowed out and psychedelic lights danced around the stage. Iris had picked the BGM and the staging herself. It was known as "Showa Rock."

The audience was snapped back to attention by the atmosphere that seemed unusual for a supposed fashion show.

Here it was. Yozakura prepared herself mentally. She leaped onto the stage and began a martial arts demonstration beneath the lights. Maybe she couldn't compete on cuteness, but she could compete on coolness. She did imaginary battle with countless invisible enemies, and when the BGM finished its cycle, she froze in the middle of dishing out a backfist. The lighting returned to normal.

Reluctantly, she straightened up and bowed slowly to the audience. The venue burst into applause.

Good, it went over well. Despite the tension prickling throughout her body, Yozakura struck an internal victory pose.

“It’s nice to meet you, everyone!” she called. “I am the maid-shinobi Yozakura!”

“Wow! Cool!” Amesho, standing beside her, clapped her hands while cackling. “It’s just like a superhero show!”

“Oh, how embarrassing...” Yozakura scratched her cheek. A superhero show, huh? Well, maybe that had been what she was going for.

Iris was behind her now, so Yozakura couldn’t see her expression, but she hoped this matched her vision. She also hoped Iris wasn’t feeling excessive pressure to push things further. She hoped...

“Now, about Yozakura’s armor,” Stroganoff called. “Iris, please explain.”

“Okaaay!” Iris’s voice, in reply, sounded surprisingly relaxed.

Yozakura exhaled in relief.

“Um... explaining it officially is a little embarrassing. As you can see, she’s a maid-shinobi. I based it on bug monsters from the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea. It’s light armor, so it has no level requirements, and the full set offers agility and perception bonuses. That’s what allows even the low-level Yozakura to perform those action moves you just saw.”

A pleased murmur could be heard, starting from the judges, then spreading. Stroganoff, Gazpacho, and Gorgonzola seemed the most interested. Parmagiano, who seemed most likely to appreciate it on a class level, was actually focused more on the thighs peeking out from the hem, while King Kirihito had kept his eyes averted in disinterest the whole time.

In terms of design, the maid costume was more the “Japanese maid” style. Given the need for a Shinobi to be active, Iris had given the hem a rather bold cut. The thighs that Parmagiano was staring at so intently were covered in chain mail stockings and concealed with knee-high boots. The hand guards, knee

pads, and other dangerous parts had a shuriken motif, as well.

Yozakura decided to look at Nem's expression, and saw her grimacing. Maybe she had some opinions about Iris's design, which straddled the line between fashionable and functional... even if it was just that it was trying too hard to be clever.

It was a strong reception.

"Hmm..." Stroganoff mused quietly. "King, which do you like better?"

"The one that came out first," King said sullenly, without even looking at the stage.

Parmagiano whistled. "Oh, is that how you like them, King?"

"No, but the maid-shinobi is so pandering, I can't stand it."

King's words caused Yozakura's smile to freeze on her face. Immediately, she got angry, to stifle the waves of regret and embarrassment that were assailing her. That bratty little boy—er, bratty little girl, possibly. Of course, she didn't show any of that on her face.

"Shall we take a straw poll, first?" As Stroganoff said that, voting panel windows appeared in front of all the players in the hall. "This isn't the real vote yet. If you aren't sure, don't press anything. Choose whichever one gave you the best first impression."

The eyes of the four people on the stage—in other words, Iris, Yozakura, Fuyo, and Amesho—all turned to focus on the big panel set up nearby. The words "MiZUNO" and "Iris Brand" were written there, and the numbers displayed beside them started surging upwards.

2,109 votes for MiZUNO. 1,726 votes for Iris Brand...

No, 1,727 votes. Lower than expected. If not for what that stupid King Kirihito had said...

Considering that close to 2,000 people there were fans of Amesho's, though, maybe it was a good showing.

Close to 600 people in the venue hadn't yet voted. It might still be possible to win, but...

Yozakura turned around trepidatiously. Iris met her eyes and said with a smile...

“No time to be playing the good girl, Yozakura. It’s time for Plan B.”

Yozakura noticed something especially nasty in Iris’s tone. King’s thoughtless words must have made her angry.

But Plan B... Plan B, she’d said? Was she... was she telling her to do *that*?

Yozakura clutched her head in her hands. She really didn’t want to.

It was true that it was a tradition for ninja, and had been ever since that classic RPG. Yozakura, as Sakurako, had two older brothers. The eldest, Umehiko, was a fan of *Wizardry*, while the second brother, Momotaro, was into *Ultima*. She’d been made to play them both until she was sick of them, so the traditions were firmly entrenched in her mind. Even so, she didn’t like it.

“Aw, there’s no need to push it, Yozakura,” Amesho said with a giggle, casting a triumphant smile at the votes shown on the display. “I don’t know what you’re thinking of doing, but I’ve got lotsa friends. About 40% of the people in this hall are on my side, y’know? It’s always the power of connections that wins in the end.”

“Th-Those are insightful words, Amesho...” It was Amesho’s words, surely unintentionally, that gave Yozakura her final push. “You’re right. It’s the power of connections that will win in the end...”

“Right? So...”

“But one of my loyal friendships is worth a thousand of yours!”

Jerking her face upwards, Yozakura pressed one of the shuriken designs on her bracers. An electric visual ran through her body and she shouted the keyword to activate the gimmick: “Cast off!”

“Haaaah!!” Yuri raced across the ground, exchanging blows with Taker. To bridge the enormous level gap between them, Yuri had PvP-specialized Grappler Skills and Arts, as well as her own personal history as a former attendee of the national karate tournament. Of course, Taker had the same

class, and he appeared to have just as much combat experience as she did.

He swiftly sidestepped each of Yuri's kicks as they came. Felicia wanted to go to help her, but the masked-and-frilly Shinobi Army was keeping Gobo locked in place. Meanwhile, Matsunaga had scaled the Power Golem's huge form.

"Eek! It's him!" Felicia screamed.

"You make me sound like a monster or a stalker..."

"You *are* a stalker, Mr. Matsunaga!" Felicia's honest expression of her feelings caused the grin to disappear from Matsunaga's face; he must have been genuinely hurt by that one.

In the momentary opening this created, Felicia threw Gobo-Two. It slammed Matsunaga in the forehead and sent him plunging to the ground. Given that he managed to break his fall, though, he must have still had HP remaining.

Edward was crossing swords with the Shinobi Army on the ground, firing off his Lost Gun on support. Gobo's arms swung around, tossing the swarming frilly Shinobi Army this way and that.

It was then that Felicia noticed Sorceress, whose support magic was making a lot of trouble, as it had on the beach a few days ago. Felicia knew they had to take her out somehow, but all of her allies were currently being held at bay by the strengthened Shinobi Army.

With a cry, Felicia held Gobo-Two aloft, then catapulted him using a Masakari Submarine Pitch. The steel shot flew towards Sorceress at high speed, but she just quirked a smile and erected a wall. Gobo-Two bounced harmlessly off the new barrier.

"It's all pointless," Sorceress giggled.

Felicia stiffened. What was with this girl? The way she smiled... it was like she was mocking any attempt at effort. She had even trivialized Nem's and Iris's honest competition. What was she trying to accomplish?

"You're not the one who decides what's pointless!" A black shadow flew in from an unexpected direction. It was Kirihito.

The black-clad swordsman attacked Sorceress from behind with his sword.

With an expression of mild surprise, the girl jumped away. Although she managed to get her barrier up just in time, the swordsman had taken out a chunk out of her HP.

"Leader!" Felicia cried.

"No, that's not me!" Leader's shouted response came from directly below her.

She looked down, questioningly, but indeed, Kirihito (Leader) was there, fighting the Shinobi Army alongside Edward.

Which means, Felicia thought, raising her eyes... but Kirihito was there, too. In fact, there were now multiple Kirihitos on the field.

"Sorry we're late, Leader!" one of them cried.

Kirihito (Leader) shouted out the name in joy. "Kirihito!"

"I'm here, too!"

"You're not the only Kirihito here!"

"Ahem!"

A total of six Kirihitos had appeared from the rear line of the fight.

"So this is the power of friendship!" Edward whispered.

It was The Kirihitters. These seven Kirihitos, stranded in two different lands by the lack of Warp Feathers, were together once more. From the beach, the six Kirihitos had crossed meadows and volcanoes, traversing long distances to reunite with their comrade. The Kirihitos surrounded Sorceress. It was a dangerous sight.

"Get out of here, witch!" Taker screamed. But Yuri pursued him, lashing out with a straight punch that hit the Anthromorph in his solar plexus.

"Don't call me 'witch'!" Sorceress shouted.

"Don't argue with me!" Holding a hand to his chest, Taker tried to break out of the ring of Kirihitos. "We finally finished that damn goth loli outfit of yours! Don't lose it to the death penalty! Get lost already!"

"Taker!" Sorceress screamed.

“We’d lost the minute we let Tsuwabuki and the others break through!” he yelled. “And these guys won’t make it in time for the vote, even if they start running now! We’ve held them up long enough!”

Sorceress hesitated for just a moment, then gave a small nod and produced a Warp Feather. Immediately, her body became a ray of light soaring into the western sky.

Felicia watched it all, dumbstruck. “Just who are those two?”

“They’re mercenaries,” Matsunaga responded, having climbed Gobo once again.

“I’m not asking what their job is,” she snapped. “They said they sympathized with Nem... that they took the side of people without talent. But they seem really serious about it...”

“Hmm...”

Yuri’s fists continued to fly, but Taker didn’t dodge this time. A clean hit landed a critical and dealt massive amounts of damage to him. Felicia watched Taker’s HP slip to zero, and his body shatter.

Matsunaga’s army promptly surrendered, and the battle was over, just like that. The Kirihitos hugged and wept over their emotional reunion, while Felicia looked up at the sky.

She hoped a model made it in time.

She hoped Iris was fighting her hardest.

She hoped Ichiro would get to see the battle play out.

The next time she saw King Kirihito, she wanted to hear what he had to say about it.

Narrow Fantasy Online contained what was called “gimmick equipment.” This referred to weapons or armors that would change appearance if certain conditions were met, such as the activation of special Arts or the engagement of certain passive Skills. It also included coats with special abilities like the Hide Coat and the Accel Coat. The Accel Coat that King Kirihito equipped, for

example, had a unique speed-up ability that, when activated, caused geometric patterns to appear on its surface.

As befitting their distinctive appearance, most gimmick equipment had special effects like that. Of these, the ones with the highest crafting difficulty were of the Insect Armor series. These couldn't be acquired at NPC shops or as monster drops; they could only be created by a crafting class player with extremely high skill levels.

Insect Armor used components from bug-type monsters that appeared in the depths of the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea, and it came with the gimmick "Emergence."

The apron dress that Yozakura's maid-shinobi was wearing as her main piece was based on one type of Insect Armor. When she pressed the switch on the back of her hand and shouted the command word, the apron dress revealed its true form.

Cast Off! Choriki Shorai! Cross Out!

A bolt of lightning struck Yozakura's body. At the same time, the polygons that made up the apron dress began to crack apart and scatter. She collected the lightning effect wreathing her body in one hand and tossed it aside, and Yozakura's "emergent" phase was complete.

Her skin, as white as porcelain, shone beneath the sunlight. That curvy, feminine silhouette contrasting with long, slender limbs was a truly dazzling sight. The pastel green cloth offered precious little coverage, revealing Yozakura's body for all to see. A scarf covered the area from her mouth to her neck and then trailed into the wind, and the way it concealed her expression despite the extreme exposure of the rest of her body left her feeling extremely unbalanced.

Naked! In the all-ages world of *NaroFan* there were limits to how much you could expose, yet it was clear to all assembled that Yozakura was wearing nothing but a swimsuit and a scarf! Each part of it—bikini, panties, and scarf—had just enough of an insect wing motif to them that the purpose could be identified. Indeed, it did look a bit like an insect spreading its wings.

"Ah, the motif is the mayfly," Iris began, though Yozakura knew that nobody

watching would care. It was true that the way it forced your eyes to wander without ever settling anywhere was evocative of the transience of the mayfly.

“Now that is amazing!” Stroganoff shouted.

“I’m so impressed!” Parmigiano cried.

It was extremely likely that they spoke for most of the people currently in the audience. Even if Yozakura was a fictional avatar, her perfectly balanced proportions were still being laid bare, with only a thin cloth separating them from the outside air. The air passing in and out of their lungs (even though breathing meant nothing in this game) was the same as that touching Yozakura’s skin! The feelings of the silent, frenzied spectators were united.

They are so creepy! Yozakura thought disgustedly.

“How vulgar.” Those words, said by Nem with a scowl, were also true.

It was vulgar. It had artistic appeal, but it was still vulgar. Saint Tiramisu, in the judges’ seats, was likewise shocked. There was a clear difference in the reactions of men and women. Amesho alone praised Yozakura’s “courage” and smiled and clapped her hands.

“King, what do you think?” she asked.

“I-I-I-I d-don’t c-c-care... I-It’s pandering, and um...”

The king did not even try to meet her eyes. He was innocence incarnate.

Even if it wasn’t really her own, Yozakura had no illusions about what would happen if you exposed your body to a crowd.

Still, what was with this audience reaction? Even taking into account that most of them were men, the result was greater than she had ever expected. She wasn’t getting whoops like Amesho had up on stage, but the responses were largely positive.

The power to compete with Amesho’s popularity! The angelic campaign girl had been right to use the gimmick. Their votes in the straw poll were rapidly rising.

“It’s a bit of a mystery, though,” Stroganoff proclaimed in his usual grandiose manner from his place in the judges’ seats. “No matter how freely you can

customize your graphics, there is no ‘naked’ in this game. The underwear graphics are always there under everything else you wear, and they aren’t as revealing as this. Besides, she was originally wearing chain mail under the apron dress, wasn’t she?”

It was a truly gamer-ish perspective, a question about how it worked within the system. He was right: it was impossible to throw off all your clothing in this game and stand completely in the buff, and the underwear that all characters wore underneath everything was not as revealing as her Mayfly Bikini.

However, this was where Iris held her head high. “If I may spoil the trick, Yozakura’s body itself is part of my design. She’s still wearing the chain mail underneath.”

“Aw, it’s just a flesh-colored leotard?” Amesho complained.

“I don’t like that way of putting it.” Iris scowled at the comment, but she didn’t deny it.

Yes, Yozakura wasn’t naked at all. It was clothing designed to make her look naked. Iris’s original plan had been to not even include the bikini, but fearing reprisal from the devs, she had added polite covering around the chest and crotch.

Still, that fact was cold comfort to Yozakura. If her avatar looked naked, it meant she was naked. The argument “you’re wearing clothing, so it’s fine” was nonsense when the body being exposed wasn’t Sakurako’s real one to begin with. If that fact had been enough to cheer her up, Yozakura wouldn’t be so upset to begin with.

“I-It’s vulgar,” Nem whispered once again.

Yozakura slumped a bit, as if it was she herself that was being labeled vulgar.

“Iris, don’t you think it’s a bit overly pandering?” Nem asked.

“I don’t see the difference between catering to the needs of the market and pandering,” Iris said. “Nem, the market in this place is a little different from the world you exist in, the one I’m trying to reach.” She wore a serious expression now, different from the one she had assumed when they were trash-talking each other. “All I did was pull out all the stops to beat you. You know, this

‘naked’ equipment... it was really hard to make! You know what a physics engine pawn is? I incorporated one! Though I won’t say where I did!”

“It’s the scarf,” Yozakura said.

Iris’s words weren’t a lie. You could say she was pandering overly much, but if this was the result of her earnest attempts to appeal to the market, she had no regrets whatsoever. What really hurt Iris’s pride as a designer was when she cut corners to compromise with herself.

“I feel no shame over this, only pride!” Iris declared.

“That’s right, because I’m the one bearing your shame for you, Iris!” Yozakura shouted.

Nem couldn’t help but fall silent in the face of Iris and Yozakura’s cries. She brought her thumb to her mouth to chew on the nail. What could be going through her mind at the moment? Was she ruminating over Iris’s words, or scorning her for them? Perhaps she was tying it to “designs Ichiro likes” and performing some mental arithmetic based on that.

The clothing Nem had designed was wonderful. It was no exaggeration to say that in Yozakura’s mind. Amesho, clad in those simple pastel colors, was a formidable enemy. She’d love to wear the clothing Nem designed in the real world. But Nem’s common sense did not apply to the world of the game.

“Nem, it’s okay.” Amesho tugged on Nem’s sleeve as the woman seemed to fall deep into thought. “Iris worked hard, and Yozakura’s very cool, but we’ll still win.”

There was no trace of panic in the young Anthromorph’s voice. She seemed the most relaxed of everyone on the stage, beaming with easy confidence and a smile that caused her fans to whisper “angel.” Her grace in the face of Yozakura’s overwhelming nakedness belied her supposed 15 years of age. But was she really lying about her age, or was it simply some otherworldly charisma? Well, Yozakura hoped it was the latter.

“You have a lot of confidence, but not a lot of basis for that confidence,” Yozakura said.

“Yozakura, are you the sort of person who needs basis to have confidence?

People like that tend to fold very easily," Amesho said with a grin. "We're gonna win. Nem's clothing combined with my charm makes us the best. What basis do we need besides that?"

"We're not going to lose, either," Yozakura declared. "I gave it my best, bared all, and now we just have to wait for the results!"

The two models glared at each other on the stage, listening to the noise from the crowd grow even louder. From the judges' seats, the Knights began offering up some color commentary, as if bored.

"This is quite the competition..."

"I thought the choice would be obvious, but..."

"They're both pretty appealing, huh?"

"But if one or the other has to win..."

"Yeah, it's obvious."

As usual, none of it had any substance at all.

King Kirihito, despite fervently averting his eyes, cast the slightest glance at Yozakura. It was to the point that she was worried about creating a significant impediment to these young men's mental development.

Then, just as the tension in the hall seemed to be reaching its breaking point, Stroganoff finally took the mic, and said in a grave voice: "Well, let's start the voting."

It was finally time. The judging time of destiny.

Yozakura gulped, and Iris narrowed her eyes. Nem did the same. Amesho was the only person still smiling happily. A grand figure in a small package—she was a truly remarkable person.

The numbers from the straw poll reset, and panel windows appeared in front of the spectators again. Yozakura gazed at the large display above the stage as if she was praying.

The tabulations began silently, without any prelude. Iris Brand and MiZUNO: both of their totals started surging. Iris Brand's votes were rising far faster than

they had the last time.

We might just make it, Yozakura thought, clenching her hands into tight fists.

But of course, MiZUNO and Amesho had a steady base of support. Their numbers, rising with even greater force now, were every bit as impressive. At last, the movement on the count for each slowed and became sluggish, and it was clear to see that they were neck-and-neck.

Yozakura's thoughts of *Reach them, reach them* had by now turned into *Beat them, beat them.* And then, mercilessly, the tabulation stopped.

Everyone in the hall, with various thoughts riding on it, read out the the numbers on the display.

"MiZUNO, 2,331 votes! Iris Brand... 2,331 votes!"

"It's a tie?!" someone in the hall shouted above the din. A tie. Unbelievably, it was a tie.

"What do we do in a situation like this?!" Yozakura whipped around, the physics engine pawn responding as it should.

"There's no one in the arena who hasn't voted... Which means it'll come down to a judges' decision."

They were going to talk it out, then? Their team might be at a slight disadvantage here, Yozakura thought, biting her lip. Tiramisu held a lot of sway among the judges, and she had likely voted for MiZUNO, as had King Kirihito. The only one who was clearly on their side was the Knights' playboy, "Shooting Star" Parmigiano-Reggiano, and he couldn't necessarily be counted on.

But Nem seemed to think this put her at a disadvantage, too. In fact, she was looking slightly ill. It was true that from her point of view, the only clear allies she had were King and Tiramisu. The "cast off" strip gimmick aside, there was a real possibility that gamers like Stroganoff might prefer the in-game functionality of the maid-shinobi costume.

"Though if just one more person votes, that will tip the balance," Stroganoff whispered, and with those words, it was as if he was predicting the future.

It started with a stir among the spectators. The little ripple quickly spread, and

soon, everyone in the venue was pointing towards the sky.

In Manyfish, the seaside resort town, the sky was blue. The air was clear. Anyone could see the point of light in the azure sky above, rushing at them from a great height, at great speed. The players onstage all immediately knew who it was. The only ones that didn't notice were probably Nem and the judges.

"What is that?!"

"A bird?!"

"A plane?!"

"No..."

Even as they were talking, the point of light picked up speed, and dropping dazzling visual effects, it made a beeline for the stage at a sharp angle. It was like a beam of light had been released. It slid across the stage, leaving a charred visual in its wake, and then slowed to a stop.

"Hey, it's me," said the young heir, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, as he folded his Dragon Wings.

So late! It was one thing to be fashionably late, but here, the deadline for voting was about to close!

The reactions around the venue were varied, but the majority opinion seemed to be, "I thought it was too quiet around here." The judges seemed to share a similar opinion.

Despite being a member of Iris Brand, as neither a presenter nor a model but just a "mere player," Ichiro had the right to vote as long as he was in that hall. As if to convey that, the panel window appeared before him.

"Master Ichiro..." Yozakura murmured.

"Y-You're late..." Iris said.

Those were the only words they could muster.

"Ichiro..." Nem said quietly.

"Meow-ho, Tsuwabukiii!" Amesho cried.

Nem immediately averted her eyes, as if vexed by his timing. Why had he had

to show up now? Perhaps that was what she was thinking. If her vote total had been more overwhelming, maybe she could have faced him. Even knowing that her superiority in the voting meant nothing, perhaps she wished to use that as a shield to stand tall in front of Ichiro.

The victory was as good as decided. Who would have expected that the clinching vote would be cast by Ichiro's hand?

Ichiro looked at the display on the stage, then at the panel window before him, then at Yozakura, then at Amesho, lingering for a while on each. Yozakura found herself wanting to wrap herself up in her scarf.

After seeming to understand the circumstances, more or less, he opened his mouth. "May I vote?"

"Rules are rules. By all means, choose the winner," Stroganoff said with a shrug.

Ichiro scrutinized Yozakura and Amesho's clothing one more time, then reached for the panel window. Everyone involved gulped as they watched where his finger would go. And then, he said: "Mm, I'll go with this."

MiZUNO: 2,332 votes. Iris Brand: 2,331 votes.

With that, victory was decided.

6 - Epilogue

Airi Kakitsubata was a 17-year-old girl attending a design trade school. She wanted to be a fashion designer when she grew up... but right now, she was a zombie.

“I... I thought you fought very valiantly, myself,” Airi’s companion said.

Airi was sitting in a luxury restaurant on the top floor of a hotel. Cuisine of a level she had never eaten before in her life was spread out on the table in front of her, but her appetite wouldn’t budge.

The *Narrow Fantasy Online* fashion competition had ended with a squeaker of a victory for Nem, a.k.a. Megumi Fuyo. Several days had passed since Iris’s total self-sabotage, for which the term “karmic retribution” was truly apt. (In fact, it had been a fair and honest competition, but to Iris, it had felt like self-sabotage.) “I feel pretty awful about it,” Airi muttered. “To lose after putting Yozakura in that outfit. I feel... pathetic. There’s nothing I can say in my own defense.”

Airi had told the young heir that she didn’t want him to interfere. In other words, to respect the purity of “Airi Kakitsubata vs. Megumi Fuyo,” she had warned him not to take her side. As a result, he had acted as he wished to, let the contest proceed, and in the end, voted for the outfit he really thought was better.

He had done just as she had asked him to, regardless of the result. And because Iris had asked for it herself, it had felt like self-sabotage.

“The fact that his vote decided the result was unbelievable, but that’s karma for you,” Airi muttered. “I knew it wasn’t a design that the young heir would like. He likes less ostentatious clothing, like the one he voted for.”

“W-Well... that’s true... Tee hee...”

“I know that, but I know that if I’d made a design that would earn his vote, I might not have gotten enough of the other votes I needed... I feel like I was

between a rock and a hard place," Airi complained.

The person sitting across the table from Airi was none other than Megumi Fuyo herself.

The cutting-edge fashion designer known throughout the world—Airi Kakitsubata's idol, and at the same time, her ruthless rival. The way in which the vote cast by Ichiro, who had been the instigator of the original argument between them, had settled their competition as well did feel like karma, in a way. But it had also cheered Fuyo up tremendously.

Megumi Fuyo's invitation to dinner had reached Airi several days later. Airi had been shocked, stunned, and she'd wanted to go, but she hadn't been sure how to face her. After all, she had gambled on that embarrassing, vulgar design, and lost. She wanted to apologize to both the angelic campaign girl and to the part-time job money she'd spent making it.

She wanted to apologize to Yozakura, naturally, as well as to Felicia, Yuri, Edward, and Kirihito (Leader). They had all said "what a shame" after hearing the result. Both Felicia and Yuri had asked, "But you gave it your best?" and she'd managed to say that yes, she had.

She hadn't seen Yozakura since then, so she hadn't been able to apologize to her yet. She had managed to see Kirschwasser, and had told him that she'd like to find Yozakura and apologize. In response, he had looked rather hesitant and just said, "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

Iris hadn't been sure if he was telling the truth, or if he was simply trying to spare her feelings in his own way.

"Iris." As Airi's thoughts went around in circles, Megumi Fuyo interrupted with a clearing of her throat. "You mustn't be so despondent. Such thoughts trivialize my victory, too. You're the one who investigated the market within the game, made a design from scratch, and competed with something you had created, aren't you? You should take proper responsibility for the votes submitted for your clothing, and for what you made, as well."

"But you can say that because you won, right?" Airi responded.

"W-Well, that is true..."

Airi let out a small sigh. It was true that there was no point in kicking herself over it. “So, Fuyo. Why did you call me out here? Not just to brag about your victory, right?”

“Ah, n-no, ah...” Airi’s question had Megumi Fuyo openly flustered for some reason. She averted her eyes, looking for something to settle them on.

Airi tilted her head questioningly, but she didn’t urge her on. She just waited, patiently.

“Ichiro said something to me recently.”

“What was it?” Airi asked.

“He said he thought... that you could be a very good friend to me.”

“Huh?” It was a strange thing to be told out of nowhere.

The woman Megumi Fuyo, who was over a decade older than Airi, looked up suddenly. Her face had gone crimson. “I’m rather sheltered... ah, and I have few friends. Especially... friends with whom I can discuss fashion. So, ah, if you wish, Airi, I was wondering, ah, if you would...”

“Oh, um... sure.” Airi was dumbstruck, but agreed. At the same time, she couldn’t help but wonder if it was that same loneliness that had twisted her so. Maybe it was natural that someone so innocent would fall head-over-heels for a man like the young heir.

Friends, though?

Friends?

With the woman who, until a week ago, had existed on an entirely other plane? The world really was unpredictable.

“Sure, I will,” Airi responded firmly. “Let’s be friends, Miss Fuyo. I’m Airi. Airi Kakitsubata.”



Megumi smiled suddenly, in a truly girlish way. “Okay! It will be my pleasure, Airi!”

Airi rather liked having her hand taken this way, but she couldn’t help but feel that if it had been the young heir sitting there instead of her, the problem would have been resolved a lot faster.

Well, I guess that’s all nonsense.

Airi couldn’t even taste her first high-class meal.

It was the morning after the friendship between women with a large age gap had been forged.

“Today’s the day!” Sakurako cried happily at the calendar, hands set firmly on her waist.

“Yes, it’s the day when Asuha and King will be arriving,” Ichiro said.

“That’s right!!” Sakurako turned excitedly to look back at Ichiro, who was sitting on the sofa reading a newspaper.

Naturally, it was Sakurako Ogi who had played Yozakura and worn that immodest outfit at the fashion show the other day. That Ichiro had cast the final vote for Nem and Amesho had been quite a shock, but after he had taken her to a restaurant in Akasaka that night and explained things, she’d woken up the next morning feeling much better. She saw no need to hold a grudge.

It had been the day after that that Asuha had asked if Sera could come along with her for her planned visit during summer vacation. Ichiro had been slightly surprised, but had given ready consent, and when he had told Sakurako, she’d been so delighted she’d leapt in the air.

“That reminds me. I never did ask if Sera was a boy or a girl. I wonder which... Hee hee...”

“You’re having fun,” Ichiro said.

“Well, I’m looking forward to it!” Sakurako had been quite curious about Sera’s true identity for a while, so that was only natural.

They would be boarding a bullet train from Nagoya Station about now. They'd probably arrive at Tokyo Station a little after noon, and then Ichiro and Sakurako would go to meet them together.

"Surely you're looking forward to it, too, Ichiro-sama," she said. "You even bought another Cocoon."

"Hmm, well, I suppose I am. I thought King would prefer that."

Ichiro would have been happy to take them sightseeing around Tokyo, but Asuha had seen it all already, and Sera likely wouldn't be terribly interested. That had made him think it might be good to order another Cocoon. Thus, he had called Thistle Corporation yesterday and had bought yet another commercial-grade Miraive Gear Cocoon. The result was that there were now three Cocoons in the Tsuwabuki household.

"That reminds me. If you don't mind the change of subject..." Ichiro set down his newspaper and picked up the smartphone on the table. "I heard from Megumi last night. It seems she smoothed things over with Iris."

"Oh, I see," Sakurako said. "That's very good. Iris admires her so much, I don't want them to fight."

"She said she'd come to Iris Brand to visit. Shall we go and say hello to her?"

Sakurako cleaned up the empty teacup that Ichiro had finished. "Oh, yes. Why don't we log in? I imagine that when Asuha and Sera arrive, they'll want to play even more anyway."

That decision sped things up significantly. Sakurako quickly finished her remaining household chores and was still a bit out of breath as she proclaimed, "Let's go!" They moved to the room with the three Cocoons, opened their respective hatches, and slid inside.

Sakurako waved with a smile and said, "See you later!"

Ichiro was reminded that he had to help Yozakura level up soon.

He pulled down the lever and closed the hatch, then sat down in the reclining drive seat to which he had grown quite accustomed. He pulled the gear onto his head and locked it in place around his jaw. After his consciousness transitioned

into the fictional space, he selected “*Narrow Fantasy Online* Premium Pack” from the icons that floated up into view.

It was at this point that things began to go off-track.

The Pony Entertainment and Thistle Corporation logos popped up, and he could hear NPC Azami’s cheerful voice proclaiming, “Welcome to *Narrow Fantasy Online!*”

He inputted his User ID and 16-character password to complete his login. Up until this point, everything had been as it usually had. But just then...

“Password incorrect. Cannot confirm User ID.”

Oh?

Ichiro Tsuwabuki had never committed an input error in electronic media in his life. Thinking that perhaps stranger things did happen, he input his password once more.

“Password incorrect. Cannot confirm User ID.”

Hmm.

Ichiro’s mind worked quickly. It was impossible that he would get his password input wrong twice in a row. It was far more likely that his password itself had been changed without his knowledge.

Ichiro selected the “cancel drive” option and removed his headgear. He raised the lever and opened the hatch, then pulled his credit card out of its slot.

It seemed his account had been hacked.

Afterword

Well, *Paying to Win in a VRMMO: The Origin* is now on sale!

Hello, everyone! It's me, Blitz Kiva! We've finally reached volume four.

I doubt anyone's started with this volume, so I won't bother introducing myself! If you happened to find this at a store or a friend's house or a library and read it, buy the first volume! It will make you very happy!

Well, it's volume four. Yes, volume four. Such a touching moment... It's barely been a year since the first volume was published, and we're already to volume four.

A wise man once said that when you reach year three, or volume five, you ascend to creator level two. That means I'm finally there, I guess. And I owe it all to you!

Oh, no! I've run out of things to say! Let's talk about what happened in volume four!

Volume four is mainly a remix of the "Guild Sponsor Arc" from the web novel. Iris and Nem (in the web version, she had no handle name and was just Fuyo)'s fashion battle is at the center of it all, but by fiddling with the time frame, I got to add a lot of original content.

Iris started out closely resembling a template tsundere character, but here she gradually starts to stray from that, taking on unique characteristics (later, people start calling her "Evil God"). That also made it hard to preserve the emotions of the climax, but I worked hard to maintain the excitement of the web version.

As for Iris herself, what do you think of her?

I think a lot of people out there like the song "*Sainojin Oenka*" ("Song of Encouragement For the Talented") by Japan's famous rock band, Bump of Chicken. I think there are a lot of people who go beyond liking it, taking it as a creed. I'm one of them. The talent you want isn't always the one you get.

Iris is portrayed as a character who has no talent whatsoever. She occasionally shows extraordinary talent in certain fields, but that's all static compared to the field she wants to be part of. You could say it's a First World problem, but it's hard not having talent in the one field where you want it most of all.

You could call her the exact opposite of the young heir, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who is talented in everything. Her sense of money is very plebian, too. This is why the young heir (acting like a demon lord watching a hero) sees her as so intriguing, but as her creator, I also want her to continue to work herself nearly to death.

Next, Felicia.

I feel like she's starting to pick up some individuality of her own. She's even able to throw fireball pitches...

What is this, *Gaiking*?

I feel like when your protagonist is rich, your love interests need to have some degree of independence. In that regard, Felicia has a lot of ground to make up for compared to Iris and Sakurako-san. But she's a love interest you couldn't see in the web version, and thinking about where her growth is going makes her the character, as a creator, I'm most looking forward to. Those of you who have only read the web version, I really hope you'll look forward to it!

Next episode will be the arc that was popular in the web version, the "Fake Young Heir Arc." You might have seen it already in the epilogue, but it touches on the most dangerous thing that can happen to you in an online game: the account hack. Look forward to it!

Now for the acknowledgments.

This one's on the short side. Um, due to the time when this was going to come out, things got pretty hairy around the end of the year. I caused a lot of trouble for my editor and proofreader. Thanks to you, I've published five volumes.

I also put Mr. Kirishima through hell for this and *The Origin* volume one. Iris is very cute in that. I'm looking forward to the illustrations as she slowly evolves

into her Evil God form, too!

To the printers, the distributors, and the booksellers, and the people reading the web version, and everyone reading this version... thank you all!

Well, everyone, talk to you later!

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Paying to Win in a VRMMO: Volume 4

by Blitz Kiva

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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