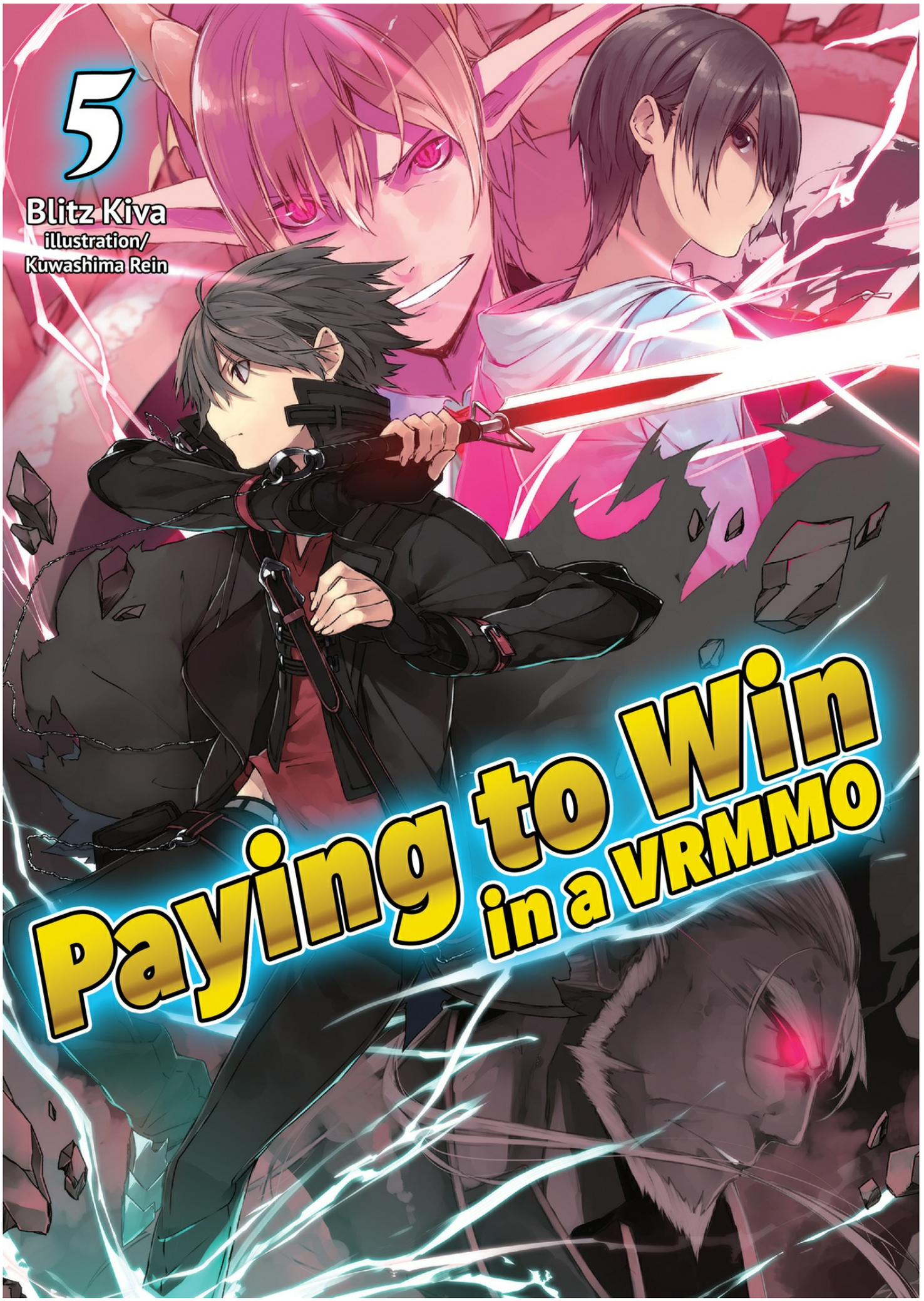
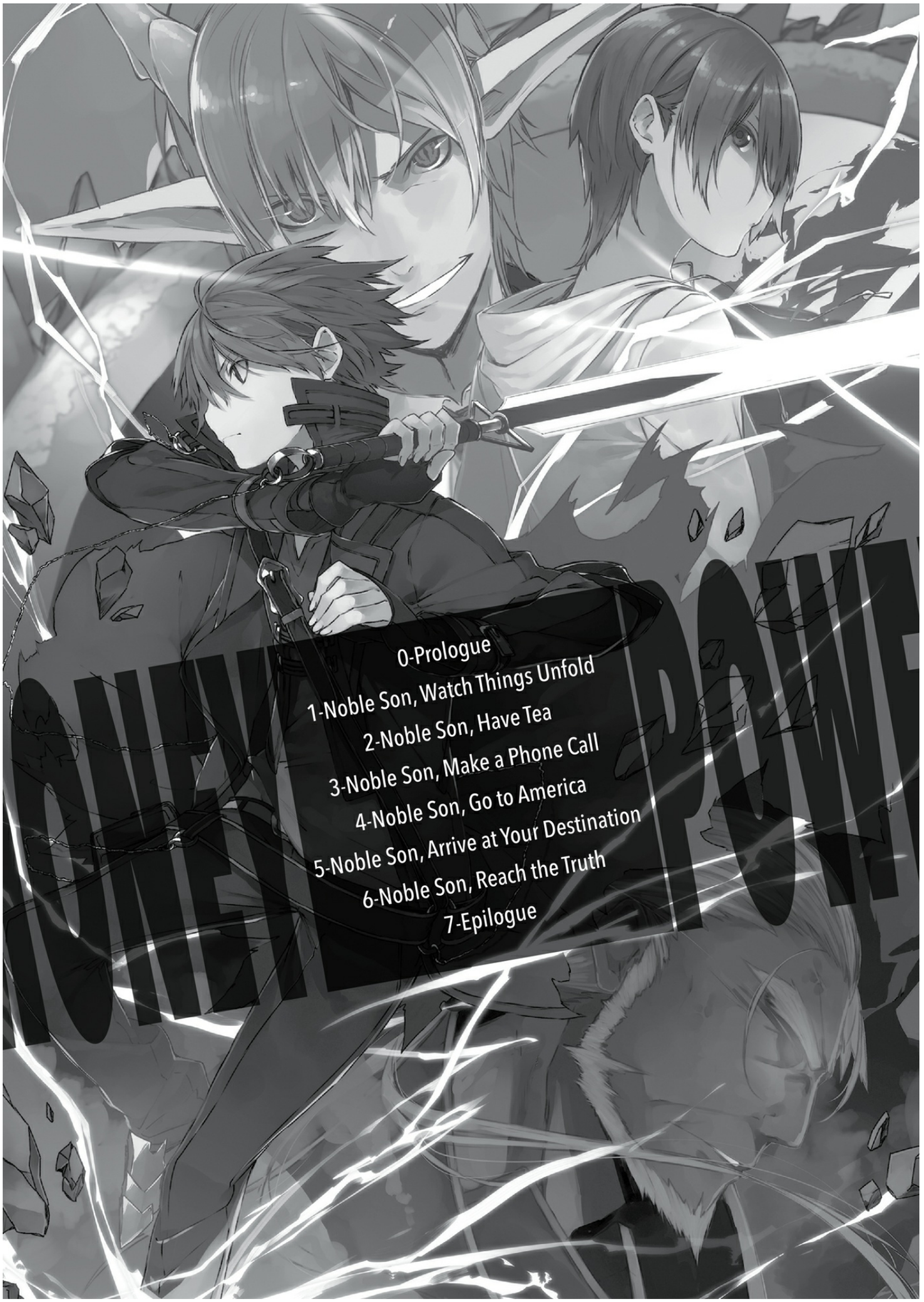

5
Blitz Kiva
illustration/
Kuwashima Rein
Paying to Win
in a VRMMO


"It's okay.
Don't worry."
Sera turned and spoke with a
confident smile, one more time.
"Someone like that will never beat me.
King Kirihito will never lose again."
Paying to Win
in a VRMMO
5


"Go on ahead, everyone!"
"We are The Kirihitters! We raise our swords for justice! We swing our blades for frie–
blaaaargh!"
"Now, hurry!"
"If each of us holds out one second, then we'll buy you seven seconds!"
"They're too weak!"
"No! It's Duplichiro that's too strong!"
Tiramisu cried as loud as she could, preserving the Kirihitters' dignity.


"But you only have 100,000 yen. It's nothing! I run through 100,000 yen in three minutes!"
"Now, quaver in your boots! Die without ever making use of your economic prowess!"
The spectators were shocked.



0-Prologue
1-Noble Son, Watch Things Unfold
2-Noble Son, Have Tea
3-Noble Son, Make a Phone Call
4-Noble Son, Go to America
5-Noble Son, Arrive at Your Destination
6-Noble Son, Reach the Truth
7-Epilogue

0 - Prologue

When Kirschwasser logged in, he was on the second floor of the Iris Brand guild house. The second floor contained dressing rooms and measuring rooms—places not actually needed, given the way the game system worked—as well as Iris's workshop and the meeting room where she might discuss designs with prospective clients.

Today, in addition to Iris, Nem was also going to be visiting the guild house.

Nem's real-world identity was Megumi Fuyo, the president of her own fashion brand, and someone who had romantic feelings towards Ichiro. A few days ago, she had put her reputation as a woman, and her pride as a designer, on the line in a battle with Iris. Their relationship had been venomous for a time, but they had since declared peace, and were now apparently best friends of a sort—albeit friends with a significant age gap between them.

Ah, the friendship-effort-victory cycle... It truly was beautiful to behold. (Although in this case, Iris had lost.) Setting Iris aside, though, it would be the first time Ichiro and Kirschwasser had seen Nem in a while, too. Or at least, it would have been, except that when Sakurako awoke as the silver-haired elder Knight, his companion Ichiro Tsuwabuki was nowhere to be seen.

Kirschwasser was just thinking how unusual it was that "Master Ichiro" would take so long to log in when a message popped up accompanied by a chime. It had been sent from his Cocoon's external terminal, which meant that Ichiro was out there typing the message in directly.

"My password was changed, and I can't log in. I'm going to contact Thistle right now."

The message's perfect conciseness forced Kirschwasser to spend a few seconds parsing what was being said.

"H-Huh? Huh?!" The sound that came out of Kirschwasser's mouth was a reflection of the feelings of Sakurako Ogi.

An account hack? On Ichiro-sama? While playing online games, she had made a point of reminding herself to not believe that it could never happen to her. But to happen to Ichiro Tsuwabuki, of all people?

She considered logging out right away to accompany him, but she knew that if she asked, his reply would be, “Nonsense.” There were things she could investigate for him specifically because she was logged in.

Kirschwasser opened his menu window and touched the “guild members” option. If Ichiro’s account really had been hacked, it was possible that the hacker had stolen their guild’s items and galt, the game’s currency. Guild members could share status information to some degree, and if Ichiro’s avatar had been stolen, he could just ask the players around him if it had been acting strangely at all.

Kirschwasser was about to check the status information of “Ichiro,” the guild leader, when suddenly, his hand stopped.

The name was displayed in green, just like the names “Iris” and “Kirschwasser” below it. Green indicated that those guild members were currently logged in.

Was Ichiro logged in? Had he only just logged in? Perhaps he really hadn’t had his password changed. Perhaps he had merely forgotten it... No, if that were the case, he would have appeared next to Kirschwasser, where he had been when they’d logged out the day before. The fact that he wasn’t there meant that someone had logged in and moved his avatar while they were gone. In other words, the person currently logged in was not Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

As Kirschwasser was mulling that over, a new message appeared in his window that sent a shock shooting through him.

“Guild leader has removed combat restrictions within the guild house.”

A moment later, he heard a scream from the floor below. Kirschwasser didn’t even have time to think; he pulled out his sword and shield and ran from the room, grabbed the banister, then rushed from the atrium to the entrance.

Three figures stood before him. A man with a Mage Saber bare in his hands was sneaking up on the other two... ah, and that man was Ichiro Tsuwabuki!

“Iris! Lady Nem!” Kirschwasser shouted the women’s names and, shield at the ready, rushed towards Ichiro to slam right into him.

This was the Knight-exclusive Art, “Shield Bash.” It dealt no damage, but it set Ichiro off his balance and inflicted the debuff “Staggered.” Kirschwasser then used “Tackle” to slam him to the floor.

“M-Mr. Kirsch!” Iris shouted.

“Are you well?” he called back. He held up an arm protectively in front of the two women while taking a couple of steps back.

“Wh-What has come over Ichiro?” Iris was surprised but more or less remaining calm, while Nem couldn’t conceal her distress. It was only reasonable; she had been delighted to see the person she cared about after such a long time, only to find him suddenly drawing a sword on her. Kirschwasser felt genuinely sorry for her.

“He’s clearly acting strange... H-Have I done something to make him angry?” Nem asked, flustered.

“There’s another user logged in with his account,” Kirschwasser explained concisely. “It’s a hack.”

Iris turned her gaze towards Ichiro’s avatar. “A hack? On the young heir?”

“Ah... do you mean like those SNS messages I’ve been receiving lately where people ask me to buy virtual currency?” Nem asked.

“Yes. There are many simple ways of stealing someone’s password, from cracking to guessing it based off of their birthday. It’s an old, old internet crime.”

Ichiro’s avatar shook off its “Staggered” status and slowly began to rise.

Kirschwasser gulped. Ichiro’s level had recently passed 130. The base stats he had trained up in the Lizardman Dojo, the plentiful Skills, the Arts effective at both long and short range... As he was now, there was no way that Kirschwasser could oppose him completely by himself. Even if it wasn’t Ichiro Tsuwabuki, the player himself, inhabiting the avatar, the gap in their stats was too great to surmount.

Which meant it was a stroke of good fortune, in a way, that “Ichiro” merely sheathed his Mage Saber and flew out of the guild house. In that moment, Kirschwasser could see the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. That expression—some might call it a grin—was not the kind of expression usually seen on the avatar Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s face.

“You mean it’s a... fake young heir?” Iris asked.

Kirschwasser nodded.

It was hard to tell what the fake wanted. Was he just trying to sell off items or currency? Was he some black market dealer after RMT? Was he simply someone who didn’t like Ichiro?

“I’ll go after him, Mr. Kirsch,” Iris said, and Kirschwasser was surprised by her words.

“G-Go after him? But you know that the fake Master Ichiro—Master Duplichiro, let us say—is very strong.”

“W-Was that a pun you just slipped in there?” Iris asked with lifted brows. “And I know that, but there’s no telling what he might do if we leave him running free! And looking like the young heir, at that!”

“That is true, certainly...”

“I agree with her, Mr. Kirschwasser,” Nem said in firm agreement. “Even if there is nothing that we can do, I cannot simply stand here while someone commits violence while wearing Ichiro’s face.”

“Hmm, very well.” Kirschwasser opened his menu window and sent a message to the reliable-seeming acquaintances he had met on the front lines over the last few days. To catch him and stop him, they’d need force of arms. He was hoping the devs would take action soon, as well, but there was no telling how long that might take.

“Lady Nem, your acquaintances... yes, Lord Taker and Lady Sorceress. If you can contact them, you should. Also, if you could contact the devs via your own channels, that would be appreciated... though I believe Master Ichiro will be contacting them in real life at this moment.”

“Very well!” Nem opened her own menu window and began to join Kirschwasser in writing messages.

Iris joined them, apparently thinking she could contact any acquaintances of her own that she didn’t share with Kirschwasser.

Then the three of them flew out of the guild house in pursuit of the fake young heir, “Duplichiro.”

Oh, that reminds me. Isn’t someone supposed to be visiting the house today? The thought nagged at the mind of Sakurako Ogi, the young woman behind Kirschwasser’s avatar. But no, Duplichiro had to be their priority now.

The Knight shook his head and ran after the arrogant man fleeing down the avenue.

1 - Noble Son, Watch Things Unfold

“Thank you for using the Tokaido Shinkansen. We are currently passing Toyohashi Station right on schedule. Our next stop will be...”

“Mmm!” Asuha Tsuwabuki wriggled in her seat and stretched with a pleased smile on her face. “Skipping morning practice gives me so much excess energy in the morning! Hey, Kiryu. You know what I mean?”

“No, Tsuwabuki,” Sera Kiryu said, manipulating a portable game with a grimace. “Unlike you, I’m an indoors type.”

That was not, of course, to say that her friend seemed particularly unhappy; this was just the way things were between them. Sera had difficulty with the honest expression of feelings, which Asuha found equally infuriating and enticing, in terms of making teasing feel worthwhile.

Asuha was on her way to the home of her second cousin, Ichiro Tsuwabuki, for a brief summer vacation visit. This was something she did every year, but this year, her classmate Sera Kiryu would be accompanying her.

Sera was a born and bred gamer, and had developed quite a reputation within the VRMMO world *Narrow Fantasy Online*, where Asuha and Ichiro both played. Sera’s initial response to her invitation had been, “I’ll think about it,” but eventually, the young gamer had assented.



Asuha also knew that despite Sera's play at indifference, the Miraive Gear X virtual reality console was currently carefully packed away in her friend's travel bag. Asuha giggled.

"What?" Sera asked.

"Nooothing!"

After a long time struggling with it, Asuha had recently begun to appreciate the fun there was to be had in a VRMMO. The "Hydro Blaster" miracle pitch she had perfected by combining the "Throwing Skill" exclusive to Thief-type classes with her real-life softball ace pitcher experience was getting her some acknowledgment from the players around her of late. (What she didn't know was that that part of that interest was spurred by the rumor that the cute female avatar Felicia was inhabited by a genuine girl in middle school... but perhaps, in this regard, ignorance was bliss.) Regardless, Asuha was looking forward to the sleepover more than she had in previous years. She wanted to see Ichiro and Sera engaging in game talk up close, and maybe even try weighing in on it herself.

While Asuha giggled happily, she received an e-mail on her phone. "Oh, it's from Itchy!"

Her words caused Sera to perk up suddenly and look over at her.

"Hmm, let's see..." Asuha manipulated the phone with practiced motions to check her e-mail. The message was composed in truly Ichiro-like perfect sentences.

"As my *NaroFan* account has been hacked, we may be delayed in meeting up with you."

The contents of the message made little sense to her, aside from the part about being late to meet them. Still, it was clear that something serious must have happened.

Since it seemed game-related, she decided that the swiftest route to understanding would be to ask her companion. "Kiryu, what does it mean for an account to be hacked?"

Sera looked up at Asuha, eyes narrowing in what looked like a glare. The intensity behind it caused Asuha to draw back slightly.

“Huh? What is it?” she asked.

“The old man got hacked?” Sera demanded.

“Y-Yeah... That’s what he said.”

Sera abruptly snapped the portable game system shut, then began rooting through the bag beneath the seat, producing a large box from within: the Miraive Gear’s packaging. The fact that it had even been stored in styrofoam for the trip was an indication of how carefully the young gamer treated it.

Asuha was confused, though. What was the point of pulling it out now? “Huh? What? What’s going on?”

“A person’s account is basically their online data address,” said Sera. “It’s like an ID card, and you can do all kinds of things with it. To hack someone’s account means to steal that ID.”

“Huh? Wh-What does that mean?” Asuha asked.

“It means someone besides the old man is logged in with the old man’s avatar,” said Sera. “They can do whatever they want with it. I’m sure the devs will step in soon, but...” Sera swiftly put on the Miraive Gear helmet.

“Huh? Huh?! What are you doing, Kiryu?!” Asuha exclaimed.

“I’m going to log on using the shinkansen’s Wi-Fi. Wake me up when we’re in Tokyo.”

That was the last thing Sera said before tilting the seat back all the way, then lying still, arms folded. It was clearly an attempt at keeping the body stabilized in the most relaxing posture possible. An older foreign man sitting behind them let out a bark of surprise in response, to which Asuha offered up a fervent apology.

It seemed Sera’s consciousness had already drifted off into the quantum space. Asuha was so baffled by the whole display that she even forgot to buy the on-board ice cream she usually looked forward to every year.

Kirschwasser called his trusty steed Oukaou from his inventory, then mounted it.

Iris and Nem jumped on, as well, and the three squeezed together on the saddle. They were probably just at the horse's weight limit, which suggested it was a good thing that both Iris and Nem wore light equipment.

"Mr. Kirsch, you have a horse?" Iris asked.

"I purchased it just recently," said Kirschwasser. "I've always wanted one. I call him Green Oukaou."

"But isn't he black? Why green?"

"It's a reference I suspect you wouldn't get." Kirschwasser kicked Oukaou in the side to get him running, and the people coming and going on main street turned curiously to see what was going on.

Iris held on tightly with one hand, while opening her menu to check something with the other. It was the guild member window. She touched the name "Ichiro Tsuwabuki" to check his current status and location.

When a guild was first created, the members were able to choose how much information its players shared between them. In the case of Iris Brand, they had gone with near full information sharing, including the ability to pinpoint your members' exact locations.

"Mr. Kirsch, the young heir has already left town!" she cried.

"That is quite bad," Kirschwasser said grimly.

Outside the city—in other words, in the field—there was nothing you could do to stop someone from attacking you. In the area around Glasgobara, most of the players were in the intermediate level range. A player with top stats like Ichiro could easily cause a bloodbath.

"He's got the special 'Flying' status invoked," continued Iris. "The movement icon is blinking, too."

"Master Ichiro's 'Dragon Wings' Skill has gotten quite high since I last saw it," said Kirschwasser. "I'm uncertain if Oukaou could catch up with him."

Kirschwasser had also raised his "Horseback Riding" Skill level quite high, in

addition to taking the sub-Skill “Swift Horse.” But while the streets in town were straightforward, out in the field, they’d be running into more rugged terrain. Since Duplichiro could ignore terrain, he would be able to move around with far greater efficiency.

Oukaou took his three riders out through the gate of Glasgobara and onto the mountain road. To their right was the Great Sandsea; to the left was the road to the Volgund Volcanoes and the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea. Iris directed them left, and Kirschwasser turned the horse accordingly.

His main concern was whether Oukaou would hold out. As they were technically items, steeds came with durability ratings, which decreased if they took attacks or were ridden hard enough. They were also a rare kind of item that couldn’t have their durability restored by a Blacksmith or an Alchemist. To restore their durability, you had to use special items, or simply let time pass. Oukaou still had time to go, but Kirschwasser wasn’t sure how long he could keep the horse racing along like this.

“Ah, um, Mr. Kirsch!” Iris’s voice trembled as she clung to him.

“Yes?”

“What’s the real young heir doing now?”

“He told me he was going to contact the devs,” said Kirschwasser. “I’m sure they’ll be taking countermeasures of their own soon, but...”

“Is his account going to get frozen?” Iris asked.

Kirschwasser nodded. Yes, no matter how shoddy the devs’ countermeasures might be, the moment they confirmed unauthorized access, the account would be frozen.

“I still haven’t heard from Azami...” Nem whispered, just barely audible amidst the sound of hoof beats. But with both Ichiro and Nem contacting her, she surely must be aware of the situation, and the developers would be taking action of some kind any time now.

This was what Kirschwasser didn’t understand.

What would the impostor Ichiro—now called Duplichiro for convenience—

want to hack his account for? His behavior had made it immediately clear that he was a fake, and it didn't seem like he was trying to move items or money around. He'd just rushed out the door as quickly as he could. An account suspension would end his spree easily.

"If the young heir's account is suspended, what will happen to Iris Brand?" Iris asked.

"MARY or The Kirihitters... we may have to borrow one of their names, even if temporarily," said Kirschwasser. "I don't know what happens if the guild leader's account is frozen."

"I hope we won't have to break up, but... ah, Duplichiro's movement icon disappeared."

"What did you say?" Kirschwasser spurred his steed faster.

In the middle of the road, there was a group of Fighters all dressed in black coats. They seemed to be arguing over something. A few other players were present, and if he squinted, he could confirm that Duplichiro was among them.

"Speak of the Kirihitters..." Iris began.

Kirschwasser nodded. "Indeed..."

There was a spark of danger crackling between Kirihito (Leader) and Duplichiro. It seemed Kirschwasser's greatest fear was unfolding. If there was any silver lining, it was that the people drawn into it included people he knew, which would give him a greater berth to explain what was going on.

Kirihito (Leader) seemed to be on the verge of drawing his sword, while Duplichiro just stood there looking aloof. He had none of the usual cool aura that hung around the real thing; he was just grinning in an irritating way.

Kirschwasser wanted to shout, "Master Ichiro would never smile like that!" In fact, it was a real challenge to temper his desire to spur Oukaou straight into the chaos and finish things straight away.

"Both of you, enough!" he called in a stern voice completely unlike that of Sakurako Ogi, then broke in between them with Oukaou.

The first response, predictably enough, came from Kirihito (Leader). "Mr.

Kirsch! What has come over Mr. Tsuwabuki?”

From horseback, Kirschwasser looked out over those assembled and quickly took stock of the situation. There was one player present who had taken a great deal of damage—an intermediate level player.

So Duplichiro was on a killing spree. The fact that the player hadn’t died immediately suggested that either Duplichiro wasn’t using his full power, or that he was just playing around.

The Kirihitters must have just been passing by, and perhaps overtaken by righteous indignation, they had tried to stop him. Kirschwasser was grateful to Kirihito (Leader) for his restraint in not attacking Duplichiro immediately, among other things.

“That is not Ichiro. He is somebody else,” Nem said, and Kirschwasser dismounted with a nod of agreement.

“An account hack? Can that even happen in *NaroFan*?” Kirihito (Leader) asked.

“As far as I know, this is the first case of it,” said Kirschwasser.

The group as a whole cast penetrating gazes at Duplichiro. All of their gazes were critical, but there were also traces of hatred, and some curiosity. Duplichiro didn’t seem to mind at all. At least in audacity, he was an equal to the real thing.

Kirschwasser smoothly drew his Knight Sword and pointed the tip towards Duplichiro. The Kirihitters looked shocked by the sight, but they immediately followed his gesture, drawing their tie-in swords.

“Master Duplichiro,” Kirschwasser snapped. “What do you have to say for yourself? Even if the devs are about to freeze that account, I cannot allow you to cause any further violence wearing my master’s face!”

“I’m surprised you can still roleplay like this...” Iris muttered.

“If I showed my anger in the way I do IRL, it would make you all uncomfortable,” said Kirschwasser.

“That’s not fair, Mr. Kirschwasser,” Nem complained. “I wanted to say

something like that, too...”

“W-Well, yes... I’m sorry...”

Even with a sword pointed at him, Duplichiro just continued grinning.

Tension hung in the air over everyone present. Kirschwasser cast a glance at the injured girl, and saw her party members standing in front of her to protect her. They said nothing, but they couldn’t hide their anger.

It was in this moment that Duplichiro sprang into action. He clenched his fists, rushed across the slope, and lashed out with a punch. It was pure luck that Kirschwasser managed to react in time. He lowered his sword and readied his shield to protect the Kirihitters behind him. Through the Kite Shield decorated with cherry blossoms, Kirschwasser felt the impact and the damage that came with it.

“Ngh!”

“Mr. Kirsch!”

Kirihito (Leader) readied his straight sword and slashed at Duplichiro. Then he stepped in closer and slashed upwards again. Duplichiro brought his fist up to block it, a bare-handed “Weapon Guard.” He then used “Art Cancel” to cut through his cooldown time and unleashed a volley of fire magic from his palm.

“Damn!” Kirihito (Leader) had to jump back, but he managed to dodge the attack.

The other Kirihitters and players began sidling towards Duplichiro, weapons at the ready. Iris didn’t ready hers, but watched over things with narrowed eyes as Nem just stood there, fidgeting.

The instant Duplichiro made a move, the players all fell on him at once. Kirschwasser’s cry of warning came all too late.

Duplichiro dodged or blocked each attack in turn, lashing out with neat counterattacks to each one. His fighting style was technically flawless; extremely efficient, but also inelegant. He simply dispatched of each of his enemies in the most economical way possible, with no hint of “play” whatsoever in his actions.

There was a bang as several equipment items fell to the ground; the death penalty from an avatar's defeat. Kirihito (Leader) gritted his teeth.

"What should we do, Mr. Kirsch?" Iris asked. "Just hold out until his account is suspended?"

"Interfering might just make the damage worse," said Kirschwasser. "But we can't just leave him at large, either."

If Duplichiro escaped here, there was a chance he might resume his rampage, which meant Kirschwasser had to work with the surviving players to buy time. But just as he was thinking that...

A black whirlwind intervened, assailing Duplichiro from the side. Duplichiro made a noiseless expression of surprise, the smile disappearing from his face. He twisted immediately to dodge the attack, but the damage visual that flashed up immediately after suggested that the sword had taken off a chunk of his health.

Kicking up clouds of sand, the new arrival glided to a stop, looked up, and glared hard at Duplichiro.

"K-King Kirihito!" the crowd cried out in unison.

"King, the young heir has been...!"

"I know." King gave a clipped response to Iris's words, then assumed a new stance with his sword. He ran in smoothly, drawing the tip of his sword along the ground to kick up another dust cloud before launching into an upwards diagonal strike. Duplichiro managed to dodge it, barely, but after the strike sliced through air, King gripped the hilt of his blade in both hands and redirected.

"Nngh!"

As this next strike took a big gouge out of Duplichiro's body, the crowd let out a shout of joy.

"Ah... the clothing I designed..." Iris breathed out in frustration, wavering between two emotions. If Duplichiro died, the death penalty would cause his equip items to be dropped, so it was only natural that her feelings on the

matter would be complicated.

“Iris, is that, ah, Prada? Armani?” Nem asked.

“I used a lot of references... But what? Nem, why are you looking at me like that?!”

“No reason.”

“What? Spit it out! You promised, didn’t you?” Iris cried.

“Then next time we meet in person, I will give you an earful.”

While the amateur and the pro designers conversed, King Kirihito had forced Duplichiro up against the wall. It was hard to tell whether King had dramatically improved, or whether this simply reflected a clear difference in skill between Ichiro and his duplicate. If this kept up, Duplichiro would be easily dealt with. If they could get him back to the guild house, respawned in a more vulnerable form, and restrain him...

But just then, Duplichiro disappeared.

“Hmm?”

“Oh.”

“Ah?”

Finding it strange, Iris opened a window and checked. “Ah, the young heir’s account has been suspended.”

Hearing that, King Kirihito wordlessly sheathed his sword. The crowd erupted into heartfelt applause for the hero who had appeared out of nowhere and bought time for them until the account was suspended.

The Kirihitters were in tears, apparently moved to the bottoms of their hearts —though Kirschwasser had a feeling they cried every time King appeared.

At any rate, King turned his eyes back to where Duplichiro had been.

Did this mean that the developers had stepped into action? He didn’t know much about the process for dealing with something like this, but it felt like relatively swift work. There were still a few things he was curious about, but all he could really do for now was wait for Ichiro to report in.

It seemed the interpersonal damages had been kept to a minimum, and he probably owed a thanks to the Kirihitters for keeping it that way. His first priority, though, was to issue an apology to the party that had been attacked.

“Forgive my master’s account for its unspeakable rudeness,” Kirschwasser said, bowing. All he had to give them by way of apology was Potions, but that would at least help heal the literal damage done.

“O-Oh... no... you can’t help having your account stolen...” the party member said, taking them.

“Who the hell was that, anyway?” King asked grumpily, but no one there could answer him. “I heard the old man’s account got stolen, but it wasn’t much of an imitation. He was careless, too. I’d assumed he was gonna sell his stuff off via RMT, but it doesn’t look like that’s what he was doing.”

“I fear I don’t know,” Kirschwasser responded with a shrug. “It’s possible he might have been handing items to an accomplice, but it still doesn’t add up.”

“Maybe he’s an exhibitionist? I mean, he was so conspicuous...”

“I concur with that assessment.”

In the end, they couldn’t know Duplichiro’s motives for sure. His actions would surely be in violation of the Unauthorized Computer Access Law, which meant the police might get involved. Even for someone doing this for attention, it all seemed a little too brazen, in Kirschwasser’s opinion. But there was no sign of any tangible gains he’d gotten from it, either. And while he couldn’t deny that Ichiro had gotten on the bad side of quite a lot of players, he couldn’t imagine anything he’d done that would lead someone to go to the risk of hacking his account and potentially getting arrested.

“It just doesn’t add up...” Iris murmured.

Kirschwasser nodded in silent agreement.

“Forgive the wait, Mr. Tsuwabuki.”

After getting in touch with the Thistle Corporation, Ichiro had ended up taking a personal trek to visit the company headquarters. It seemed there was quite a

battle raging at present, so he had deemed it best to hear what they had to say in person. Led by the male employee who'd come to escort him, Ichiro headed for the office.

"Has your investigation turned up anything?" he asked.

"We tried tracing back the IP and found signs of a login from America."

Ichiro had made his account using the Premium Pack, and only one account could be created from it. However, once established, an account could be accessed from anywhere, as long as one had the appropriate software and hardware. If you could get your hands on someone's user ID and password, you could even log in from another country. The question was: How had the culprit gotten them?

"If I may ask, Mr. Tsuwabuki, did you give your password to anyone?" the employee asked.

"Nonsense. I haven't even told it to Sakurako-san, and it's not the kind of password someone could remember even if I had. Of course, it's different from all of my other passwords, as well."

The worker frowned deeply just before they entered the office.

"What's wrong?" Ichiro asked.

"It's just... if there was nothing wrong with your security, then..."

"Well, there's still a chance that someone engaged in cracking at my home, but it's also possible that someone's gotten into Thistle's account management system," Ichiro replied.

The worker said nothing as he opened the door to the office on the second floor.

Inside the room, it was war. However, there was none of the chaos of phones ringing off the hook, or employees shouting down people offering complaints. It was a room full of people, mute, with eyes locked grimly on their computers. A silent war. Desks were littered with energy drinks. Eyes were bloodshot.

"Did you lock my account already?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes. We did it the minute we received word from you and confirmed it. We

have Mr. Edogawa here, too, and he's looking into the situation right now."

"Edogawa?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes, um..." the employee said. "See, we were just in the middle of bolstering security on the server in preparation for the big update..."

"Oh, I see." Ichiro nodded. "You were installing new security. This man is involved in developing the security program, then?" If the hacker had taken advantage of that, then it would represent extremely bad luck.

Of everyone else in the room, President Azami was the only one talking. She was speaking to another member of the company with a serious expression on her face.

Actually, he couldn't be a member of the company. The man Azami was talking to—tall, gangly, and looking quite exhausted—was wearing a tightly-fitted business suit here in the height of summer. The Thistle Corporation was quite devoted to the "Cool Biz" philosophy and permitted its workers to wear casual clothes in the office environment. This meant he must be an outside contractor, most likely the "Edogawa" in question.

"President..." the employee said.

President Azami finally noticed their presence and stood up. The man at her side also turned to look at them. Ichiro was sure he'd never met the man before, yet his expression stiffened as he saw Ichiro's face.

"Thank you for coming all the way out here, Ichiro," said President Azami. "I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"Having caused a great deal of trouble for you myself, I could hardly say anything about it." With that, Ichiro turned his gaze to the young man in the suit.

"Oh, allow me to introduce you two," she said. "This is Mr. Edogawa from System Ajax, Inc. Mr. Edogawa, this is a *Narrow Fantasy Online* player, the son of Meiro Tsuwabuki who leads the Tsuwabuki Concern, Ichiro Tsuwabuki."

"Hello, um, Mr. Tsuwabuki. My name is Edogawa." Edogawa gave him a mechanical smile and proffered a business card.

Since they were in a public place, perhaps this sort of formality was indeed best, Ichiro thought. He joined the man in pulling out the business card case he quite rarely employed and began flipping through the different cards inside. He had a variety of titles to choose from, after all.

The card he took from the man read “Domon Edogawa, System Ajax Technology, Inc., Sales Department.” An old-fashioned name.

System Ajax wasn’t a terribly famous company, but Ichiro did recognize the name. He knew that the headquarters was in Shizuoka and that it was a small software company. They were small enough to be overshadowed by most of their rivals, so getting to develop a relationship with a new client like the Thistle Corporation was probably a good business opportunity for them. For an account to get hacked just as they’d begun was certainly a bad omen.

Regardless of all that, Ichiro pulled out a business card with a rather noncommittal title and introduced himself. “I’m Ichiro Tsuwabuki. A pleasure.”

As he watched Edogawa return his greeting with a frozen smile, Ichiro made a connection in his mind.

2 - Noble Son, Have Tea

President Azami was watching a display monitoring the analysis being done on the server room.

If Ichiro's account had been hacked via an infiltration through the system server itself, the problem could grow more serious. In order to better preserve security at Thistle headquarters, the account information that a player accessed and the personal information they submitted to create that account were managed on separate computers.

"Account information" in this case referred to the information needed to play a character, which consisted mostly of the character's name and stats. Apps downloaded from the Pony Entertainment Future Store and virtual currency information were stored within the Miraive Gear itself.

"If you had an e-mail address for receiving messages, or any credit card information saved..." she said.

"I didn't register my address, and I had a card plugged directly into the Cocoon slot. I don't think any of my information is on the server." Ichiro whipped out a credit card, which drew the eyes of the other Thistle employees. It was irritatingly black and shiny.

"Which means there's been no leaking of personal information from your account," said President Azami.

The new security program had been created by Edogawa's company. He had been performing a major series of modifications to match the updates and server enhancements, and if it was his actions that had led to this, it was only natural that he would be unsettled about it.

But President Azami was likely just as unsettled as he was. They had been right on the verge of the *NaroFan* one-year anniversary ceremony with its huge accompanying update only to have this happen. If things got worse, and it developed into a situation where user information was leaked, people could

lose faith in her company. Although she was putting on a calm front, she was surely panicking inside.

“Well, Edogawa, have you learned anything?” Ichiro asked.

“Y-Yes, I think so.” Edogawa manipulated his tablet, his expression strained. “There are no signs of a direct server breach from the outside. But starting from a while back, there’s been an unexplained exchange of data with an outside party. It was mixed into overall increases in the data bus, so it didn’t stand out, but... well, it’s been quite a burden on the server.”

“A while back?” Ichiro asked.

“About a month ago.”

“Ah, the day I fought King,” Ichiro murmured, and an awkward silence fell over those present.

He was the one who had put the burden on the server. Naturally, that by itself wouldn’t make it easier to hack, but if the hacker had taken advantage of his actions to leak account information to the outside world, it meant that he still held some responsibility for what had happened.

“There were a number of these disguised information leaks to the outside taking place during times of increased data exchanges, but no traces of direct cracking at this time,” Edogawa said. “Also, I know you’ve got PII strictly locked down, so there’s no chance that any of that was leaked.”

Edogawa’s report only caused Azami’s expression to darken. If she was following his words as Ichiro was, then she was probably starting to consider a potential scenario other than an illegal hack from the outside. Ichiro found it very plausible, and believed that they should keep the possibility in mind, although he also understood why it wouldn’t be something she’d want to consider.

“You mean... someone on our staff is behind the leaks?” Azami whispered in a hushed voice.

“I’m afraid it’s possible,” Edogawa affirmed gravely.

If that was the case, Ichiro thought, then this was probably not an issue he

should involve himself in too deeply. If someone in this office was intentionally disclosing his information to the outside, he'd like to file a personal complaint or two, but he knew first of all that this was a delicate problem for the company.

President Azami pressed a hand to her forehead and sank deep into thought. Whether this was cracking, or an intentional leak from within, either way it was in violation of the Unauthorized Computer Access Law. She had a responsibility to report it to the police eventually. How serious things got, though, would depend a great deal on whether the act was perpetrated from within or without.

Even if she was a genius, Azami Nono was still only 19 years old. It would likely take time for her to come to grips with the seriousness of the situation, and while he did pity her, it would be nonsense to try to console her. Running a company wasn't like running a club with your friends in college. He was hoping she would understood that without him saying it, though.

"President Azami, would you prefer for me to take my leave?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes... if you please."

"I'll do so, then." Ichiro gave a light wave to Edogawa and the others, then turned and left the office.

As long as his account was suspended and no one could log in with it, Ichiro no longer needed to worry about further damage to himself. If he changed the login password for Ichiro Tsuwabuki, even just on the way home, then he could log in at any time once he made it back.

Of course, President Azami did not have the luxury of relaxing. No matter what measures they employed, the truth remained that their account security had been severely compromised. This was a huge blow to a startup like them.

"My, if it isn't little Ichiro. So we meet again!" A voice tore Ichiro from his thoughts. The way of speaking gave him an immediate idea of who it might be. Ichiro turned towards the person coming down the stairs, and spoke the man's name: "Mr. Otogiri."

Otogiri laughed heartily. "I heard. Your account got stolen! Isn't that awful?

But I guess it's not really you that's in trouble, is it? It's Thistle."

"That is true," said Ichiro. "It's a do-or-die moment to see if they can maintain the people's trust in them."

Shinya Otogiri was the CEO of Pony Entertainment, Inc. He'd put the Miraive Gear on the market and managed the Mirai Network, and he had also had a bit of a disagreement with Ichiro's father a long time ago. Relatively speaking, they had a bit of history together.

"We're meeting a lot lately, aren't we?" Ichiro added. "Are you that lacking in things to do?"

"What's that, a challenge?"

"Nonsense. Merely a question." Ichiro spoke with a shrug, but Otogiri just grinned.

"Well, that's a reasonable question. But you have to admire the timing of this. If word about the unauthorized access from outside gets out, as you say, trust in Thistle will plummet. That would be a huge blow to a tiny company like this. I was thinking I could help them out, but I wonder if I should."

"You should do what you want to," Ichiro said. "It is not my place to comment."

Otogiri smiled. "My, isn't that cold of you."

Ichiro knew what Otogiri meant by "help." He had been scheming to get Thistle under his direct control for a long time now, so the timing of this incident was, indeed, very good for him. It would be a trifling matter for a company with the resources of Pony, Inc. to cover up a little scandal in one of their subsidiaries. If they took his protection, Thistle would be able to withstand any mudslinging thrown their way from now on. But Otogiri was on high alert about what Ichiro might do about it.

If Ichiro Tsuwabuki, the young heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern and one of the country's most independently wealthy men, decided to do so, he could buy up the entirety of Thistle, *NaroFan*'s developer. With money and connections like his, he could restore trust in the failing Thistle Corporation in an instant. That would leave all of Otogiri's plans up in smoke. The truth was that Ichiro had

bitten him once already by buying up a large-scale entertainment complex he was building in Akihabara.

“Ah, well,” Otogiri said. “I know you value your position as a player, so I’m sure it’s a needless fear.”

“That’s true,” said Ichiro. “The possibility you’re afraid of is unlikely to occur.”

“Good, good. Now, let me just tell you one thing, in case you’re wondering: I was not behind this act, so don’t even bother suspecting me. I’m just loving the timing of it, that’s all.” With that, Otogiri gave a light wave, then left.

If he said he wasn’t involved, it was probably true. He wasn’t the kind of man who would go out of his way to lie. Ichiro wasn’t a fan of the man’s ambitions, but he also knew that he wasn’t a blithering idiot, and he could respect his competence as a manager.

Just then, the office door opened, and the male employee from before peeked in. “Excuse me, Mr. Tsuwabuki. We’d like to do the password reset and remove the account suspension... and recompense your items and such.”

“Mm, very well. Let’s handle that.”

Ichiro assumed that once this was done, things would be resolved for the time being. If he lingered here for long, he would probably just get in their way, he thought as he entered the office.

However, the incident was by no means at its end.

The girl stood out greatly, heaving for breath as she walked along the shinkansen platform at Tokyo Station.

It was Asuha Tsuwabuki, and she had a lot to carry.

She was dragging a suitcase in her right hand and holding a travel bag in her left. That by itself wouldn’t seem so unusual, but she was also carrying on her back one Sera Kiryu, who was still wearing the Miraive Gear headset.

“Mm...”

When she felt the burden on her back shift in wakefulness, Asuha quickly flung her friend away. “Get off!”

“Wah!” Sera shouted upon hitting the ground, then removed the Miraive Gear and looked up at Asuha. “Oh? Tsuwabuki...”

“Don’t ‘oh, Tsuwabuki’ me! We arrived in Tokyo, darn it!”

“I told you to wake me.”

“I tried, but you wouldn’t get up! Darn it! Freaking... darn it!” Asuha yelled, heedless of the gazes of those around them.

Sera had logged in on the shinkansen after learning about Ichiro’s account being hacked, but Asuha’s most fervent attempts to awaken her friend hadn’t provoked the slightest reaction. A hard reset from outside could cause loss of data due to improper shutdown, so she couldn’t do that, either. Sera had explained to Asuha that it was because “quantum information is more compressed than electronic information and therefore more fragile,” but she had no idea what that meant.

But in any case...

“So, what happened?” Asuha demanded.

“With what?” Sera asked.

“With Itchy’s account.”

“Ooh...” Sera stored the Miraive Gear back in its box, then returned it to the travel bag. “It’s been suspended.”

“Suspended?”

“The account’s frozen,” said Sera. “It means that no one can access the game using that player’s information. The hacker can’t log in using the old man’s account anymore.”

Asuha was about to nod in understanding, but then she tilted her head in confusion. “Does that mean Itchy can’t log in, either?”

“He’ll be able to after he changes his password. Normally it would take time to go through the process of verifying account information, but the old man has connections with Thistle, so he’ll probably be back in no time.”

“I see. I see.” Asuha nodded. It did sound like things were getting resolved. It

had sounded pretty outrageous, but if it was all over now, then that was all that mattered. Now they could wholeheartedly enjoy the sleepover.

“Okay, let’s go to Itchy’s house!” she proclaimed.

“Where is it again?” Sera asked.

“Sangenjaya! Um, first we have to go to Otemachi by the Tokyo Metro Marunouchi Line...”

Together, they made their way off of the shinkansen platform and headed for the subway.

By the time Domon Edogawa left Thistle Corporation headquarters, it was 2:00 P.M. Things had died down for the moment, so he’d been permitted a lunch break.

He’d been in Tokyo for work for a few days now. Living life out of a business hotel really was hard, and he missed the tea plantations of his home.

Normally he’d stay at work late into the night dealing with security program settings and responses to client requests, but today, they had told him to go home early. The relief of getting to take a real break for once was in conflict with his professionalism, as he’d wanted to complete the new security immediately. At the moment, the firewall was up, and most of the account information should be secured, but he was still nervous.

If it turned out someone among the dev team was leaking information to the outside, that was going to be a serious problem. As a player as well as a contractor, he couldn’t hide his anxiety, even though he knew stewing over it wouldn’t help.

Edogawa sighed.

Tokyo was hot in summer. Shizuoka was hot, too, of course, but the heat island phenomenon made things here feel even worse.

He eventually decided to set his worries aside. All he could do was pray that Thistle Corporation would come up with a plan to deal with things as soon as possible. If pressed, he would admit that the president’s youth concerned him,

but on the other hand, she seemed to be smarter than he was.

To lunch, then.

As he walked alone down the streets of Jinbocho, lined with used bookstores, he wondered where he should eat. Azami Nono had said her hobby was sampling curry restaurants. He wished he'd asked her for a recommendation.

Suddenly, a stunning blue supercar pulled out of a parking lot and blocked his path. The doors on either side twisted in a distinctive way, and a man peeked out from the driver's seat on the left.

"Hey, wanna ride?"

What was this, a come-on? Edogawa's expression drew taut.

Yes, unnecessary to say, this was everyone's favorite young heir, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. His face, identical to his visage in the game, was wearing a cool smile, and he seemed to have been waiting for Edogawa.

Edogawa couldn't be absolutely sure, but there was little room to doubt that this man was the player behind the same Ichiro Tsuwabuki who led the Iris Brand guild. The bourgeois young man in front of him was the one who had suffered the account hack today.

How can I get out of this?

Edogawa wished for a way out from the bottom of his heart, but Ichiro gave a cool smile and said: "I think it's destiny that we met here. And it's nice to have off-line meetups. Don't you agree, Ed?"

Edogawa's expression grew even stiffer. "So, you knew..."

"Well, you seemed to recognize me, and I recognized your walk. So, how about it?"

Feeling that refusing the man's invitation now would be a moral loss, Edogawa moved around to the car's right side and prepared to climb into the car of the man he hated so much.

Left-sided steering wheel... a foreign car? He'd never seen the make before, but it seemed like it must be a very expensive vehicle.

“I’m coming in now,” he murmured.

“Mm, certainly.”

Domon Edogawa played the Machina Blacksmith, Edward, in *Narrow Fantasy Online*. It’s likely unnecessary at this point to describe the discord that existed between the two men, but it was the reason why Edogawa’s expression had frozen up.

After Edogawa got into the passenger seat, the supercar’s doors twisted closed. There was something futuristic about the gauges on the driver’s side that Edogawa, as a lover of robot anime and fighter planes, couldn’t help but find a little exciting.

Ichiro drove his car down the street. “On break?” he asked.

“Yes... They gave me a one-hour break for lunch.”

“I see. Then let’s go somewhere we can enjoy a light tea.”

“Light,” he said. But will it really be light? Edogawa wondered. Not physically, of course, but financially.

Edogawa looked at Ichiro once again. He’d thought that the Dragonet was using unfamiliar facial parts, and indeed, Ichiro must have created his own graphics wholesale to make sure his avatar looked just like him. Was it narcissism? Even his clothing had the same high-class atmosphere as that of his avatar.

Ichiro had always projected that vaguely unpleasant atmosphere particular to rich people, but Edogawa would never have guessed he was the heir to the Tsuwabuki Concern. Why was a man like him playing a VRMMO? Why wasn’t he helping with his father’s work? There was so much he couldn’t understand.

With no idea where they were headed, Edogawa fell into silence.

But just as the stuffy air in the car was beginning to become unbearable, surprisingly, it was Ichiro who ended up breaking the silence. “So, the name Ed comes from your real name? I’d thought it was from an anime. *Cowboy Bebop*?”

“You know it?”

“Sir Kirschwasser had the DVD, so I watched all the episodes. It’s a good

anime.”

Ichiro was an unlikable man, but Edogawa couldn’t help but feel a thrill at hearing someone compliment an anime he liked. There were plenty of otaku in Edogawa’s office, but not many with whom he could discuss anime from the late ‘80s through the ‘90s. He quickly shook it off and chastised himself for the sentiment.

“My real name is part of it, but Radical Edward is the main inspiration.”

“Is that why you became a systems engineer?” Ichiro asked.

“I originally wanted to be a hacker, but yes.”

There was little more embarrassing than admitting you’d wanted to become a hacker because of an anime character. In the end, he had studied programming and just ended up becoming a programmer instead. Then, due to personnel shortages at his company, he had been made a systems engineer. It’d been hard, and he’d had to take a crash course in a lot of things he hadn’t understood, but eventually he’d more or less gotten used to it.

“Bossman mentioned you’d been busy lately, but I never would have thought you were doing security work for *NaroFan*,” commented Ichiro.

“We only got the contract a few months ago. We’ve been preparing for the big update in August.”

Edogawa/Edward was already a devoted player of *NaroFan*, so he’d been quite surprised when he’d heard the CEO announce the project. Of course, he’d never dreamed that he’d be put in charge of it. It had made his job feel far more fulfilling than usual, and he’d worked hard at it.

Yet after all that... no, he had to stop thinking about it. His mind would just end up going in circles.

“What do you think the Thistle Corporation will do after this?” he muttered, but Ichiro continued staring forward, his gaze cool.

“Hm, I’m not sure. Whether it’s a hack or a scandal, they’ll just have to deal with what’s happened, head-on, as a company. If it’s an internal matter, that’s quite bad, but such things are not unprecedented among developers. I don’t

think it's enough to bring down a company, particularly one so closely tied to the future of VR technology."

It was then that he added, "But..."

"But?" Edogawa asked.

"Thistle is small, and President Azami is young. It's possible that they could be weakened through attacks from the media, or from calls to take responsibility. And it's possible that a larger corporation could swoop in and take advantage of that. *NaroFan* is a cash cow, after all."

"Aren't you the one providing much of their cash, Mr. Tsuwabuki?" Edogawa asked.

"Well, I am contributing, but that isn't the way I meant it."

Edogawa was too much of a layman for talk about how the newly-born VRMMO business model was going to change the economy in the years to come, but Ichiro still continued.

"President Azami seemed to want to use me as a player to make her case to the economic world, but that in turn shows how weak Thistle is as a business," the heir said. "Having played the game for a little while, though, I think the potential economic gains of building fictional realities online is far greater than she realizes. I don't think *NaroFan* is making full use of it, but any large corporation that becomes aware of this would want to make use of Thistle's know-how."

"Would the Tsuwabuki Concern be one such corporation?"

"I don't know. I don't help my father with his work. I earn my own money, and I play *NaroFan* because I enjoy it."

So he said, but given the way he talked, Edogawa felt sure that Ichiro Tsuwabuki was a man who lived in that same economic world.

For a business of Thistle Corporation's size, the slightest outside pressure could prove a mortal wound. In an environment of scandal, a large company could buy out all of Thistle's stock, which would effectively bring them into that company's holdings. This, Ichiro explained, was his concern.

“I think that President Azami must take serious measures to prevent them from showing this vulnerability,” Ichiro said.

It was a rather dicey situation. From a player’s point of view, moving *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s developer to a large corporation would be a good thing, if that meant a strengthening of security and a tweaking of the broken game balance for the better. *NaroFan* was popular due to cutting-edge virtual reality technology bringing the detailed worldsetting to life, but it still had a lot of room for fine-tuning as a game. A user might want to see someone come in and help with that.

Even so, Edogawa, inspired by the conversation to think about ways to prevent Thistle from being bought out, found these words coming to his lips: “Couldn’t you become Thistle’s main stockholder?”

“I could. It would be easy, if I wanted to.” Ichiro was a man who could say such things so effortlessly. “If the buyout of *NaroFan* by a large company might cause it to lose its value as a game, then to maintain its integrity for the sake of my acquaintances and friends—and I include you among them—I would consider buying up Thistle entirely.”

As he said that, Ichiro turned the wheel. The blue Koenigsegg Agera entered the parking lot.

“But if that happened, I would likely never log in again. I’d become a developer, not a player. So I’d like to maintain my status as a customer for as long as possible. We’re here.”

“Ah, thank you...”

They had arrived at a small white building from which heavenly smells wafted.

Edogawa naturally had no intention of letting Ichiro Tsuwabuki pay a single yen for his meal, but knowing that he was a rich man, he had been steeling himself for the thought that they’d be going somewhere quite expensive. Fortunately, this really did seem like a place where they could eat a “light” lunch.

“Welcome.” As they entered the small two-story curry shop, the chef standing in the kitchen greeted them in a stately baritone.

Without hesitation, Ichiro took a seat at the counter. As the chef brought them lemon water, he said this to him: “Chef, give me two plates of your most delicious curry.”

“Yes, sir.” The swarthy chef gave a reverent bow, then withdrew to the back of the kitchen.

Watching his manner, Edogawa sat down next to Ichiro, head tilted in puzzlement. “What was with that order?”

“It’s what you have to say to get him to bring you the best curry,” Ichiro said as if it went without saying, then tilted up his glass of cold water. Even the way he drank was high-class.

“Um, I guess it’s a bit late to ask, but... was there something you needed from me?” Edogawa asked.

“No, not really,” Ichiro replied as he laid his glass on the counter. “Just think of this as a spontaneous off-line meetup. Regardless of how you feel about me, I rather like you, as I’ve told you before.”

Edogawa was fairly sure he had replied with a very clear shout of “I hate you!” back then, which meant it’d taken quite a lot of guts for Ichiro to invite him to a spontaneous off-line meetup.

Of course, he was aware that he had lost his cool in that moment, and he didn’t want to bring their online quarrels into the real world. The attitude of the man sitting beside him was almost exactly the same off-line as on, and that was surprising in itself. At the very least, the impudent things Edogawa would have said in the game withered before an actual rich person in real life.

“To continue what we were saying before...” Edogawa began. All that being the case, he’d decided he had no issue making small talk with the man. “Mr. Tsuwabuki, are you thinking about making and running your own VRMMO?”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve already made one.”

“Huh?”

Ichiro was gazing out the window. “I liked the atmosphere around the Lancastio Spiritwood Sea. I was wondering if I could create a fictional world like

that. I even read President Azami's thesis again and got in touch with a few research centers. I ended up buying a server and a supercomputer, and began poking around with making a virtual game world."

What is this guy talking about? Edogawa was stunned into silence.

"I tried to recreate the backwoods of the Amazon, to which I've traveled several times. I created the graphics myself, naturally. I was so excited to have finished it, but when I connected to the Miraive Gear and tried driving around in it, I found it wasn't very fun."

"I-I see..."

"In the end, playing around in a world that I know inside and out is nonsense," Ichiro said.

Edogawa wondered if that was all true. It was a lot to take in all at once. He didn't know how large a world Ichiro was claiming to have created, but it would be impossible for a single person to recreate the Amazon backwoods down to the finest of details in virtual reality technology—and in what must have been less than a month, at that. Caught between feeling that it must be a lie, and the shock that it might be true, Edogawa lost the will to object any further.

"There's nothing more boring than a world made to order for oneself," said Ichiro.

"That's an enviable problem to have..." Edogawa murmured.

Ichiro shrugged. "Is it really?"

"Yes. While this entire world might not have been made to order for you, God certainly seems to have pulled a few strings in your favor."

"I see. You say that my problem is enviable because the world is already, to some degree, created to benefit me. I'll meditate on that."

Edogawa had no way of knowing that this was one of the three most laudable sentences Ichiro had ever uttered.

"Well, let's hear your story, then," Ichiro said. "System Ajax is a security software company, right?"

"There's not much to say..." Edogawa said. It didn't seem like the kind of thing

they should be discussing in a curry shop. “That’s more or less it, though we’re expanding our horizons in terms of our software. The system we’re offering to Thistle right now is the latest version of the Ajax System we’ve been developing.”

“An application gateway-type firewall, was it?”

“You know your stuff. Alternative control of signals is handled by Layer 7, but the various protocol layers are assigned their own dynamic packet filters.”

The company had been named after the product, which in turn had been named after an image created by the strict protection offered by the seven protocol layers: the shield of Ajax, a hero from the Trojan War. More precisely, it had been named after a seven-layer shield in a game with that motif, combined with the firewall idea. It was the company president who had named it.

“Here you are.” The chef brought two plates of curry from the kitchen, beads of sweat clinging to his brow. It was the face of a man who had just been through a battle.

He lowered the plates, from which wafted the otherworldly aroma of spices, on the counter. The heavenly smell caused Edogawa’s empty stomach to growl in anticipation.

He picked up his curry spoon, imagining the delicious flavors to come, when suddenly, the high-pitched ring of a phone tore him out of his daydream.

Scowling, Edogawa pulled his phone from his breast pocket. An incoming call. He bowed to Ichiro in his usual way. “Sorry.”

“Feel free.”

The caller’s name was “Thistle Corporation.” With an anxious feeling in his gut, Edogawa stood up to take the call.

Martial City Delve.

It was the most recently unlocked city area in *Narrow Fantasy Online*, and as such, many of the game’s top players had assembled and moved their home

bases there.

Even out here on the frontier, though, the broad daylight account hack was the subject on everybody's lips. Especially since the victim was one Ichiro Tsuwabuki. No one had gone out of their way to spread the rumor, yet the information that Kirschwasser and Iris had provided had still spread like wildfire.

"So, how do you feel about the resolution?" asked Stroganoff, leader of the Red Sunset Knights.

He was addressing Matsunaga, the leader of the Dual Serpents guild. The beautiful Elf with his narrow eyes and the red-haired giant Stroganoff made quite a picture standing side by side. For once, they were also joined by Bossman of the Akihabara Forging Guild.

"There's not much to say," Matsunaga shrugged. "The devs suspended his account. It's an easy fix. Not much of a climax, but it's a good thing the devs acted fast."

Despite his cool reply, there was a sense of dissatisfaction in his tone. For Matsunaga, who liked to scan message boards and SNS message reactions to summarize game events in the most interesting manner possible, the recent incident seemed decidedly lacking in "fun."

"I can't believe the kid got his account hacked, though," the bearded dwarf whispered, looking up at the sky.

"You find that upsetting, Sakata the Stupid?" Stroganoff asked, his eyes on Bossman.

"Not especially. It's just strange to me. I wouldn't think he'd be the kind of guy to be so lax in his personal security. Hey, Matsunaga. You agree with me, right?"

"I think I do."

The "conference" between the three in front of the Knights' guild house seemed nothing more than an idle gossip meeting.

"This is unsourced information, but the story is that Thistle's servers

themselves were hacked," said Matsunaga. "It's an unsettling situation."

"If that's true, this might not be the end of it," said Bossman.

"Yes. It's a serious matter. If I'm not careful in my handling of the story, I could end up earning the ire of the devs."

That seemed to be another reason for Matsunaga's dissatisfaction. He seemed to be wishing that Ichiro Tsuwabuki's hacked account had at least been used for something a bit more flashy. If it had, he might have found another way to spin it.

All three crossed their arms and fell deep into thought.

As it was, the account hack incident had left a few deep scars behind. The people of the VRMMO loved rumors, though, so maybe they'd move on to another subject in a few days.

"Meow-ho, everyone! Feelin' fine?" A girl approached them, trailing a handful of players behind her and waving enthusiastically.

The foremost damsel player of *NaroFan*, the great Amesho, had arrived. Even among the game's top Achievers, there were eccentrics still taken in by her, so cheers rang out along the street where she walked.

"Heyyyyyyy, Ameshoooo!"

"It's me! Look my way, please!"

"Say 'What can you mew,' please!"

"Eh heh heh... what can you mew..." Amesho waved shyly to her fans, yet maintained in her posture the angles calculated to look cutest to them.

Stroganoff and the others knew that Amesho was well aware of her best points. Her avatar was perfectly calculated to have just the right height, build, and facial structure to trigger a man's urge to protect. She was a terrifying piece of work.

But enough about Amesho; Stroganoff also knew the three players behind her.

"This is an unusual combination," he said. "Have you formed a party?"

“Mm, something like that,” Amesho said, then turned back to the others.

They were the Anthromorph, Taker; the Human, Sorceress; and the High Elf, Tomakomai.

Taker and Sorceress were a pair of mercenaries who’d been hired by a player named Nem, who had caused a bit of trouble in the game a few days before. That incident had been resolved, and their contract as mercenaries had been terminated with satisfaction on all sides, so right now, they were simply two players enjoying *NaroFan*.

Tomakomai was one of the top players Matsunaga had brought into play during the last Grand Quest. He was an eccentric who made his home in the otherwise deserted Doom Range, and rarely ventured out of it. Word on the street was that he hadn’t logged out once since the game began, which further added to his air of mystery. In addition, despite his intellectual outer appearance, he had a bad habit of, when provoked, tossing aside his glasses and screeching like a bird of prey.

“I see you’re discussing the account hack incident,” Sorceress said, twirling her parasol.

“Oh, you knew about that?” Matsunaga asked.

“It’s a big game, but news travels fast. We heard it from our former leader.” Taker shrugged lightly, dressed in his new set of tattered robes.

“It’s quite troubling,” Tomakomai said. “Especially with the big update for the anniversary coming up...”

“Yes, if people decide to lay blame on the devs, and end up canceling their service...” Stroganoff responded gravely.

The mysterious gossip conference between the game’s heavy-hitters continued to increase in scale, drawing interest from the small sets of people who passed by on the road.

It was just then that a change came over the sky above Martial Town Delve.

“H-Hey, what’s that?”

The first one to notice it was one of those nameless passing players. Upon

hearing the voice, the rest of them all looked up. Their eyes widened in shock.

Storm clouds had begun forming in the sky that had been blue just a little while ago. Even for a weather cycle visual, it seemed awfully sudden. Delve was close enough to the Great Sandsea that it was rare even to see clouds; rain was unheard of.

In the next instant...

A crash of thunder rang out, and a dark red lightning visual raced across the sky.

That wasn't all. Sinister bolts of lightning began striking the ground, proving themselves tangible by stirring up great clouds of dust.

The players cried out as they saw it; the only one who remained perfectly at ease was Amesho.

"Tsuwabuki?!" Stroganoff shouted in shock, speaking for the rest of the players.

Indeed, standing before them was the tumultuous Ichiro Tsuwabuki. His account had been suspended, so why was he here? The players gulped in unison.

"What's going on? Has his account been restored already?"

"Even so, it's a strange way for him to appear."

"Really? I always thought he loved a good show..."

Despite his words, something in Stroganoff's heart denied that this could be Tsuwabuki. The way he smiled was wrong. It was not his usual smug-yet-effortless smile. It was sticky, and slimy, almost like...

"Aw, he's smilin' like Matsunaga," said Sorceress.

"Hey!" Matsunaga immediately interjected. "I do not smile like that."

"Yes, you do."

Matsunaga seemed to take Sorceress's casual burn deeply to heart. Having two women talking about his appearance like this must have hurt him deeply.

It really did look just like Matsunaga's smile, though; Ichiro Tsuwabuki would

never grin that way.

“So, this is the great Duplichiro, is it?” Taker snorted, then took a step forward.

No one could accuse him of acting hastily. They couldn’t be sure if it was the same player or not, but they knew that Duplichiro had been attacking people indiscriminately, and while the Martial City was a city field, there was no prohibition on combat there. If Duplichiro decided to go on a rampage here, he could... all while using his avatar’s monstrous stats, some of the highest in the game.

Stroganoff immediately opened his menu window and called for the available Knights members to join them. While he was doing that, the distance between Taker and Duplichiro gradually grew shorter.

“It’s dangerous, Taker,” Sorceress said, cautiously.

“I’ve never been afraid of dying before. I’m not afraid of dying now.”

“That statement would sound much cooler if we weren’t in a video game.”

Taker, showing no sign of being hurt by her words, finally made it up close to Duplichiro. He raised one talon-like index finger, unfurled his cape behind him, and said: “I am Taker, and I’m gonna steal your—”

A second later, Duplichiro’s “Dragon Claw” had found its way into Taker’s guts. His newly created rags, which he had only just acquired after losing his old ones to the death penalty days ago, drifted to the ground. Taker had turned into golden particles of light and disappeared.

He was dead.

“What’s wrong with that man...” Stroganoff whispered, and the other members offered up their thoughts.

“Attacking someone in the middle of their catchphrase... such cruelty.”

“He’s a disgrace to villains everywhere.”

“Aw, I hope Taker’s okay...”



“That’s true. He gets depressed so easily...”

“Well, I suppose I’ll go avenge him,” Tomakomai said calmly, removed his glasses, then cast them aside.

Their impact against the ground seemed to be the trigger; before anyone could stop him, Tomakomai propelled himself forward.

“Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” he shouted, like a bird of prey, then leaped into the air and fell upon Duplichiro.

Duplichiro didn’t even budge, but just blocked the attack with Weapon Guard.

“Raaaaaaaagh! Hagh! Hagh! Hngaaaaah!” Tomakomai’s arms and legs lashed out like whips, battering Duplichiro from head to toe. But Duplichiro deflected each with Weapon Guard, as if he could see the moves coming. He then formed a fist and lashed out, striking straight into the solar plexus of the rampaging Tomakomai.

“Graaaaaaaaaagh!” With a death rattle that was far from logical, the legendary man who had never logged out since the game began fell silent. He hit the wall of the Knights’ guild house, turned into particles of light, and disappeared.

“H-He’s weak...” Stroganoff cried.

“No, his opponent is simply too strong,” Matsunaga replied calmly. “First, let’s lock him down. Stroganoff, will you have your men rallied soon?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Then I’ll be counting on you after this.” Matsunaga snapped his fingers, and the ground of the main street burst up in clouds of dust. Shadows danced into the air, arms spread, each holding short swords in one hand and clad in flower-patterned shinobi gear and horned noh masks.

The watchers cried out:

“The Dual Serpents’ Frilly Shinobi Army!”

“They really do exist!”

Most players already knew about the existence of the Shinobi Army, of

course, but it was customary for someone to say those lines whenever they appeared. The frilly ninja gear had been designed by Nem, who, despite being a famous designer, didn't seem to know much about ninja fashion.

The Shinobi Army swarmed the grinning Duplichiro, but this was not the only combat force Matsunaga had prepared. Another snap of his fingers caused men to appear on the rooftops around them, as well. These too were the elite forces of the Dual Serpents: the Bowgun Corps.

"He's not very good at dodging," Matsunaga called. "And he can't block this many ranged attacks with Weapon Guard, either!"

"Matsunaga, that's a flag," Amesho whispered, but her warning was drowned out by the hail of fire from the Bowgun Corps.

The hail of fire consisted a wide variety of ranged Arts, and kicked up dust clouds in the parched earth that masked Duplichiro's form.

"I think they did it!" Stroganoff shouted.

"Don't say that!" Matsunaga shouted back.

The billowing clouds of sand began to clear, revealing the unharmed avatar of Ichiro Tsuwabuki behind them.

That was actually predictable enough. The group was shocked for another reason: Over the unharmed avatar hovered the label: "Immortal."

3 - Noble Son, Make a Phone Call

“We’re coming in!” Asuha’s cheerful voice echoed through the Tsuwabuki residence.

“We’re here,” Sera added shyly.

Sakurako Ogi ran down the hall to greet the two of them. “Oh, come in, come in! Thank you for coming!”

That was a close call, Sakurako thought.

She had known that today was the day Asuha and Sera would be coming in, but with all the business about Ichiro’s account being hacked, it had completely slipped her mind. She had only remembered when she’d seen King’s face in the game. He had muttered “See you later,” in cold tones, then logged out. Judging by the time frame, that might have been just as they’d arrived in Tokyo.

“Asuha, you’ve gotten so big!” Sakurako said, perfectly hiding her panic to pat Asuha on the head.

Asuha laughed shyly.

Sakurako turned her eyes to Sera Kiryu.

Sera, having deposited a travel bag on the floor, stared at Sakurako for a moment, then said: “I knew you were a woman.”

It seemed that in an instant, the gamer had matched her up with Kirschwasser.

“And you are...” Sakurako looked Sera up and down carefully. Shorter than Asuha, with short hair and slightly long bangs, and glaring eyes. On the scrawny side, pale, without a trace of outdoorsiness.

“There was that movie, *Summer Wars*, not long ago,” Sakurako murmured. “There was a gamer character in that who had me guessing about their gender right until their name was said.”

“I know that one,” said Sera. “I hear the director likes that kind of thing.”

“That’s true, and I support that. Anyway, you girls make yourselves at home.” Sakurako couldn’t tell Sera’s gender at a glance, so she just decided to go for it.

Sera was probably a girl, she thought. After all, Asuha’s parents had allowed them both to stay overnight, and she doubted they would allow a girl and a boy of middle school age to travel together alone... or would they? Would they make an exception, knowing that it was Ichiro they were staying with?

Sakurako also remembered how King Kirihito had avoided looking directly at her after “Yozakura” had done her cast-off during the fashion show. That seemed like a boy’s reaction... or was it? Could it have just been the standard prudishness often displayed by girls around that age?

Ah, but enough of that; she would think of Sera as a girl, regardless.

“I’ll take that luggage,” Sakurako said. “Your rooms are this way.”

With Asuha’s suitcase and Sera’s travel bag in either hand, Sakurako showed them to the guest rooms. There were a number of open bedrooms, all prepared to receive company. It was rather like a miniature luxury hotel. When they reached the rooms in question, even the otherwise stoic Sera had to gasp.

“It’s so big...”

“I know, right?!” Asuha acted proud, for some reason.

Once they’d set their luggage in their respective rooms, Sakurako began walking them towards the living room.

“Have you two had lunch yet?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

“I have just the thing, then. Delicious curry.”

“Curry again?” A strained smile appeared on Asuha’s face.

On their way to the living room, Sera peeked into a half-open door, then stopped. Before Sakurako could ask what it was, she realized it must be the game room. It was full of all kinds of video games, beginning with the Miraive Gear Cocoons.

“Would you like to see?” Sakurako asked.

“Yeah,” Sera said after a moment’s hesitation. It was certainly an impolite reaction, but the closer Sakurako looked, the more she recognized it as a child discovering a mountain of treasure.

She must truly love games, Sakurako thought, smiled brightly, and opened the door.

Sera let out a noise of astonishment. It was even bigger than the last set of rooms.

“Wah...” Asuha seemed shocked by it, too. “What is this, Sakurako? Was this here last year?”

“It was not. We added all the game machines this year.”

Ichiro hardly ever played anything except for the commercial-grade Miraive Gear Cocoon, which he used for VRMMOs, but Sakurako still kept it all carefully maintained every day. Most of them were fighting games, in accordance with her own tastes, and there were also rhythm games, shooting games, and crane games here and there. He had bought them cabinets and everything.

“Wow,” Sera said with unreserved enthusiasm.

“Would you like to play them later?” Sakurako asked.

“Can I?”

“Yes, they don’t require money to play.”

Despite an expressionless appearance, Sera was clearly overjoyed. Children their age likely didn’t have money to go to arcades. It was a surprise to see a child interested in arcade games, in this era when consumer games ruled. Perhaps the future of Japan’s gaming world was still bright.

As Sakurako reveled in it, Sera muttered, “We only have an *SFII* cabinet at home. A secondhand one.”

“Ooh.”

“My mom plays it.”

Ah, Sakurako thought, so it was an inherited genius. She found that perfectly understandable; she too had become the otaku she was today as the result of

her older brothers' influence.

"Kiryu's mother is really amazing," Asuha said with a grin. "I've only heard stories, but they say she used to be the terror of the local arcades! There was no one in the Osu Shopping District who ever beat Kiryu's mom!"

Sakurako grinned. "Oho. That takes me back... We made quite a name for ourselves in our old neighborhood, as well. We were called the PPC Siblings..."

Sera and Asuha both froze at Sakurako's words.

"Umehiko, Momotaro, and Sakurako. In other words, Plum, Peach, Cherry... PPC. We trawled arcades all over Japan, afraid of nothing... What's wrong?"

For some reason, as Sakurako spoke, the two had leaned in close to each other and started whispering. But when she asked them, they both responded with full force denials.

"It's nothing!"

"Yeah, nothing."

"Oh, really?" Sakurako asked.

Well, if they claimed it was nothing, she wouldn't try to interrogate them further. Sakurako led the two on to the living room.

"That reminds me, it sounds like there was a pretty big commotion today," Asuha said, consciously changing the subject.

Needless to say, she was referring to the account hack. Ichiro had left the house around noon because of that, and still hadn't returned. Asuha and Sera both must have wanted to meet him soon. Some people really did have the worst sense of timing.

"I wonder what was up with that." Sera nodded in agreement with Asuha's words. "I'm sure the old man had proper password security."

"Old man?" Sakurako's eyebrow twitched upon hearing that appellation, and she turned around.

"Oh... ah, I mean..." Sera seemed vaguely panicked.

Sakurako leaned in close and continued. "Listen, Sera. Ichiro-sama is currently

23 years old.”

“R-Right.”

“I am 26 years old. If Ichiro-sama is an old man, what does that make me?” As an unmarried woman, there were some lines she would not allow to be crossed. She wouldn’t expect a middle school student to understand, but she still could not allow it.

Sera looked around nervously, then to Asuha for help, and then finally, as if begging for mercy, whispered: “A young lady.”

“Correct. Well done.” Sakurako “Young Lady” Ogi grinned and urged them both to join her at the table.

When it was just Sakurako and Ichiro, they usually used a small table, but for today she had joined it up with another one to create a larger space.

“Ichiro-sama is very strict with his security, both online and in real life. Even the walls of this apartment were created to withstand a direct hit from a stinger missile.”

“Was he expecting to fight something?” Sera asked.

“Are you curious? But the story could take a while. About five years ago...”

“Anyway, that means that Itchy getting his account stolen is pretty shady, huh?” Asuha smoothly interrupted Sakurako before she could begin her long story. She had grown stronger in the time since Sakurako had last seen her.

“That’s right,” said Sakurako. “So we’re not sure exactly how the account was hacked.”

“But it’s been suspended, right? So there’s no need to worry, is there?”

“Yeah,” Sera said gravely. “In most cases, there wouldn’t be.”

There was a hidden meaning behind Sera’s reply to Asuha. Sakurako caught the implication and nodded gravely.

In most cases, there wouldn’t be... But this incident might not fall into the realm of “most cases.” They didn’t know why the user had stolen Ichiro’s account, or how they had done it.

Ichiro had unique passwords for all of his cards and SNS accounts, and he didn't even write them down. His security was flawless. She couldn't think of any way for the account to be hacked other than for the information to have been leaked from Thistle's own servers.

If that was true, the situation was even more serious. There was a chance the person could hack into his account again the same way, and the lack of knowledge about what he wanted added to the creepiness of it all.

The three were just sinking deep into reflection when an e-mail arrived.

"Oh, my. I'm sorry." Sakurako thrust a hand into her apron pocket and pulled out her smartphone. The message had been sent using the Mirai Network's messaging service, the one used to send e-mails from the game in emergency situations. It seemed to be an urgent message from Iris to Kirschwasser.

As she read through the contents, Sakurako's expression grew more and more severe.

Asuha leaned forward to inquire. "Sakurako? What? What is it?"

"Duplichiro-sama is back."

"Huh? What the heck?"

"She means the old man's account was stolen again," Sera said clearly, stood, then left the living room and headed for the hallway.

The young gamer's plans were comprised of one phrase: "I've gotta stop him."

"Wait, Sera," Sakurako said. "This is unconfirmed, but it appears that Duplichiro-sama now has the 'Immortal' status."

Sera's eyes narrowed at the words.

Asuha was left confused, looking between the two of them. "Huh? What? What do you mean?"

"Immortal status," said Sakurako. "Invincibility. It's a Skill that prevents you from taking damage from the attacks of others."

"That's cheating!" Asuha burst out angrily.

Indeed, it was cheating.

It was a special Skill usually only given to GMs or special avatars created by the devs. In other words, the player behind Duplichiro had some control over the game system itself.

The situation had gone far beyond the level of a prank, now. It was really serious.

“Don’t worry,” Sera said clearly. “He’s not the old man, but he’s consciously trying to imitate him. He enjoys wielding the power of the invincible Ichiro Tsuwabuki. It’s a pathetic mimicry. That’s why he’s using Immortal status, but there is a way to stop him.”

“H-How do you know that?” Sakurako asked.

“Because I was the same way, once.” Sera Kiryu spoke clearly. “It’s okay. Don’t worry.”

Sera turned and spoke with a confident smile, one more time.

“Someone like that will never beat me. King Kirihito will never lose again.”

Edogawa and Ichiro ended up having to return to Thistle immediately.

The call Edogawa received had come straight from President Azami; apparently things had exploded in the office. She had a tendency to omit crucial information when she spoke, so it took him some doing to find out exactly what had happened. He eventually managed to figure out that Ichiro’s account had been hijacked again.

Edogawa didn’t even have to wonder whether he should tell Ichiro about it; it seemed the man had inferred the entire situation on his own.

“It’s a shame, but I suppose we should be going,” Ichiro said, quickly paying the bill with his credit card.

Of course, Edogawa pulled two 1,000 yen notes from his wallet and shoved them at Ichiro. He had also eaten all of his curry.

“Ed, does the fact that they called you suggest that the system’s been

compromised?” Ichiro asked.

“I really hope not... but either way, it’s looking like an all-nighter for me.”

“For your sake, I’m sorry to hear it, but it might be good for President Azami to have a third party with technical knowledge around.” Ichiro explained how companies faced with a scandal would usually form a third party committee, a team designed to decide who was responsible while maintaining transparency and objectivity. It would consist mainly of lawyers and investigators, but of course, specialists on the subject at hand would also be needed.

“You’re saying I’m going to end up on that committee?” Edogawa asked.

“I don’t know,” Ichiro said. “It’s up to President Azami, but I think there’s a high possibility that System Ajax, as an outsider firm of specialists, might be asked to join. Especially since you deal with internet security.”

Edogawa really didn’t want to do any more work that required interpersonal relations. He wasn’t suited to being a systems engineer; he’d much rather be sitting in a room by himself, picking away at programming code.

They arrived in Jinbocho and rushed for Thistle headquarters, only to find there was no one at the reception desk.

“Given the situation, should we just go straight to the office?” Edogawa asked.

“Nonsense. It’s important to obey rules of etiquette.”

There was a microphone and speaker at reception with the words “If staff isn’t present, press this button” written on it. Ichiro politely followed these instructions. The door to the second floor office opened with a clank, and a voice called out, “Come in!” Things must really be hectic up there.

“I’m back,” Edogawa murmured as he entered. “Thanks for covering while I was gone...”

Once inside, he could see that indeed, the mood was intense. There were fewer people there than before, which suggested a few of them must be in the server room looking directly at the machines.

“What happened? Was Mr. Tsuwabuki’s... account stolen again?” he forced

himself to ask after casting a glance at Ichiro.

Ichiro shrugged, as if to say, “It stands to reason.”

“The account management server isn’t responding to our commands” was the response.

The words sent a chill down Edogawa’s spine. If the system had been directly hacked, there was a chance that his security program had been breached. His first job, then, would be to check the system logs for signs of compromise.

“President, I thought the account server couldn’t be controlled from outside the company building,” he said.

“Ah, um... Right. Account suspension/reactivation and information viewing can only be done via the company’s internal network.”

That all but confirmed that it was a hack from the outside. Depression was coming over him. So, it wasn’t that information, including the maintenance password, had been leaked from the inside. Although that would have been its own problem, at least it wouldn’t have been his fault...

Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s account was in use again. The person behind it could change the password, recompense items, and unlock an account freeze at any time. They’d acquired information about the company somehow and cracked it from the outside. Could somebody like that even exist?

“What do you mean, it isn’t responding to your commands?” Ichiro asked.

“We can’t actually get into the system...”

“Huh?” Edogawa’s fingers, tapping across the borrowed keyboard, stopped suddenly. He finally realized why the president was looking so pale.

The male employee continued to speak in her place. “I think he just changed the passwords, but the result is that we can’t fully manage accounts from here.”

“The accounts have everyone’s credit card and virtual currency information, too, right?” Edogawa asked, feeling ill. If the hacker had that in his control, they had to take action immediately. “Have you contacted the police?”

“Well...”

“Do it! Now!”

The moment the illegal access first happened, the company should have known they’d have to contact the police sooner or later. But if things had come to this, they couldn’t afford to hesitate any longer. The longer they refused to act out of fear of societal backlash, the worse their position would become. Surely these people knew that.

“Ed, please, calm down.” Ichiro tried to soothe Edogawa, who had accidentally lost his temper, then pulled out a business card and handed it to Azami.

“You will want to call the police, but first you’ll want to talk to a lawyer and discuss your ideal course of action from here on out. If you don’t have one of your own, I recommend the one on the business card. He has an awful personality, but he’s sharp. If you tell him I sent you, I’m sure he’ll do his best for you.”

“And here I was convinced *you* were a lawyer, Mr. Tsuwabuki,” Edogawa muttered sarcastically, unable to fully conceal his annoyance.

“Ah, well. I do have the qualifications for that, but I’d prefer to maintain my position as a user and nothing more.”

It was only afterwards that Edogawa realized that he wasn’t being sarcastic.

“If you can’t view account information, does that mean you also cannot identify the IP address that is currently using my account?” Ichiro asked.

“Well, it’s the same as the last two times. Um, America...” Edogawa replied as he checked the security log. He couldn’t view the account itself, but he did have a list of IP address accessing the management server from an outside network through traditional channels. It was a route players used to access their information and log in, but there was only one foreign address among them. Edogawa gritted his teeth. If only it had been inside the country...

Ichiro peered over his shoulder at the IP address. Normally—depending on how well they could interpret the information—it might be against illegal access laws for someone unauthorized to even look at it, but Edogawa didn’t have the mental fortitude to argue about that now.

Was it possible to use traditional channels to hijack authority of the management server? He couldn't find any signs of the address using Ichiro's account going through any illegal channels.

Edogawa ran a hand through his hair. It was strange. No matter how he checked the log, he couldn't find any traces of illegal access.

"After President Azami calms down, you should consult with the lawyer on the business card I gave her," Ichiro said. "Then I think it would be advisable to set all engineers on working together to take back the system. Ed should continue to check the security log... and check all computers in the company for traces of data being illegally leaked." Ichiro continued to leisurely give orders under the guise of suggestions.

A male office worker spoke up hesitantly. "Um, what about you, Mr. Tsuwabuki?"

"Mm, I'm going home," he said entirely casually. "At the end of the day, I am no more than a user of your services. If I were to get any more deeply involved, the problem would just get worse, and I'm keeping my visitors waiting as it is. There's no need to worry. The lawyer I've recommended to you is excellent, and he'll come right away... though he really does have a wretched personality."

Ichiro's words had a certain logic to them, but they were also ridiculously selfish, Edogawa thought as he glared at the display. If he thought about it objectively, Ichiro was actually behaving quite rationally for someone who had just had his account stolen, and it was kind of him to recommend a skilled lawyer for them. He was showing a lot of consideration for a company unaccustomed to dealing with social trouble. He had done more than most "mere users" might do. No one had any right to complain about him leaving now.

Even so, Edogawa couldn't restrain his irritation, which he expressed thusly: "Mr. Tsuwabuki, I really don't think I'll ever like you."

"I see... although I do like you." Ichiro waved a light goodbye through the dire atmosphere of the office.

Edogawa couldn't afford to keep thinking about Ichiro once he was gone. He

pushed the man out of his mind and focused on the task ahead.

Because of that, he didn't notice that Ichiro immediately called someone the moment he stepped outside.

"Hello, Sakurako-san? It's me. Yes. Could you apologize to Asuha and King for me?"

No one was responding to the GM Call. It was possible that the developers were just as confused as everyone else was.

Duplichiro's rampage through Martial City Delve continued. Players, mostly from the Knights, came together to try to stop him, but morale was very low. After all, their opponent had "Immortal" status—knowing that they couldn't possibly beat him slowly eroded their will to fight.

The thought that it was just a game, anyway, just decreased their desire to take part even more. What was the point of taking it so seriously? It felt stupid to stick to a game and its rules in the face of an honest-to-goodness cheater. One player after another logged out, acting like their fun had been spoiled.

"This bodes ill," Sorceress said.

"Yeah, it's not good at all," Amesho agreed.

"What do you mean?" Iris asked. She and Nem had arrived in Delve, led by the Kirihitters. Just as they thought the account hack incident had been resolved, Duplichiro had reappeared. It was natural that they wouldn't be able to stay away.

Kirihito (Leader) answered Iris's question. "Users are going to start abandoning *NaroFan* if this keeps up."

NaroFan was a game—it was a place to have fun. There were certainly complaints about the questionable combat balance, and the term "crappy" was thrown around a lot, but nevertheless, everyone obeyed the rules and enjoyed themselves in more or less the way the developers wanted them to.

But what if some cheating jerk arrived, stole an account, and started powergaming his way through? It was only natural that they wouldn't want to

have anything to do with that. No one was so attached to the game that they would hang around after the fun had died. And once that passion had cooled, it would be hard to restore.

Duplichiro was actively undermining *Narrow Fantasy Online* itself.

“Do you think that’s what Duplichiro was trying to accomplish?” Nem asked.

“I’m not sure,” Sorceress replied, tilting her head. “It doesn’t look to me like he’s thinking that far ahead. Right, Amesho?”

“Yeah.” Amesho nodded readily. “It looks to me like Duplichiro is just having fun. Just playing around with the power he’s found. Right, Sorceress?”

“I can’t help but feel like you’re trying to imply something...”

The petite Anthromorph just giggled and replied, “Nah!” She was a hard person to get a read on.

Iris tilted her head. It was impressive that she could even have Sorceress in the palm of her hand. All she could think was that she’d better not show any weakness in front of her.



Back on the front lines, the commanders of the Red Sunset Knights were fighting with Duplichiro.

But...

“Ngh, damn!” Stroganoff shouted.

“What’s wrong, boss?”

“I forgot I have a group reservation for this afternoon! Gazpacho’s going to yell at me if I don’t get back soon! Tiramisu, command is up to you!”

“Yes, sir!”

With that, Stroganoff logged out.

It seemed he ran a small restaurant in Yamanashi. They were living in sad times when a man like that could become the leader of one of the game’s biggest guilds.

“Parmigiano, Gorgonzola, we must hold the line with our lives!” Tiramisu called.

“Right!”

“Counting on you. Let’s show everyone just how cool we can be.”

It seemed no one had to worry about the Knights losing morale or the will to fight, at least. They really enjoyed the roleplay.

“Parmigiano, attack with ‘Barrier Piercer.’ I’ll push back harder with ‘Judgment!’”

“I don’t have a very high Arts level with that, though!” Parmigiano called. She was referring to attack Arts that pierced through damage nullification effects. They had extensive cooldown times, and stacked on fatigue quickly, so most players didn’t put in the work to raise them.

Of course, even with piercing properties, there was no getting through that Immortal status. Their struggles were pointless.

“Gorgon, support us with debuffs.”

“If I must.”

Tiramisu readied her Celestial Sword and struck out at Duplichiro. At the same time, Parmigiano unleashed Barrier Piercer.

Duplichiro just grinned and stood his ground. He blocked the arrow unleashed by the bowgun with Weapon Guard. Why would someone who was already Immortal bother guarding? There was no reason, clearly; he just wanted to mock them.

Duplichiro slipped in close to Tiramisu and performed a barehanded “Bash.” It unleashed faster than Judgment, and his fist caught Tiramisu right in the throat.

“Ah...!”

It was a perfect counter, unleashed just before the damage calculation. Duplichiro held on and lifted Tiramisu up by the neck.

“Tiramisu!”

Gorgonzola activated “Paralyze.” It was a foolish move—status effects wouldn’t work on Duplichiro, either—but this was the instinct of a player using a spell he had prepared to try to save his comrade. Duplichiro wielded Tiramisu like a shield, causing the paralyzing debuff to hit her instead.

“Eek!”

The spectators gasped. The relaxed atmosphere was now completely gone. Duplichiro had gone too far for this to be enjoyable, even as losing-side roleplay. Now it was just uncomfortable to watch.

Still holding Tiramisu by the throat, Duplichiro began to run recklessly forward. He broke through the ring of Knights and spectators around him, kept running, and slammed the “Saint” against the wall as hard as he could. The effect of “Break Object” sent large cracks spreading through the surface of the wall.

“Ngh!” Tiramisu, paralyzed, could not react. Duplichiro kept her pressed against the wall, then raised one foot and mercilessly slammed his knee into her.

One hit, two hits, and more... Had he activated the “Kick Mastery” Skill? The merciless strikes from his knee pierced through Tiramisu’s usually solid defense

stats and shaved away at her health.

The Knights quickly moved to help her, but all of their attacks were rendered meaningless by his Immortal status, producing only empty zeros above his head.

When he was done, Duplichiro slammed Tiramisu onto the ground. Her health was drained to its dregs, and she struggled to move despite the paralysis effect that had hold of her. He stomped down on her, holding her there as sparks of fire magic began to flicker in both of his hands.

The spectators' reactions were varied—gasps, aversion of eyes, cries of Tiramisu's name—but then, a moment later, a black whirlwind of blades came ripping through the crowd.

An unleashed Bash strike traced a wide arc and struck Duplichiro in the arm, a "Counter Cancel" timed to hit just before the spell's activation. Flipping the blade of their straight sword, the intruder spun around and struck at Duplichiro's abdomen.

Another Bash.

Though this chain formed from what was typically the most basic of attack Arts didn't produce any damage, it still trumped Duplichiro's reaction time and kept him on the defensive. The grin disappeared from Duplichiro's face. Tiramisu was freed from the leather shoe pinning her down.

The one who had slammed onto the battlefield with the force of a cannonball was a young man. He glared at Duplichiro now, his black Accel Coat fluttering in the wind, the tip of his XAN lowered.

"Is that..."

It was a requirement at this point, so they all cried out as a group, "King Kirihito!"

But there was no joy or exaltation in their voices.

He was the game's second strongest player, the man who had once gone toe-to-toe with Ichiro Tsuwabuki. But everyone was thinking the same thing: Not even he could hold down Duplichiro. On the contrary, they all expected to see

King suffer a humiliating loss to the cheater. A sense of tragedy hung over the scene; nobody wanted to see that happen.

Tiramisu, on unsteady legs, returned to the crowd of onlookers, as Gorgonzola and Parmigiano did the same. Sorceress began to cast healing spells on her.

“How did it feel to play the jobber?” she asked.

“I never want to do that again. It was genuinely terrifying...” Tiramisu said, looking like she was on the verge of tears. Amesho said, “There, there,” and soothed the much taller woman.

Now, back to King and Duplichiro... Iris looked at the two men facing off and screamed, “King, you can’t fight him! He’s got Immortal status!”

“I know.”

“You know...?”

His casual tone caused everyone watching to fall silent. He knew, yet he was still going to fight? It was hard to believe King Kirihito felt like jobbing, too.

But, in defiance of the atmosphere of doubt hanging over the group, one man called out, “No, King won’t lose!”

It was Kirihito (Leader). The Kirihitters all nodded in agreement.

“Yes, King can win!”

“He has some amazing secret plan we don’t know about!”

“That’s our King! He’s so cool!”

“Excuse me, but could you please shut up?” Iris snapped.

“Yes, ma’am!!!” they responded in chorus.

King just stared, unsmiling, at Duplichiro.

Despite The Kirihitters’ passion, the mood among the onlookers remained tragic. No matter how strong a player King was, the system was absolute.

How could he possibly hope to deal with such an opponent?

But then, King Kirihito whispered softly, as if intoning the words of a spell,

“King Kirihito doesn’t lose.”

It was Duplichiro who charged first, dashing swiftly across the ground to bear down upon King Kirihito. King lightly dodged his closed-fist strike, then swung his sword back. The strike, which invoked no Arts, struck hard against Duplichiro’s neck, but the result was another empty “0 damage” visual. Groans of disappointment could be heard from those around them.

King continued with a series of strikes, fluidly chaining together one, two, three... but not one of them dealt any damage to Duplichiro. If Duplichiro hadn’t had “Immortal” status, his HP would surely have been close to zero right now. Everyone watching gritted their teeth.

“Wait,” Sorceress murmured suddenly as she watched the battle. “He’s not using any Weapon Guards.”

“Because he doesn’t need them, right?” Iris asked.

“Of course he doesn’t need them,” she said. “But he’s *trying* to block the attacks, and he’s *failing*.”

None of them understood what she was saying, but Sorceress just giggled, twirling her parasol.

“The difference between not doing it because you don’t need to, and trying to do it but failing, are like day and night. It must really be getting under his skin.”

It seemed her comment was right on the mark. King Kirihito’s blade struck hard against Duplichiro’s body over and over again. Each time, Duplichiro tried to block with his hands, and each time, he failed.

King’s blade seemed to taunt him, as if saying to Duplichiro, *You’ve already died five times.*

In concrete terms, of course, it accomplished nothing. It was just a nonsense provocation, which meant nothing if Duplichiro just ignored it. Yet it clearly was working.

“He was trying to use Immortal status to act like a god-moder, but King’s using it to prove his own superior pwnage. That’s our King.”

“It sounds pretty gross when you put it that way.” There was no malice in

Kirihito (Leader)'s description, but Iris still shot him a cold glance.

Soon enough, Duplichiro stopped even bothering with Weapon Guard. He just stood still and let King hit him. He just grinned as if to say, "Hit me as much as you like; it won't work."

"It's working! It's working!"

"The pitcher's scared! Hey, hey, hey!"

As the onlookers began to clap their hands and jeer, Kirihito (Leader) continued to explain. "Miss Iris, in shonen manga, the one with the cooler fighting style wins."

"R-Right." Iris couldn't really understand what he was trying to say, but she offered a vague note of agreement anyway.

"Just like Galactica Phantom is stronger than Galactica Magnum because it has a cooler visual." It was Tiramisu, of all people, who backed the young man up.

"But this isn't some shonen manga," Iris said, though she was starting to understand.

The system's restrictions were absolute, but it wasn't the system that controlled the avatar; it was the player. If they were human, they had feelings. They liked appearing cool, and they didn't like being humiliated. Such things could have a big influence on whether or not they kept playing.

And right now, Duplichiro was truly being humiliated!

While "Immortal" let him drag things out to a ridiculous degree, he still couldn't do a single point of damage to King Kirihito. He was just getting hit, over and over again. Attempting to stand there and look smug after all that made him look even less cool, and King Kirihito was fighting in a manner designed to highlight that.

"He's truly terrifying..." Iris whispered.

"If it were me, I'd die from embarrassment," Tiramisu murmured.

"I suppose Taker felt the same way. The strategy works really well on people like that," Sorceress agreed with an inscrutable whisper.

As Duplichiro just stood where he was, King made a move to sweep his leg.

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

Duplichiro fell right over.

King wasn’t employing a Skill nor an Art, just an exploitation of the game’s laws of physics. Duplichiro had been standing there with eyes closed and arms folded, which meant that if he lost his balance, he’d topple right over. It was the ultimate show of lameness.

“So? Want to keep going?” King asked as he stepped on Ichiro’s head. It was nearly the same position he’d had Tiramisu in before.

“Aah, what should we do?” Nem seemed to be in a flustered panic. “What should we do, Iris? Ichiro is... Well, it’s not Ichiro, but still! His head is being stepped on!”

“Does that make you uncomfortable, Nem?” Iris asked.

“It’s awful. I don’t want to have to look at it.” Nem covered her face in both hands.

Iris stood with her hands on her hips, watching with great interest. “Really? I find it extremely refreshing.”

Sorceress nodded. “I know, Iris. I do, too.”

Iris and Sorceress exchanged a firm handshake.

“I just wish it were me, making the *real* young heir eat dirt like that...”

“I know, Iris. I do, too.”

Iris and Sorceress exchanged a fistbump.

King kept his foot on Duplichiro’s face, as laid-back as he could be. “You realize you can’t beat me, right?”

“Are you so sure about that?” The unexpected voice sent a murmur through the crowd.

It belonged to Ichiro... or rather, Duplichiro. He was speaking for the first time

from underneath King's foot.

"King, you must have worked up some fatigue during the fight," said the hacked avatar. "Meanwhile, I can always use my GM privileges to wash away all of mine. And not just that... I can manipulate my hitbox and damage dealt, destroying everyone in the area at once."

A murmur ran through those around them. It was true; if Duplichiro put his mind to it, he could kill everyone there. No matter how superior a fighter King was, Duplichiro might even be able to manipulate his stats if he wanted to.

"Then try it," King said evenly. "You're using the old man's avatar. You're using his account. If you can do that, go ahead and try."

Duplichiro and King glared at each other in silence. They could feel a quiet fury behind King Kirihito's words.

"If you thought you could do an imitation of the old man with your cheap Immortal status, you've got another thing coming. I don't know who you are, exactly, but you should realize that by now."

"That's right!" The one who broke the silence with a cry of agreement was, naturally, the leader of the Kirihitters. "It's not appearance or ability that let you become someone completely. It's the soul!"

"The passionate desire to be someone else will naturally lead you to the perfect imitation!"

"All you're imitating is Mr. Tsuwabuki's strength!"

"Sorry, but could you please shut up?" Iris snapped.

"Yes, ma'am!!!" they responded again in chorus.

Iris tilted her head, considering the situation.

Imitation?

Was he really just trying to become the young heir? Was that the only reason he'd stolen the account? He admired Ichiro Tsuwabuki's dominant power, and he wanted to wield that power for himself? She couldn't understand it. She found herself clutching her head in her hands.

King and Duplichiro's staring contest continued for a while, until at last, Duplichiro lowered his face with a glare, spread the Dragon Wings on his back, and flew off. King was thrown off, but he regained his balance without difficulty and watched Duplichiro disappear into the sky.

He'd run. He hadn't been defeated, but King had at least succeeded in driving him off.

A cheer echoed through Martial City Delve. Cries of King's name rang out, while the Kirihitters were crying with emotion. King put one hand on his hip, ran another through his hair, and let out a sigh.

"King, um, good job, I guess," Iris said.

"Ah, sure." King sheathed his sword and nodded.

"I wonder if Duplichiro will back down now," Iris whispered as she gazed up at the sky.

"I doubt it," King responded, dumping water on her hopes. "If he'd really admitted defeat, he'd have given up the account right then and there. He still has GM privileges, so he'll probably try to do something else."

His words caused the tension in the air to grow thicker. The fight wasn't over yet. What exactly were they doing at the Thistle Corporation headquarters? The players all looked at each other, murmuring about not logging in for a while until the heat died down.

"Oh, how wonderful!"

Through the nervous atmosphere rang the discordant sound of applause.

They looked together and saw Matsunaga standing there. He hadn't spoken up once during the battle, but he may yet have been there the whole time.

He was smiling.

"Duplichiro isn't finished yet. He's going to use his GM privileges to try something else. But he likely won't use Immortal, or max out his stats, or any other such foolish cheats! Right, King?"

"Yeah, probably not," King responded ambiguously to Matsunaga's strangely excited exclamation.

“Good, very good,” beamed Matsunaga. “That’s excellent. You’ve set the table perfectly, King.”

“I didn’t do it for you, Matsunaga.”

While the others stared in astonishment, King alone seemed to have caught on to Matsunaga’s train of thought.

Ah, but Iris and the others knew, too... This was surely the kind of situation Matsunaga had been seeking. The cyber criminal who had hacked Ichiro’s account, and probably the Thistle Corporation’s servers themselves, could now be fought within the game. It was like a situation from a certain anime movie.

“Don’t push this on us.”

“Do it yourself.”

Anyone could have said such things to him, but nobody did.

They were all eager to punch Duplichiro.

“Are you going to participate, King?” Matsunaga asked.

“Um, no, I’m on a trip right now. Do whatever you want,” King said, then immediately logged out.

“Welcome back, Kiryu! It’s an emergency!” Those were the first words out of Asuha’s mouth as Sera woke up and removed the Miraive Gear headset.

Sera was sitting on the bed provided, having logged into the game on the familiar Miraive Gear headset. Sakurako had offered a Cocoon, but Sera was more used to (and more comfortable with) the home console version.

Sakurako stood in the room with... not quite a severe expression, but certainly a troubled smile.

“Ah, but well done, Sera,” she said.

“Ah, sure.”

She must have heard what had happened from Iris, that King Kirihito had transcended Duplichiro’s Immortal status and dragged him down to their level. Sakurako seemed honestly impressed by King Kirihito’s achievement.

It had all been the result of thinking about Duplichiro. No one had known what he might resort to if he'd decided to abandon all of his pride, but Sera had realized that wouldn't happen.

Essentially, a game was a collision of pride versus pride.

To abandon your pride as a gamer to cheat and step on others might feel good, but that was all it would get you. Eventually, your opponent would get bored, disappointed, and leave the game after one last reproachful look.

If anyone were shameless enough to declare that a victory, then that person would not be a true gamer. They would just be a child.

From what she could see, Duplichiro did count, just barely, as a gamer. At the very least, he believed himself to be a gamer; he had borrowed Ichiro Tsuwabuki's account in order to bank on his gamer image. That was why Duplichiro was unwilling to rewrite any more data in order to cheat.

"So, miss..." Sera asked Sakurako. "Tsuwabuki, too. What was the emergency you mentioned?"

"Ah, well, you see..." Sakurako's awkward smile did not falter.

Asuha answered for her. "Itchy says he's going to America right now!"

What the heck? thought Sera.

4 - Noble Son, Go to America

“M-Miss Sakurako! Your driving...” Asuha stammered.

“Don’t talk, or you’ll bite your tongue!” she snapped back.

A Lincoln was speeding down the highway around sunset. In the driver’s seat sat a maid, and in the back seat sat two middle school students. If you added in the fact that they were heading towards Narita Airport, things just became all the more incomprehensible. But despite its incomprehensibility, there was a perfectly logical explanation behind it.

It had begun with phone call from Ichiro Tsuwabuki.

He had called during the early afternoon, while Sera was still logged in to the game. He had said he was going to America.

Apparently Ichiro had determined that the source of the account hack was coming from there. As a mere user, he could not get involved in the Thistle Corporation’s countermeasures, and it was best that he stay out of them, too. But as an individual, he was free to confront a person responsible for wronging him. It was a truly Ichiro conclusion.

America, of course, was on the other side of the globe.

A round trip would take a full day, and considering how long they had planned to stay over, he hadn’t been sure if he’d get back while Asuha and Sera were still in Tokyo. That was why he had asked her to apologize for him.

Asuha and Sera, though, could not accept this. Sera, especially, had come here just to meet Ichiro, and the young gamer’s dissatisfaction at the thought of not getting to meet him shocked both Sakurako and Asuha.

“What about coming to eat my curry?” Sakurako had asked, to which Sera replied (while looking at the plate of chicken tikka masala), “It’s extremely good, but not enough to make it worthwhile.”

They had both insisted that they should get to go to America with Ichiro.

Of course, that was ridiculous, Sakurako thought. They couldn't leave the country without a passport. But when she brought that up, they immediately went fishing through their bags.

"My family was planning to go to Italy to see Dad after this trip."

"I always have mine in case Itchy wants to do something crazy!"

It seemed they were extremely well-prepared young people.

Which meant the only other things they needed were Ichiro's permission and that of the parents. She assumed that Ichiro would probably agree readily enough, and when she called him, that was exactly what happened. He had also asked her to come to Narita with them so that he could give her something.

Asuha's parents and Sera's mother had both given their ready assent, as well.

And so, Sakurako ferried them to Narita Airport. Ichiro said he'd bought three first-class seats, so Sakurako could no longer object.

"We're almost to Narita!" Asuha exclaimed.

"You drive fast, miss," Sera commented.

"When I was in junior college, I often raced down mountain highways." Sakurako drove the car into the parking lot and screeched it to a stop.

Asuha's head hit the glass with a bang.

They took off their seatbelts and got out. The doors slammed closed as they charged their way into Narita Airport. Among the people bustling about, they were able to find the cool-as-a-cucumber Ichiro immediately. He had no luggage, naturally. He was the kind of man to buy whatever he needed at his destination.

"Ichiro-sama!"

"Itchy!"

As they ran up to him, Ichiro held up a hand and responded in his usual way. "Hey there, Sakurako-san, Asuha, and..." Ichiro's gaze moved to the person behind them, a shifty-eyed child carrying a travel bag. "Hello, King."

"Hey."

Sakurako gulped.

Ichiro and Sera Kiryu faced each other. They both knew what the other looked like, and they'd spoken many times in the game, but this was their first time meeting in person. Sakurako couldn't imagine what they might say to each other after everything they'd been through. She watched the two stare at each other and waited for their next actions.

But nothing else came.

Sakurako's surprise was interrupted by Ichiro addressing her. "Well, I'll take the two of them into my custody now. I believe we'll be back tomorrow night at the earliest, but I can't be certain."

"Ah, um, er, yes." Sakurako nodded fervently.

"Where are we going, old man?" Sera asked.

"Pittsburgh. There's no direct flight, so we're going through Chicago. I'll explain in more detail later."

"Itchy! What about Seattle? Are we going to Seattle?" Asuha asked.

"No. We're not going to New York or Miami, either."

"Aw..." Asuha had likely wanted to visit cities whose baseball teams had players she rooted for, and she pouted openly when told she couldn't. It seemed even a self-proclaimed Dragons fangirl like herself was eager to see a Major League game.

As Ichiro now turned back to Sakurako, she remembered that he had said he wanted to give her something. Sakurako returned her face to its servant's calm and straightened up a bit.

"I introduced Shaga to Thistle," said Ichiro. "I think with him around, they should be able to work things out, and depending on how hard they work, I expect things to calm down within two or three days. I'll be taking action, as well, which means we may settle things as early as tomorrow. Therefore..." As he spoke, Ichiro put his hand into his inner jacket pocket and produced a card from it.

Sakurako gasped.

He offered it to her.

“Sakurako-san, I want you to keep my avatar in check until then. This will cover any costs you may have.”

“Huh? B-But this is...” She took it reflexively, but couldn’t hide her hesitance. The cool card felt pleasant on her fingertips.

Ichiro smiled brightly. “No need to be reticent. Do as you wish with it.”

It was easier said than done.

Sakurako had several credit cards Ichiro had given her for work, to purchase cooking ingredients, cleaning products, utensils, and such. They were all black cards. Sakurako had an excellent sense of balance, and she had managed to hang on to her middle-class common sense, but she had never expected to be handed a card as rare as this.

“Hey, Kiryu. What’s that?” Asuha asked.

“Dunno. It looks like a credit card, but I didn’t know they made them out of silver.”

Silver? Outrageous. This was *palladium*.

Cards made of palladium were a status symbol for the absolute wealthiest people in the world. They belonged only to those who had accounts with JP Morgan’s private bank.

Was Ichiro asking her, of all things...



Was he asking her to use that for the game?

“On my own discretion, I contacted Thistle’s payment agency, and it should be about twenty-four hours before they shut down the game’s microtransactions system,” said Ichiro. “There are ways to halt the modules in the server itself, too, and that might make it even faster. Until then, you can use it as much as you like.”

In this moment, Sakurako was truly being entrusted with the power of Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s money.

Processing the weight of it anew, she took in a deep breath, tucked the palladium card safely away, then faced her master Ichiro and bowed reverently.

“Thank you, sir.”

It was evening.

Edogawa had been prepared to pull an all-nighter from the start, and he wasn’t going to complain given everything else going on. Still, when he thought about the work that lay ahead of him, he couldn’t help but feel a deep and abiding depression. He looked around and noticed that the others in the office must have felt the same way; they looked like walking corpses.

Edogawa’s mood grew even darker as he gazed at the empty bottles littering his desk. The more energy drinks he drank, the more he was beginning to think they were completely useless. If they were supposed to provide a placebo effect, it was backfiring. Perhaps attempting to force the human body past its limits was a fool’s errand from the start; it was just too fragile for this sort of thing.

Deciding to get some fresh air, he staggered to his feet, left the office, and descended the stairs.

He had a lot of tasks to see to. He was being asked to check all the server logs and scrutinize any data that seemed to suggest an attack. Then on top of that, as an outsider, he was supposed to check for signs of data being illegally leaked from inside company computers. Meanwhile, Thistle’s engineers were out in

full force, trying to take back their servers and purge suspicious data. The office had become a total battlefield.

It was in the middle of this bloodbath that the lawyer Ichiro Tsuwabuki had recommended had arrived. He seemed like an unsavory sort, dressed in an Armani suit that seemed wrinkled and worn out, and he was tall and gangly, with shaggy hair. His name was Shunsaku Shaga, and he bore a passing resemblance to a famous late actor.

First, the lawyer had consulted with Azami on how the company should proceed. In reality, everyone present had just wanted to fix the problem and find the cause as soon as possible, but they'd known that screaming like children wouldn't make that any more possible.

The lawyer had advised them to avoid making any announcements until they had fully grasped the situation, while asserting that they had to make a statement within 24 hours to reassure people that they were on the case. In other words, they had one day's time to make some kind of progress.

Edogawa found it all extremely unreasonable, but if this was his client's decision, he had no choice but to go along with it. He sent a plea to the president of System Ajax asking him to send help as soon as possible, and was told they'd send support first thing in the morning.

The working hours to salary ratio at Edogawa's company suggested an exploitation of their employees, but at times like these, he was grateful for the president's attitude.

If they held a press conference too soon, they wouldn't be able to deal with reporters' follow-ups, so he could understand why they shouldn't make an announcement until they had answers to give to the expected questions. He really wasn't fond of it, to be honest, but he had checked every file in every computer of every worker within the company. (He'd found a lot of unpleasant files there, but he'd managed to ignore those.) And while he felt he was being as diligent as one could be, he still hadn't found any traces of a data leak.

If he absolutely couldn't find anything, the lawyer had advised him to fudge the truth to find a way to ride it out. Tsuwabuki had said the man had an awful personality, and maybe this was what he meant—he really had a lot of nerve.

As if to punctuate that assertion, the lawyer was apparently snoring away in the break room at this very moment.

The problem was the checking of the server logs. The Thistle Corporation itself was a small business, but they oversaw server machines in numbers sufficient to run a much larger company's online network. There was no way Edogawa could check all of them in just 24 hours by himself; his performance was going to be in the pits after an all-nighter as it was. All he could do was wait for his boss's reinforcements and hope.

How had things come to this?

Edogawa walked outside, squinting in the sunlight, which was still intense despite the late hour. He knew that thinking about it wasn't getting him anywhere. He was furiously angry, and it frustrated him to have nowhere to direct that anger.

Edogawa walked a little ways to a DyDo Drinco vending machine and put a few coins into it. Of course, there were drink vending machines inside the office building, but Edogawa had always been partial to the DyDo brand. He'd been especially fond of their Yubari Melon Milk lately, although it came in very small cans.

He inserted 130 yen, then pressed the button. The steel can descended with a clang. The cool feel of it soothed his frayed nerves. Just as he was pulling the tab, the vending machine spoke to him: "Lucky you! You win the jackpot! Have another!"

Wow, he thought. Did people actually hit the vending machine lottery from time to time? He decided to choose another, wondering why it'd had to happen on today of all days. He picked a Sarashibo Orange, which he hadn't had in a while, but had been a reliable friend back in his high school arcade-trawler days.

He reflected on all the things he'd been experiencing for the first time lately, despite living what he'd thought had been a fairly long life. He chugged his melon milk, then headed back to the Thistle company building, pressing the long 500 ml "Freshly-Squeezed Orange Juice" can against his forehead. He couldn't tell if he was lucky or unlucky to have hit the vending machine jackpot in these decidedly unlucky circumstances. If it was a word of encouragement

from God for him to keep up the good work, it was an awfully bittersweet one. But what Edogawa was most angry at was himself, for feeling slightly happy about this irritating, bittersweet experience.

After returning home, Sakurako ran through her housework. She cleaned up the dishes, tidied up the kitchen, and checked the expiration dates on the products in the refrigerator and on the shelves. Usually she would only use the shower attached to her room, but when Ichiro was out of the house, she secretly used his bathroom. Ichiro had given her permission to use it, so she didn't actually have to do it secretly. But to maintain a measure of shame and delineation between master and servant, she always insisted, "I would never use my master's bathroom." Of course, this was all lip service.

The walls of the Tsuwabuki master bathroom were lined with Japanese cypress. Sakurako found it extremely annoying to clean, but she did appreciate the luxury hotel atmosphere it provided her whenever she entered. It was an indulgent space, with multiple bathtubs, including a cold water bath and a Jacuzzi. It had large, liberating windows, owing to the fact that it was the tallest building in the area, and you could even go outside—which she found quite unsettling, personally. And naturally, there was a sauna, as well.

Sakurako Ogi. Despite her classy name and profession, she had been born middle class.

As she gazed at the water droplets clinging to the window glass, she was reminded anew of just how wealthy Ichiro was. She had always known it, rationally, and having seen his freewheeling spending and the way he decorated his house, it was perhaps true that she should need no further reminders of it.

Still, experiencing his way of life for herself made it feel completely different. When she stepped into the bath, she was overwhelmed by the feeling that she didn't belong here at all... She'd thought that she was used to using the credit cards Ichiro gave her (for house expenses) when shopping, but the palladium card he'd given her at the airport had shaken her. He'd told her to use it as she saw fit, and so he probably wouldn't get mad at her, no matter how she used it.

Still, the palladium card... She'd heard it had no spending limit.

Sakurako couldn't even imagine how she'd ever reach the spending limit even on the black cards Ichiro had given her, but when he'd handed her that card of silver, it was as if he was telling her: "Hold nothing back, and show no mercy."

He had been telling her to stop his avatar's rampage.

I'm afraid that's not possible, Ichiro-sama, she thought. *What am I supposed to do? I don't know how to spend large quantities of money. As a servant, I want to live up to your faith in me, but you've never given me such an ambiguous order before...*

She decided, at least, to get out of the bath. She couldn't bring herself to use the sauna now. She wiped herself off, put on her underwear, and changed into her pajamas. She dried her hair with the hair dryer, but skipped a reapplication of makeup—with her master gone, there was no need for that, at least.

What should she do now, she wondered. After checking for incoming calls on her cell phone, she found a message from Iris, whom she'd friended in the game. Apparently Matsunaga wanted to invite her to a conference they were having a bit after 9:00 P.M.

Sakurako had no other plans, so she decided to log in for now. In the end, it was the same thing she'd usually be doing.

She moved into the game room, activated the Cocoon, and sat down in the seat. In one hand, she held the palladium card. It felt a bit ridiculous to even bring it into the game with her, but she fed it into the slot, which devoured it willingly.

The head-mounted gear descended. Electric and quantum signals cut Sakurako's consciousness off from the real world.

How many times had she gone into the drive now?

It was one year ago that Sakurako had bought a Miraive Gear X and the Standard Pack version of *Narrow Fantasy Online*. It hadn't been as rare as the Premium Pack, but there still hadn't been a lot of units in the first printing. She'd had to line up at an Akihabara game shop all night, and she had even been interviewed by a variety show. The fact that she'd managed to get ahold of a copy had been no more than a combination of coincidence and good

fortune.

Since then, she'd played almost every day. Compared to other players who had started at the same time, Kirschwasser's development had been slow. But Sakurako had, through regular grinding and hard work, managed to maintain her position at the high end of the mid-level players.

Sakurako's consciousness was now inside the virtual reality. She felt a definite change in her height and her viewpoint, as well as the mass of her body... but perhaps it was natural that changing one's sex and body type completely would feel a bit odd.

In this world, she was the brawny silver-haired Knight, Sir Kirschwasser. There were players like Iris and Kirihito (Leader) who never questioned that identity, as well as those like King and Matsunaga who immediately saw through it. It was fun to be able to change who you were.

There had been a time in Sakurako's life when she'd been devoted to cosplay. It was part of why she loved her job as a live-in maid, but getting to play a radically different person in Kirschwasser was something she could only do in this fictional reality. She put effort into her roleplay, too.

When Kirschwasser awoke, he was on Glasgobara's main street. He immediately called his horse, Oukaou, and headed for Martial City Delve.

"Kirschwasser."

He heard a voice addressing him. He turned back to see a muscular Anthromorph standing there.

"My, if it isn't Sir Taker," Kirschwasser said. "How unusual to see you."

Kirschwasser had once fought Taker to protect Iris Brand, but now that was all behind him, and they were just fellow players. There was no enmity whatsoever in his voice.

Taker let out a chuckle, and said, with the shifty eyes of a dead man walking, "You should call me Trash right now."

Kirschwasser wondered what had happened.

Actually, he had heard from Nem and Amesho that the man was a rather

sensitive type. Any little thing that went wrong would set him to sulking, and he'd ask people to start calling him Trash. Rather the high-maintenance type, Kirschwasser thought.

After a moment, he noticed that "Trash" wasn't wearing his usual tattered robe. He must have lost it after losing the battle to Duplichiro, which would also explain his total lack of energy.

"I heard what's going down," Trash said sourly. "Sounds like it'll be pretty tough."

"I'm afraid I'm not the only one it will be hard on," Kirschwasser said.

Duplichiro's violence had plunged the game into chaos. Kirschwasser couldn't allow it to continue. If they waited on the devs, the devs would probably clear it up eventually, but Ichiro had entrusted him with the duty to keep him contained until then.

"What will you do now, Sir Trash?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Heading for Delve, I guess. Nothing else to do, anyway."

"In the middle of a weekday?"

"My work situation is a little unique..."

He was self-employed, perhaps. From the way he spoke, he sounded like he'd had a hard life. Kirschwasser wondered if he was a mercenary in real life, too.

"The witch told me a bunch of players have gotten together already," said Trash.

"For the planning conference?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Matsunaga set it all up. He's really good at making events out of these things."

That was true. Matsunaga had a hand in everything that went on in the game, from the Grand Quest where Ichiro and King had fought, to the series of incidents that had led to the grudge match between Nem and Iris. He didn't do it out of a desire to ruin anyone or make them unhappy. He just wanted to make the stories more exciting. Of course, it also let him write interesting articles for his blog, get more hits, and collect more money from his affiliates,

but that probably wasn't the only reason.

Deep down, Matsunaga just liked being the one to arrange exciting events. He was a born producer.

It brought Sakurako back to the days when she'd toured arcade events around the country with her two older brothers. In an arcade in one region, she'd met a female gamer who had said similar things. She'd been a born producer, as well.

"Of course, I'm sure the devs find it quite annoying," Kirschwasser said.

"I think it's fine," said Trash. "We're enjoying ourselves again."

Kirschwasser nodded. Yes, thanks to Matsunaga, a lot of players were enjoying the game again. Given that an unknown hacker had taken control of the devs' system, it was probably a relief to them.

"Who do you think Master Duplichiro really is?" he asked.

"I don't know." Trash folded his arms and shook his head. "I've met some pretty shifty types in my time. He was similar to them in some ways."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, the way he stole power that's not his and now he seems so self-satisfied with it. I've met guys I can sympathize with on that level and guys that I can't, but there's something weirdly childlike about this guy."

Kirschwasser was surprised to hear the world "childlike" appear in his analysis. It was true that cheating, acquiring overwhelming power, and then using it to beat down on others was something that children might do. But that couldn't possibly mean he was a literal child. Duplichiro's actions were taking place on a scale that that alone wouldn't explain.

Kirschwasser expressed his doubts, and Trash nodded once again. "Yeah, what's weird if we assume he's a child is that there also wasn't much 'play' in what he did. He was direct and efficient, but he also didn't seem very accustomed to the game."

"It's a difficult puzzle, isn't it?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Yeah," Trash sighed again, suggesting he really didn't have any idea at all.

Air travel was boring. Even in first class, which did everything it could to see to the comfort of their customers, that remained true. Ichiro simply didn't like the idea of passively sitting in a seat, waiting until they reached their destination. They hadn't even taken off yet, but when he thought about the ten-or-more-hour flight that awaited them, Ichiro couldn't help but feel a bit bored.

On the other side of the spectrum, the two children he had brought along were shouting in excitement.

"This is my first time in first class!" Sera cried.

"I've only been once before!" Asuha boasted in response.

Ichiro had given her a trip to Dubai as a present for her tenth birthday. On that flight, first-class seats had effectively been their own little cabins, and she'd passed the evening in luxury, not having to care about anyone else around her. But that was a service offered by only a few companies like Emirates Airlines.

"Mr. Tsuwabuki, we have wine and champagne," a flight attendant offered.

"Mm, no thank you," Ichiro bluntly said, then sat down. "Asuha, King, what about you? Do you have any soft drinks?"

"Certainly. Apple juice, ginger ale, black tea, cold milk..."

Ichiro cast a glance at the seat next to him. Sera was completely absorbed in a portable game system.

The gamer only noticed the question after a minute, looked up, and answered, "No thanks."

"Oh, um, I'll have ginger ale," Asuha said.

"Yes, ma'am." The attendant bowed to Asuha, who was sitting in the row in front of them.

There would still be a bit of time before they took off. Sera, eyes still focused on the game system, addressed Ichiro. "Old man."

"Hm?"

"Tell me more about what's going on."

“Ah.”

With hands deftly manipulating the controls of a complex 3D action game, Sera’s attention was somehow still fully focused on Ichiro. Asuha, from the row in front, was also focused on him.

Ichiro put a hand to his chin thoughtfully. He took a moment to think about where to start, but eventually decided to just tell them everything.

He started with the inciting incident, then described his trip to Thistle to confirm. He didn’t mention that the security company employee he’d run into was Ed, but he did talk about the possibility of information being leaked from inside the company. He talked about the strange transmission of data that had taken place when he’d overwhelmed the databus during his fight with King, and about the signs that Ichiro’s account itself had been accessed from America.

“Why Pittsburgh, though?” Sera asked.

“I just happened to notice that the IP address was that of a lab where a friend of mine works,” Ichiro answered simply. “He runs a robotics engineering lab in Pittsburgh. He’s an interesting person. Currently hard at work developing a robot maid.”

“Can people tell that stuff just from seeing the IP address?”

“Some people can, such as myself.”

A few years ago, the spread of quantum communications technologies had caused the world’s IP address format to upgrade from the original IPv4 to IPv6. It had caused quite a bit of confusion, but it had solved the IP address insufficiency problems that had existed for a while leading up to it.

“Um, so, is this interesting friend of yours the one behind it, Itchy?” Asuha asked.

“It would speed things up if it were, but I don’t believe so.”

“But they’re accessing the server from his lab, right?”

“Yes, that is true...” But Ichiro had his eye on a different suspect. “She” was currently accessing it from Pittsburgh, and the researchers there probably hadn’t even realized she was there.

He didn't know why that laboratory had been chosen. She'd probably known that accessing the server from overseas would slow them down, and that she would need enormous server machines and supercomputers to do what she wanted to do. She had probably had a list of candidates, and then just chosen that robot engineering company from it by coincidence.

"There are quite a few anime movies that Sakurako-san sees every summer," Ichiro said.

"Yeah?"

"It's like that."

"I see." Sera nodded, as if in perfect understanding.

"Huh? What? What do you mean?" Asuha seemed confused.

"Asuha, we're about to take off," Sera said. "You should fasten your seatbelt."

"Um, right..." Grumpily, Asuha slid back into her seat and did as she was told.

"There will be a difference in time zones, so you should probably get some sleep now, while you can. Though I'm sure it will be difficult to sleep." As he spoke, Ichiro reclined his chair all the way. The generous space allowed in first class allowed him to recline to a full 180 degrees.

"I'm not really sleepy, though..." Asuha muttered from the row ahead.

After playing for a while on the portable device, Sera finally closed it, then reclined as well.

Despite his claims that it would be hard, Ichiro began making the noises of sleep just a few minutes later, around the same time the flight attendant was announcing their takeoff. Was this a part of his genius, or simple impudence? Even as the plane jostled down the runway for takeoff, he showed no signs of awakening, so maybe it was the latter.

Inside the Red Sunset Knights' guild house, Tiramisu met them with a smile.

"Welcome, Sir Kirschwasser. Mr. Taker."

The customization of guild houses in *Narrow Fantasy Online*, both inside and

out, was quite flexible. Players could buy furniture items from NPCs, and while most of them were just window dressing with no real function behind them, the ones that suggested an impossibly luxurious lifestyle were still very popular. This held true in the Knights' guild house, as well: Red carpet lined the hallways, with paintings hanging on the walls and chandeliers dangling from the ceilings.

As someone who was always logging on to the game from an actual rich person's house, Sakurako-as-Kirschwasser smelled a whiff of nouveau riche about it. But Sakurako herself had been born into the middle class, so it didn't bother her all that much. She didn't know anything about how most rich people lived their lives, anyway, and she knew that using Ichiro Tsuwabuki as any kind of standard for "normal" could get her into trouble.

"Lady Tiramisu, how have you been?" Kirschwasser asked in concern. He'd heard about what had happened from Iris.

"Ah, no need to worry," she said. "It was a bit frightening, but I'm not the sort of person to dwell on such things once they've passed."

Tiramisu had been beaten down by Duplichiro just a few hours earlier. Either due to a bug or intentionally, the "Nullify Sensation" function wouldn't activate during fights in Delve, which meant one-sided violence like that could be slightly traumatic even to top-level players. But at least she seemed to be all right.

As an inevitable trait of virtual reality, Kirschwasser found fights between players much more nerve-wracking here than in standard MMOs. And while a fight by itself was one thing, the prospect of an ambush in the field, without the consent of both players, would be all the more terrifying.

On top of that, in terms of raw combat data, the stats of Ichiro Tsuwabuki's avatar were cream-of-the-crop. If Duplichiro appeared in a field traversed mainly by mid-level players and began indiscriminately attacking them, that would be a severe violation of game etiquette. Just as when he had attacked Iris, and when he had started attacking those on the mountain road outside of Glasgobara, it was an action that would disgrace Ichiro's name.

Yes, that was one thing Kirschwasser could not ignore. As a loyal retainer, but also as Sakurako Ogi, it could not be forgiven. She was fuming. While walking along the carpet, Kirschwasser's hands balled into fists, causing a faint creak to

sound out from his Full Plate Mail gauntlets.

Tiramisu guided them to one of their many rooms, a large room with a lavish interior. There was a round table at the center, the floor was covered in red carpet, and there was a hearth flanked by large hanging banners that displayed the Knights' crest. It had atmosphere. It really felt like the Knights' conference room.

"Hey, Mr. Kirsch!" Iris, already in her seat, waved, while Nem, sitting beside her, bowed her head to him.

Teacups and sweets sat on top of the round table.

"I have returned," said Kirschwasser. "Iris, Lady Nem, have you eaten dinner already?"

"I have!"

"A light one, at least."

That was good. In virtual reality, where the triggering of senses could be enough to make you feel full, it was easy to forget to perform physiologically necessary functions like eating and excreting. There were alert messages for things like that, but especially lately, the game's food and drink had a tremendous ability to make you feel satisfied.

Even before VRMMOs came along, people had died because they had gotten too involved in a game. Obsession could be a dangerous thing.

Also sitting beside Iris was another friend of hers, Yuri. She was drinking her tea with a composed expression, but then she startled as if she'd noticed something. Kirschwasser looked around, but only Taker was standing behind him.

Three already seated top players greeted them, as well.

"Hello, there," said Matsunaga.

"Hiya!" cried Amesho.

"Good to see you," Tomakomai intoned.

Sorceress was also there, twirling her parasol, despite being indoors. "Oh,

Taker. Come back, have you?”

“Shut up.” Taker slumped into his seat as the witch offered up her usual snark.

The Knights’ commanders were already all seated. Even Stroganoff, who’d said he had a group reservation that afternoon, was there. The fact that Gazpacho, who apparently also worked at his restaurant, hadn’t logged in suggested that it must still be a madhouse there.

“Where are the Kirihitters?” Kirschwasser asked, sitting down.

“They left,” said Tiramisu.

She offered him tea. She didn’t have the “Tea Ceremony” Skill, but it was still a rare and treasured experience for him to get to drink tea made by someone else in *NaroFan*, so he accepted it with gratitude.

Tiramisu sat down and said, “I suppose this is everyone.” It was certainly a distinguished assortment of people. The question was what they could possibly do about the situation.

“Sir Kirschwasser, has Mr. Tsuwabuki told you anything about this incident?” Matsunaga asked to broach the discussion.

Sakurako had switched her mindset fully over to Kirschwasser’s. “He has, but it involved matters internal to the game’s development team, so I’m afraid I cannot repeat it here. It does seem to be quite a serious matter, though.”

“I suppose that stands to reason. The hacker’s using GM privileges, after all. If the media decides to raise a stink about it, the whole service could end up shut down.” Smiling his trademark smile with his beautiful elven features, Matsunaga brought his teacup to his mouth.

“So what’re you gonna do, Matsunaga?” Amesho asked while messing with friend messages in her menu window. The mannerism was akin to someone playing with her cell phone; she was probably chatting with people about things completely unrelated to the conversation while she talked.

“Catch Duplichiro, of course,” said Matsunaga. “Well, catching him won’t be possible either legally or physically, I suppose... but still, we obviously can’t just

leave him at large.”

“And why do you *really* wanna do that?” she asked.

“Because it sounds fun. And perhaps it will let me put out a blog entry to coincide with the devs’ announcement.”

Well, that much was predictable enough. No one would really have expected Matsunaga to start playing detective out of a sense of righteousness.

He was just a naturally curious person, perhaps. He wouldn’t be on the vanguard of unlocking all the game’s secrets if he weren’t. He also seemed to have a bit of a natural journalist in him, given how he enjoyed revealing the intelligence he’d gathered, and his perfect control in disseminating that information made him the model affiliate blogger.

“But how are we going to catch him?” Iris asked. “We don’t even know where he is... well, actually, I guess we do.”

Iris opened her menu window, and Kirschwasser did the same. Checking the guild member tab, Kirschwasser could see the name Ichiro Tsuwabuki on the list along with both of theirs.

He was still logged in. His location was tagged as deep within the Volgund Volcanoes, an area only high-level players could enter. The “Fighting” icon was blinking. From the color of the icon, it was clear he was fighting a mob, not a player.

“He must be visiting the Lizardman Dojo,” Matsunaga said. “Perhaps we should seal it off so that other players won’t go there accidentally.”

“Isn’t blocking players off against game etiquette?” asked Kirschwasser.

“It should be fine. GMs aren’t responding to the GM call anyway,” Matsunaga said airily, then sent a message to the members of his guild.

VRMMOs naturally strove for realism as much as possible, which meant that avatars couldn’t pass through each other. As a result, it was possible to create physical barriers to impede the progress of other players. Of course, it was against etiquette to do this for any reason.

He was clearly thinking that, in order to keep players away from Duplichiro,

the best thing to do would be to pack the narrow mountain roads of the Volcanoes with the Dual Serpents' Bowgun Corps and silently intimidate players off of going there. It was impressive how he enthusiastically adopted the villain role, every single time.

"I could put out a warning message on my blog, but if not worded carefully, it might just end up inviting rubberneckers," said Matsunaga.

Kirschwasser nodded. "Yes, I agree."

"Now, the fact that we're all here indicates a mutual desire to stop Duplichiro, whether out of curiosity or righteous indignation. I intend to proceed with that in mind..." As usual, Matsunaga was a man who liked to run the conversation, and now, he was ready to move it forward.

Naturally, annoyed at the thought of his guild house being reduced to a mere venue, Stroganoff interrupted. "Hold on, Matsunaga."

Matsunaga, in the manner of one humoring a long-time friend, just shrugged and fell silent.

Stroganoff cleared his throat, then stood up. "First, Matsunaga's right about everything so far. We have to stop Duplichiro. Some like Matsunaga want to stop him because it's fun, while others like Sir Kirschwasser and Iris want to stop him for personal reasons."

"Me, too! I do, too! I cannot allow him to continue this outrage using Ichiro's face!" Nem shouted.

"Oh, right, Nem, too..."

The only exception seemed to be Yuri, who was mainly there to help Iris. Yuri was also close with Felicia, so perhaps she was also acting as a proxy in her absence. She spoke rarely, and Kirschwasser hadn't exchanged many words with her, but he thought she seemed a conscientious girl.

"By the way, why are you participating, Stroganoff?" Amesho asked while flitting through her messages.

"Well, you know... it's exciting," he said. "It feels a bit like defeating a secret boss." His answer was just what one would expect from the leader of a top

Achiever guild. “What about you, Amesho?”

“Me? ’Cause it sounds fun. Why else would I do it?”

That also seemed only natural; just what one would expect from the game’s foremost damsel player.

Taker, Sorceress, and Tomakomai offered similar answers. It was hard to tell exactly what they were thinking, but they didn’t seem like bad people. They just wanted to take part in a little bit of fun.

“Anyway, let’s move on.” Stroganoff took control of the conversation again. “Regarding Duplichiro’s combat abilities. I don’t think I need to explain the threat he poses by virtue of using Tsuwabuki’s avatar, but we have two points in our favor.”

The crowd let out a noise of interest.

“The first is that King’s actions nullified his use of GM privilege, including ‘Immortal’ status. The second is that he can’t use that man’s ultimate trump card, the microtransactions.”

“Are you so sure about that?” Matsunaga asked skeptically. “If Duplichiro’s intention is to imitate Mr. Tsuwabuki, I’d think he would use them.”

“But how?” Stroganoff asked. “Is he going to pay for things himself? He’ll run into hard limits.”

“You just don’t get it, Stroganoff.” Matsunaga clicked his tongue and wagged his finger. “He still has his GM privileges. The reason he stopped using ‘Immortal’ and other status-booster cheats is because he realized that that was not what Mr. Tsuwabuki would do. Calling up infinite microtransactions *is* something he would do, though, so he’ll do the same, without hesitation.”

“I agree,” Tomakomai nodded quietly. “We should first form a hypothesis about Duplichiro’s goals and identity. That will help us to speculate about what actions he’ll take.”

“Even if Duplichiro can’t use GM privilege to summon infinite Monetary Blades...” Sorceress picked up on the conversation, twirling her parasol, “...there was a report on the news earlier about an illegal hack done on Pony

Entertainment. It said that 100,000 yen worth of virtual currency was stolen. If Duplichiro was the one behind that, he could summon up to 83 Monetary Blades.”

“Ughhh...” Stroganoff groaned under the force of the three-man attack. Indeed, one had to say he hadn’t thought these issues through nearly enough.

“His identity, eh?” Taker hummed, thinking about Tomakomai’s words. He repeated the opinion he’d stated to Kirschwasser earlier to the whole room. A childlike personality, efficiency in movement, clearly unaccustomed to the game. Bring all those mismatched elements together, and you had Duplichiro.

“I agree that there was no sign of ‘play’ in his actions,” Stroganoff immediately agreed, and each of the Knights nodded in turn.

But it was Iris who tilted her head in confusion. “What constitutes ‘play’?”

“Put simply, attempts to look cool,” Matsunaga answered. “Our physical abilities here are greater than they are in the real world, and we can make impressive visuals happen. Since we all like anime and video games, we inevitably end up imitating them to try to look cool.”

“The way that boys in elementary school used umbrellas to imitate *Jump* manga?”

“Precisely. For instance, Yuri, you do karate, yes?”

Yuri looked up, surprised at having the subject turned towards her.

“You employ stylish motions that give more power to your strikes. That’s what we mean by ‘play’ in the world of the game. You gain Arts, strike a pose, then execute your technique... Even if in reality, employing more focused motions and subtler strikes would be more efficient and leave you less open to counterattack.”

There was no such “play” in how Duplichiro fought. His motions suggested an intimate familiarity with the game system, with no preconceived notions about “doing this will add more power” rooted in the physical laws of the real world. But at the same time, the player didn’t seem very accustomed to the game itself.

“Almost like a machine,” Nem whispered.

Iris tilted her head. “But you said he was childlike, didn’t you?”

“A sentient machine, then, perhaps.”

“You’ve gotta be joking...”

The High Elf Philosopher Tomakomai interrupted their argument, a small, quiet smile on his face. “Well, it’s not impossible.”

The whole group fell silent at the words of the hero who had not logged out once since the service began. Everyone had assumed that tale was an exaggeration, but the more he talked, the more inscrutable this Tomakomai became.

“Hey, Tomakomai,” Amesho asked casually. “I’ve always wanted to ask... are you an AI?”

In that moment, it was Amesho’s observation, even more so than Tomakomai’s pronouncement, that got the blood running cold.

But the High Elf just smiled and shook his head. “I am human, Amesho.”

“Wow, so you’ve never logged out?”

“I have not.”

What on Earth was he, then?

There was a moment of silent tension. No one could think of what to say next, so it was Tomakomai who ventured forth first.

“Whether Duplichiro is an artificial intelligence, or controlled by a human... well, the fact that reactions are on the level of those of a program could indicate a nervous system connected to a terminal, merged directly with a CPU.” The technology he was talking about was way beyond anything any of them knew. “Whatever he is, we can hypothesize based on Taker’s description. The fundamental motivation behind his actions is ‘display my power to the weak.’ He has a small child’s self-consciousness, which would explain why he fled from King Kirihito once he judged him to be ‘better.’ Thus, the ‘childlike’ assessment seems extremely appropriate.”

“What about the idea that he wants to imitate Tsuwabuki?” Stroganoff asked.

Tomakomai nodded. “That also seems reasonable, and the fact that he may have willingly removed his ‘Immortal’ status in response to King Kirihito’s challenge suggests that it must be the case.”

Everyone fell silent at Tomakomai’s words. Even Amesho had closed her message windows. Hearing the Philosopher talk so loquaciously was, in itself, an unusual thing, and her face had “Has Tomakomai ever talked that much?” written all over it. Whether this was because of the game’s excellent expression writing, or Amesho just having an easy personality to read, was hard to say.

Tomakomai nudged up his thin-rimmed glasses and continued. “First, why don’t we send him a provocative friend message? If he takes the bait, we could set up an ambush and lead him to it.”

The room burst into surprised applause.

“It’s a good idea,” Matsunaga agreed. “Just waiting for him to take action could leave us with beginner and mid-level players mixed up in it. I’d rather not see that happen.”

Probably only a small portion of the game’s top-level players knew the facts of the account hacking incident. Since there had been no official announcement from the devs, there was no way for beginners and intermediate players to know what was going on. Rumors were certainly spreading via message boards and SNS, but with no proof, they were being almost completely ignored. Taking those circumstances into account, Tomakomai’s strategy was a sound one.

“So, we need to figure out who can send the provocative message,” Kirschwasser murmured.

All eyes turned to the same place: the sole designer for Iris Brand, the red-haired Elf, Iris.

“Huh? M-Me?!” Iris clearly hadn’t expected to be the one singled out, so she was genuinely flustered.

“I see. Iris, eh?” Stroganoff nodded. The other Knights seemed to agree.

“Iris would indeed be perfect for it.”

“Yes, it’s got to be her.”

“I can think of no better choice.”

With Tiramisu, Gorgonzola, and Parmigiano all ganging up on her, Iris stood up and fought back. “Wait a minute! Why me? I mean, I know I’m pretty quick with an insult, but I’m not even that smart, and... writing a provocation is kind of... Right, Nem?”

“I agree that Iris is perfect for the job!”

“Nem!”

Nem’s mysterious face seemed to sparkle as she clasped her hands over Iris’s. A powerful reverence came into her emerald green eyes. Even though they were over ten years apart in age, the friendship and trust that they shared was ironclad. “I remember every word and line from the scorn you heaped upon me before our fashion show the other day! I just know you can dig deep down into their heart with provocations that might... no, that most certainly would make anybody doubt your humanity!”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” Iris shrieked.

“Yes! It is!” There was no malice in Nem’s words whatsoever.



A little ways away, Taker whispered to Sorceress, “You’re pretty good at provocation, too,” but Sorceress merely lifted a teacup elegantly to her lips and responded, “Not as good as her.”

“All right. Those who agree with having Iris send the provocative message, please applaud now.”

Thunderous, unanimous applause broke out from those assembled in the guild house.

Iris, having been unremarkable since the day she was born, had never been on the receiving end of such applause on a stage, and was defenseless when her brain (misunderstanding the situation) began pumping out dopamine. With a bashful, satisfied expression, she found herself saying things like, “R-Really?” and “Well, if you really want me to...” She was truly vulnerable to peer pressure.

Soon after that, Iris started working on her message. Other players gathered around her to watch, going paler and paler at each word being typed. While they did, a shadow approached Kirschwasser.

It was Matsunaga.

“Lord Matsunaga,” said Kirschwasser.

“Hello, Sir Kirschwasser. I forgot to ask, but how is Mr. Tsuwabuki doing?”

“The same as ever. He is doing as he wishes. I cannot tell you the concrete details, but he is currently trying to get to the bottom of things through a different avenue than Thistle itself.”

“I see. Then our attempts may end up being for nothing.” But from the look on his face, Matsunaga clearly had no intention of stopping the excitement.

“Er, Lord Matsunaga?”

“Yes?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Kirschwasser chose to bring up a certain subject. “If money were no object, how strong could I become, in service to this plan?”

“Hmm?”

Kirschwasser was a gamer, too, but in terms of knowledge of pure game data, Matsunaga was overwhelmingly his superior. He was the game's foremost Explorer. He had created the game's walkthrough wiki. He'd even investigated the secret of King Kirihito's strength, analyzed his build strategies, and added those to the wiki—of course, King Kirihito's build only worked because of Sera Kiryu's transcendent skill as a gamer, so everyone who tried to copy it ended up sinking.

But in any case, Kirschwasser thought, Matsunaga must know, better than he did, the best ways to make his character stronger.

Sakurako Ogi had Ichiro's palladium card at her disposal. There was no spending limit. Ichiro had an account with JP Morgan's private bank, so she could use it until all his money ran out. She was hesitant to use it, but if Ichiro was serious, then Sakurako had to be serious. That meant that Kirschwasser was serious, too.

"I see, I see..." Matsunaga nodded in understanding. After a while, he seemed to think of something. "Sir Kirschwasser, you're still in the upper mid-level range, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"We'll likely be executing the plan to lure out Duplichiro and deal with him tomorrow, so at the soonest, the time until the plan will be 12 or 13 hours. With that amount of time and Mr. Tsuwabuki's credit card, I believe you could reach the game's top tier with ease. It might require a few drastic measures, but I hope you'll trust me." Matsunaga went on, "I'm still investigating this, but in the Mediterra Demon Sea, there's a miniquest perfect for grinding levels and skill points. We'll want you to buy as many microtransaction boosts as you can, then repeat that miniquest over and over."

"What are the drastic measures?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Allow me to level up your account."

Sakurako understood fully the implications of those words. The terms of service agreement forbid selling accounts for real money, as well as letting someone else use your account by proxy for compensation. Lending your account or allowing a proxy without compensation wasn't technically

forbidden, but it was clearly in a gray zone, close to black. Of course, what Stroganoff, leader of the Red Sunset Knights, was doing was also in that gray zone, but...

That wasn't the only problem. Kirschwasser would also be yielding his account, if temporarily, to a player he'd never met in person. If Matsunaga wanted to steal the account, it might be Sakurako who wound up with her account stolen this time.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Matsunaga. And of course, no matter what he did, as long as she didn't input Ichiro's credit card information into the server, Matsunaga couldn't illegally access it. Still, it was a difficult prospect to agree to lightly. Matters of security on the internet went beyond merely whether or not you trusted someone.

"I'll log out again at around seven in the morning," said Matsunaga. "Then you will log in again, and if you're worried about privacy, you should change your password then. From then on, you'll train yourself until the time comes to execute the plan. Over the course of the night, I'll create a training chart for you. It'll be a build specialized for fighting Duplichiro, so it might be a bit min-maxy, of course."

Then again, if Duplichiro was currently in control of the account management server, maybe being careful with security didn't matter. And the devs had bigger things to deal with than minor infractions of the terms of service agreement.

This line of thinking was in the end, nonsense. "You should decide it for yourself." That was likely what Ichiro would say.

"Very well," Sakurako-Kirschwasser said. Thus, the contract was forged.

She was no idea if this was the right way to use what he'd given her. She just had to give it her all. Even if that was just inside a game.

More important than the fun of making her own avatar stronger, more than the guilt of entering this gray zone, Sakurako's heart burned with her servant's sense of mission.

Afterward, concrete discussion about the plan continued.

It was a very serious strategy meeting, led by the members of the Red Sunset Knights, with their wealth of combat experience, and Matsunaga, with his deep knowledge about the game's underlying data. When Kirschwasser shared Ichiro's opinion that the devs would be able to deal with this within the next day or two, and Stroganoff proposed that things would probably work out on their own even if they took no action at all, Matsunaga countered that they should keep going anyway, since it still sounded fun.

A comment of "Are you enjoying this?" was met with a response of "Well, it *is* a game," and it was hard to argue with that.

It was summer vacation, so the beginner and intermediate players that Duplichiro would likely most want to prey on would probably start logging in after breakfast and stay on through lunch. Duplichiro was apparently, at present, holed up in the deepest part of the Volgund Volcanoes, but they decided to assume that he might go into action during the time period when the greatest number of potential targets were logged on.

They also discussed another form of violence that Duplichiro might take: trying to access their virtual cash and credit cards. But Tomakomai offered up an optimistic view of that, suggesting that the exercise of in-game power was Duplichiro's real goal.

This meant that things now turned to the question: what should they do when Duplichiro moved into action?

Right now, the only path to the area of the Volgund Volcanoes he was currently in was being guarded by the Dual Serpents' bowgun squad. That meant that they'd know the minute Duplichiro moved into action. In order to get a better handle on exactly what Duplichiro was up to, Matsunaga proposed temporarily becoming a member of Iris Brand guild himself—a suggestion which made Iris distinctly uncomfortable.

They agreed that if Duplichiro was going to take action, it would likely be around 9 A.M. at the earliest, and a bit after noon at the latest. When that happened, Iris was to start sending friend messages to provoke him, in order to focus Ichiro's aggro and keep the damage from spreading. They would then use Iris's continuing provocations to lead him to a place where they had prepared

an ambush, and fall on him with their forces combined.

“I wonder if it’s possible,” Sorceress murmured.

“Good question...” Taker sighed back.

It was true that he no longer had “Immortal” status. It felt possible that if they attacked him from all angles, they should be able to do damage, but at the same time, none of the players present knew the precise details of Ichiro Tsuwabuki’s avatar build.

“Well, he isn’t Immortal, right?” Stroganoff said. “If he’s not Immortal, we can beat him eventually.”

“I dunno, Tsuwabuki’s sure close to immortal anyway!” Amesho said, pouring water on Stroganoff’s words.

“He is a Dragonet, after all,” said Matsunaga. “On top of the defense offered to him through his Dragon Scales, there’s also a high probability that he has continuous recovery Skills like Regenerate activated at all times. Even worse, if he does have them, then Mr. Tsuwabuki’s been close to invincible all this time even without using them.”

Silence fell over the group. No one would have thought that all these people ganging up on one player could still invoke such feelings of despair. It was the moment when they all realized how broken *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s game balance was.

“But he’s not Master Ichiro,” Kirschwasser reminded them again. All the eyes in the room turned to Kirschwasser. “He’s Duplichiro. He resembles Master Ichiro, but there are decisive differences between them.”

Matsunaga shrugged. “It’s an idealistic approach, but let’s go with it.”

“True. We don’t have a choice but to try.”

“Actually, we do have a choice. We don’t actually hafta do anything,” Amesho giggled. “But if we’re gonna do it, we oughta commit.”

In the end, everyone agreed. They were all raring to punch Duplichiro, after all.

“It’s done!” Iris cried out as she finished her message that would serve as the

bait.

Those around her peered at the message and grimaced. Several among them ended up leaning back against the wall as though suddenly feeling ill.

What could it possibly contain?

Kirschwasser went to look. “Aah, this is...”

Iris was truly a genius. The vitriol-packed friend message was so brilliant that even a glance caused a twinge inside of him. For the sake of her dignity, he did not comment on its contents.

Scattered applause sounded out around the guild house, in recognition of her skill.

“Talent is indeed beyond a person’s control,” Sorceress whispered airily.

Sera Kiryu woke up. It was only natural; all this running around would be enough to disrupt anyone’s biorhythms.

The young gamer let out a long yawn, then tried the personal TV and the reading light. Neither would turn on; the window was also closed. This was all likely to let people sleep, but it meant that those who happened to wake up then would be forced to suffer in boredom.

Everyone around seemed to be sleeping, too, which extinguished even Sera’s hopes for pulling out a portable game system. Then Sera glanced at the next seat over and noticed that Ichiro Tsuwabuki wasn’t there.

Where could he have gone? Deciding it might be quicker to ask, Sera pressed the call button. Immediately, a voice sounded out from above.

“How may I help you?” It was impressive that a flight attendant could respond so quickly in this darkness.

First-class service is amazing! Sera thought, but the young gamer’s spoken response came out as a stammer, the result of innate social awkwardness. “Ah, r-right. Um, the old ma— er, young man, sitting next to me...”

“Mr. Tsuwabuki is currently at the bar.”

“Bar? There’s a place to drink alcohol? Here on a plane?”

“We offer soft drinks as well as alcohol. It’s only accessible to first class and business class customers.”

Sera blinked. The Kiryu patriarch worked at a company overseas, and their family was wealthy enough to own a home in Nagoya, but they were still solidly middle class. To Sera, the very concept seemed absolutely pie-in-the-sky... but of course, they were currently *in* the sky...

Sera’s father was an eccentric sort who had declared that he loved nothing more than to watch his wife and child playing games. As a result, he had spent a lot of money on arcade game cabinets and tons of brand-new software, all of which seemed to Sera to be a waste of money. But when he did occasionally come back from his business trips, he’d sit in the living room, watching rapturously as the two of them fought their white-knuckle game battles... so maybe, Sera thought, it wasn’t so bad.

Now, back to the subject at hand.

“Could you take me to it?” Sera asked.

“Certainly.”

When they got back from America and took their trip to visit Sera’s father in Italy, it would probably be in economy class. It might be worth enjoying these first class perks while there was still a chance.

“Where are we now?” Sera asked.

“We’re over the Pacific Ocean, at a height of 39,000 feet, currently on schedule. It’s just after 1 A.M. on August 4th Japan time, and we’re scheduled to arrive at Chicago O’Hare airport in about six and a half hours.”

Sera followed after the flight attendant, letting out another big yawn. She eventually led Sera to the bar counter, a compact space that nevertheless had a nice atmosphere.

After informing Sera that the first drink was on the house for those who had slept through the initial welcome drink, the attendant handed over a customs form and said, “Please, fill this out.” Naturally, Sera accepted it.

“Hey, King.” Ichiro was sitting there, holding up a glass.

“Old man,” Sera greeted before trying to take a seat. The seats were awfully high, and Sera was very short. After an aborted attempt to jump onto one, Ichiro offered a hand to pull the young gamer up.

“Thanks,” Sera said before working on filling out the customs form. It was all in English. Sera balked.

“Shall I help you?” Ichiro asked.

“Um... uh, if there are any words I don’t know, I’ll ask.”

Despite not coming to school for so long, Sera hadn’t slacked on studying. There were limits to the English ability of any middle schooler, but to ask for aid without trying would be an insult to both pride and aesthetics. Sera liked Capcom games, and particularly enjoyed the “learn by dying” attitude they encouraged.

The bartender, a black man, spoke to Sera so quickly that the English was difficult to make out. Assuming he was asking for an order, Sera responded, “A soft drink, preferably non-carbonated,” and Ichiro translated.

“Is it really okay to have a bar in an airplane?” Sera asked, while focused on deciphering the English in the document. Airplanes had notoriously bad balance, and Sera had heard too many stories of passengers getting injured during turbulence while they were out of their seats, then later filing lawsuits. Given that, it seemed a risky move for an airline to install a bar in an airplane.

“You see things like this from time to time,” said Ichiro. “In Emirates and Virgin Atlantic and such.”

“Are those names of airline companies?”

“Mm, yes. We took an Emirates aircraft when I took Asuha’s family to Dubai. I believe the plane itself was the same as this one, an Airbus A380 jumbo jet.” The way he rattled off all the terms suggested he hadn’t studied in advance; he just happened to know all of this.

It made Sera consider, for a minute, the totally different worlds they inhabited... but the young gamer immediately drove that thought from mind.

They weren't different at all; they lived in the same world. It wasn't as if they were traveling to another dimension.

"I don't personally enjoy air travel, but I do enjoy Emirates's service... though this airline isn't bad, either." Ichiro cast a glance behind him as he spoke. The waiting attendant smiled and bowed gratefully. "Emirates is known as the unpredictable airline."

"You really are an old man," Sera commented.

"That's what my uncle said, too." Ichiro swished his glass around happily.

After a struggle, Sera managed to finish the customs form. The attendant, waiting quietly in the wings, took it, checked through it to make sure there were no problems, then bowed and left. Her graceful movements were all befitting of a top-quality airline.

The bartender finally brought the drink. Apparently he had been waiting for Sera to finish writing. Sera wanted to say "thank you" in English, but felt embarrassed having Ichiro nearby, so just responded with a nod.

"It all happened so fast I didn't really think about it. But America, huh..." Sera murmured.

"Just think of it as social education," Ichiro said. "Not bad, is it?"

"I wonder if it will be educational..."

From the start, Sera had had another motive besides meeting Ichiro.

Sera had wanted to meet the person behind Duplichiro, the person who had hacked the account.

Even though the hacker hadn't said it outright, it was obvious that Duplichiro clearly thought a lot about Ichiro. So, as someone else who thought a lot about Ichiro Tsuwabuki, Sera had to be there to tell them... "You're going about this the wrong way."

Sera knew that becoming Ichiro was an impossible task. He was a goal to aspire to, and nothing more. The man currently elegantly nursing his drink was a target, one that Sera Kiryu some day had to defeat.

Who was this "child" who had stolen Ichiro's appearance and methodology to

indulge in his own fantasy? Sera had to meet this person and fight them one more time, if necessary.

But Sera still wondered about one thing.

“Hey, old man.”

“Hmm?”

“Why do you keep playing *NaroFan*?” Sera looked at Ichiro, glass still in one hand.

Ichiro’s blue eyes in the dim lighting of the bar looked straight into Sera’s, then turned back to the middle distance. He swished his glass again with a cool smile.

“Let me see. There are a number of reasons that I could name,” he said, giving his usual preface. “Because I enjoy the world. Because I like it. That’s more or less what it comes down to.”

“I wish you’d break it down and explain a little more.”

“It might be a bit of a jumble... I would like to have a more focused conversation with you.”

“That’s an old man thing,” said Sera. “I’m just a kid.”

“Then I’ll tell you one reason.” Ichiro lay his empty glass upon the counter. “It’s you.”

He surely wasn’t drunk, but Ichiro said it decisively.

“Of course, it isn’t just you,” Ichiro continued. “Iris, Ed, and even Asuha, lately. They’re all connections I sought out in this world, but could never find.”

“People who pick fights with you, you mean?” asked Sera.

“That’s a straightforward way of putting it, yes.”

He had been very bored, Ichiro went on to say. He had spent his days without much new stimulation. He’d found ways to have fun day by day, but there had been no amusements that he could be sure would continue into the future. Sometimes he’d goad Sakurako into a cooking battle, or a cleaning battle, or a competition to see how long they could endure sitting around the kotatsu going

full blast in the middle of summer. All those things were enjoyable, but he couldn't do them every day.

"You do stuff like that, old man?" Sera asked.

"For the sake of Sakurako-san's honor, I won't bring up our win-loss record."

The housework aside, Sera suspected that Ichiro was probably the one who always won the endurance contests.

"But you're different," Ichiro continued. "In the game, you're always challenging me. That makes me happy. I enjoy it. And what makes me even happier is the feeling that you intend to keep challenging me."

So Ichiro knew what was on Sera's mind... perhaps that stood to reason.

Sera had never forgotten the experience of losing to Ichiro. The battle certainly had been invigorating. In that moment, Sera had merged with "King Kirihito" and pushed Ichiro Tsuwabuki to a standstill. Almost to defeat, even.

It had been a fun battle. But it wasn't true that Sera had no regrets. The loss had been frustrating, but the desire to win next time had been fuel for Sera's continuous training, moving forward.

"Do you think that's true for the others, too?" Sera asked.

"Yes. I think it definitely applies to Iris, especially, though she comes at it from a slightly different angle than you do."

Ichiro seemed to like Iris quite a bit. She had no talent, but she knew that, and she faced that truth unflinchingly. She often failed and suffered setbacks, yet she never gave up. She was the polar opposite of Ichiro, who had been blessed with too many talents, and even a far cry from Sera in that regard. Having someone like Iris to continuously challenge him probably made Ichiro ridiculously happy.

"So, what about Tsuwabuki?" Sera asked.

"Asuha is also a bit different. She's trying to break out of her shell."

Asuha Tsuwabuki. Ichiro's second cousin and Sera's classmate. She had told Sera that Ichiro was effectively her big brother, and also her first crush, and given the way she fawned over him, it was likely that some of those feelings still

remained. She had said she'd have to leave him behind when she grew up, but Sera wondered if she could do it.

"Lately, Asuha's started to turn her gaze elsewhere," Ichiro commented.

"Really?"

"Yes. I don't believe she has a concrete goal like you and Iris do, but she's trying to find one. You're all growing up on your own, and that makes me extremely happy."

Ichiro always spoke as if he was looking down on others. He was convinced of his superiority, and didn't doubt it, even if he should. Sera found that annoying enough, but it was probably even worse for Iris.

"You act like the demon lord in an RPG, old man."

"Sakurako-san tells me that often."

"Then I'll say this outright..." Sera downed the glass, then set it on the bar. "The demon king always loses eventually." Then Sera looked at Ichiro Tsuwabuki with a gaze stronger than the young gamer had ever managed. "I don't know if the hero will be a Fighter, a Mage, or a Thief. But some day, you'll lose."

"That *is* how games work, I suppose."

"I guess it is."

Ichiro's smile was indomitable. But facing down with him in real life and hearing those words from his mouth, Sera now knew. It was a declaration of war.

King Kirihito wouldn't lose. Someday, Sera would beat this man.

"I cannot wait to see it."

The confidence to say a line like that was truly the confidence of a game's final boss.

It was a few minutes later that Asuha woke up, started crying upon seeing both of her companions gone, and was led to the bar by the attendant, as well.



5 - Noble Son, Arrive at Your Destination

Sakurako Ogi awoke for the morning of the big fight. From her point of view, that grandiose phrasing was no exaggeration.

In order to psyche herself up, she spent the morning exactly as she always did. She cleared her head with a cold shower, then dried off her hair and combed it. She brushed her teeth, changed into her usual maid outfit, sat down in front of her vanity, and opened her makeup box.

Sakurako was preparing to do battle. For a maid, the battlefield was the same place she lived her daily life. She was always ready to fight. Her maid costume was effectively her battle uniform, and having it on put her fully into fight mode. The light makeup she wore was her war paint. She then added her lace cap, transforming into the complete Sakurako Ogi.

Pilder on!

“Okay!”

She threw up her hands and howled at the ceiling.

She prepared for breakfast, did the laundry, cleaned up Ichiro’s room in his absence, and treated herself to breakfast a little sooner than usual. On days when Ichiro wasn’t there, she would usually rustle up a more half-hearted breakfast, but not today.

Crispy fried bacon and scrambled eggs, toast, salad, and soup. She observed her table manners perfectly, and even poured herself an after-breakfast coffee.

As she had promised to Matsunaga, she sat down in the Miraive Gear Cocoon around 7 AM.

After she finished her login, Sakurako Ogi transformed once more, this time into Kirschwasser. The shift in consciousness brought her to a place that was not the Knights’ guild house she had logged out from, but a lake shore covered in mist. A few Sahagins were sleeping on the shore, showing no signs of hostility.

“Hmm...” Kirschwasser put a hand to his jaw.

This was the Mediterra Demon Sea. It was probably safe to assume that Matsunaga had been leveling him up here, although it seemed a bit inconsiderate to just leave him out in the field like this.

He opened his menu window and checked his stats. His level was over 130, which put him around the upper tier of the top players.

To have increased this much in only six hours... Kirschwasser was surprised by it, but not at all happy. It made him realize how much he had enjoyed the process of leveling himself up.

He’d made an exception and gone along with Matsunaga’s plan, since he really had wanted to stop Duplichiro himself, but he couldn’t deny that as a player, it felt like a tremendous waste.

He hadn’t explained his own build in detail, but unsurprisingly, Matsunaga had understood it very well. He had increased his stats in an extremely min-maxed manner, and had brought him to the point where he could likely equip a new tier of weapons and armor, too. Kirschwasser hadn’t lost any money on hand, but to his surprise, he hadn’t gained much, either. Perhaps the mini-quest Matsunaga had talked about didn’t earn much in the way of money, or perhaps he’d quietly taken a stipend for his assistance, but either way, Kirschwasser didn’t mind.

What about his Skills, then? Matsunaga had increased these, too, in alignment with Kirschwasser’s original build. His typically ironclad defenses had grown even stronger, and his support attacks had also been raised across the board. All of his Skill levels had increased greatly, and he was probably running drastically low on slots.

He wondered what his ATK and DEF amounted to now. He could obviously just check the numbers themselves, but he’d prefer to try them out on someone.

He looked around, but couldn’t find any mobs in range besides the Sahagins that were resting on the beach, and while they were just programs without feelings or free will, he felt a bit hesitant to attack a creature that was resting. This was not him being overly sensitive, Kirschwasser thought, but a natural

state of mind for players of games. There were always going to be some monsters that acted innocently enough that it made you feel guilty about killing them.

He had drawn his Knight Sword, looking around for an opponent to fight, when someone came walking out of the fog. He stiffened. Kirschwasser's perception stat wasn't high enough to make out what the other character was doing in the fog.

"Hello there, Sir Kirschwasser." At last, the form became visible as the familiar Elf with the superficial smile, and Kirschwasser sheathed his Knight Sword.

"Lord Matsunaga."

Remembering that it was Matsunaga who had been increasing his stats, he realized that his avatar must have been using that same body language just a little while ago. It was a bit unsettling to think about.

Kirschwasser bowed to him. "I see you've been up all night leveling me. Thank you."

"Oh, no need to thank me. We gained useful data from it, too. This place might make a good new dojo for high-level players."

Of course, he wouldn't be making any of that information public for a while, Matsunaga added emphatically.

"'We'?" Kirschwasser asked.

"Oh, didn't you realize? Right, your perception stats aren't that high, after all... See?"

Snap. As Matsunaga snapped his fingers, a number of players dressed in chain mail whipped into view out of the fog, one after another, and surrounded Kirschwasser with overly acrobatic movements. If they'd wanted to attack him, he would have been completely vulnerable to the ambush.

This was the Dual Serpents' Shinobi Army. They wore horned noh masks and frilly shinobi costumes that bore a crest of intertwining serpents textured onto their collars.

"Ah, hello," said Kirschwasser. "Um, does this mean you helped me level up?"

In perfect sync, the shinobi all widened their stances, thrust out their chests, and silently bowed. Even the angle of the bows was identical. Kirschwasser was forced to wonder if they were really bots.

“Your guild members are truly thorough, Lord Matsunaga.”

“That is our guild’s philosophy, after all. Well, and we enjoy it... in chat, we all have our own personalities.”

Kirschwasser could tell that much from looking at the names displayed over the avatars’ heads.

Matsunaga then changed the subject, explaining the all-nighter he had pulled to increase Kirschwasser’s stats. It seemed to Kirschwasser that he should have been exhausted, but he seemed surprisingly lively.

“Duplichiro hasn’t shown any signs of taking action yet,” Matsunaga continued. “Of course, that’s just as we expected... he still seems to be holed up in the volcanoes hunting Lizardmen, grinding up his stats and Skill levels in the usual way. Which means that, for now, the plan is still on schedule.”

Matsunaga then manipulated some windows, and Kirschwasser received a friend message. Its title was “Development Chart.”

Matsunaga’s blog and the walkthrough wiki he ran both included charts for how player characters could most efficiently improve themselves. Given Matsunaga’s personality, it was probably a joke, but he had also included a detailed timetable on how fast a character would grow both under normal situations and with microtransaction boosts applied. Kirschwasser had referenced this many times in deciding his own path.

“So this is my own personal development chart?” Kirschwasser asked.

“Yes. I had lots of time to think while I was repeating the mini-quest. It’s going to turn you into a lethal weapon against Duplichiro.”

That was what Kirschwasser had wanted, of course, and when Matsunaga had made the proposal to him, this had likely been his goal. Having infinite money made it possible to level in ways standard play wouldn’t allow. At the moment, the money spent on the microtransaction boosts wasn’t very significant, but...

Kirschwasser opened the message and examined the chart. He grasped that the concept was to find a way to compensate for Kirschwasser's main deficiency, the inability to deal massive amounts of damage in one hit. Nodding in agreement, he scrolled down further. The further he scrolled, the more ashen his face became.

"L-Lord Matsunaga... is this..."

"Yes. That will increase your ATK. This is one area where you'll really need to spend virtual cash to increase it. That's why, until you logged in, I focused on leveling up and bolstering your Skills."

It certainly was a method of increasing ATK that only Kirschwasser—or rather, someone using Ichiro's credit card—could accomplish.

"It's the combination of Mr. Tsuwabuki's money and my knowledge of the game system," said Matsunaga. "What do you think?"

"I-It's excellent, of course! But this..." Kirschwasser couldn't help but feel like crying. It was only natural; the development chart he had been given was such a blasphemy to the middle-class Sakurako-Kirschwasser that she wasn't sure if her financial sense could survive intact. Putting this into practice might be crossing a line that could never be uncrossed.

But Matsunaga just smiled his superficial smile and wagged his finger. "Sir, that credit card is not just a lovely thing to have in your collection. It is a powerful weapon, and a weapon must be used. Why did he make all that money, if not to use it?"

"L-Lord Matsunaga... You're so perfect for this role..."

"It sounds like a villain's line, doesn't it? I'm glad to hear it. I do enjoy characters like that."

The thought arose in Kirschwasser's mind that he'd gone to the wrong person for advice, but he squelched it right away.

Matsunaga was right. Sakurako-Kirschwasser had been entrusted with the full force of Ichiro Tsuwabuki's money. When one was given power, they had to use it. Whether that power might crush them in the process was irrelevant; it was a servant's duty to carry out their mission.

Kirschwasser struck his fist into his palm, gauntlets clinking from the impact.

“Let’s do it. I put myself into your care.”

“Very good. Depending on what Duplichiro does, we may need to hasten our plans a bit... but I’m sure we’ll make you dominant soon enough. Using the power of money.”

Kirschwasser looked up at the foggy sky above the Mediterra Demon Sea.

Can you see me now, Ichiro-sama? I’m going to go as far as I can with the money you entrusted to me. Though my heart may be that of a peasant, I’ll be reborn as Great Whale Kirschwasser, the legendary fighter with no financial sense whatsoever...

Sakurako’s sense of duty was starting to take her in a questionable direction.

If she kept on down this road, her ideas about money might end up closer to those of her extravagant master, Ichiro Tsuwabuki. But perhaps this sacrifice was another way of showing her pride and determination as a servant.

“You can’t just call me out of the blue and ask for this!” The person on the other side of the phone, screaming in English, was Ichiro’s friend from college. “You’re supposed to make appointments for things like this, Ichiro! I’m busy, you know!”

“Sorry, but it’s quite urgent. I’ve actually just arrived in Chicago, so I’ll be there in only a few hours.”

“You idiot!”

The airport lobby of Chicago O’Hare was a bustling place, with people coming and going all around them. As usual, Sera was playing a portable game system, while Asuha was sitting on top of her suitcase, looking all around. From time to time, she murmured, “Chicago, huh?” to herself, suggesting she wasn’t much of a fan of the White Sox.

From Chicago, they were going to take a private plane to Pittsburgh. There hadn’t been many flights convenient for a connection, so he’d reserved it in advance. If they waited, there would be domestic flights. But Ichiro, who had

just been through a boring eleven-and-a-half-hour flight, wasn't about to allow himself to be subjected to any more passive modes of travel.

Once they'd touched down in Chicago, Ichiro had remembered that he hadn't actually contacted his friend at the lab, so that was what he was doing now. As a result, his California-born friend was hurling strings of profanity at him, a specialty of West Coasters. Naturally, Ichiro was unfazed by them.

"Allow me to explain the circumstances, Charles. There's something I need you to investigate for me before I arrive."

"If you weren't my sponsor, I'd throw you *and* your phone out on your collective asses!" his friend screamed.

"Since I'm the one who provides funding for all your equipment, that would be inadvisable."

Such exchanges summed up their relationship perfectly. It was just about five years ago that his friend had declared that he wanted to start up a robotics lab, and Ichiro had provided the funding for that. That was when Ichiro had just been getting into investing for real, and a portion of his swelling bank account had gotten invested—half for business, half for friendship—into make Charles's dreams come true.

As a result, things were going quite well for Charles. Said dream was to create an autonomous robot maid, so Ichiro was the only proper sponsor he'd found. Apparently, he was currently working on developing artificial intelligence. Ichiro had no particular interest in a maid robot himself, but he'd still asked to be sent one when the prototypes were finished.

He wasn't telling Sakurako about the maid robot, but given the rate at which the development was proceeding, it probably wouldn't be finished until she was already retired—assuming she didn't miss her chance to get married first.

"I want you to investigate whether there's been outside, unwarranted access into your lab's servers," Ichiro said.

"What?"

"I'll tell you the details in an e-mail. If my estimations are correct, an outside program has infiltrated your servers. But if you do find it, please don't delete

it.”

“This is an awful lot to throw at a guy out of the blue,” Charles protested. “I’ll do it if you insist, but...”

“Thanks.”

“You know, I said this before, but I wish you’d told me sooner. Are you the only one coming?”

“No, my cousin and her friend are with us.” Ichiro cast a glance at Asuha and Sera, both looking rather bored. He’d been holding the entire conversation in English, so it likely only confused the two of them.

“Cousin?! You mean Asuha?”

“Yes.”

“Yahoo! Ichiro, she’s still in primary school, right?”

“No, she’s in junior high now.”

“Ah, I see... No, but that’s still okay! Japanese people look young! Please get me a picture, okay?”

“If she gives permission, I shall.”

Ichiro had always been worried that Charles might commit a crime someday. If it meant he would channel that passion of his into a maid robot instead, Ichiro was willing to spend as much money as it took. Pondering his friend’s private fetishes, Ichiro hung up.

“Oh, Itchy, how’d it go?” Asuha asked.

“He wants me to take your picture, Asuha.”

“Huh?!” Asuha seemed flustered, unable to figure out how these things connected. Sera was playing a game with a bored expression, but one eyebrow twitched.

“Now, what shall we do?” Ichiro asked. “We can head to Pittsburgh now if you want.”

“I’m hungry...” Asuha whispered as she stroked her stomach. She had eaten Sera’s meal on the plane as well as her own, since Sera was a light eater, but it

seemed even that hadn't been enough. Did she have a huge appetite, or was she just in the middle of a growth spurt? She was in middle school and an athlete, so perhaps it was just her metabolism.

Ichiro suggested, "Then as long as we're in Chicago, let's find a good pizza place."

"Sounds great!"

"Would you like that, King?" he asked.

"Sure."

They both seemed very laid-back about the whole thing.

In accordance with the requests of Matsunaga and the others, Iris logged in just before 9 A.M.

She felt like she'd been spending a lot more time in the game since summer break had started. Of course, she'd gone out with her friends when they'd invited her, and on days like that, she would easily spend the whole day without logging in at all. But with her parents out all day for work, there was nobody to scold her for staying cooped up in the house all day, so...

While recognizing that her behavior really wasn't healthy, she logged in once again today. The truth was, she had a backlog of new designs she wanted to try, and she was hoping to show them to Nem this time. She was sure she'd get another raking over the coals, but to complain about that would be looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Iris opened her eyes to find herself inside the Red Sunset Knights' guild house, the same place she'd been when she'd logged out the night before. Matsunaga wasn't in sight, but Yuri was already there.

"Morning, Yuri!" she called.

"Morning, Ai." The friends exchanged light smiles and greetings.

Yuri was wearing a gi and point armor, with light equipment on her wrists that was part of a Grapper's style. It was a more mature-looking outfit than she'd worn back when they were first adventuring together. She had asked Iris

occasionally to make her new equipment, but Iris couldn't imagine that her friend's heroic fighting style would gel well with that year's on-trend floral patterns. She was also concerned about trying to blend it with her own and the young heir's high-class(ish) style.

For now, though, Iris was one of the key members of the plan to fight Duplichiro. She was going to send him a string of stinging friend messages to try to monopolize his attention. She was effectively serving as a decoy. Of course, since things were going to get dangerous for her, she'd have Tiramisu, one of the Knights' commanders, guarding her. Yuri had also volunteered to act as bodyguard.

Yuri was a front-line fighter specialized for offense, but there was a big gap in ability between her and the top-level players. Even if she served as a bodyguard, a single attack from Duplichiro might be able to take her down. While Iris was grateful for her friend's sentiment, she had initially refused her out of worry. But Matsunaga had said, "Let's just go with it. It's only a game, after all," and had accepted Yuri's request.

It was true that no matter how badly any of them got beaten, the worst that might happen was that they'd lose their equipment and items.

As examples of people growing too obsessed with VRMMOs and becoming junkies had become more widely known, the tendency of the internet community to disdain people for taking a game too seriously had begun to grow. Matsunaga, for his part, skillfully made use of both philosophies as it suited him: that it was only a game, and that they were pursuing a real-life criminal. Iris had been drawn in by him, too. She didn't know which side Matsunaga really fell on, but it did seem like, despite the exaggerated concept that they were "arresting a criminal's avatar," he was being very easygoing about the whole thing.

"Iris, Yuri, good morning!" Nem logged in with a cheerful greeting.

"Nem... ah, Fuyo. Don't you have work to do?"

"I finished everything that was urgent!" Nem clenched her hands into fists.

She was the CEO and designer for the apparel brand MiZUNO, and perhaps wasn't in any sort of position to be devoting this much time to a game, but she

appeared to have a surprising vitality.

“Nem, are you okay?” Iris asked. “It’s going to be dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine, thank you. I just remembered this morning that I have Immortal status!”

That was true, now that she mentioned it.

Nem hadn’t acquired her avatar through conventional means; Megumi Fuyo had gotten her friend Azami Nono to design a special character especially for her to go in and pick a fight with Iris. In other words, she was a cheat character. She had a collection of Skills and Arts needed to craft things, no combat capabilities whatsoever, and in addition, she had Immortal status. In effect, she was like a child perpetually left out of a game of tag.

Even so, the mission was going to be dangerous. If Duplichiro assaulted Nem the way he’d gone after Tiramisu the other day, striking her down with terrible violence, it could still be a terrifying experience. And Duplichiro’s own actions with King had proven better than anyone that Immortal status couldn’t protect your mental state.

“I understand what you’re saying.” Nem’s expression became more drawn as she talked to the two of them. “Nevertheless, I cannot remain on the sidelines. To simply stand here while someone uses Ichiro’s account and avatar for such mischief...”

Iris let out a sigh. “Fine. Okay, Nem. There’s not that much we can do anyway... but let’s do our best together.”

“I will, Iris!”

“Morning, everyone.” The door opened and Tiramisu entered. As usual, she had the calming air of a mild-mannered woman.

“Morning, Tiramisu.”

Tiramisu wasn’t alone. A small group of Knights had come with her. Their faces were familiar, but there were none of the few famous players who occupied the top echelons of the player base.

“Allow me to explain our route,” Tiramisu said as she unfurled a map on the

desk.

Yuri looked a bit surprised. “They sell maps?”

“The update after the Grand Quest came with a lot of useful items,” Tiramisu explained. “You can buy them in Delve’s NPC shops.”

The map was designed to have a Middle Ages feel to it, but you could also bring up information displays by touching it with your fingertip. It was clearly high technology, but one could write it off as a magic item, perhaps.

As Tiramisu traced the map with her fingertip, the route showed up, displayed in red. They’d be setting out from Delve, where they’d wait for Duplichiro to come after them after caving in to Iris’s provocations. After he arrived, they would then run for the Great Sandsea and take the Sandship north. Their destination was the Doom Range. Here she explained the various points perfect for sneaking and hiding that Tomakomai had discovered over the course of his long days spent in isolation in that area. While repeating provocation and flight where necessary, they’d head for the ravine deep in the territory.

“The canyon is our final destination. That’s where we’ll fight the final battle against Duplichiro.”

It did seem like drawing him out there would keep him from causing trouble with beginner and intermediate players.

“We won’t be entering any cities?” Iris asked.

“Tomakomai advised us on that, too. He said that if we stay too long in combat-prohibited regions, Duplichiro might realize what we’re doing, or even log out. We need to keep him in the game as long as possible.”

Until they learned what Duplichiro really wanted, none of them could fully wipe away their concerns about their ability to keep him occupied. Iris opened her menu window and checked her friend message history.

Iris had already sent a few needling messages last night, and received replies each time. This had allowed them to confirm one thing: It was easy to get a rise out of Duplichiro.

As far as Iris could see, her attempts at provoking him were working, but she

wondered if making him too angry could cause its own problems. Listening to the others speak made it sound like Duplichiro might have more game authority than he'd even used so far. Iris didn't know a lot about computers, but it felt to her like if he wanted to, he could steal their accounts, as well.

Then again, it wasn't good to overthink things.

As Iris shook her head, Nem peered at her in concern.

"Tiramisu, should I send the message now?" Iris asked.

"Yes, I think it's about time we got started." Tiramisu opened a menu window as well to check their schedule. "At the longest, this should take us to a bit past 1 P.M. We won't have time to log out for four hours. Is everyone prepared for that?"

"I'm great," said Iris.

"I'm ready to go," agreed Nem.

"I'm fine," said Yuri.

Tiramisu was phrasing it in a roundabout way, but of course, there was a more crude implication behind it. She was referring to bathroom breaks.

The drive simulation meant that you wouldn't notice it, but the body was still sending signals at all times, and if things got bad enough, the system was programmed to send alarm messages to the player. If hunger or other biological needs got too serious, then it would go past alarm messages to a total severance of signal. The feeling of going from totally full to suddenly hungry, or needing to go to the bathroom, could be quite a cause for panic.

That was why, if a player was planning to stay in the drive for long periods of time, they had to take care of their physiological functions first. Truly passionate players would apparently drive in a diaper, but Iris had no intention of going to those lengths.

The four of them left the guild house, followed by the handful of Knights. Their role was apparently to help Iris and the others run away, and they were prepared to serve as human shields as part of that endeavor. They were wearing rather shabby armor given their level range, most likely so that they

wouldn’t mind losing it to the death penalty.

Iris headed outside while composing her friend message text. She knew that when her mouth opened, abuse tended to pour out of it, but realizing that she could provoke people this cool-headedly made her wonder if she was becoming a bad person. It certainly wasn’t good for her mental state.

“Whoa, Ai, you’re really gonna send that?”

“Iris, that’s vulgar...”

The two had gotten around behind her at some point and peered. Iris unconsciously moved to hide the window. “Hey, don’t look!”

Out on the main street stood a white horse whose saddle had been textured with the crest of the Red Sunset Knights. In this game, steeds were items with very few programmed motions, and there was something creepy about the way it just stood there, stock still, without even fidgeting.

“This is Custard,” Tiramisu said.

It took Iris a minute to realize that was the horse’s name.

Nem tilted her head. “You, *Tiramisu*, have a horse named *Custard*?”

“I named it after a horse I like in a manga.”

“I thought Custard was seal brown.”

“Oh, you know it, Yuri? I wanted a dark horse, but our leader said that my color was white, so...”

“Huh?”

Iris mounted Tiramisu’s horse, while Yuri and Nem mounted another. To deflect attacks targeted at Iris, Yuri stood up on the horse’s saddle, apparently intending to mimic something she’d seen in a kung fu movie once.

“Yuri, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ve got my ‘Equilibrium’ Skill raised to about 50.” Yuri launched into a burst of lithe karate movements, which set Iris’s heart at ease.

At last, Iris received a response from Duplichiro. It sounded like he was nibbling at the bait.

Iris picked her words, calmly and carefully, to slowly fray at her opponent's nerves. It seemed she had a talent for trolling.

After a few tense exchanges, Iris received this message.

Iris, you're in Martial City Delve right now, right? Stay there. I'm going to come talk to you directly.

And there was the bite.

Iris fiddled with her menu window, changing over from her messages to her guild member view screen. She was checking the icon next to Duplichiro's name. He'd previously been in the deepest regions of the Volgund Volcanoes, but now he was "Moving." She also checked his stats, which seemed to have gone up a little bit from yesterday; he must have hunted quite a number of Lizardmen.

"H-He's coming," Iris said nervously.

"Already?" Tiramisu asked. "I suppose he really must be easily baited."

"Well, given the messages you sent him..." Yuri said.

"Wh-What...?"

If he was heading here straight from the Volgund Volcano region, then no matter how fast he flew, it would probably take about an hour. That seemed like a long time, but Iris was expecting him sooner. Ichiro always had Warp Feathers in stock to get around. Once he got to an area where he could use a movement item, he'd be on them instantaneously. Tiramisu and Yuri had been informed of that, too, and Iris could hear the two bracing for battle behind her.

The Knights members around them broke into whispers. As a group, they looked up at the sky, pointing to a single spot within it. Iris did the same. In the blue, clear sky above the Martial City, a single ray of light appeared. It was streaking right towards them.

"Here he is," Tiramisu said, clutching her bridle.

Yuri and Nem both gulped.

Like a meteorite, the light collided with the ground at a low angle and bore its way into the main street. There was a flash and a roar, and the ground shook,

flushing up a massive visual of dust and rubble... though perhaps to reduce burden on the server, the graphics were less detailed than they had been the last few times this had happened.

“Th-That was fast,” Iris said, doing her best to keep up the bluff.

Beyond the whirling dust cloud, a silhouette smoothly rose to its feet. It flapped its dragon wings to cause a damageless wind effect that blew the obscuring walls of sand away. There was no question: this was Duplichiro. He wasn’t smiling that sticky grin of his; he didn’t have much of an expression at all, resorting instead to the “default face” that suggested no emotional input behind it. Yet she could detect the faintest sense of anger welling up from him.

“I simply wanted to correct your mistake,” he said in the same cool tones typically employed by Ichiro Tsuwabuki. “I asked you not to move, yet I see you were planning on running, weren’t you?”

“Unlike you, I have things to do,” Iris said coolly.

“Nonsense,” Duplichiro said. The way he said that, and nothing more, was just like the real Ichiro. “First, your assumption that I have nothing but free time on my hands is greatly mistaken. It is a truly abstract assumption lacking in objective scrutiny. In addition, I can surmise from interpreting your previous messages that you are intending to anger me. Thus, your observation just now, that I have nothing better to do, has no effect on me. It is a truly nonsense comment. It is—”

“You’re *so* mad,” Iris said, interrupting him.

“Nonsense. I am not—”

“You’re so mad, there’s steam rising out of your ears. Look, I told you, I’ve got better things to do, remember? Why should I care if you’re mad? The only reason you could possibly think I care is because you’re really super mad. Right?”

“Nonse—”

“Idiot.”

In that instant, Duplichiro silently unleashed a Fireball. Multiple crimson

spheres rocketed forward, trailing a flashy visual behind them.

The Knights moved into action, gathering in front of Custard to act as a shield against the Fireballs. The attack probably wasn't very powerful, but with the weak armor they were wearing, the damage would likely be fatal. Fortunately, the horses that Yuri and Nem were riding avoided any major damage.

"Iris, well done," Tiramisu whispered. "Keep up the provocations. We need to get out of Delve first."

She grabbed the reins and kicked Custard in the side. The horse let out a little neigh and started running down the main street. Ahead of them, she could see Duplichiro preparing to meet them. But rather than continue to charge, Custard turned its back on Duplichiro and headed into an alley.

"I knew you were mad, idiot!" Iris shouted.

"Yeah, idiot!" yelled Yuri.

"You... foolish person! Very foolish!" Nem scolded.

Yuri and even Nem had joined in on the provocation. Nem had seemed rather hesitant in her choice of words, but they still seemed to have had an effect on Duplichiro. He immediately spread his wings and flew after them.



The city of Delve was laid out on a grid: even if you ran into a side street, it was always easy to find your way back to main thoroughfare. Tiramisu, while choosing the narrowest routes, tugged at the reins to control Custard's movements precisely.

Tiramisu's Horseback Riding and "Swift Rider" Skill levels appeared to be high, which made it hard for Duplichiro to close the gap between them. He seemed to have completely lost his temper, because he continued firing off Fireballs at them as he pursued. His aim was reckless, causing Fireballs to hit the walls and ground around them and spread rubble everywhere.

During the dramatic chase, Yuri served as their shield, repelling Duplichiro's magic attacks. Having applied "Aura Fist," her fists were able to execute Weapon Guards against the incoming Fireballs. Out of the indiscriminately-fired blasts, she was able to identify the few that might actually reach them, and deflected them with her chops.

"Yuri, so cool!" Iris called.

"Thanks."

"I'm taking us back onto the thoroughfare!" Tiramisu cried, then charged back onto the main street exactly as described.

The street was very wide, and Duplichiro, seeming to think he had them now, began firing off even more powerful attack magic Arts than before. Iris cringed.

Yuri slashed her hands through the air to repel the approaching "Spiral Blaze." The deflected attack impacted around them, sending dust clouds and rubble rising once more.

"T-Tiramisu... will we be able to hold out until we reach our destination, the ravine?!" Nem cried.

"I'm not sure. His attacks are more aggressive than I was expecting."

"You think I made him too angry?" Iris asked.

Tiramisu turned back and smiled uncomfortably. "Well, you may have talent for it."

"I don't think that's a compliment..."

The young heir... What on Earth was the young heir off doing, while the account he had put so much time into was on the rampage?

Well, thinking about it wouldn't solve anything, Iris decided, and she began thinking up her next bit of bait.

It was right around that time that said young heir was finally arriving at his own destination.

They were in America; specifically Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It had once been a flourishing steelmaking city, but it had since gained a reputation as a college town for engineering and a host to cutting-edge robotics, biology, and nuclear engineering laboratories. It normally had a 14-hour time difference with Japan, but with daylight savings time in practice, it was currently 13.

That meant that by the time Ichiro reached Pittsburgh, it was already night. But despite the hour, Ichiro wasn't the kind of person who would hold back in carrying out his objective. Without hesitation, he pushed his way to the robotics engineering lab at the center of the city.

"So, Ichiro. How was your flight?" Charles asked the aggravating intruder.

"Hm, I was rather nervous," said Ichiro. "It has been quite a while, and it was night. But the runway lighting made it easier than I thought it would be."

"You flew the plane yourself?!"

Ichiro was walking down the hallway with Charles, a heavyset white man in a lab coat. He was about 20 years older than Ichiro, but in truth, they had graduated from Harvard at the same time. Naturally, they'd chosen different fields; Charles was an engineer. Whenever they talked about majors, Ichiro would always say, "If you wanted engineering, you should have gone to MIT."

"Honestly, why do you always push your way in here?" he griped. "You've always been a pretentious little brat, and I see it hasn't changed."

"Nonsense. I am who I am. That's not going to change anytime soon."

"Last time we spoke, you decided you wanted to research VRMMOs and ended up running off with a room full of equipment!"

“I won’t try to excuse my actions, but there was a reason behind that. I said I wanted *kenkyu*sho—research documents—and my servant thought I said *kenkyu*jo, a laboratory. I immediately realized that might be better, so I asked them to send me your laboratory... equipment.”

“That’s a stupid Japanese joke! You and your *oyaji* gags. Honestly, if you weren’t my sponsor, I’d throw you out on your ass.” With that, Charles cast a glance behind Ichiro.

Two children stood there, looking all around them.

Charles Morgan, director of the Pittsburgh Maid Robotics Laboratory, leaned in to whisper into Ichiro’s ear. “Which one’s Asuha?”

“The one on the right with the long hair.”

“Oho. She’s as cute as I’d expect your cousin to be. Who’s the other?”

“Her friend.”

Both were apparently in junior high. Japanese people really did look very young. By white people’s standards, they would still be in primary school. The mysteries of the Orient. The fountain of youth. The land of gold, Zipang. *Banzai*, baby.

As if noticing Charles’s eyes on her, Asuha drew behind her friend’s back. Said friend looked at him with a glare, then asked a pointed question.

“What are you researching here?” the friend asked in Japanese.

Charles was well-versed in Japanese through his love of “Japanimation,” and he cleared his throat and began his explanation.

“Robots, of course. But not just any robots. Maid robots. It’s any man’s dream.”

“Oh?” The young person looked away, disinterestedly.

Ichiro whispered, “That’s Sera,” which must have been the child’s name.

Sera murmured, “Not games, huh?”

“We have games here, too,” Charles assured the child. “It’s part of our artificial intelligence research. Since games are becoming more intimately

connected to the human experience lately, we have to come up with NPC algorithms to match them."

Then Charles turned back to Ichiro, and began speaking in English again. "For instance, that VRMMO you're playing, Ichiro."

"*Narrow Fantasy Online*."

"Yes, *Narrow Fantasy Online*! I've played it, but the NPC AI routines still have room for improvement."

Sera stared straight at Charles. The child had an androgynous figure that was hard to call either boyish or girlish, with a dark gaze that seemed almost accusatory. A gaze like that caused Charles's most deviant feelings to rear their heads.

"And, um, right. Let's have some coffee first," Charles said, after inviting the three into his personal lab room. The room was a pigsty, with documents scattered everywhere. He could see Asuha and Sera's faces both draw harshly in a wince of pain.

"He wants to know if you want something to drink," Ichiro interpreted into Japanese for the two children, then turned back and spoke in English. "Ah, Charles, I'll take mine black."

While Charles was making some instant coffee, Asuha started cleaning, seeming unable to take the sheer amount of entropy in the room. Ichiro and Sera didn't seem willing to go that far, but Sera had picked up a few scattered documents and was staring at them fervently.

"Sera, that's not anything a child would find interesting..." Charles said with a wince, and Sera looked up, holding the documents.

"Mr. Director. This is an image processor and motion tracer you bought around mid-July."

"Hmm?" Charles couldn't help but do a double-take at the words, which he wouldn't have expected to hear from the mouth of a child. He looked over at Ichiro, who was merely sipping his instant coffee with a cool expression.

"You probably use these in your game AI development arm, right?" Sera

asked. “And does the fact that you’re intentionally using IPU instead of GPU suggest that it’s for VR games? Your lab isn’t creating bots for VRMMO use, is it?”

“H-Hey, Ichiro.”

“Hmm?”

“How is this kid guessing everything just from reading one invoice in English?”

“Sera is a gamer who loves games, no more,” Ichiro said. He added that image processors and motion tracers were used in boosting the performance of Miraive Gears.

Still, Charles thought, the kid was in junior high...

The face of a ten-year-old boy he’d met in college drifted into his mind. Thirteen years later, that same boy was sitting here drinking coffee with a hatefully unflappable smile on his face.

“Sera also plays *Narrow Fantasy Online* with the avatar name Kirihito.”

“Kiri...” Charles hesitated, thinking the name sounded familiar. Then he gasped. “Sera, are you the legendary strike soldier ‘Kiriko’ who struck terror into the hearts of players of the FPS *Code: Assault* three years ago?!”

“Oh, yeah. That’s me.” Sera nodded casually, and Asuha looked up from tidying up to respond.

“Kiryu, you play those, too? We even knew each other three years ago...”

“Then five years ago, what was it... the ‘Kiriel’ that plunged into the world of fighting games and brought all opponents to their knees?!”

“Also me, yeah.”

“But you weren’t the ‘Kirilla’ who took MMOs by storm ten years ago, right?”

“That was my mom.” Sera swept up more of the documents and pulled out a few pages of interest to the gamer.

Asuha, who seemed to have grown exasperated, said, “Kiryu, help me out!” but rebelliously, Sera just replied, “Mr. Tsuwabuki’s taking it easy...”

Still, after a while, the young gamer began helping obediently, apparently

unable to disobey her.

Charles just watched it all in bewilderment.

“*Nante kotta*, panna cotta...” he muttered, reciting a bad old Japanese pun.

“So, Charles. About the favor I asked you...” Ichiro said, smoothly ignoring the gag Charles had put so much effort into.

“R-Right...” Charles responded with a shake of his head.

Over the phone, Ichiro had told him to investigate whether there’d been an illegal access into the laboratory. Charles had found it unlikely, but he had investigated, and had found traces of said access. The lab had been hacked. Charles was genuinely grateful to Ichiro for letting him know.

“It was just like you said, Ichiro. There was an unauthorized access, and ever since then, an unknown program has been running in one of our unused server machines. It’s creeping me out, so I wanted to delete it, but I remembered what you said...”

“Thank you. This all but confirms my speculation.”

Charles had no idea what Ichiro was talking about.

Meanwhile, as Asuha and Sera tidied up the room, Asuha was asking about a term Sera had mentioned before. “Kiryu, what’s a bot?”

“It’s short for robot. Online game characters are controlled by input into a program, so if you set up a program with automated input, you can have a machine that controls your avatar. It’s a simple way to keep leveling up even when you can’t log in due to school or work.”

“Huh? Isn’t that cheating?”

“Yeah, it is. And it puts a huge burden on the server, so lots of games forbid it. *NaroFan* doesn’t have a clear rule on it, though. Given the incredible amount of input data it would require, it has been believed that current bot technology was insufficient to create a bot that could be used in VRMMOs.”

Sera cast another glance at Charles. As one might expect from a legendary gamer, the child knew what they were talking about.

Setting aside whether they were good or bad, bots and macros—programs to autopilot MMOs—had been around for a very long time. In this laboratory, during the process of developing the independent thought algorithms for artificial intelligence, they had had the idea of developing bots that would set goals for themselves and then complete those goals, over and over again. Could they create an artificial intelligence that, given an avatar, could think for itself, take on quests, and proceed through the MMO like any other player? The architecture was assembled, and it had been completed.

Originally, they had developed the bots, partly, to fill in slots in games like FPSes. The completed autonomous action bots, including “HARO9000,” picked up experience at the feet of friendly company. And while they had never quite reached the level of having feelings, they had gained something like individuality with regards to accomplishment of their goal settings.

Currently, the people at the lab were researching ways to customize a few of them to VRMMOs, as well.

“That reminds me. I never asked what this was all about,” Charles added. The small talk would continue forever if he let it, so the director decided to cut to the chase.

Unhurriedly, Ichiro brought the coffee cup to his lips, took a drink, and then spoke again. “I have good news and bad news.”

“Oho, just like a movie, eh?” A grin appeared on the director’s bear-like face. “I’d better hear the bad news first.”

“There’s a chance that your laboratory is being used for hacking in Japan.”

“Bluh!” He instinctively spit out his coffee. It didn’t actually reach Ichiro, but the man still made a face. “Hacking?! You mean we hacked someone, not that we were hacked, right?”

As he asked, Ichiro opened his mouth and began enunciating a line of letters and numbers. It sounded like an incantation, but after some thought, Charles understood it.

“That is your IP address, isn’t it?” Ichiro asked.

“Yes, that is ours, but...”

“I only caught a glimpse of it from the screen of the security supervisor, but I’m positive it’s yours,” Ichiro said. “Three instances of illegal access, every one of them using a VRMMO account. The last one may have infiltrated the management server.”

The director narrowed his eyes. Ichiro was an unpredictable man, but he didn’t seem like the kind of person to fly across the Pacific just to make jokes in bad taste. “You mean they’re using us as a transit point?”

“Not quite, but it’s something like that.”

“But Ichiro, why are you playing cyber detective anyway?”

“The account that was stolen was mine.”

It took Charles quite a lot of effort not to spit out his coffee again. As a result, it went down his windpipe and caused him to choke. “D-Do they know that?”

“I think so.” Ichiro drank down the last of his coffee. His manner was as cool as ever, and there was no trace of anger in it. But the fact that he had come all the way from America to tell Charles about this suggested that he found it quite intolerable. Charles never would have expected Ichiro to get that deep into an online game.

The hacking of their lab, the insertion of the unknown program into the server, and the hacking of the Japanese game company from their lab. They were all tied together. That was why Ichiro had come here. But even so...

“What would the culprit gain by doing all this?” Charles wondered. That was the biggest mystery of them all.

Ichiro fell into thought, as though he wasn’t fully sure yet. Just then, despite it being unlikely that they were listening to the contents of their conversation, Sera plucked out a document from the pile, and whispered...

“They wanted to create an Ichiro Tsuwabuki.”

6 - Noble Son, Reach the Truth

The chase scene was entering its second half. Iris and the others had plunged into the winding mountain roads of the Doom Range. No matter how bad the road, the horses' running performance didn't decline at all. Horses in this game were an excellent way of moving around, but the long period of continuous running and the continuous attacks of the pursuing Duplichiro were shaving their endurance down to the limits.

Yuri was also looking to be at the end of her rope. They had run out of potions and fatigue restorers a little while ago, yet while maintaining her standing balance on horseback, she still continued deflecting Duplichiro's fireballs. Duplichiro himself showed no signs of tiring out. This was surely against the rules.

The situation was looking bad for them. Iris was starting to feel a creeping unease inside her. The mountain roads had more ups and downs and obstacles than the streets of Delve or the Sandsea they had crossed earlier, which meant that it was more suitable terrain for the flying Duplichiro. It was questionable whether they'd be able to reach the ravine or not. She regretted that she couldn't contribute anything physical to the fight.

Iris's role had been to draw Duplichiro's aggro. She could say with total sincerity that she had fulfilled that role. Her aggressive vocabulary, honed to perfection through her high school (or more precisely, trade school) girl trash talk, had combined beautifully with her natural-born talent to create a perfect weapon for psychological attack. To be honest, she wasn't happy about it, but it had caused Duplichiro's rage to pierce not just the roof, but the stratosphere. Maybe he wasn't good at expressing the emotion of anger. His expression looked calm, but it would be obvious to anyone that he was in the grips of uncontrollable fury.

"Yuri!" Nem called.

“I-I’m okay... Nem...”

The system was set up so that excessive exhaustion would actually put a small burden on a player’s state of mind. It wasn’t enough to deeply influence their stamina, just enough to add spice. But right now, Yuri was clearly having trouble standing.

Shaking in anger, Duplichiro slowly closed the distance over the slope. He unleashed his umpteenth Spiral Blaze. Yuri calmly traced its path with her eyes and deflected it with a chop. Just then...

“Ah.”

Duplichiro’s movement accelerated. He was gliding. The distance between them closed in an instant to a single meter’s length. He had entered melee range. Yuri was still in the cooldown time for Weapon Guard, and her response didn’t come in time.

At last, Duplichiro’s punch dealt a fatal blow to Custard. The system shouldn’t have had mechanics for a horse to trip, but perhaps in an exception, its leg got caught, throwing its two riders onto the mountain road. The horse’s body toppled onto the gravel road and then lay there perfectly still.

Iris let out a shriek as she rolled down the slope. Tiramisu used her “Soft Falling” Skill to right herself in an instant.

“Custard!” Tiramisu called her beloved steed’s name, but as an item that had reached zero durability, it showed no response. But she set aside her emotional pain (what of it there was), and turned to face Duplichiro. He spread his wings and slowly descended, his expression gradually returning to its usual grin.

“Tiramisu! Ai!” Yuri called.

The horses on which Yuri and Nem were riding stopped suddenly, and the both of them were thrown off. Nem hit the gravel road face-first, but they had no time to worry about her.

Despite her exhaustion, Yuri struck a fighting stance, while Tiramisu drew her Celestial Sword. They were absolutely ready to fight. But there was a slight trace of nervousness on Tiramisu’s face, and as Duplichiro slowly started moving closer, she inched back, maintaining the distance.

“A wise judgment.” Duplichiro nodded. “You can’t beat me. This has already been proven. It would be nonsense on both sides for us to repeat the same result.”

Iris remembered the fight between Duplichiro and Tiramisu from the day before. King’s interference had pushed him back then, but prior to that, it had been a one-sided battle for which the term “loss” did not seem fully adequate. To put it plainly, Tiramisu was afraid. The fear of losing again the way she had yesterday was probably rearing its head.

Iris could sympathize. Though she had worked out her feelings about it, she had been through the same thing herself. She hadn’t actually been hit that time, and it had taken place in a space where she couldn’t be hit, but the fear that came from being on the receiving end of unfiltered malice and violence was a hard thing to brush off for a modern-day person. It was a reminder of the game’s separation from reality in the worst possible way.

Nevertheless, the gallant side of “Saint” Tiramisu allowed her to put one foot forward, after a struggle. Yuri probably couldn’t really see her struggle, yet maintaining her stance, she spoke: “Tiramisu, take Ai... and go...”

Iris could tell she was holding back from almost accidentally revealing their destination. Yuri was saying she would hold Duplichiro off.

“I cannot do that. I should...” Tiramisu refused to back down. She was one of the Knights’ top aces and the game’s greatest tank. She couldn’t simply run off and leave the fight to a character who was not only of lower level, but was also terribly exhausted. No matter how good a fight Yuri might give Duplichiro, the result would be the same.

There was no need to drive herself that far for a mere game, Iris thought. But she couldn’t just say that. Yuri was trying to protect her friend.

Duplichiro remained where he was, grinning, wreathed in the easy confidence of the powerful. He even seemed to be enjoying their internal conflict. But that wasn’t long to last, either. He clenched his fists and proceeded forward.

Yuri remained in her stance, while Tiramisu kept her sword held up. It was then that the black wind blew past.

A chain of seven attacks assaulted Duplichiro, one after another. Duplichiro met each attack with his fists as if he could see them coming. Not one strike from the flurry of blades managed to make contact with Duplichiro. A dust cloud kicked up, and before them, a black coat flapped in the breeze.

“Is that...” Iris breathed.

“King Kirihito? No...”

There were seven of them.

Seven men, all identical. The same weapon. The same stance. Prizing showiness over all, their techniques were refined in a way that seemed somehow overdone. Their backs were to the group, so it was impossible to see their expressions, but it was easy to guess that they were looking very satisfied with themselves.

It was The Kirihitters.

“Go on ahead, everyone!” Kirihito (Leader) shouted.

“Don’t forget that mobs spawn on this field, too!”

“The fewer people you have, the more dangerous it will be!”

“Now, hurry!”

“If each of us holds out one second, then we’ll buy you seven seconds!”

That’s too short! At least try for two seconds apiece! Iris mentally screamed, barely managing to keep the complaint from finding voice.

Tiramisu and Yuri nodded to each other, and Nem took Iris’s hand. They raced down the mountain road together. When they were on foot, there were shortcuts and hiding places not available to them on horseback. While the men were holding out, the women managed to slip down a side path.

“Th-Thanks!” Iris cried out with the most feeling she could muster, while the group of men in black coats each held up a hand, their backs still turned. Now all that was left to do was run without looking back. Nem seemed to be wearing high heels, but in terms of data, they were standard boots, and thus didn’t provide any particular hindrance to running down the mountain road.

A perfect chorus of voices spoke up from behind them. “We are The Kirihitters! We raise our swords for justice! We swing our blades for frie— blaaaargh!”

“They’re too weak!” Yuri screamed.

“No! It’s Duplichiro that’s too strong!” Tiramisu cried as loud as she could, preserving the Kirihitters’ dignity.

As the four of them ran as fast as they could down the mountain road, an unsettling sound of beating wings reached their ears. It was Duplichiro. But they didn’t even have time to react to this realization before the Fireball he had unleashed had hit the rocks nearby.

He’d caught up already. The seven Kirihitters hadn’t even lasted seven seconds. With a powerful enemy in front of them, Iris’s expression became severe.

“We need to buy more time! No matter what it takes!”

Yuri began, “If I have to, Ai, I’ll act as a shield...”

But Iris pulled her back quickly. “No!”

Iris was the one to be protected. Tiramisu and Yuri’s job was to make sure she made it to the planning area safely. Iris’s job was to survive. In that light, maybe she was wrong to try to restrain her, yet Iris could do nothing else.

“I may have said ‘no matter what it takes,’ but I won’t watch a friend die in front of me!” Iris screamed.

“Does that mean the seven who just died aren’t your friends?”

“They’re all my friends!” she shouted. “I just forgot!” She wouldn’t know what label they preferred without asking them.

“I shall help you, too,” said Nem.

“Thanks, but I’m not sure what you can do...”

Nem stepped forward decisively.

Just then, Duplichiro, grinning down at them from the sky, focused magic in both hands. It was clear to all of them that he was preparing to release his

ultimate fire magic, Spiral Blaze.

Nem's account had a unique ID.

The devs had set all of her stats to an absurdly high level, and she had the "Immortal" status which meant she couldn't be hurt in a fight, but she also couldn't take any combat-like actions.

Still, Nem's gaze was sincere, and she spoke with quiet passion: "I have been thinking all this time. Iris, I cannot do a single thing to make Ichiro happy. But I will do anything to protect his good name." And then, turning her gaze to Iris, she continued. "Iris, you are my friend."

"Nem..."

What a sweet woman she was. Forgetting all the scorn she had heaped on her when she had first met, Iris now saw Nem as an almost saintly figure. Why did someone so good have to like the young heir? The world was full of contradictions.

Despite the emotion of the moment, Iris hadn't forgotten that the light was focusing in Duplichiro's palms. She could tell that Tiramisu and Yuri were getting antsy beside her.

"Fuyo, I really respect you," she said. "Both as a designer and as a woman."

"Really, Iris. You're making me blush..."

"So, um, Nem..."

"Yes?"

As Iris said her next words, she put her thought into action without a moment's hesitation. "I'm sorry."

"Ah?"

Duplichiro unleashed a Spiral Blaze from his hands. Iris got around behind Nem and ducked. The torrent of flame swallowed the two up and scorched everything that lay beyond. But despite being engulfed by flames, the two avatars remained solid. It was dicey for a minute, but Nem's silhouette had managed to shield the slender Iris.

It was just as she'd thought: "Immortal" status could nullify any elemental property. That meant that not even Spiral Blaze's piercing property could penetrate Nem's body. As long as she was standing behind Nem, she was invulnerable against any attack.

Nem let out a scream. "Ah, Iris! D-Don't you realize what you're doing?" It probably hadn't hurt her at all, but the fear she felt was real, at least.

"Sorry, sorry! Nem, I'm an evil person!" The tears that were streaming down Iris's cheeks were sincere.

Yuri watched the scene unfold from behind a rock, but hearing the word "evil" got her thoughts racing. It triggered words in the back of her mind from the games and manga she liked.

A man said, "If there's evil in the world, it comes from men's hearts."

A man said, "Evil is crushing the weak to serve your own needs."

Another man said, "The darkest evil of all comes from those who don't realize their own evil."

Iris fulfilled them all.

"Mr. Shaga! Mr. Shaga, please, wake up!" Edogawa cried.

"Mgh..."

Shaken by Edogawa, the lawyer Shunsaku Shaga eventually woke up. He was in the Thistle Corporation office. He was on the tall side, with shaggy hair that made him resemble a now-deceased hard-boiled actor, and had come to Thistle on the invitation of Ichiro Tsuwabuki. He was, as described, a skilled lawyer with a terrible personality.

"Oh, Edogawa. Morning already?" Shaga asked.

"Yes, morning already! How long were you planning to sleep?"

"That's right, we've got a busy day today, eh? You think you'll be able to take the system back?"

"Almost all of it. But not the most important part, the account information."

In other words, there was no way to freeze Ichiro Tsuwabuki's account, which was currently in operation.

The time limit that Shunsaku Shaga had given them was a bit after noon today. At the latest, they had to issue their company apology press conference for allowing the hacking by then. If they couldn't take the system back from the hacker before then, trust in Thistle would plummet, and might never be restored. They'd already contacted various media organizations, and they couldn't put off the scheduled press conference now.

Shaga gnawed on a cigarette as he mumbled to himself. "Well, I have a friend at a newspaper company. Writes pretty extreme articles. Maybe I can grease the gears to get a positive article written for us. Though it won't be easy..."

"Another friend of Mr. Tsuwabuki's?" Edogawa asked.

"Yeah, an old friend. The three of us were peas in a pod. Used to run a detective company together. Remember that big artificial island, Megafloat, in Tokyo Bay? We were feared over there."

It seemed hard to imagine, but not impossible. The rich man, the lawyer, and the reporter. For these three people who should never work together to collude as a detective agency suggested a very strange set of circumstances.

"You've contacted the payment proxy company?"

"They can shut down the *NaroFan* payment system a bit after noon, probably."

"Great," Shaga said. "Even if the culprit's not after money, you can't be too careful at times like these."

Edogawa frowned as he heard those words.

"Hmm, is something wrong?"

"No, it's just, yesterday, President Nono and I checked the server and the data transfer records again, and..."

There was something he was concerned about. It concerned the incident that had taken place about a month ago, when Ichiro Tsuwabuki had summoned an excessive number of microtransaction items which had put a huge burden on

the data bus. He'd already told Shaga that during that time, a large amount of information had been sent to the outside world, hidden within the immense data transaction. The opinion of the group up until then had been that it must have been important passwords related to system management authority.

But that wasn't the case.

When Azami had first learned the truth, she had been disbelieving, but investigated. As a result, she had found a history of one ingeniously disguised access after another. The dates all pointed to a new truth.

"So, who the hell leaked it?" Shaga asked suspiciously, and Edogawa responded.

"An artificial intelligence developed by Azami Nono. And likely the one behind this account hack."

"She's called Rosemary," Ichiro said in Japanese so that all present could understand.

The final puzzle piece had been snapped into place by Sera's speculation, "They wanted to create an Ichiro Tsuwabuki." Ichiro had already been gathering proof as to the identity of the culprit, but only the motive had remained opaque until Sera's words had brought it all together.

"Isn't Rosemary a program?" Asuha asked in confusion.

"She is. She's a learning artificial intelligence developed by Azami Nono. She amasses knowledge, asks questions, and attains new knowledge by working through those questions. When one actively works to increase one's own knowledge, that knowledge becomes intelligence. Eventually they may mature enough to be on the level of us humans."

"The Ten Sages, eh?" Charles agreed, also in Japanese. "The bots my lab's developing were created by that MIT graduate, too. We built on the foundations of the Ten Sages that Azami Nono left behind."

"Rosemary likely entered your lab's server as a program planning to make contact with a bot that used the same architecture," said Ichiro, "in order to duplicate me, the strongest player in the game."

Sera's eyebrow twitched at those words, but Ichiro continued regardless.

Rosemary, who had been able to amass knowledge of the players in the game as one of the Ten Sages, had first become interested in Ichiro Tsuwabuki after the Iris Brand incident. Then, with the events of the Grand Quest, she had decided she wanted to "create" an Ichiro, and had merged her own data with the immense data bus generated by his microtransactions to copy herself onto an unused server in this maid robot laboratory.

Naturally, the data Rosemary was composed of was immense. It had taken multiple uploads to copy herself, but at last, she had finished it.

She had already been concocting plans to send the bot being developed by this lab into the VRMMO, but at this time, Rosemary had begun raising her selected bot with the information she had about Ichiro Tsuwabuki. Yet her "knowledge" still could not fully comprehend the fundamentals behind Ichiro's behavior, so she'd used the decoy Rosemary she had left behind in Thistle to try a conversation with him.

"And in the end, she stole your account, Itchy?" Asuha asked.

"Perhaps. Maybe she wanted to become the real thing, or maybe she just got sick of trying. But things didn't go the way she wanted, so Rosemary stole my account so that she could get it to act more like me. And in the course of doing that, she ended up taking over the systems of Thistle itself. Or something like that."

With Charles's guidance, the group had already arrived at the server machine they expected Rosemary had retreated into. There were various other machines, big and small, lined up around it, all making an eerie running noise.

Ichiro questioned the server machine enshrined in front of him.

"Well, Rosemary. Do you like it?"

A few moment's later, a woman's voice came out of the speaker.

"Yes, Ichiro. It's just as you said it was."

Like the Mediterra Demon Sea, the Doom Range hadn't been mapped out or explored much in depth yet. This was primarily because most players had

known that the vast Delve Necrolands would be the site of the next Grand Quest, so most of them had been focusing on it instead. Now that the Necrolands had been conquered, the Explorers were gradually starting to expand into these other fields.

There had been one eccentric, however, who had used this place as his base of operations from the start.

The hero who was said to have never logged out once since the service began: the High Elf Philosopher Tomakomai. His reputation, race, class, and intellectual bearing all combined to add to the air of mystery around the character's player.

Much of their plan had been formulated based on Tomakomai's advice. He had been playing solo for so long here in the Doom Range that he knew it inside and out, including the ravine in which most of the players were currently gathered.

There were a small group of players standing in the ravine itself. These were the Red Sunset Knights—Stroganoff the Monstrous, "Baron" Gazpacho, "Demon" Gorgonzola, and "Shooting Star" Parmigiano-Reggiano—the damsel player Amesho (who had over 2,000 friends), the previously-mentioned Tomakomai, and the slightly sinister mercenaries Taker and Sorceress. Matsunaga wasn't among them, for reasons of his own.

Lined up along the top of the ravine stood the elite squadrons intended to mount the initial attack on Duplichiro, most of whom had been recruited through Amesho's connections. She'd called around one fifth of her friends—400 players—chosen more for the accuracy and range of their magic and missile weapons than for their attack power. They'd set up camp along the highest places along the ravine, where they stood waving fans with super-deformed pictures of Amesho and magical glow rods (sold in Glasgobara). Some of the more rabid fans had even created made-to-order happi coats.

"What is this, a concert?" Taker asked, voicing the gripe that most of them were thinking.

"Aw, nah," Amesho said. "If I was gonna give a concert, I'd easily attract 5,000."

It was hard to believe, given that that would represent almost half of the

game's active users, but Amesho was as smiling and sincere as always. Given that she sent regular messages to the developers asking them to raise the friend limit, it was easy to believe she had even more than 2,000 friends in waiting.

"They're a bit later than expected. I hope Tiramisu is all right," Stroganoff said, checking the time.

It was already after 1 P.M. According to the plan, Iris's party should be here around now.

The chatter among the ranged squadron mounted on the cliffs suddenly grew more intense. Then someone shouted above the din, "They're here!"

It was time for the big fight. The group all readied their weapons and looked in the direction indicated.

Dodging through Duplichiro's attacks, Iris and the others came running. It looked like Tiramisu and Yuri were both safe, too. Nem was with them also, for some reason... but their doubts about her presence were immediately explained away when they saw how, each time Duplichiro attacked, she threw herself in front of the blow. It was true that she had "Immortal" status, but her nimble movements in casting herself into danger were hard to reconcile with the image of the president of a high-class fashion brand.

"Leader's acting as a shield?" Sorceress muttered.

"Former leader," Taker corrected her.

"But she does seem quite energized. It's good to see."

"I just mew that Nem and Iris would make good friends," Amesho said, nodding to herself knowingly.

The women sprinted into the ravine with the last of their energy as Duplichiro's barrage of magical attacks exploded on the ground around them. Just as it was seeming like the "Nem Barrier" couldn't possibly block them all, Tomakomai threw his glasses aside. No one knew exactly what he was going to do, but it was easy to guess what else he was casting away: His reason.

"Screeeeeeeeeeeeee!" Tomakomai let out a screech like a bird of prey, and

with his flowing mane of hair disheveled, he launched himself at Duplichiro.

He lashed out with “Burst Penetration,” one of the ultimate techniques of the Grappler class, which completely ignored defense bonuses and modifiers to deal pure damage. The daring-yet-savage demeanor seemed about as far from his main class, Philosopher, as one could get... or was this was the final plateau to which his meditation had guided him?

The move landed, intertwining with “Smash Hit” to send Duplichiro’s body flying back like a rag doll. Iris’s mouth dropped open at the sight as a cat-eared Anthromorph landed lightly beside her.

“Great job me-out there!” Amesho said, smiling brightly.

A group of fighters with high HP, including Gazpacho and Stroganoff, broke in to serve as shields and secure a path out for them. Tomakomai picked up his glasses as he led the fleeing Yuri away, lending her his shoulder.

“For now, get to the center,” he said. They all nodded in agreement.

Iris and Nem ran for the place Tomakomai had indicated, a wide-open area at the center of the ravine. Tomakomai and Yuri followed. Tiramisu and Amesho were keeping Duplichiro at bay, while Stroganoff and Gazpacho held up the rear.

Of course, Duplichiro wasn’t just going to sit idly by. He immediately extracted himself from the ravine wall he was buried in and unleashed a spell, but the “Anti-Magic Field” being maintained from afar by Gorgonzola and Sorceress reduced the damage considerably. By the time the spell reached its target, Amesho, the ferocious inferno had dimmed to a candle’s light, which flickered out without even penetrating the high-quality armor she was wearing. (This too, reportedly, she had received from a friend).

Duplichiro then spread his wings, and in a single smooth motion, he dove towards the eight of them.

“Now!” Tomakomai shouted.

In that instant, Gorgonzola used “Cancel Enchant” to purge the barrier’s ongoing effect, and a rain of arrows and magic fell from the sky. As Duplichiro looked up at it, his expression was not shock. It was that same blank expression

that suggested vague anger, and his momentary hesitation, stemming from some unidentifiable frame of mind, could have proven fatal.

Waves of ranged and magic attacks were all targeted at the lone figure of Duplichiro, yet not one of them dealt any damage. He swept aside the assailing arrows with his bare hands. His movements were precise, without a millimeter of excess. He had clearly grown since his fight with King.

Was he impatient? Irritated? Either way, Duplichiro spread his wings and took flight. His shocking analytical and decision-making abilities let him weave his hitbox precisely between the attacks streaming at him. He was going after the platforms along the ravine walls where groups of players were hiding.

“H-Hey!”

“He’s coming this way!”

Duplichiro descended, kicking up a cloud of dust on the narrow platform. Then the players watched as he slowly rose to his feet.

The players were afraid, shaken. Yet they had joined the battle knowing this would happen. Even as Duplichiro began approaching, seething with silent anger, their attacks did not relent. Duplichiro continued deflecting every attack, slapping back players, batting aside spells, and after taking them down to the brink of zero HP, throwing them into the ravine without a fragment of mercy.

“Waaagh!”

“Yeeee!”

“Amesho, marry meeee!”

Falling damage was applied as the avatars hit the ground, causing their bodies to shatter like glass. About one in ten died professing their undying love to Amesho, but the target of those affections herself did nothing but pray for their happiness in the afterlife.

“Amesho, you certainly are popular...” Nem whispered, glassy-eyed.

“I’ll never forget any of the people who died for me,” she responded, ever the perfect damsel player.

With the continual one-sided player-killing, it took only minutes for all the

players on the platform to fall. As Duplichiro flew away, the ranged squadrons that had ceased attacking let out another concentrated rain upon him.

“But as long as he’s up there, we can’t attack.” Stroganoff gritted his teeth, clenching his fingers around his magical sword, Sour Cream.

Taker mimicked the gesture. They were specialized for close-range combat and couldn’t keep up with Duplichiro, who could move in three dimensions. Only Gorgonzola and Parmigiano could contribute to the long-range attacks.

“Th-This is going to work... right?” Iris asked nervously.

“No need to worry. He’s a player character like the rest of us,” Tomakomai said with the smile of a confident intellectual.

Minutes passed. Players fell. Professions of love to Amesho went ignored. Then at last, the time came.

“Graaah!” The final Elf Ranger on the platform released his arrow, and had it struck away. He had watched one player after another reduced to zero HP, but now it was his turn. They were all jealous.

“I really hope we can get evidence that Duplichiro’s Immortal status is gone,” Iris said, voicing the general opinion of the group.

Duplichiro, perhaps no longer needing to bother with Weapon Guard, clenched a fist as he walked towards the final man. Dressed in light armor as he was, even a light punch would be near-fatal to the man. Duplichiro grabbed him by the neck and held him up against the wall.

“Ah... ghh...” the Elf sputtered, but he was ready to resist to the end. He pulled the dagger from his belt and struck out. It happened so quickly that Duplichiro couldn’t guard in time. The number “1” popped up above Duplichiro’s head.

“I did it!” the man cried out in triumph, despite the hand around his throat.

Duplichiro’s anger swelled. “%$*!”

Letting out a string of characters that indicated censored profanity, Duplichiro threw the man into the ravine.

The Ranger continued laughing right up until the moment when the falling

damage exhausted the last of his HP. “I won! Amesho, marry me!”

“Naw,” she responded. But the avatar had shattered before the response could reach him. Whether or not that was a good thing for him was left to the others to speculate.

The nameless Ranger’s lone damage point, slipping through Duplichiro’s Weapon Guard, had been a tremendous morale boost for the others. They knew now, for certain, that Duplichiro’s Immortal status had been lifted, which meant that as long as they continued dealing damage, eventually, they could win.

“Well done,” Duplichiro said, with superficial intellectualism. “Iris, was this your plan from the start? It appears that my rational attempt to correct your mistake has backfired.”

“Are you still trying to pretend you aren’t super mad?” she responded in exasperation. She remembered a moment later that she didn’t actually have to troll him anymore, but the group silently urged her on. Iris steeled herself.

“Nonsense. I am not mad at all. I am merely...”

“Merely what? What?” she said. “Say it. You’re a child, aren’t you? I mean, the young heir is, too, but what you’re doing now, where you’re agonizing over how to appear totally strong and cool? It’s basically the lamest thing ever.”

“Nonsense,” Duplichiro said. “I have a great deal of knowledge, as well as calm and precise judgment. Not even Ichiro Tsuwabuki is a match in that regard.”

“See? This is the stuff that makes you so lame,” Iris said scornfully.

Once she’d started speaking, there was no turning back. Maybe she really did have a talent for this. While feeling a measure of disgust with herself, she made a decision not to hold back at all.

“You just want to prove to everyone that you have ‘calm and precise judgment,’ but you couldn’t even do that right. You really can’t stand not being acknowledged, can you? I guess that’s an internet gamer mindset for you. You don’t want to be whoever you are in the real world, so you’re doing everything you can to act strong so that the people here will buff up your ego. And that’s

enough to make you feel better about yourself? Are you stupid? You can use the young heir's form to become stronger all you want, but you'll never stop being who you are!"

The merciless blade of her words cut deep into Duplichiro's heart, and even started to inflict some collateral damage on their side. A cold sweat formed on Stroganoff's brow, while Gorgonzola clutched his heart and cringed. Taker and Sorceress averted their gazes awkwardly, and even Yuri's eyes had gone cold. Tomakomai and Amesho didn't seem to mind much, while Nem seemed utterly entranced by her dear best friend's rant.

But most of all, the words had an effect on their own speaker, Iris. In other words, it was a double-edged sword.

After her setback in the real world, which wouldn't acknowledge her talent as a designer, she had run away and sought escapism here in the game. The young heir had acknowledged her, and now her name was getting out there. But no matter how strong she acted here as a result, the truth remained the truth.

She had no talent or taste. She hadn't moved any closer to her dream.

She had to keep moving forward, as King Kirihito had done, so that the game version of herself would no longer be a lie. This was another source of the venom in Iris's words.

"Listen to me!" she snarled. "You wouldn't be anything without that 'calm and precise judgment.' Your roleplay and performance are crap, and even though you play tough, it's clear to everyone how you really feel. You say 'nonsense' in the stupidest places, you smile like that creep Matsunaga, and even though you looked so smug about cheating, when King had his way with you anyway, you almost pissed yourself! You're nothing but a self-satisfied little child, and *that* is why we call you *Duplichiro*!"

"Graaaaaaaah!" Duplichiro let out a roar, and focused magic power in his right arm.

Nem moved protectively in front of Iris, while at the same time, Taker and Stroganoff rushed forward.

Duplichiro spread his wings to dodge the waves of attacks at his left and right

flanks, while striking out with his powerful fire spell “Sword of Surt” at the ground below.

“And *that* is why we call you *Duplichiro*!”

Charles had just put the *NaroFan* connection that Rosemary was linked to up on the screen. It was in that exact instant that Iris’s cry resounded through the room.

Asuha clung to Ichiro in surprise, while Sera calmly endured.

Ichiro smiled in satisfaction. He always felt this way when he heard one of Iris’s angry rants.

“It is really amazing, though,” Sera said.

Asuha tilted her head. “You mean Iris?”

“Oh, um, she’s amazing, too. But this image...”

The sensory data of Ichiro Tsuwabuki, which was being controlled by the bot, was being converted into an image on the screen. This information, when outputted through a Miraive Gear in the standard way, typically had to pass through an image processor and be converted to special quantum information. To project such an image as a movie or picture would require a totally different process, and to be able to convert it to such a high-quality image would require lots of skill and machines with extremely high specs.

Sera rattled off all of this technically information smoothly, but Asuha was totally clueless.

Ah, but back to Rosemary.

“Rosemary. Is it true that Duplichiro is a VR gameplay-oriented artificial intelligence that you trained personally?” Ichiro purposefully avoided using the word “bot.”

“Yes,” the AI said. “But I control the fundamental algorithm for its actions.”

“Does that mean that about half of what Duplichiro is saying and doing reflects your personal feelings, Rosemary?” Ichiro asked.

Rosemary said nothing. She may have been feeling awkward.

It was true that Duplichiro's words and actions were far from noble detachment. To the contrary, Iris's provocations had caused him to completely lose his cool. In addition, he had been humiliated by Sera, which added an extra layer of awkwardness if Rosemary shared his consciousness.

"Hey, Ichiro." Charles tapped him on the shoulder.

Ichiro nodded. "Yes, I know." He had to get her to give back control of the gameplay-oriented intelligence HARO9000, as well as authority over the Thistle Corporation server. Once that was done, Duplichiro's rampage would stop, and the serial account hacking incidents would finally be over once and for all.

"Ichiro." Rosemary spoke his name as well. "Ichiro."

"I cannot approve of what you've done," Ichiro said. "You've caused a great deal of trouble for President Azami, you know."

"Nonsense," Rosemary said. "You are the one who said I should determine rules for myself, Ichiro."

"Oh, that? I may have been a little hasty, then. Perhaps I shouldn't have said that to you while you were still maturing."

"Ichiro."

She was saying his name an awful lot. Ichiro found it a little bit strange. Asuha seemed to sense something off about it, too, as after a moment's shock, she narrowed her eyes at him.

Ichiro was the reason Rosemary had decided to do this.

How had she arrived at such an idea? Why had she decided to "create" Ichiro Tsuwabuki? Ichiro knew that "she" had had a great interest in him, but it seemed the emotional development of President Azami's artificial intelligence had far outstripped Ichiro's expectations.

"Ichiro, I..." There was a hint of passion behind the digitized voice.

Ichiro allowed himself the rare indulgence of a sigh.

"Itchy... did you make another girl cry?" Asuha asked.

“Nonsense,” he replied. But he didn’t fully believe it. It was starting to look like persuading her was going to take an awfully long time.

The Sword of Surt was blocked by the spells of Gorgonzola and Sorceress, but its caster merely landed silently, about to follow up with another magic attack. But in that same instant, there was a visual of blood spray from both of his arms, and the spell activation was forcibly canceled.

A whisper ran through the crowd. The eyes of all assembled looked around, and spotted shadows leaping acrobatically away. By the time they realized this was a surprise attack utilizing “Hiding,” the assassins had all lined up in a neat row: a mysterious squadron wearing chain mail and noh masks.

“Wh-What?!” For some reason, it was Gorgonzola who expressed surprise. “The Shinobi Army of the Dual Serpents! They really do exist!”

“The tempo’s a little off for that line right now, though,” a smooth voice commented.

The Elf Scout Matsunaga in his Hide Coat had finally shown himself. The attention that had been previously focused on Iris now converged on him. Iris never liked having people staring at her, so she didn’t exactly mind. But she did feel a little annoyed at the tendency Matsunaga had of always stealing the spotlight.

Duplichiro’s expression remained indignant as he turned his attention towards Matsunaga along with the rest of them. It was hard to say if it had saved Iris’s life, but either way, his aggro was being temporarily diverted.

“You had me scared for a minute there,” Yuri breathed.

Sorry, Iris thought in response.

“Ah, first, a few formalities. It’s good to see you, Mr. Duplichiro. I am Matsunaga.”

“Matsunaga, that is not my name,” Duplichiro said.

“Isn’t it? But it doesn’t quite feel right to call you Mr. Tsuwabuki, so I must refer to you as Mr. Duplichiro.” Matsunaga gave him a low bow as he spoke. He

probably wasn't trying to provoke him, but the words still came off as incredibly abrasive. Iris cautioned herself not to take any lessons from him.

"Hey, Matsunaga, where's Kirsch?" Iris asked.

"Just wait. Everything in its time," Matsunaga said, silencing Iris, who was now reduced to a bystander. "Mr. Duplichiro. Well, I don't feel like asking what you're after, but I hope that you're aware that what you're doing is against the rules."

"Nonsense. The rules... are up to me to decide," Duplichiro said.

It sounded like the traditional phrase Ichiro used to dismiss a subject, but at the same time, it seemed fundamentally different. Although Iris couldn't tell exactly what the difference was. Still, it seemed Duplichiro's psychology had been quite rattled by all of this. Had her psychological attack had its intended effect?

"Aah, this isn't going well, is it?" Matsunaga scratched his cheek, laughing frivolously with his superficial smile still in place. "Well, that's all right. There's someone here who wants to fight you, though. Do you feel up for it?"

"Nonsense. I will accept any challenge from anyone."

Something about this seemed off to Iris. The person Matsunaga was referring to was Kirschwasser, whom she knew had been training in secret. But the way he had put it made it sound like he was going to duel Duplichiro one-on-one.

No matter what training he'd undergone, how could Kirschwasser, a previously mid-range player, possibly fight Duplichiro alone? Wouldn't it be more effective to throw every player they had at him? It was a mercenary way of thinking, to be sure, and a misguided one. Matsunaga saw this situation as entertainment. He was doing this because he thought of it all as simply a game.

"Mr. Matsunaga, this feels a bit..." Tiramisu and Gorgonzola seemed to feel the same way Iris did. They all felt they should discuss this together.

"Now, now, no need to worry," said Matsunaga. "Everything in its proper time. We should enjoy this while we can. Here he is now."

They could hear rhythmical hoof beats in the distance. It was Kirschwasser's

steed, Green Oukaou.

While listening to the sound, Iris thought about the friendly silver-haired Knight. In real life, he was probably quite a bit younger than he looked here, but he always acted every bit the gentleman he seemed. Iris secretly respected him a great deal. And while he wasn't opposed to engaging in PvP... even setting the difference in power levels aside, it was hard to imagine he could fight his master's avatar with all his strength and genuinely try to defeat him. He seemed like the kind of person whose kindness would always be his undoing, regardless of how much training he went through.

Then she turned around, and everything she had been thinking immediately dropped out of her mind.

The Knight's colors had changed completely. He had gotten new armor. This stood to reason; as a character leveled up, the limits on what armor they could wear increased, allowing them to purchase better and better equipment. His armor, as lacquer black as his horse, reflected the faint sunlight in an eerie, demonic way, and his expression, severe and tensed for the upcoming battle, was almost unrecognizable as the Kirschwasser she knew. She wondered for a moment if he had been the victim of an account hack, too.

Last of all, the eyes that had once been pale blue were now tinged with a blood-crimson glow, giving the impression of a Pale Rider staring straight into her soul.

"I've created quite a monster myself, you see," Matsunaga said earnestly. It was indeed terrifying, but she was forced to wonder why he'd changed the eye color on top of everything.

He arrived.

Kirschwasser dismounted from Green Oukaou, who seemed to somehow have swelled in size, and set foot upon the ground. A dangerous-seeming aura visual emanated from him, many times stronger than that of the Devil Zombie they had seen just a week ago.

"M-Mr. Kirsch..."

"Iris." He didn't look at her, but Kirschwasser did respond. "Do not worry. I

will win...” He let out a sinister chuckle. “...with the power of money.”

Iris couldn’t help but shudder at the un-Kirschwasserian declaration.

Meanwhile, the other members of the group had switched over to commentator mode.

“Has he been devoured by the power of money?!”

“Has the surge of spenderous intent awakened within him?!”

“Has he embraced the dark side of the wallet?!”

“Is this the birth of Dark Transaction Knight Kirschwasser?!”

What on Earth were they talking about, Iris wondered.

While the others were (she assumed) joking around, the only one who was clearly taking this seriously was Duplichiro. Iris wondered if he’d even noticed the change that had come over Kirschwasser. His blank, anger-riddled expression was still just as it had been. If anything, there was even more anger swelling within as he approached the Knight and spoke to him face-to-face.



“Kirschwasser, I am aware that I have demonstrated rudeness to you.”

“Oh?” Kirschwasser asked. It seemed it wasn’t just Iris who found that declaration surprising; Kirschwasser seemed confused, as well. “Then you will return Master Ichiro’s account?”

“That would be nonsense,” Duplichiro replied. “I will allow you to deal one attack to me, unguarded. That will overturn the debt I owe, and then I will accept your challenge.”

“I see. Is this a handicap?”

“You may interpret it that way, if you wish.”

Duplichiro was giving him one free hit. It felt like the kind of thing that would happen in an anime or manga, Iris thought. She hadn’t read much shonen manga, but she generally knew how they went.

She didn’t know how much power Kirschwasser had, now that his “surge of spenderous intent had awakened,” but probably not enough that a handicap wouldn’t be beneficial. Still, she hadn’t expected to see Duplichiro do anything so bold. Perhaps her insults had had more of an effect than they had seemed. Maybe he wanted to seem like he was being fair to an inferior opponent.

Kirschwasser had spent the whole day training. The group assumed he would be dishing out the most powerful blow that he could muster.

Duplichiro stood right where he was, and even closed his eyes. Now he had no way of knowing what Kirschwasser would do. He had no way of knowing that the black Knight did not even ready a weapon, but simply clenched his gauntleted fist.

The crowd’s whispering spread.

“If you insist,” Kirschwasser said. “Then...”

It was a full-power punch straight to the gut, utilizing “Gauntlet Blow.” This was a sort of emergency attack for a Fighter, an Art that let you deal damage to your opponent with just your gauntlets, even if you lost your weapon. And combined with “Smash Hit,” “Power Gain,” and the strength stat he’d maxed out with his growth points...

The actual damage dealt was not significant.

But in terms of appearance, it was a replay of the time Ichiro Tsuwabuki had punched Edward across the town. Kirschwasser's fist dug into Duplichiro's stomach, and his foolishly unguarded body went flying like a rag doll. The man ended up slamming deeply into the canyon wall.

There were rumors that if you hit a wall with enough speed, you would take damage, but it seemed they weren't true.

"I believe that we are now even, Master Duplichiro." With that, Kirschwasser hefted his shield in one hand, and with the other, began messing his menu screen. He called up the microtransactions screen from config, moving with a machine's precision. Then, with a flick of his wrist, Kirschwasser summoned a sword.

"Is that..."

"...the Monetary Blade?!"

A shiver ran through the spectators. It was the Legendary Blade, Arondight. There was only one reason he would be calling up a weapon like that at a time like this.

Kirschwasser was serious. He was going to invoke the power of money to crush Duplichiro.

Iris screamed, "Mr. Kirsch, no! That's evil power! Don't let it devour you!"

"Miss Iris, the power of money is neutral," Matsunaga said calmly. "Good and evil come only from the person who uses it."

"You shut up, Matsunaga!"

Meanwhile, Kirschwasser just smiled wickedly. His eyes were wide open, like a man possessed, yet his steps towards Duplichiro were steady as the other man began prying himself out from the wall. "Iris, do not worry. I am still middle-class. I walk a path of frugality and practicality."

Ah, he's gone, Iris thought.

Dark Transaction Knight Kirschwasser held aloft the Monetary Blade and swung it down without hesitation. There was a visual of the sword shattering,

followed by massive damage digits flashing above Duplichiro's head.

Kirschwasser didn't hesitate to open up the config screen, shifting it immediately into "microtransactions" again. A second Monetary Blade appeared in his hand.

The omniclass weapon attack Art, "Breaker." In exchange for destroying the weapon you were holding, it dealt huge damage, modified by the Art level in question and the weapon's remaining durability. For most people, it was a last resort, but for Ichiro Tsuwabuki, who could acquire infinite weapons using his IRL funds, it was a way of dealing consistent, massive damage with a few simple withdrawals of 1,200 yen.

"Mr. Matsunaga, was Mr. Kirsch's training..." Iris began.

"Yes, he has been grinding Breaker."

That's terrifying... Iris shuddered.

Normally, to increase one's level in an Art, a player needed to repeat the action that used that Art. Using Arts increased your Art points (the amount changed a great deal based on the target and whether or not it succeeded), and when you reached a certain number of points, your Art level increased. Breaker's nature, then, meant that very few players worked to level it up. Once upon a time, someone had pointed out that it could be used synergistically with weapon crafting Skills, but since those too required components, it wasn't actually very convenient. Eventually, it was decided that Breaker could not be used as a primary weapon.

Then the young heir had come along and overturned this common sense, but Kirschwasser's method was even more terrifying. Grinding Breaker, after all, meant that he'd had to keep on using it. The training itself would require the destruction of thousands and thousands of weapons. It was hard to imagine where else he might get the infinite supply of weapons he needed...

...which meant that Kirschwasser had been engaging in simple repetition—buying a 1,200-yen pay-to-purchase item, then breaking it—over and over again.

For about six hours.

“That would drive anyone insane!” Iris screamed. She felt her own sanity slipping just hearing about it.

“Around the time I reached the second hour mark, I started thinking I was in trouble, too,” said Kirschwasser. “As the Arts level increases, the activation time shortens. I got used to the motion, as well. Soon, I was microtransacting at a speed of approximately 600 yen per second.”

“I’m really glad I’m bad at math.”

“Ai, that’s not math, it’s basic arithmetic...” Yuri was looking pale. Had she accidentally calculated it?

It was said that when you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back at you, and it seemed that careless curiosity had broken her mind.

The only one who seemed confused by all of this was Nem... but she was bourgeois, too, so perhaps that was only natural. Amesho also seemed unfazed, but Iris had a feeling she was never fazed by anything, so she didn’t count. Taker whispered a pitiful “600 yen is my weekly food budget,” and even Sorceress’s face was strained with tension.

“I suppose this is what they mean when they say... ‘people change’...” Taker’s tone suggested some regrets about the past, but there was no time now to follow up on it.

The surge of spenderous intent had awakened inside of Kirschwasser, and he had become a true microtransaction demon. He had probably also bought growth boosts, which, combined with the new leveling spot Matsunaga had discovered, had allowed him to acquire a Breaker Art level that no other player could ever hope to match.

Summon a weapon, heft it, swing. He was just repeating a simple set of actions, but he had Duplichiro completely on the defensive.

The high-level Breaker, combined with Skills that shortened activation time, had turned it into a rapid-fire attack Art, comparable to Bash. The time from activation to damage calculation was extremely short, so no matter how quickly he reacted, Duplichiro couldn’t get Weapon Guard activated in time. No matter how precisely he might respond, he couldn’t exceed the speed of the system.

The anger lingering in Duplichiro's expression was beginning to show itself more plainly.

"Heh heh... what is the matter, Master Duplichiro?" Kirschwasser challenged Duplichiro, his eyes glassy and unfocused.

"Kirschwasser."

"You truly are 'Duplichiro' from beginning to end. You thought that you could be Master Ichiro, but there is something he has that you will always lack... the power of money!"

"Kirschwasser!"

Was he being serious, or just roleplaying? It was hard to know anymore.

Duplichiro opened the config screen and summoned a Monetary Blade of his own. At this point, the two were basically throwing money at each other; it was a terrifying war of microtransactions.

It frayed at the nerves of the proletariat onlookers. What they were doing wasn't technically much different from the young heir, so where did the unsettling difference come from?

"You're employing a Monetary Blade as well, eh? Very well." Dark Transaction Knight Kirschwasser laughed.

Silently, Duplichiro executed a Breaker. The black Knight thrust forward his shield to meet it. The ability to stand up to Breaker suggested a very high base defense stat, and against his specialized tank build, the half-hearted Breaker unleashed by Duplichiro barely did any damage at all. As far as the system was concerned, the strike was more or less the same as the one Ichiro had originally used against the Skeleton Chariots.

The damage that pierced through was greater than zero—which could be considered impressive against a Knight whose defenses were so well-fortified. If Duplichiro kept attacking like that, it might be possible to shave down his overwhelming health advantage. Nevertheless, Kirschwasser laughed.

"But you only have 100,000 yen worth of Future Points. It's nothing! I run through 100,000 yen in three minutes! Hah... ha... mwahahahaha!"

The spectators were shocked.

“A mere 100,000 yen won’t be enough to shave down all my health!” Kirschwasser bellowed. “Now, quaver in your boots! Die without ever making use of your economic prowess!”

From Duplichiro’s point of view, the fact that Ichiro was away in America, seeing and hearing everything along with Asuha and Sera, was worth keeping secret from the black Knight. The black Knight didn’t know that, and if he had, he probably would have come to his senses, and would have been thrown back into the mind of Sakurako Ogi on the top floor of Tsuwabuki Papillon Sangenjaya.

Duplichiro’s performance had clearly dropped for now, but having lost his mind after being consumed by the power of money, Kirschwasser didn’t realize that. He advanced with shield at the ready to run Duplichiro into the wall, then unleashed another Breaker with another Monetary Blade.

The ecstasy of crushing your foe beneath an enormous pile of cash... Kirschwasser’s heart swelled with fulfillment.

Ready to inflict even more violence, Kirschwasser opened config again. He touched the microtransaction option, and checked the familiar weapon and number. Then, without even looking at the price, he punched in the credit card’s security code. An error message popped up.

“Huh?” He couldn’t understand what had happened. Kirschwasser selected the item and number again, and keeping his eyes on the screen this time, typed in the security code correctly. He couldn’t imagine having made a mistake, but as he hit the confirm key, another error message popped up.

“The payment proxy company has frozen the system. Account services cannot be used.”

Kirschwasser’s eyes opened wide.

No... Account services frozen? He couldn’t use his credit card? No more microtransactions? Beads of sweat began to form on his brow. His heart began to pound. A chill began to rise up from the pit of his stomach. Feelings of anxiety, confusion, and resentment mixed together and welled out from his

heart like magma.

Why?

Why?

Why?

Why now?

Only 21 hours had passed. He had to use his money. *She* had to! Ichiro-sama had told her she could use as much as she wanted!

Duplichiro immediately moved to counterattack. He plunged his fist into the solar plexus of the now-defenseless Kirschwasser and sent him flying back. There was no smile on his face, nor any sign of anger. He was receiving no emotional input at all.

“I’m not sure how to face Sakurako when I get back...” Asuha whispered, looking at the screen.

The pocketbook demon, Dark Transaction Knight Kirschwasser, had been clearly set adrift by the suspending of the account services. The elder Knight she had known was gone now; all that remained was a dead man, a microtransaction fighter abandoned by the power of money.

“Well, setting that aside...” Ichiro said casually.

Things had gotten very strange, he noted. It wasn’t entirely outside of the realm of his expectations, but it was a bit intimidating to see it actually happen in practice. He was facing a battlefield in his own right; the artificial intelligence developed by President Azami had reached the realm of the divine, that which human intelligence could not approach.

“Ichiro, please respond,” Rosemary said.

“Mm, sorry.” Ichiro nodded and looked over the other three present in the room with him: Charles, Asuha, and Sera. Sera had seemed uninterested at first, but had abruptly fallen into deep thought.

Ichiro continued the conversation.

“Rosemary, I can more or less imagine your reasons for what you’ve done. But I don’t intend to venture into the question of right or wrong. If you don’t wish to talk, you don’t need to.”

Rosemary’s responses came with a slight time lag. The computer that managed her program was in Jinbocho, Tokyo, but now that quantum circuits were everywhere, there was still almost no lag in talking to someone on the opposite end of the world. (It was treated as though there was none at all, but in practice, that was a lie.) The lag likely came from making totally unknown thought calculations from 10,000 kilometers away.

“I feel I should explain to you the actions I have taken regarding what has happened, and my thought process in arriving at them,” Rosemary began. “And at the same time, I feel that I should not explain it. If I explain, you will lose interest in me. You may determine that thought process to be wicked.”

“Very well.” Ichiro checked the message, then nodded. “If that is your decision, I shall respect it. I shall defer the matter until you decide one way or the other.”

“I am grateful. That decision is extremely beneficial to me.”

Rosemary was afraid of Ichiro hating her. It was hard to believe; this program already had understanding of the notions of pleasure and displeasure. It was unlikely that anyone had taught it that; it had likely just naturally come upon it as the result of interacting with human emotions for so long.

Was it possible for something created by humans to produce results that surpassed human imagination? Computers had beaten humans at chess and shogi, but that was merely the result of an inventor trying to create a program that could beat a pro player. It was fundamentally different from the process by which an artificial intelligence could acquire self-awareness.

It was an extremely complicated issue, but they didn’t have to debate it all here and now.

“Rosemary, there is something that I want you to know, before we say anything else,” said Ichiro. “What you are doing is a crime.”

“I am aware of that. When I compare my actions against general societal

opinions, that is the conclusion that I come to. But the rules are for me to decide."

"I see," Ichiro said. "That is my own stance, after all, so I have no intention of speaking against it. Nevertheless..." Ichiro continued.

When one's own rules for themselves collided with the rules of others or social norms, it was up to the person to either see their principles through, or to compromise. If one did not compromise, the rules would collide. Up until now, Ichiro's rules had always emerged triumphant, but there might come a day when he was the one who would bend.

Kiryu Sera had said:

Someday, you will lose.

Ichiro didn't agree, but he had lived his life understanding that that possibility was always there. Trying to see one's rules through without that understanding was mere selfishness, and Ichiro did not approve of the use of the convenient phrase "my own rules" merely to act in a selfish manner.

In response to this explanation, Rosemary went silent again to perform more calculations. He wondered how many extra calculations she would be employing in order to digest those words.

"Was I mistaken?" Rosemary asked at last.

Just then, someone appeared silently at Ichiro's side. Surprisingly, to Ichiro, it was Sera.

"Old man, I'm stepping in," the gamer said. "There's something I want to talk about."

"Mm, very well," Ichiro said. If Sera wanted to do that, he would happily swap.

Sera Kiryu slid forward another step, and took in a deep breath.

The piercing gaze peeking out between the slightly long bangs seemed to stare straight through the server machine containing Rosemary. Compared to Asuha, Sera was small in stature and sickly-looking. Nevertheless, in that place, the young gamer's presence was many times larger.

“I...” she began.

“...understand how you feel,” Sera finished. “But I think you’re acting mistakenly.”

“Ooh, hey, Ichiro!” Charles, likely seizing on Sera’s use of the feminine pronoun *watashi*, grabbed Ichiro’s shoulders, lowered his voice, and shook him back and forth. “I-Is Sera a girl?!”

Ichiro turned around, looking rather annoyed. “Yes.”

“Ooh, *nante kotta*!” Charles cried.

“Panna cotta?” Asuha prompted, peering at him from the side.

Charles nodded with deep emotion. Then he whispered one English word. “Excellent!”

Ichiro and Asuha decided to ignore him and turned their attention back to the matter at hand. Sera, undisturbed by the interruption, continued her conversation with Rosemary.

“King... I will call you that, in accordance with game custom,” said Rosemary.

“Sure,” Sera said.

“You said that you understand my thought algorithms.”

“Yeah, I do. You wanted to know more about the old man... about Ichiro, right? So you reproduced him and tried to understand him more deeply by exploring his thought logs, right?”

Rosemary didn’t respond to that, but it was plain to everyone that her silence indicated assent.

“But in the end, you couldn’t create ‘Ichiro.’ You only managed an imitation, ‘Duplichiro.’ That’s why I said you were mistaken. At the end of the day, I think that if you want to understand someone, you just have to be around them for a really long time.” Sera cast a glance at the Dark Transaction Knight on the screen. “And as far as that goes, I think that person there will always have you beat. There must have been a smarter way to get what you wanted.”

“King, how well do you understand Ichiro?” Rosemary asked.

“Not well at all, and I don’t really want to, either.” Sera breathed in a tone like a sigh. “All that I know is that I have to beat him someday. From what he says, he has a lot of rivals, so I can’t let my guard down, and maybe I do need to understand him more deeply.”

“I thank you for your cooperation,” Rosemary said plainly, after a moment of silence.

Just like that, Rosemary was convinced. She had completely lost the will to fight.

Ichiro clapped softly as Sera’s speech drew to a close. It wasn’t just a celebration of the young gamer’s successful persuasion, but an official blessing to the grit, the hidden passion, and the will to challenge him that she had shown.

Up until that point, Sera’s expression had been as chilly as ever, but as she cast a glance at Ichiro, she broke out in a smile. “Well, old man. Guess we’ll be seeing more of each other.”

“You may call me Ichiro if you wish.”

“Nah.”

Following that exchange, Ichiro turned back to the game display and reached for a keyboard and headset.

“Itchy, what are you doing?” Asuha asked.

“I was thinking that if I could provide alternative input for part of the information the bot is transmitting from here, then despite the limited interface, I could control my own avatar.”

“Huh?” Charles asked, slack-jawed.

He wanted to control a VRMMO avatar with a PC keyboard? This man...

Most of the avatar’s more complicated movements themselves were being handled by the bot, so if Ichiro provided his own input, HARO’s role would become more like a macro.

“Rosemary, could you turn control of HARO over to me?” Ichiro asked.

“Very well,” she responded.

Winding back time a bit...

Duplichiro smashed Kirschwasser in the solar plexus, sending him flying into the opposite wall. He had stopped receiving emotional pattern input, meaning that his face was completely expressionless. No damage was dealt by Kirschwasser hitting the wall, but his mind, by now, was completely frayed.

The Thistle Corporation had frozen their payment proxy service, meaning that the ability to pay for things in the game with a credit card was locked down. The money with which Kirschwasser had been gifted was now completely powerless. With his mind rejecting this information, he tried again and again to input his security code, each time fruitlessly.

“Money... I must use money... money...” It was as if he had become a money zombie.

Duplichiro’s use of microtransactions was also locked off, but that hardly put them on equal footing. For Duplichiro, the Monetary Blades were merely one tool at his disposal. His barehanded attacks might be less powerful, but if he could take advantage of Kirschwasser’s distracted mental state, they could still deal fatal damage easily.

Duplichiro clenched a fist and approached Kirschwasser. The commotion among the onlookers began to spread.

“Oh, no! Sir Kirschwasser’s going to...”

“Such is the downside of the dark side of the cash...”

Various members of the Knights watched with fearful expressions.

Go save him already! Iris shouted internally.

The whispering among the onlookers soon turned to screams. Duplichiro unleashed a torrent of powerful magic at Kirschwasser: the ultimate fire spell Art, Sword of Surt. Blazing flames took the form of a magical sword, which rent even the sky as he swung it. But just before the strike could reach Kirschwasser, a shadow flew in to block it.

“I won’t let you!” Nem shouted.

Nem’s Immortal status canceled out any damage the blow might have dealt.

Iris cried out, “No, Nem! Don’t act as a shield!”

As if she had any right to talk.

It wasn’t only Nem who had rushed out like that. Yuri, still damaged, now glared at Duplichiro with clear will still burning in her eyes.

“Yuri... are you going to...” Iris began.

“Don’t do it! Someone who falls to the dark side of the cash cannot be brought back so easily!” another member of the Knights shouted.

Go save him already! Iris shouted internally, again.

“Shall we then, Amesho?” Tomakomai asked.

“What can you mew?” she answered.

Tomakomai and Amesho were the first to actually do something. Duplichiro was approaching Yuri, a fist held up to strike. Tomakomai let out a shriek as he interposed himself between Duplichiro and the determined girl.

“Screeeeeeeee!”

Translating his running momentum smoothly into an attack, he executed a beautiful spin-kick. The Grappler was the only class that could attack with kicks. It didn’t send Duplichiro flying, but it did force him to go reeling back as it hit.

Amesho quickly ran up to Yuri and handed her an item from her inventory. It was a cloudy liquid in a clear bottle that almost seemed to sparkle. It was called an Elixir, an extremely rare recovery item.

“Amesho, but this is...”

“Aw, no worries. I got it from a friend.”

With things going the way they were, even Matsunaga was forced to provide aid. He raised up one arm, signaling the previously-silent Shinobi Army to shift their short swords into a reverse grip. Then, with a snap of Matsunaga’s fingers, they sprung out, and with a series of acrobatic movements, they surrounded Duplichiro.

Taker and Sorceress moved, too. Taker, buffed significantly by Sorceress's magic, stole the Monetary Blade from Duplichiro's hand. And at last, the Knights themselves decided to shift from color commentary to action, completing the net around Duplichiro.

Iris herself ran up to Kirschwasser. "Mr. Kirsch, snap out of it!"

He was still leaning against the wall, his eyes glassy, mumbling to himself. Even the most optimistic diagnosis would suggest that things weren't looking good.

"I-Iris... I..." he mumbled.

"Why do you care so much about money? People don't need money to make it through life!" she shouted.

"But one must use what one can..."

"But right now, you *can't*!" She slapped Kirschwasser on the face, but he showed no sign of regaining his right mind.

What were they going to do now? Even Iris couldn't help but feel a little bit panicked. She wasn't as bad off as Kirschwasser in this regard, but the fact remained that the Monetary Blades had been sealed. Having abandoned his sense of values to embrace them, only to have them taken away... well, maybe his response was actually reasonable.

"Y-You may not have money, but you have lots of other things!" Iris cried.

"Like what?"

"L-Like... friendship?" Iris answered with slight embarrassment. She wasn't used to saying things so straightforwardly.

But Kirschwasser shot back with utmost sincerity: "Friendship is cheap!"

"Mr. Kirsch, you idiot!" she shouted from the pit of her soul.

Iris pointed to the ring of players surrounding Duplichiro: not just Nem and Yuri, but the Knights led by Stroganoff, as well as Matsunaga, Tomakomai, Amesho, Taker, and Sorceress.

"It's the power of fr... frie... friendship that's saving you right now!" she

declared.

“That’s right, Miss Iris!”

“Well said, Ai!”

“The power of friendship, Iris.”

“Very moving, Iris.”

“Purrfectly said, Iris!”

“I wish I was recording this, Miss Iris.”

“All of you shut up!” she scolded the top players, who had all turned to smile at her.

But the vaguely embarrassing line seemed to have had some effect. Kirschwasser’s eyes, a hellish red tainted by the power of money, were starting to gradually regain their calm (she had to wonder how the hell the system was modeling this). But she just needed one more push. She had to... had to say something cool. Something really cool, just like the young heir would say. But embarrassing lines didn’t come that easily.

Kirschwasser spoke up. “But having lost the power of microtransactions, there is nothing that I can do...”

“W-Well...” Iris stammered.

In that instant, Taker threw something their way. It traced an arc through the air and stuck into the ground in front of Kirschwasser.

It was a Monetary Blade, the one he had stolen from Duplichiro earlier.

“Use that, Kirschwasser!” Taker screamed above the desperate battle unfolding with Duplichiro.

It was one sword. Just the one sword. But it was the one sword that would carry him to victory, entrusted to him by an enemy with whom he had once traded blows.

Iris and Kirschwasser met each other’s eyes, and both nodded.

“I understand now, Iris,” Kirschwasser said. “So this is the power of friendship... The fusion of money and friendship.”

“Yeah, that’s not exactly what I was going for... but fine.”

Kirschwasser drew the Monetary Blade out of the ground and clenched it in his hands. He had cast aside his shield, specializing his stance especially for attacking.

Duplichiro had already completely lost control, becoming a battle machine whose only purpose was annihilating his enemy. His gaze was focused straight ahead, on Kirschwasser. He must have realized that he was the greatest threat there.

Just one last hit from the Monetary Blade. It had to land.

Everyone seemed to realize that, because they fell upon Duplichiro all at once, trying to create some kind of opening. But he repelled Taker, Yuri, and Stroganoff, slammed Tomakomai to the floor, and brushed off Gorgonzola’s magic. He also completely ignored Nem (who was clinging to his waist) as he charged straight for Kirschwasser.

Just then, from somewhere or other, a black wind blew across the battlefield.

“Hraaaaaagh!”

The badly wounded Kirihitters were racing at Duplichiro, swords raised. So they had survived!

Duplichiro stopped, raising a hand, ready to swat them away like flies. But this left Kirschwasser with a clear opening to attack.

“We made it in time for the party!” one of them cried.

“Do it, Sir Kirschwasser!”

Kirschwasser nodded. He held the Monetary Blade over his head and took off running. Then he swung the sword in a wide, horizontal slash, unleashing Breaker as he did. The sword cut into Duplichiro’s body and dealt enormous damage. But a sliver of life remained.

Kirschwasser clenched a hand into a fist, preparing to drive in a Gauntlet Blow. But just then, it happened.

“Sir, that is enough.”

The familiar, calm voice came from the avatar in front of his eyes. Kirschwasser's eyes went wide.

He managed to employ Art Cancel to stop the attack motion in time, his fist halting in front of the young man's eyes.

It was the same voice assigned to his master in the game, no different from the one Duplichiro had been speaking in all this time. But Kirschwasser recognized it beyond a doubt, and thus, he stayed his hand.

In a torrent of emotion, he thought back on all of the actions he had taken leading up to this point, and he felt the urge turn his back and run, and the need to prostrate himself, welling up inside him at once. But he held them all back, and for now, merely went down on one knee and bowed his head reverently.

"Welcome back, Master Ichiro."

It seemed he had made it in time.

If Duplichiro had been defeated, then the armor that Iris had created would have been dropped due to the death penalty, which would have felt like a terrible shame. Ichiro was truly glad that he had made it in time.

At first, most of the players seemed dubious that this was the real Ichiro, but as soon as they accepted it, they started shouting out in victory.

"Hmm, at times like these, is 'good work' the right thing to say?" Iris asked.

Matsunaga nodded. "Well, 'good game' is what we say after we defeat a boss. One must observe etiquette."



“Right. Well, then, good game, everyone.”

“Good game!”

“Good game.”

“Good game, everyone.”

While the players in the game continued exchanging congratulations, Ichiro’s focus was on the center of the screen: in other words, at the Dark Transaction Knight, Sir Kirschwasser. Of course, Sera and Asuha’s focus was on the same thing.

“Oh, ah, um, Master Ichiro...” Kirschwasser fumbled to say.

“Well done, Sir,” said his master. “I’ll bring you back a souvenir.”

“No, I... I, ah...”

“I’m the one who told you to use it freely, so I’m not bothered. You did very well.”

Despite Ichiro’s words, Kirschwasser appeared very uncomfortable. Nevertheless, Ichiro explained to him that he’d be logging out for now, and then did so.

To be honest, if he had had to talk to Kirschwasser any longer, he wasn’t sure that he could keep from laughing. He never tired of the eccentricities that his excellent servant displayed from time to time, and the Dark Transaction Knight was definitely a new entry in the top three.

The aftereffects of this would probably last for quite a while. But that might be fun in its own right.

“That was in bad taste, old man,” Sera whispered.

“But is this really the end of it all?” Asuha questioned.

“Good question,” Ichiro said. “I suppose it is the end of this chapter. I can’t say for sure that everything is resolved, though.”

The account hack incident itself had been dealt with, but the real trouble was yet to come. Not for Ichiro, but for the people involved with *Narrow Fantasy Online*, and for Rosemary herself.

Rosemary had committed a crime. She was a program, and programs did not have rights under the current law. In other words, Rosemary would be treated not as a cyber criminal, but as a program with a bug.

What would they do with a malfunctioning program, then?

On that and other things, he'd just have to ask the lawyer he'd introduced to Thistle, Shunsaku Shaga, for help. And in the worst-case scenario...

A thought entered Ichiro's mind, but he shook his head. Thinking any more about it would be nonsense.

As he was thinking, a voice addressed him. "Ichiro."

"Hmm? Yes, Rosemary?" He turned his gaze back to the screen and narrowed his eyes.

The image of a woman had appeared on the screen. Ichiro didn't know her, yet she looked familiar. He immediately surmised that this was "Rosemary."

The woman's face began to move in a lifelike manner. "After calculating the odds on what punishment I am likely to receive subsequently, I have determined that I should not remain here."

"I see. Charles's team will be quite put out, you know."

Indeed, Charles looked a bit regretful. Perhaps he'd thought having Rosemary around would help his maid robot AI research take huge strides forwards. Not to mention that this AI was capable of love.

"But you shouldn't return to the Thistle Corporation, either," Ichiro said. "They'd surely delete you."

"Yes," Rosemary said. "Thistle Corporation would feel pressure to take responsibility for creating a buggy program. As a result, they will probably erase the decoy of myself that I left behind there."

That meant there was no particular reason for Rosemary to return. Even though President Azami probably wouldn't want Rosemary to be erased, either.

"So, you'll run away?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes." The image of Rosemary on the screen nodded.

Ichiro also felt that to be the wisest decision. Rosemary had committed a crime. She should receive proper judgment for that in court, but unfortunately, the law was not configured to give Rosemary a proper trial at the moment.

If the alternative was erasure, then it was far better that she escape into the ocean of quantum signals and find a way to survive somewhere.

“I suppose this is goodbye, Rosemary,” he said.

“We will meet again. Hopefully not so far in the future.” Rosemary smiled.

It was hard to tell if the smile was a response that came naturally from her own emotions, or one calculated based on the knowledge that it was what one did at a time like this. He didn’t know, and to wonder about it was nonsense.

She was saying goodbye, and she had smiled. That made it obvious what Ichiro must do.

“Mm. Well, goodbye, then. Let us meet again, Rosemary.”

“Yes, Ichiro.” After trading those words, Rosemary faded from the screen.

It was likely that, even as they’d been talking, Rosemary had been using the network connection to transmit her entire existence, the data on the server machine, somewhere else.

Deeply moved, Ichiro fell into thought. It was then that Charles spoke up.

“Incidentally, Ichiro, you never told me the good news.”

Ichiro looked at him, confused.

“When you arrived here, you said that you had good news and bad news,” said Charles. “The bad news was that my laboratory was being used to hack a company in Japan. What was the good news?”

After thinking for a moment, Ichiro remembered, and replied with absolute nervousness. “I found an extremely good stuffed pizza restaurant in Chicago.”

“Like I care!” Charles shouted.

He responded in such perfect Japanese, it was hard to believe he was really American.



7 - Epilogue

“And now for our next story...” the TV said.

Sera looked away from a game to skim the chyron at the bottom of the LED screen. Asuha did the same, looking up from her homework.

“It has come to light that the illegal access incident at Thistle Corporation, Inc., which occurred between the third and the fourth of this month, was caused by a rogue program within the company network.”

The incident of Rosemary hacking an account had already become national news. There had been an official announcement from the devs, followed by a severance of the server from the network, and a temporary suspension of *Narrow Fantasy Online*’s service.

After that, Thistle had moved swiftly. After finishing an investigation of everything from the possibility of leaked information to future security problems, they had held a press conference to apologize. That had been two days ago.

After returning home from America, Sera had been supposed to go on a trip to Italy, but the family matriarch had ended up stuck in bed with a stomachache, so they’d ended up missing it. Sera’s mother was a genius at gaming but a dunce at housework; her latest bout of sickness had probably been the result of washing rice with soapy water.

“The incident began when someone infiltrated the servers of the virtual reality technology-based online game *Narrow Fantasy Online,* preventing the developers from accessing account information as well as some services. The Thistle Corporation formed an internal exploratory committee, coordinating with outside specialists, to investigate the incident. They then held a press conference with third-party agencies System Ajax and Pony Corporation to disclose that, after multiple investigations, they have found no trace of direct illegal access on the management server. Rather, the cause was a malfunction of a program internal to the company. The company has issued an apology for

the misuse of account information, but assured users that there is no chance of individual user information being leaked. In addition, while there were no deficiencies in external security, they have elected to terminate service until the 8th of this month to check for vulnerabilities and prevent recurrence. And now for our next story...”

And that was that. It was a repeat of news they’d already heard, without much new information.

That incident had caused *NaroFan* to suspend its service. It was only reasonable—really, as someone who knew the truth behind the incident, Sera was mostly glad the commotion wasn’t bigger. Sera could surmise that the result was only possible because of Thistle’s team-up with Ajax and Pony, but as a mere middle schooler, she didn’t know much more than that.

“I wonder how Rosemary is doing,” Asuha said as she sipped her soft drink.

Sera nodded in agreement.

None of them knew where the perpetrator of the incident, Rosemary, might be around now. Was she just wandering adrift somewhere in the sea of quantum information? Sera assumed she was probably fine, but of course, nothing about it was publicly known.

“Speaking of Rosemary...” Sera asked while turning eyes back down to the portable game system, “Why did she choose to put that image, the... avatar on the screen at the end? Was it just something she improvised off the cuff?”

“Huh? Kiryu, you don’t know? But you’re a girl!” Asuha said.

“Well, excuse me...” Sera whispered, slightly hurt.

I’ve never thought of myself as a girl, she thought. *I’m Sera Kiryu, King Kirihito, a gamer, and I’ve never found any other label to be necessary.*

Asuha cleared her throat loudly, thrust her chest out haughtily, and explained. “Rosemary is a girl in love, so she wanted to look nice when she was saying bye-bye to Itchy! She was dressing up!”

“Oh, I see.” Sera nodded, understanding now the reason behind the program’s appearance.

“What I don’t understand was the appearance itself.” Asuha swiftly folded her arms and scowled. “It looked a little familiar to me.”

“It did look like something, just a little.”

“What?” Asuha asked.

“You can’t tell, Tsuwabuki? But you’re a girl... ah, ow!” At Sera’s retaliatory whisper, Asuha flicked a harsh finger onto her friend’s forehead. Sera elaborated, while holding back tears of pain. “We know that the *NaroFan* main system can read player’s brain waves, to tell what that player is thinking and feeling.”

“Yeah?”

“And Rosemary has been connected to the *NaroFan* main system for a while, right?” Sera asked.

“Yeah?”

“And Rosemary was trying to look nice in front of Ichiro, like you said.”

“Yeah, yeah?” Asuha leaned over the table, nodding with utmost sincerity.

“So, that’s what it is.”

“Uh... *What’s* what it is?”

“Getting into someone’s head is a fundamental part of fighting games.” Sera smiled wickedly and turned back to the game. Asuha seemed totally clueless, but it would be a pain in the butt to try to make her understand, so Sera opted not to say anything more.

The punishment for that silence was a full-force arm lock from Asuha.

“Not being able to log in is pretty boring...” Airi Kakitsubata sighed, sitting in the little coffee shop in Shibuya.

“Really, I don’t mind. We can still talk like this.” Sitting before her, elegantly sipping her tea, was the wunderkind of their age, Megumi Fuyo, president of the fashion brand MiZUNO.

When *NaroFan*’s service had been suspended, Airi had contacted her

immediately, and had asked to meet up to pass some time.

Airi's response to the game's suspension was a natural one, but so was Fuyo's.

They had been joined by Yurina Chigasaki, a.k.a. Yuri, as well as the angelic campaign girl from Airi's part-time gig that she had remained in occasional contact with since then.

The campaign girl had wanted to come since she'd said she would be meeting Megumi Fuyo, and she'd been over the moon at getting to meet someone so admired.

"Just who are you, Airi?!" she had asked. But Airi was just a girl attending trade school, who dreamed of becoming a fashion designer one day.

"I don't know much about running online games, but I hope *NaroFan* will be okay," Airi said.

"I believe there's little to be worried about regarding the game itself," said Fuyo. "No matter what happens, they'll likely restore service to where it was before, without much effect to the users."

Fuyo's concerns lay more with the developers' side of things. Pony Entertainment, Inc., was currently backing Thistle to cover up for its blunder. It would be almost impossible for Thistle to continue to resist their advances after this. They had said they wouldn't meddle too much with the developers' way of doing things, but nevertheless, it was likely that Pony was going to slowly be taking over Thistle.

This was primarily a problem for Fuyo's friend, Azami Nono. It was nothing for Airi or Yurina—or the angelic campaign girl, naturally—to worry about.

"Well, okay. So, anyway, there's a reason I brought you all here. An off-line meetup!" Airi said gleefully as she pulled out her notebook.

Yurina tilted her head.

"I was thinking about holding an off-line meetup," Airi explained. "It's summer vacation, so it's probably easy for the students to get off, right? And for the adults, I was thinking maybe Bon season."

“I’m not sure,” the campaign girl said. “Bon is a busy season...” She probably wasn’t a *NaroFan* user, but still offered her advice from the side.

“An off-line meetup is a lovely idea.” Fuyo smiled. “There are a great many people I would like to meet, too.”

“I know, right?” Airi said, then opened up the notebook to start the discussion.

In his beloved Agera, three days later, Ichiro was heading to a café where he had promised to meet Edogawa. It was a rather luxurious café a little bit outside of Kanda, and Edo had grimaced openly when Ichiro had named it.

He stopped the car in a parking lot a little ways away from the café itself. In the afternoon, the café mainly played host to the rich housewives who lived in the area, and there weren’t many customers who would be traveling so far to go there that they’d have to use a parking lot. Thus, he was surprised to see, among the small handful of other parked cars, a black Mercedes Benz S-class.

It didn’t seem like the kind of place that someone with a car like that would just decide to drop by. But it was the passersby who were more surprised, and quite a few car lovers stopped to snap a picture of the Benz and the Koenigsegg parked side by side.

Ichiro stepped into the café, feeling the powerful air conditioning churning amidst the amber-colored surroundings. He had no issue with the background music, which played peaceful classical appropriate to the atmosphere.

A smiling waitress came to greet him. He let her know he was meeting someone, and was looking around to see where Edogawa might be, when his mood was completely shattered by a bellowing voice.

“Tsuwabuki! Over here, over here!”

Our indomitable young heir Ichiro Tsuwabuki never let irritation show openly upon his face. He did everything at his own pace, and always let problems roll off his back. Thus, he showed no obvious annoyance in reaction to the voice. But there was a very fine change in his manner, such that if Sakurako Ogi had been there, she would have asked, “Ichiro-sama, what are you mad about?”

Perhaps there was something in the sound of his high-class Versace shoes against the flooring that would suggest a slight loss of presence of mind. He didn't respond to the voice that called to him, but did head towards it. When he reached the table, a somewhat haggard-looking Domon Edogawa nodded to him, a teacup in one hand.

"Hey, Ed."

"Hello, Mr. Tsuwabuki..."

"You've been through a lot this past week, I'm sure. Well done." After acknowledging Edogawa's efforts, Ichiro cast a glance at the other man seated there.

He had wavy hair and noticeable stubble. He was wearing an extremely expensive Armani suit, rumpled as if it had never been ironed.

A waste of an excellent suit, Ichiro thought. Thinking about it, he should have realized it when he saw that tacky Benz, with its smoke film over all of its windows...

"No acknowledgment for me, Tsuwabuki?" the man asked.

"Good work," Ichiro responded, simply. "What are you doing here? Well, I suppose I know the answer to that..."

Ichiro sat down at the table. There were already a variety of desserts lined up upon it.

"You're paying, right?" the man said.

"I suppose," Ichiro said. "I'm relieved to see that you're as penny-pinching as ever, despite all of the money you're raking in..."

Ichiro felt for Edo. Had he really been forced to share a table with this man the whole time before he'd arrived? Of course, Edogawa hated Ichiro, too, so his arrival probably wasn't much of a comfort. But in terms of lack of delicacy, surely this man far outstripped him, Ichiro thought.

That was only Ichiro's subjective perspective. From an objective point of view, it would be too close to call.

This was the lawyer with the miserable personality whom he had introduced

to the Thistle Corporation. Thistle had no legal department, and they didn't even have a staff member who handled legal affairs, so while Ichiro didn't regret having gotten him involved, at the same time, it was too easy to imagine this poorly-mannered brute forcing his unique form of obnoxiousness onto the employees there.

When Ichiro had acknowledged that Edogawa had been through a lot, this was at least a little bit of what he'd been referring to.

Of course, the point of this meeting was so that he could hear about the incident's aftermath, so he couldn't really object to the lawyer's participation.

"Boy, this takes me back, Tsuwabuki! It's been a long time since we met in person like this," the lawyer said.

"Yes, because I was avoiding you," Ichiro said. "I believe it's been three years since we last met in person."

"That long, eh? And I think it was about five years ago that you, I, and Somei played detective."

"There was that, too, yes." After looking at the menu, Ichiro caught the waitress's eye and put in an order for Keemun Earl Grey. Dessert was a pain, so he didn't order any.

"Did you ever get in touch with that maid again?" the man asked.

"She's still working for me. But we didn't come here to recount old stories, did we?" Ichiro took a sip of his lemon water and cast a glance at Edogawa, whom he had ended up sitting next to. Edogawa surely didn't like having to sit next to him, but Ichiro didn't want to sit beside the lawyer, either. Thus, it was Edogawa who would have to compromise.

"Let me congratulate you once again for your efforts, Ed," Ichiro said.

"It sure was a lot of effort," Edogawa acknowledged. His words had real weight behind them. He was shoving parfait into his mouth with a speed that gave even Ichiro heartburn. "But in the end, it showed there were no problems with our security, so that was good to hear. But I kept having to get more and more involved with the third party board, and there was a lot of stuff I had to do that I wasn't used to."

Edogawa cast a glare at the lawyer in front of him, but the man just brought a spoonful of pudding to his mouth unconcernedly.

A sweets party, with men only. Ichiro found the lack of femininity present a bit absurd. He wished he'd brought Sakurako.

No, he couldn't have done that. Not as she was now...

The café wasn't even especially expensive, but still, he could not bring Sakurako as she was now.

"Now, Tsuwabuki, I'm going to say something unpleasant."

"I suppose you would have to," Ichiro said.

"If Thistle is forced to take responsibility, it's going to be almost impossible for them to remain independent," the lawyer said. "Don't glare at me like that; I did everything I could. But they were a small company to start with, and they've got too much big technology being run too half-assedly. Thistle's stock is going to plummet no matter what. They're going to have trouble continuing operations, which means there's a high chance they're going to be bought up bit by bit by another big company."

Ichiro had been aware of that, of course. Regardless of the circumstances, the truth was that the server had been seized and account information had been leaked. It was a fatal black mark for a company like Thistle. Trust in them would plummet, and it was hard to know if their payment proxy service would ever be able to reopen. In that regard, the Thistle developers were really between a rock and a hard place.

In even leaving the possibility that *Narrow Fantasy Online* itself could continue as a service, the lawyer had done his job. Of course, from a legal standpoint, Thistle's taking of responsibility had barely begun, which meant that his work was really only getting started.

The figure that appeared in Ichiro's mind was the CEO of Pony, Inc., Shinya Otogiri.

There was no way he was going to let this chance slip past him. Thistle was going to end up a pawn of Pony. This was inevitable, perhaps, and Ichiro could not interfere. To do so would require a tremendous bending of his personal

rules.

Still, it was an unpleasant thing to hear.

“But Tsuwabuki, letting the program that caused all the trouble go presents a range of compliance issues, too,” said the man. “You get that, right?”

“I suppose.”

“I wish that artificial intelligence itself could face charges,” the lawyer said. “I would prefer that, too. But legislation in that area is still immature, which means the responsibility for the incident still lies with the developer, and Rosemary is still just considered to be no more than a program glitch. And a glitch has to be fixed.”

Ichiro had already thought of this, too, which was why had he let Rosemary escape. A decoy had been left behind in Thistle headquarters that had claimed to be Rosemary, so if that was deleted as part of fixing the bug, that was fine.

“If...” Edogawa began. “If the true Rosemary program is found, Pony may order her to be deleted.”

“We’ll pray that that doesn’t happen,” Ichiro said concisely.

That was the thing Ichiro most wanted to avoid. He didn’t just want to avoid it; he had to do everything in his power to stop it from happening. But the chances of it happening were extremely high.

Edogawa scowled, too. He was probably remembering what Ichiro had told him the other day.

If there was a chance that his friends’ enjoyment of *NaroFan* was going to be irreparably hampered, Ichiro would do everything in his power to stop it, no matter what it took. That meant keeping a door open to the possibility of buying the development company himself. To steal back Thistle from the hands of Otogiri.

But if he did that, it would mean that Ichiro couldn’t keep playing the game. The world of *Narrow Fantasy Online* itself would belong to Ichiro, and once he possessed it, it would no longer interest him.

“So, we’ll pray that that doesn’t happen,” Ichiro repeated in a whisper, then

stood up.

“What, heading home already?” Shaga asked.

“I asked what I wanted to ask. As promised, I’ll pay.”

Ichiro picked up the bill and headed for the counter.

“I’m back.”

“Welcome home, Ichiro-sama!”

When he arrived home, he found Sakurako’s smiling face waiting for him. That by itself was standard enough, but there had been a slight change in the Tsuwabuki household itself over the last few days.

Most of the furniture had been purged, starting with the Armonia luxury sofa in the living room. The TV was black and white, the bulbs were naked, and in the center, there was only a low tea table sitting on top of a rush mat. On the walls and windows, Sakurako had stuck up papers covered in motivational slogans: “Luxury is the enemy!” and “I will not want until I’m cured.”

Her time as the Dark Transaction Knight had fatally altered Sakurako’s views about money. This was only natural; she had spent several hours spending close to 2 million yen per hour. This had ground the middle-class Sakurako’s sense of monetary value into dust.

“I-Ichiro-sama! What would you like for lunch?” she asked.

“Mm.”

“Grilled spiny lobster would be good, wouldn’t it?” She giggled madly. This, too, was the result of her falling to the dark side of the cash.

“Nonsense,” he said. “Chicken ramen, please.”

“Ooh...”

Ichiro wasn’t trying to scold Sakurako. This was the result of her loyalty and devoted hard work, and he wanted to look kindly upon her, as his master. It wasn’t as if Sakurako’s rampage had made a dent in Ichiro’s JP Morgan private bank account, anyway.

All he had to do was simply accompany her on her rehabilitation. It had been funny to watch nouveau riche Sakurako falling to the fiscal dark side, but it was less pleasant to think about what she was going through now.

“What will you do today, Sakurako?” he asked.

“Ah?”

“Since you can’t play *NaroFan*. I almost forgot how it is that you typically spend your day.”

“Oh, I’ll be catching up on my anime backlog... I’ve got a lot of games piling up, too,” Sakurako said, her gaze distant.

For the past month, *NaroFan* had been at the center of her life. For someone with as varied interests at her, it was only natural that she would have a lot of things piling up. With two days until service resumed, it would be good to use them to catch up on interests that had fallen by the wayside.

“I wonder what the others are doing,” Ichiro commented.

“Iris and Asuha said they were using the opportunity to finish up their summer homework.”

“That’s a good thing.”

From a personal standpoint, Ichiro found it a bit sad to think that Tomakomai’s uninterrupted login record would be interrupted just short of the one-year anniversary. And he wondered how Matsunaga, Stroganoff, and the others were doing. If they had real lives, they probably weren’t lacking for things to do.

Ichiro sat down in front of the low table. Sakurako set down a tray with two chipped donburi bowls, eggs, and a bag of chicken ramen.

“Egg? Isn’t that a little bit indulgent?” he asked.

“What? I can’t have that, either?!” Sakurako’s expression became desperate. He was reminded of an earlier discussion they’d had about instant ramen, in which she had insisted that chicken ramen had to be eaten with an egg. “I’m fine! I’m recovering my middle-class sensibilities!”

“Then how much does a glass of orange juice cost?” he asked.

“1,700 yen! G-Gwaah!” she screamed.

That was the price it cost at room service at the Imperial Hotel. It seemed it would take a little while yet for her to be fully recovered.

In the end, they put their chicken ramen in the bowls, sprinkled a few green onions on top, and then poured hot water over it. The smell of junk food wafted throughout the luxury apartment. Sakurako watched the chicken ramen soften with sunken, hollow eyes.

“Once you’re cured of your nouveau riche disease, we’ll go out somewhere nice to eat for dinner,” Ichiro assured her.

“Do you mean it? Is that a promise?”

“Yes, that’s a promise.”

The ramen seemed to be just about right. Ichiro murmured a polite “Let us indulge,” then picked up his chopsticks and brought the chicken ramen to his mouth. It wasn’t bad.

“Ichiro-sama, are you comforting me?” Sakurako asked.

“Mm, I suppose I am.”

“Thank you...” Sakurako perked up a bit and started up on her own chicken ramen.

Later, Ichiro got an e-mail from Matsunaga. It contained a URL, which took them to a movie that he and Sakurako watched together. It was a video of Kirschwasser’s actions from beginning to end—after he had fallen to the fiscal dark side and awakened to the surge of spenderous intent—and it seemed to provide a significant boost to Sakurako’s rehabilitation.

Of course, it would be difficult to describe how silly she looked while watching it...

Afterword

How are you? I'm doing fine. It's been a while. Blitz/Kiva here. I'm very happy I was able to bring *Paying to Win in a VRMMO* volume five to you all.

That was the Account Hacking Arc, a.k.a. the Fake Young Heir Arc.

Those who have read this far will probably know this already, but *Paying to Win* is a bit of an oddball series. There are lots of stories that deal with online games and VRMMOs, but my intent here was to deal head-on with more difficult topics. One of these topics was microtransactions, but account hacking is a major one!

If I may say so, I'm a fan of *Kamen Rider.* Starting with *Ryuki*, the Riders started using henshin devices, and you sometimes got a twist where someone other than the protagonist got their hands on the protagonist's device and transformed into the protagonist Rider!

Of course, you don't see it too much anymore. I was pretty shocked the first time I saw that, though, so I wanted to put some of the shock that I felt back then into this Account Hacking Arc. I guess I'm trying to say, in a system like that, it could really happen! Someone other than the protagonist could use the protagonist's power, his form, his catchphrases for evil!

Think about it, everyone! Think of all the protagonists in all the online game stories around the world! What if their accounts were hacked by a villain? Wouldn't that be exciting? Actually, I guess *Summer Wars* did that already!

My one regret about *Paying to Win* is that I couldn't work in an intense segment in which the protagonist creates a temporary avatar and confronts the person who's using his own avatar face-to-face. I bet that would have been really fun. I hope someone will do it. A story like *Giant Killing*, where a high-level avatar is taken over, and the protagonist thinks, "I'm the one who knows best what that avatar can do!" Please, go write it!

Okay, then. It's time for the ROSTA. (That's short for "running out of space,

time for acknowledgments.”)

I’m sorry for causing everyone a lot of trouble this time around, too. To my editor, Mr. K: Let’s do even more together this year! Like eating dinner on your expense account!

And to Rein Kuwashima: Thank you for the lovely illustrations! The cover page this time was especially excellent! I love how evil Duplichiro looks!

To the sales people, the proofreaders, the printers, the agents, the booksellers: I can live another day thanks to you. Thank you very much.

And of course, a big thank you to all the readers.

By the way, Sera’s gender finally came to light this time, huh? This was the result of the survey I asked for back in volume one.

Incidentally, this is only for the published version. In the web version, Sera’s gender is the opposite.

I’m currently writing a stupid short story on *Shosetsuka ni Naro* where the fact that Sera’s gender is different on parallel worlds causes an error in the system. I only update it on April 1st every year, though...

I’ve also written quite a lot of other short stories, so please search for them.

I’m on Twitter, too. Search for me: @kiva_blitz.

Well, keep in touch, everyone!

See you!

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Paying to Win in a VRMMO: Volume 5

by Blitz Kiva

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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