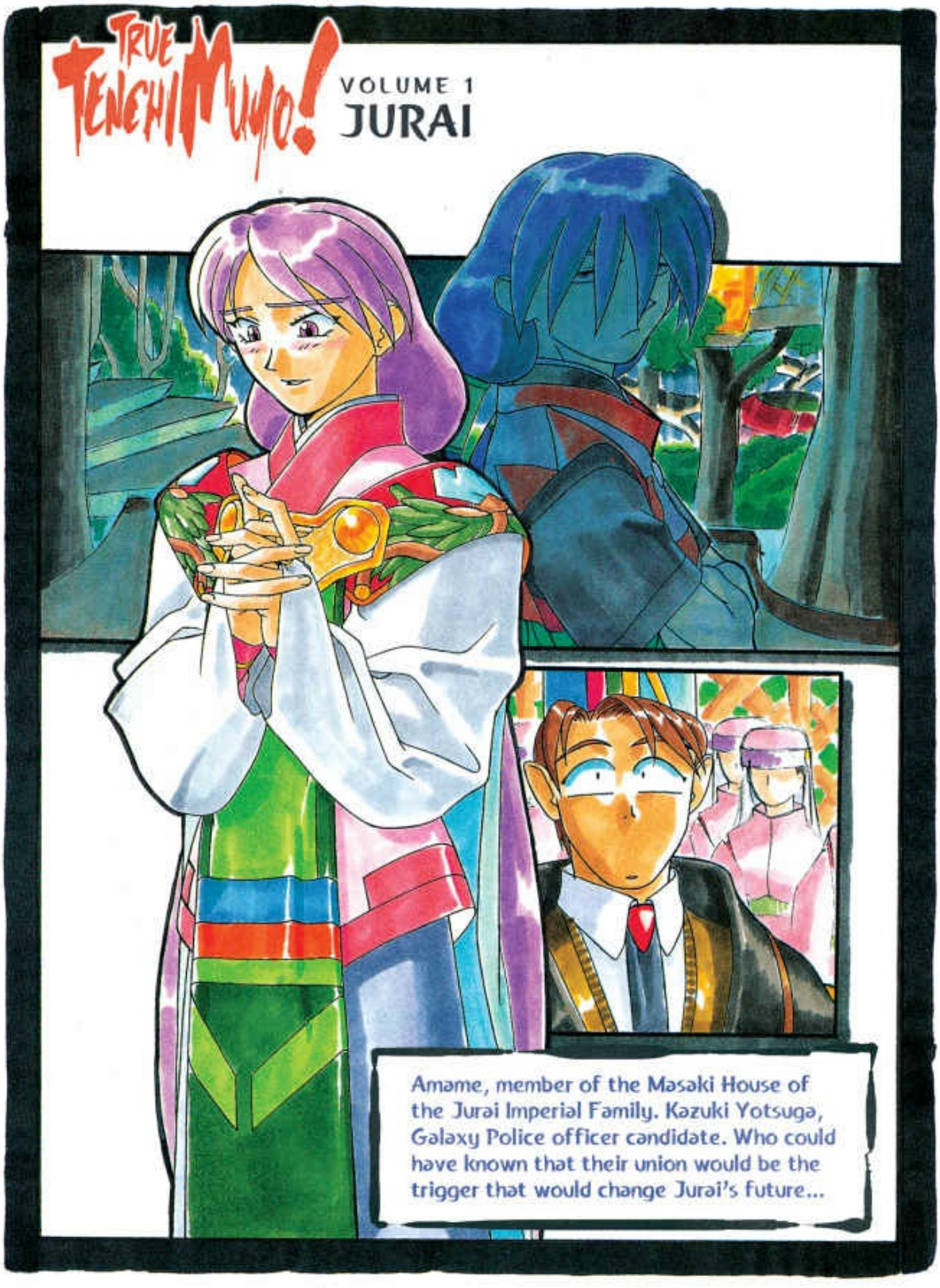


by YOUSUKE KURODA
and MASAKI KAJISHIMA

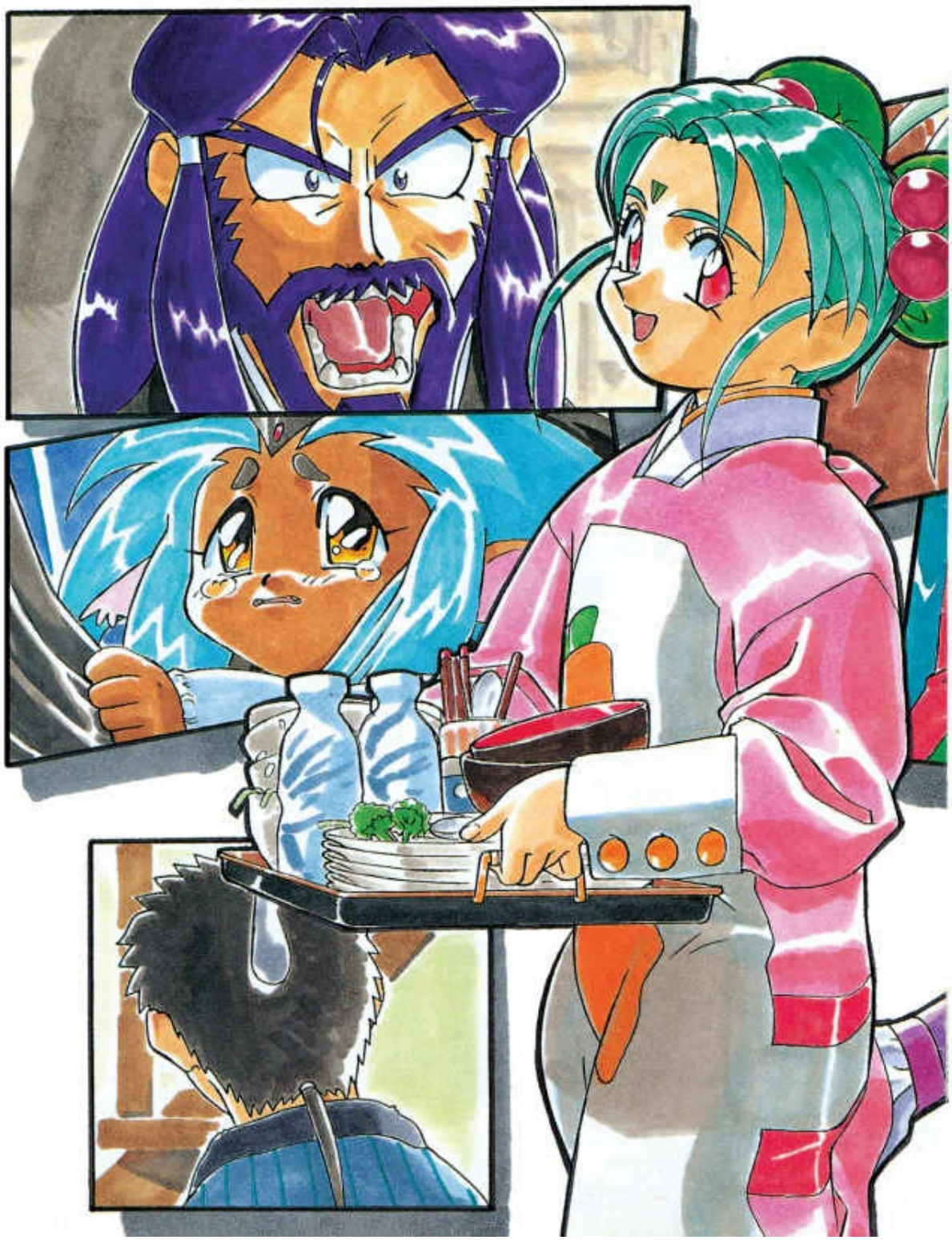
vol. 1
JURAI

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TRUE TENCHI MUYO!
VOLUME 1
JURAI
Amame, member of the Masaki House of the Jurai Imperial Family. Kazuki Yotsuga, Galaxy Police officer candidate. Who could have known that their union would be the trigger that would change Jurai's future...

The duel between Tenchi and
Ayeka's marriage candidate...



After this daily ritual came a party, of course!




The sudden appearance of the beautiful and fragile Mitsuki sent a shock through the supreme council chamber where the four imperial houses of Jurai were assembled.

SHIN TENCHIMUYO! RYO O KI Vol. 1 JURAI

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TRUE TENCHI MUYO!

VOLUME 1
JURAI

BY

Yousuke Kuroda &
Masaki Kajishima

Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

One week had passed since the Emperor of Jurai came to the Masaki household for a visit.

Technically, since he never stayed for long, it had been a week since he made his first appearance. For each visit to the Masaki home, he would show up with a candidate for marriage for his daughter Ayeka, the first Imperial Princess. However, each time he came, some outrageous series of events would send him, his marriage candidate, and the rest of his entourage away. Since this had happened seven times now, he was simply showing up every day. Each time, Ayeka would entreat, “But Father, I have Tenchi-sama…” And each time, he would repeat his line, “Unless this Tenchi can best my chosen man in a duel, I cannot allow it.” So the routine went, and this was now Masaki Tenchi’s eighth duel.

For the eighth time, their audience consisted of eight people plus one animal. There was Azusa, Emperor of Jurai; Funaho, first Empress of Jurai; Misaki, second Empress of Jurai; Masaki Katsuhito (also known as Yosho), first Prince of Jurai and grandfather of Tenchi; Ryoko, former space pirate; Washu-chan, scientific genius; and the “animal” Ryo-Ohki, living spaceship (currently in toddler mode).

The attention of all in this fine and fancy group—each of whom could probably destroy the solar system several times over in an instant—was held by two people. First: the ordinary high school student and people-pleaser (currently on leave from school) Masaki Tenchi, who, quite frankly, was sick of this farce but went along with it without complaint, and second: the rich, handsome, and completely expendable, marriage candidate.

Ayeka fretted over Tenchi, but the thought *Tenchi-sama is fighting for my sake!* kept her giddy.

On the other end of the spectrum was Ryoko, who also fretted over Tenchi, but her dark side, honest to her true feelings, took over her thoughts. *Concede! Concede! Just lose before you get hurt! Lose, and send Ayeka back to Jurai. Sasami, too. Washu can just get lost. And Mihoshi, too.* However, she sensed Misaki’s gaze next to her and reluctantly cheered for Tenchi. This

being the eighth repetition of these events, Ryoko knew that any such words that upset Misaki would result in a flood of tears, followed by a tirade of abuse, including pinching cheeks, tackles, getting tossed into the air, and then having the bill for damages incurred by her attack on Planet Jurai 700 years earlier thrust into her face. Even knowing all this, she would still succumb to those darker impulses in a few seconds and shout them at the top of her lungs. Why didn't she learn from the past? Well, that's just who Ryoko was.

Varied reactions came from the others. Azusa remained surly. Funaho and Katsuhito looked on, unruffled. Sasami, with Ryo-Ohki's help, fully confident in Tenchi's victory, handed out umbrellas to everyone while she pondered what to make for dinner that night. Washu-chan was the only one looking up into the sky, mumbling, "It should be any time now."

And so, for the eighth time in a row, the eighth duel was over in an instant. Yet again, a space shuttle came crashing down from the sky—this being despite the Emperor holding the duel at different times of day ever since the second time it happened. The impact blasted Tenchi and the expendable marriage candidate into the pond in front of the Masaki residence. Tenchi swam back to shore wondering how this could keep happening, but the poor expendable marriage candidate floated unconscious, fulfilling his destiny as an expendable character.

The spectators, shielded from the spray of water by their umbrellas, bore witness to Tenchi's victory.

And then before the spectators' eyes, soaking wet and looking like some sort of Amazonian half-fish or kappa water goblin, staggered a single humanoid form. There she stood: as always, the genius of dumb luck, the girl to whom a goddess would doff her hat, the girl who would crawl out of the depths of Pandora's Box: Galaxy Police detective first-class Kuramitsu Mihoshi. With a pitiful expression on her face, and dizzy eyes, she said, "I'm sooo sorry, but it seems I did it again. Washu-san, could you fix it, please?" And for the eighth time, she fainted dead away.

Azusa beheld this turn of events with a look of repugnance; with this eighth consecutive loss of a bet against Tenchi, he had exhausted his monthly stipend. Even the Emperor of Jurai could not write off personal gambling debts as "entertainment expenses."

Once the dueling event concluded, the partying began. While indignant

at the weak showing of the expendable marriage candidate, Azusa couldn't say no to an invitation from Sasami, the apple of his eye. Tenchi, of course, had no say in the matter, and the rest of the group unanimously agreed to the banquet.

Sure enough, the partying lasted through the night. Ryoko's drunken advances on Tenchi earned a rebuke from Ayeka, leading to a two-liter sake bottle thrown in the heat of the moment striking Azusa in the head. Tenchi, the only one still sober and in full possession of his senses, apologized profusely while, off to the side, Katsuhito sheepishly nodded along as he listened to Funaho's grievances.

But above all, the most peculiar spectacle was the conversation between Misaki and Mihoshi. Since the start of the banquet, they had sat opposite each other, humbly bowing and formally introducing themselves. (Naturally, they were drunk.)

"My name is Misaki, Sasami-chan and Ayeka-chan's mom," said Misaki.

"Oh, my, my, it's—" Mihoshi began.

"Oh, no, no. You're too kind," Misaki interjected.

"…so nice to meet you," Mihoshi continued.

"Oh, my, my. It's my pleasure," Misaki replied.

"I'm special investigator first-class—" said Mihoshi.

"Oh, it's so nice to meet you!" Misaki cut in.

"…Mihoshi of the Galaxy Police," Mihoshi finished.

"Oh, my, my. You're too kind," said Misaki.

"Oh, my, my…" replied Mihoshi.

"Oh, my, my. You're too kind," Misaki interrupted.

"…you're too kind," Mihoshi said.

Left to themselves, they would continue to converse in this manner all night. The fast-talking Misaki and the slow-talking Mihoshi, the content of their conversation never meshing in any way, and yet somehow able to understand each other perfectly. *How…?* Washu wondered, every time. She dwelled very seriously on the matter, contemplating both human

development and evolution.

Azusa's cries for them to cease went unheard. As Azusa grew enraged, Ryo-Ohki tugged at his sleeve and then performed "I'm a Little Teapot," complete with sweeping hand gestures. Suddenly, all eyes focused on her. When she finished with a bow, everyone applauded, and Azusa returned to his seat in resignation. He was well aware of how angry Sasami would be if he ever made Ryo-Ohki cry.

And the ruckus began anew. The Masaki household was full of jeers, laughter, yelling, sarcasm, and pleasant greetings, for eight days in succession.

When the sun began to rise, Azusa and the others finally declared that it was time to go. After eight times, there was nothing emotional to parting, and it now felt as familiar as waving goodbye to your father as he left for the office. Azusa left without a word, with Funaho giving a slight bow at his side. At this point, words were unnecessary. There was, however, one person who still experienced all the emotions of parting. It was Misaki.

"Farewell, Sasami-chan, Ayeka-chan, Tenchi-chan, Ryoko-chan, Ryo-Ohki-chan, Washu-chan, Mihoshi-chan."

"Oh, my, my—" started Mihoshi.

"Oh, no, no. You're too kind," Misaki interjected.

"…that's very kind of you," Mihoshi continued.

"Oh, my, my. You're too kind," said Misaki.

"Oh, no, no…" Mihoshi started.

"Oh, my, my. That's very kind of you," said Misaki.

"…you're too kind," Mihoshi finished.

As this would go on endlessly if left alone, everyone pulled them apart, and at last, the ship departed with Azusa and his entourage aboard.

"Farewell! Farewell!"

While Misaki watched, Tenchi and the others waved until the moment the ship disappeared between the clouds, whereupon they collapsed in a heap like a bunch of invertebrates. Eight consecutive days of this lifestyle had taken its toll.

“Wh-what is with your parents…?”

“And *your* mother…” That was all Ryoko and Ayeka could manage for sarcasm.

“Good grief,” sighed Ryoko and Ayeka. When it came to being at the mercy of their incomprehensible parents, on this one point, they were in agreement.

Washu-chan, amazingly, had fallen asleep standing up without anyone having noticed.

The morning sun, now fully risen, shone down upon Tenchi and the others as they lay sprawled about the courtyard. Looking up at the sky through half-lidded eyes, Tenchi thought about his great-grandmother, Funaho. *She married the Emperor of Jurai and gave birth to Grandpa, 750 years ago. Grandpa came to Earth 700 years ago, married Grandma, who gave birth to Mom, and then Dad married into the family.*

And then I was born. The blood of Jurai flowed through me. Up till last year, I believed he was just an ordinary guy. But, like it or not, that power made itself known to those of Juraian blood: the Light Hawk Wings. Those three shining wings, Washu-chan told me, stem from a mysterious power I produce on my own, without the aid of a Royal Tree.

Be that as it may, I’ve still only managed to use it twice, can’t bring them forth consciously, and it’s of no use to me in my daily life…

“What are you thinking about, Tenchi-niichan?”

He tilted his head to one side and there was Sasami, standing quietly. Ryo-Ohki, now back in animal form, was perched on her shoulder.

“Just thinking about your family, Sasami-chan.”

“I’m sorry. They’re a pain, huh?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just… I mean, your father is my great-grandfather.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Right? When I think about it, it just feels so amazing.” Tenchi smiled at Sasami and looked back up at the sky.

It’s amazing, he thought. *So many people surround me. Not even a*

year has passed, so why does it feel like they've always been living here? Why is it so much fun?

Ryo-Ohki softly meowed from Sasami's shoulder. Tenchi took the cue, "Oh yeah, I better go out to the field."

She meowed again.

Getting up, dragging his heavy legs, Tenchi headed for the shed. Perhaps, in some ways, he had the most endurance of them all.

"I'll bring you lunch later."

"Thanks, Sasami-chan, but you should get some sleep. They might come back, right?"

She laughed. "I guess so," she said, and trailed off into a yawn.

"See? Sasami-chan, take care of the others."

"Right."

"Well, shall we go, Ryo-Ohki?" Tenchi asked the cabbit.

"Meow!" came the response.

Giving a gentle wave to Sasami, Tenchi and Ryo-Ohki headed for the carrot field. The glorious spring sunshine enveloped the Masaki household and his family.

Tsunami

A spaceship sped through space at nearly 99% the speed of light. The ship, which had a red core block in the middle and was fitted with a gigantic wooden hull unit, was of an exceedingly unique design; its planet of origin would be instantly recognizable to most races in the galaxy. No matter how vast the universe may be, there was only one planet that made its spaceships from wood.

The ship's name was Kirito. It was an Imperial Family ship, owned by Planet Jurai, holder of the largest single-country territory in the whole of the Milky Way. Kirito was a ship that could literally only be owned by the Imperial Family of Jurai. As such, the central core block of the ship held a special unit, where a First Generation Royal Tree was planted.

A Royal Tree was the name for a type of tree cultivated only on Planet Jurai (or so the Juraians spun the story) which controlled the power, life support, navigation, and every other system aboard the ship Kirito as it now tore through space. While it appeared no different than an ordinary tree, it produced far more energy than a star and possessed intelligence more developed than a super computer (up until the Third Generation Royal Tree, at least). A combination of a nuclear reactor and a computer, it was truly a tree endowed with omnipotent power.

Of course, it wasn't all positive. Royal Trees had a low rate of germination and were exceedingly difficult to cultivate. And in order to actually utilize it, a type of ceremony called the Rite of Tree Selection was required, since only one person could form a bond with one tree (although it was the tree that did the choosing). Planet Jurai held the monopoly on Royal Trees because they did not publicize any information on the Unit devices used to cultivate them, and for some reason, these Royal Trees would only open their hearts to members of the Imperial Family or those slated to join it.

Currently, there were several other Units onboard aside from Kirito (the ship Kirito took its name from the Royal Tree Kirito). If Jurai's Imperial Family could not form contracts with multiple Royal Trees, then why were they there? This was because the other Units were to be cultivated as later

generations of Kirito. While it had become customary for the Juraian Imperial Family to cultivate the offspring of a Royal Tree with their parent for a fixed term, that was only when the parent tree had become a Juraian Royal Ship. Nobody, not even those in the Imperial family, knew how the saplings were raised inside the Hall of Royal Trees within Tenju, the Juraian Imperial Palace and the symbol of Jurai. Planet Jurai might have been the exclusive users of the Royal Trees, but even they did not fully understand them.

Even so, when they grew as huge as Kirito, a First Generation Tree with only three past masters, there was a high probability of it producing seeds that could mature into Second Generation Trees. For the sake of the further development of Planet Jurai, they installed a system unit that produced a special environment that encouraged seed germination and cultivation.

But why was Kirito, invaluable among all Juraian ships, traveling on its own? There was a reason for that. The sole person aboard her was currently on a journey of training and self-discovery. His name was Masaki Azusa, the Crown Prince of the Juraian Imperial Family, and next in line for election as Emperor of Jurai.

"Dammit!" On Kirito's bridge, Azusa was in a *very* foul mood. Grasping his Master Key (the symbol of his partnership with the Royal Tree, the jewels it was adorned with themselves made from hardened tree sap), he increased the ship's speed. While nothing changed inside the ship, the stars outside the window suddenly streaked rearward.

"That's enough, sir!" As the chiding voice made itself heard, the velocity indicator on the main display dropped, and a spinning ball about ten centimeters wide appeared before Azusa. It was the miniature spherical terminal of Jijii, his chaperone and Guardian Unit. His main incarnation was sealed away, as he was only a nuisance to Azusa (in Azusa's opinion, naturally). While the terminal couldn't use physical force against him, it always followed him around, ready with a lecture.

Azusa thought that sooner or later, he'd have to seal it away somewhere, too. Azusa scowled sidelong at Jijii.

"Young master, turning them down like that was simply too rude!"

“Hmph! Like I care.” In his mind, he imagined those people swarming around him, grinning and crudely rubbing their hands together in supplication (he’d completely forgotten what their faces looked like). “They’re probably friends of that old bat!”

The “old bat” Azusa was referring to was Kamiki Seto. Her husband’s name was Utsutsumi, the head of House Kamiki, one of the four great houses of the Juraian Imperial Family. With her long hair, gentle gaze, and clear eyes, her beauty took men’s breaths away and made women sigh. But that was only what those fortunate people who did not know her true nature thought. From Azusa’s point of view, she was nothing but a malicious old bat.

This had all started several weeks earlier, a few days after he departed on his journey. Picking up a distress call that the daughter of some galactically prominent somebody or other was being attacked by space pirates, Azusa immediately headed toward the scene.

However, the distress call was odd… in a way that was quite obvious.

> DAMSEL: Oh, dear. Somebody, save me, please.
>
> PIRATE: Bwa-ha-ha. It is dangerous to travel in space alone.
>
> DAMSEL: Oh. Please stop.
>
> PIRATE: No gallant man driven by a sense of justice will magically appear in a place like this.
>
> DAMSEL: I won’t believe it.
>
> PIRATE: Though there’s a wimp out there listening, he’s scared to come and will just steer clear. Bwa-ha-ha.

In addition to the wooden audio, the pirate pretending to attack the rich girl sent a real-time image of this, along with her profile. Azusa was 21 years old at the time, and while young, he was not some hot-blooded fool who allowed thoughts of reckless valor carry him away, nor was he crazy enough as to waste time on such an obvious farce. And yet, he had to try to rescue the ship transmitting the distress call, as official galactic law required that he make an attempt. You could say he was being serious to a fault. Blame that on his youth and inexperience.

So, he saved her. Kirito’s power… or rather, Azusa’s power alone was

more than a match for some pirate, who, after all, was just acting. A warning shot prompted a quick getaway, with a few pointed, badly-acted, parting threats.

With the reactor destroyed and the ship disabled, he towed it to the nearest star, where he found himself whisked off to meet the girl's family, who welcomed him with such grand extravagance that it was clear they had prepared the whole thing in advance.

At first, he was glad. He thought of it as a sort of accident on his journey, a type of informal diplomacy. But when it kept happening every three days, he was at wit's end. After subtracting his detention time, Azusa would only get half a day's travel before a pirate was attacking some rich daughter.

Azusa would receive a distress call, be obliged to rescue, find himself detained before he would excuse himself and make a run for it… Rinse and repeat, day after day. He disguised his ship's hull with metal, but this quickly became discovered. He tried ignoring the distress call, only to have the weeping girl curse him out. On one occasion, they even told him that it was "time for today's rescue." Meanwhile, their machinations to detain him only grew more radical: they threatened him with guns and then surrounded him with a fleet. At this point, he could not tell who the real pirates were.

Their goal was to wed their daughters to Azusa, the next Emperor of Jurai, which boasted both the most territory in the galaxy and the strongest military. Becoming relatives would mean a huge rise in status for their nation and their family. For most royalty and titled nobility, marrying into Jurai meant getting the golden ticket.

Officially, the only people permitted to have a Royal Tree were members of the Imperial Family. However, Jurai granted trees of the fifth-generation and beyond in strict confidence to non-Juraians, and were used as power sources on planets and colonies in early stages of settlement. Nations who were relatives of the Jurai received preferential treatment. As a result, the routine had now become, "rescue beautiful and desirable girls from cold-blooded pirates, then their fathers try to detain him by military force."

Azusa's training journey had turned into a matchmaking tour.

"Don't you find it strange?" Azusa asked Jijii.

“It is a bit unnatural.”

Azusa’s tone grew harsh in response to Jijii’s unperturbed demeanor. “A bit?! It’s totally unnatural! Jijii, you know the rules of this journey, right?”

“Yes. The nature of the training journey taken by the Crown Prince of the Juraian Imperial Family is such that, once he sets out, there is no obligation to report your whereabouts to even the Juraian Emperor himself. In the event he is caught up in any trouble, even the most mortal of peril, they will not be notified.”

“Right. Exactly. I change my destination on a daily basis, so why are there always girls being attacked there?”

“It is strange,” Jijii conceded.

“It all has to be the work of that old bat!” Azusa seethed, a scowl on his face.

In other words, this bat, Kamiki Seto, was somehow locating his position and passing that information along to these girls’ fathers. She had even clearly set a few of them up personally.

Azusa had a three-year-old fiancée named Misaki. This adorable little girl, 18 years his junior, was the daughter of Seto, the puppet master behind “Operation Arranged Marriage.” So, why was Seto trying to arrange a marriage for her future son-in-law? It was not that she did not want to give up her daughter, Misaki. She did not really have any objections to this marriage. However, she felt sorry for him that he was unable, out of deference for Misaki, to associate with another woman (and meet a young man’s immediate needs, as the saying went).

Providing a partner for her daughter’s fiancé… She was doing something that was frankly none of her business, knowing full well that he did not want it. This was an example of Seto’s warped expressions of love for others.

In any case, Azusa had been her favorite since childhood, and he was well acquainted with her methods after often suffering mischief of this sort. You could say he had developed a sixth sense of sorts. If Seto was involved, he somehow just knew.

Rumor had it that she was subtle, but bold; ridiculous, but precise; and acerbic, but loveable. Seto, Jurai's most fearsome schemer (which she of course took as a compliment), was being so blunt.

"That old bat should've just told me she was arranging a marriage for me instead of coming up with something this ridiculous."


THAT OLD BAT!

“Will we be making an escape?” inquired Jijii.

“Of course,” Azusa reflexively snapped back at Jijii. While he had gotten used to this nonsense, he had grown frustrated, not only at the nerve of these arranged marriages, but also that Seto could see right through him.

Yes, it was true that Seto was concerned about Azusa, but that was not the only reason. Since he had begun his journey one galactic standard week ago, Azusa had tasted a heretofore unprecedented feeling of liberation. The Juraian Imperial Family bloodline was originally of pirate stock, with a tendency towards wanderlust, and that disposition flowed within Azusa as well. For him, especially, the splendid life and political power of the scion of the galaxy’s largest territory held no appeal. Handed a ticket called “freedom” and leaping out into the void of space, the hot-blooded nature of his ancestors sleeping deep within his DNA had sprung forth. Unfortunately, this tendency was strongest in those who had what it took to be the Juraian Emperor.

“Operation Arranged Marriage” came just as he was starting to think he wanted to just run away from it all. In other words, knowing Azusa’s personality well, this was Seto’s prank to keep him in check. Nobody was supposed to know where he was going, yet here she was, accurately predicting Azusa’s haphazard journey, letting him know that “escape was impossible.” This sort of circuitous lesson was very much in her character.

While he was disappointed that she still treated him like a child thirteen years after he had first met her at age eight, it was not as though he did not understand the position in which he had been placed. No matter how strongly he might have longed for freedom, he would never abandon Jurai. And Seto knew that, too. Yet here they were. It bore repeating that Seto’s affection was a bit warped.

Azusa sighed in defeat. He was still wrapped around Seto’s little finger. Moreover, he knew that she was just getting started. Not even the future Emperor of Jurai could be a match for her. That was Kamiki Seto. “Pathetic…”

“Young Master, I beg your pardon, but why not just go meet the lady?” Jijii suggested.

“Don’t be absurd! I will never do as that old bat says!”

The Juraian Emperor took several wives—they were polygamous. Forming ties with new families was beneficial. In fact, Jurai had grown to its present power through both the Royal Trees and its taking many wives, continuously binding other national powers by blood. In the present day, others flocked to Jurai, not the other way round. Had Azusa been so inclined, he could have chosen any number of wives.

And yet he did not. It was not that he was being stoic. There had been a number of women who had made a good impression on him. However…

"Azusa-chan…" The voice calling to him in his heart stayed his actions. Her elegant smile and white hair longer than her body blowing in the night breeze. Each time he became interested in anyone, he heard her voice again in his heart.

"Could that old bat know…?" Azusa wondered. "No, she'd never," he said, shaking his head in denial of the doubts that seeped from his heart. And so, with his freedom guaranteed while also under complete surveillance, Azusa's journey continued.

Ping, ping. An alarm chimed softly, and a mayday message popped up on the forward panel.

"For crying out loud!" Azusa blurted out, but who would blame him? It had only been two hours since he had escaped the last lady's ship. To hell with galactic law; he could not take this anymore. Seto's sarcastic laughter echoed through Azusa's mind. "Jijii, ignore it. Ignore it and just go!"

"Young Master, hold on. This isn't like the others we've been getting."

"What do you mean?" Azusa turned his attention to the screen. The mayday appeared to be coming from a transport fleet belonging to a famous company that occasionally visited Jurai, along with its escort fleet. Azusa and Jijii could not confirm specifics because subspace communications were being jammed. It was clear that the attacker was obscuring their actions. Odds were slim that it had anything to do with "Operation Arranged Marriage."

"Looks like it's for real," Azusa concluded.

"What shall we do, Young Master?"

"Hmph… Why do you think I'm even out here?"

“By your command,” Jijii changed Kirito’s course and headed for the scene at maximum speed.

Azusa’s eyes shone intensely as he stared at the void of space onscreen. It was not out of a sense of justice, but merely a desire to kick some pirate ass to work out his irritation over what had been going on, and his indignation at the old bat (Seto). Even knowing it was Seto’s handiwork, he kept rescuing the damsels mainly because the attackers were “pirates,” and even now, that thought was subconsciously driving him.

Perhaps the old bat does know… Azusa thought as he recognized the feeling inside him.

“Azusa-chan…” He heard the voice calling him from the depths of his heart. It was not his imagination.

By the time Azusa arrived, it was all over. The escort flee was destroyed for the most part; it truly was one-sided slaughter. If there was one oddity, it was that the attackers went after only two of the transport ships, leaving the others completely untouched. It was clear that the attackers acted with a target in mind and that they were not lowly pirates who randomly plundered and kidnapped.

The display zoomed in on the distant pirate ship, and there was no doubt that this was no ordinary assailant. The ship was chalky white, like two serpents coiled around each other, a shape that did not seem to belong to any star system, and far too ostentatious for any mere pirates to possess.

Azusa opened all channels and broadcast a message to the pirates. “This is Masaki Azusa, Crown Prince to the Imperial House of Jurai. You are engaging in piracy. Under galactic law, I advise you to come to a halt and surrender. I say again…” The message was set to continually broadcast on auto-repeat.

The transport crew was no doubt ecstatic to hear the message. After all, the Crown Prince of Jurai, famous throughout the galaxy, had come to rescue them. Anyone would have thought that the pirates would turn tail and run.

No, there was only one person who did not think so: Azusa himself. As if to substantiate his thoughts, the white battleship withdrawing from the scene came about and headed for Kirito.

“That doesn’t indicate surrender,” observed Azusa. “Hah, they act as if Kirito were no threat to them.”

“Young Master, the target is far enough away from the transports. Destroy it at once!”

“Don’t rush me. Look at that ship. It’s not even using the transports as a shield. Interesting… I’m curious to see who’s aboard her.”

“What?!” Jijii exclaimed.

“Using a First Generation Juraian ship in this situation will only make me a laughingstock,” declared Azusa.

“B-but…!”

Azusa backhanded Jijii as he tried to stop him, then fired transporter pods into several locations on the approaching white battleship. Immediately, the screen displayed the contact points, and he estimated one that looked favorable.

“All right, Jijii, here I go.”

“Young Master, wait! I shall go with you.”

“Hmph! Have it your way.”

Their bodies were instantly transported into the white battleship’s interior. They were in a passageway near the upper hull, where they assumed the bridge to be.

“Intruders, and yet no alarms going off,” Jijii observed. “It’s almost as if the ship’s unmanned.”

“Unmanned…? No, there’s one powerful energy source… at the center.”

“Then it may not be human. We should fight them ship to ship…”

“They challenged a Royal ship head-on,” Azusa replied. “I expected as much. That’s why I wanted to greet them. Something’s coming!”

Turtle-like guard robots, hemispheres with limbs, appeared in the passageway in front of and behind Azusa and Jijii. But this level of firepower could not stop Azusa, the next Emperor of Jurai. He did not bother to use his Master Key sword and fought them in hand-to-hand combat. A single kick destroyed several of them. Azusa seemed to be enjoying it, as if it were a

game. In fact, he *was* enjoying it.

After defeating more than 200 guard robots, a subspace hole suddenly swished open in front of Azusa.

“Young Master, it’s a trap.”

“I know. Seeing how they went to the trouble of inviting us, we should go.”

Stepping inside without any hesitation, Azusa emerged in the middle of an enormous hall, 150 square meters in size. Artistic decorations adorned the columns and walls, making it hard to believe that they were aboard a pirate battleship. Just then, they heard the delicate melody of a *neorle* (a musical instrument similar to a pipe organ on Earth) being played nearby.

The person working the keyboard withdrew his fingers and stood. His fair skin, long hair, yellow eyes behind pince-nez spectacles, and outfit—similar to the dress uniform of the Galaxy Academy, the facility which gathered together the sum of cosmic knowledge—gave all the more impression of a great intelligence within.

This man, who looked in no way at all like a pirate, bowed respectfully as he spoke. “Welcome to my cathedral, Azusa-dono, Imperial Crown Prince of Jurai.”

“A welcome complete with the music of the neorle, I see. As thanks for your invitation, I shall receive your name. Answer me!”

“That would be my honor. My name is Kagato.”

Kagato. That was definitely what he said. To think that 750 years before Masaki Tenchi fought and defeated him, Kagato had met the future Emperor of Jurai in a place like this!

Cautiously eying his surroundings, Azusa inquired of Kagato, “Still, this ship seems a bit of overkill for the piracy trade.”

“All I seek is knowledge, and to liberate that knowledge for those who deserve it. This beautiful vessel Souja is a treasury of knowledge.”

“Are you saying you are not a pirate? No matter what your objective is, what you do can only be described as piracy under galactic law!”

“Based on the logic of the laws that you people use,” Kagato replied. “I

operate under my own laws."

"Even if that results in aggravated robbery?"

Kagato laughed, "Imbeciles who cannot evaluate their own competence desire knowledge and would never be able to use it all. Don't you think that's a terrible waste?" He adjusted his spectacles as he spoke from the stage upon which the neorle stood. "Law is that which is allowed by those who have power. So show me your laws through your power."

"Have at you, then!" Azusa cried, leaping at him.

Unlike when he had engaged the guard robots, this time he held the handle-like Master Key in his right hand, from which a blade of light extended. He realized that this man called Kagato standing before him was not what he appeared to be. If he made the wrong choice, he would never be able to win. The experience and knowledge he had gained from training in the martial arts since coming to Jurai at age ten—as well as his own instincts—moved him to draw the energy blade.

There was a flash. But then an invisible wall generated in front of Kagato, protecting him!

"What?!" Azusa was dumbfounded. The barrier deflected his mighty sword, which was unbeatable even on Jurai!

Kagato's eyes glowed with an uncanny light. His right arm moved.

A warning from deep inside his head raced through Azusa. Absorbing the repulsion shock into his body, he jumped back from Kagato.

"Ah," said Kagato. "You're quite powerful. This should be far beyond the limits of human-based bio-augmentation. And you're able to maintain such stability while using that much power."

Not bothering to listen to his admiring words, Azusa extended a second long sword and severed Kagato's right arm. But it regenerated before he even knew what was happening.

"Are you even human?!"

"You're the one who misjudged me," returned Kagato.

Indeed, despite Azusa's superhuman combat strength of the Juraian Imperial family, he was unable to inflict any damage in the face of Kagato's

regenerative ability. On the other hand, Azusa found himself easily knocked to the floor again and again by the powerful energy shots Kagato released. Each time, he hit the floor with a bone-rattling impact.

How could Kagato be so strong? This was because Kagato's body was actually Ryoko's prototype body, into which Washu, called the greatest intellect in the galaxy, had poured everything she had. Just as Azusa had sensed, he was not human at all!

Jijii flew spinning towards the wounded Azusa, calling out worried advice. "Young Master, any more of this will be dangerous. Call on Kirito-dono for assistance!"

"I don't care if he's not human. Using a ship's might against flesh and blood will only bring shame upon the name of the Crown Prince!" Azusa stood, fighting back the pain. Taking assistance from his Royal Tree partner would give him superhuman power. Or, rather, he could have power equivalent to the ship itself. Incidentally, when Ayeka fought Kagato, she was constantly calling on her Royal Tree, Ryu-Oh, for assistance. Rejecting assistance was a demonstration of Azusa's determination to defeat Kagato by his own power. He grinned, and then glared at Kagato. "Rejoice, Jijii. I finally feel like I'm on my training journey!"

He did not intend to change tactics. He would put everything he had into his sword, and then kill Kagato. He thought that was the action he would need to take as the future Emperor of Jurai. No—he thought that a truly powerful man did not need a plan. *That's right. Just like with that old bat, when I was a child…*

As Azusa moved in to attack, Kagato summoned a sword from his clenched fist. The mighty Azusa and silent Kagato's blades crossed without a sound. A moment later, there came the faint hiss of burning flesh.

"You have truly shown me the skills of the Crown Prince of Jurai," said Kagato as Azusa went down on one knee. An incinerated slash ran from his right shoulder to his left flank, not bleeding, but hurting much more than a cut.

"Young Master!"

Azusa screamed, drowning out Jijii's voice, but did not fall to the ground, clutching the Master Key tightly as its energy sword deactivated.

Through the screaming, he asked himself why he had ever come to Jurai. He thought of his father and mother. He remembered Seto's chuckling. He saw white hair waving in the night breeze. He saw a beautiful face in profile behind it…

In that moment, the Master Key he clutched in his hand began to glow with light! The cathedral was alight with a golden glow.

Kagato was astonished! "A warp in space?! Impossible! A pathway cannot be created within Souja's internal barrier!"

"Young Master, hurry!"

Azusa momentarily hesitated to leap into the pathway Kirito had created. However, if Kirito had judged the situation this dangerous, then his discontent meant nothing. "I guess this shows I'm still just an amateur…"

Just as Azusa and Jijii vanished in the golden light, a wooden spaceship appeared in the cathedral's skylight.

Kagato regarded the ship. "A Juraian vessel… You mean to say this was all that ship's doing?!"

Dozens of light beams stabbed at Kirito from Kagato's battleship Souja as Azusa and Jijii returned. Souja was 37 times larger, with an overwhelming advantage, but her blasts could not put even a scratch on Kirito. The three wings of light Kirito had deployed to her fore completely blocked physical, psychic, and even subspace attacks.

Meanwhile, on Kirito's bridge, Azusa fought pain as he held the Master Key aloft with both hands, linking with the Royal Tree and directing Kirito to counterattack.

"I never expected someone like this." Azusa had assumed he was just a pirate, though formidable. There was no way for him to know that his opponent was the assistant to Washu, the scientific genius of the Galaxy Academy, with Ryoko's prototype body. On his first training journey, Azusa had encountered a being who could stand up to a Juraian vessel, lauded as the strongest. It was fate.

"However…" Concentrating power into the center of the wings of light, which were devoted exclusively to defense, the light penetrated Souja's

defense field like a thin skin and landed a direct hit. The 60 meter long sword of light pierced her, inducing an explosion.

“Such power. So those are the wings of light used by the ships of Jurai, renowned throughout the galaxy… The Light Hawk Wings?! I see. They are powerful, indeed.” Floating within the partially-destroyed cathedral, Kagato stared at Kirito, directly in front of him. His face showed faint surprise, but no fear.

“Meeowwww!”

A ship appeared, along with a cry that seemed to resonate through the heart. A ship made of black crystal, with four horns projecting from its central core block! The ship’s name was Ryo-Ohki, in her first generation, before she regenerated.

This time, it was Azusa’s turn to be surprised. Ryo-Ohki possessed firepower equal to that of Kirito. If anything, she had an advantage, if only a slight one. “What’s with that power?! Could she possibly have the same power as a Tree?!”

A communication override overlapped Azusa’s shocked exclamation. The screen showed a young woman with bristly hair and fire in her eyes. It was Ryoko. She licked her lips, seeming to enjoy the battle, as she looked Azusa over. The jewels on the nape of her neck and both hands shone crimson.

“Not bad,” she said, “against me and Ryo-Ohki!”

“A woman?! No… You aren’t human either, are you?!”

“You can figure that out when you’re dead. I don’t care if Juraian ships really are the most powerful in the galaxy—Ryo-Ohki and I are going to blast her to bits!”

The moment she cut the transmission with a rude wink, Kirito began to take heavy fire. The wings of light generated by Kirito, the three Light Hawk Wings, could not cover the ship completely. The beams fired from Ryo-Ohki scored direct hits through their gaps. The Light Hawk Wings’ defenses were not enough… or so it seemed to Azusa and Jijii.

Part of Ryo-Ohki’s attack passed through the Light Hawk Wings, neutralizing them. There was one form of energy that could pass through

Light Hawk Wings. It required an immense reactor to utilize such energy in a weaponized form. Because of this requirement, it would take nothing short of a planetary-scale battleship to generate this weaponized energy, and it still would not cause critical damage to a Juraian vessel. The weapon Ryo-Ohki used was something else entirely.

Kirito shook, her hull taking direct hits for the first time. Juraian vessels could get away with wooden hulls because they possessed Light Hawk Wings, which served as both an absolute defense and offense. Of course, it was also an old tradition, but ships made of wood were the symbol of Juraian invincibility. Now, the ship composed of black crystal shattered that symbol!

“It’s sluggish?! Dammit, from just this much damage?”

“Young Master, you cannot maintain the link with the ship in your condition. We must retreat!” Jijii anxiously advised Azusa.

“If we do that, that ship will finish us! I’m taking us in!” Diverting energy from the Light Hawk Wings, Kirito focused its barrier at the bow. Ryo-Ohki began to spin like a top, emitting energy beams. The two tremendous energies collided. Back and forth, the two ships struggled against each other.

“That wasn’t good enough?! The link may be imperfect, but this is a First Generation Tree!”

It was Jijii’s frightened scream that roused Azusa from his bewilderment. “Young Master, the fabric of space… It’s tearing!”

“What?!”

The screen showed an exterior view. Space was twisting and curving right before his eyes. The two energy fields slightly out of phase with each other were generating an enormous repulsion, inducing a dimensional rift.

“Meow… meooww!” Ryo-Ohki, too, cried out at the tremendous energy.

The phenomenon spread out at the speed of light, engulfing Souja, as well. “A ship capable of taking on Ryo-Ohki. She may be unstable for now, but she couldn’t overwhelm it with the power of her jewels?!” On his bridge, Kagato’s body began to tremble for the first time.

The rift in space would not be enough. The excess energy of this phenomenon would likely cause ripple effects up to 300,000 light years away. The three ships fell through the rift. And in that instant, Kagato saw a humanoid form in space. The woman, her long blue hair tied behind her in two bunches and two circular marks inscribed on her forehead, floated in space like a transparent ghost.

“Who are you?” Kagato’s asked in a dazed murmur. Ryoko’s own murmured reply provided the answer.

“Tsunami.” Ryoko knew her… or, rather something within Ryoko knew Tsunami.

Wings of light grew from Tsunami’s body. Tsunami: the progenitor of the Juraian Royal Trees. Ten Light Hawk Wings grew from her body, enveloping the dimensional rift created by Kirito and Ryoko! Everything faded to white.

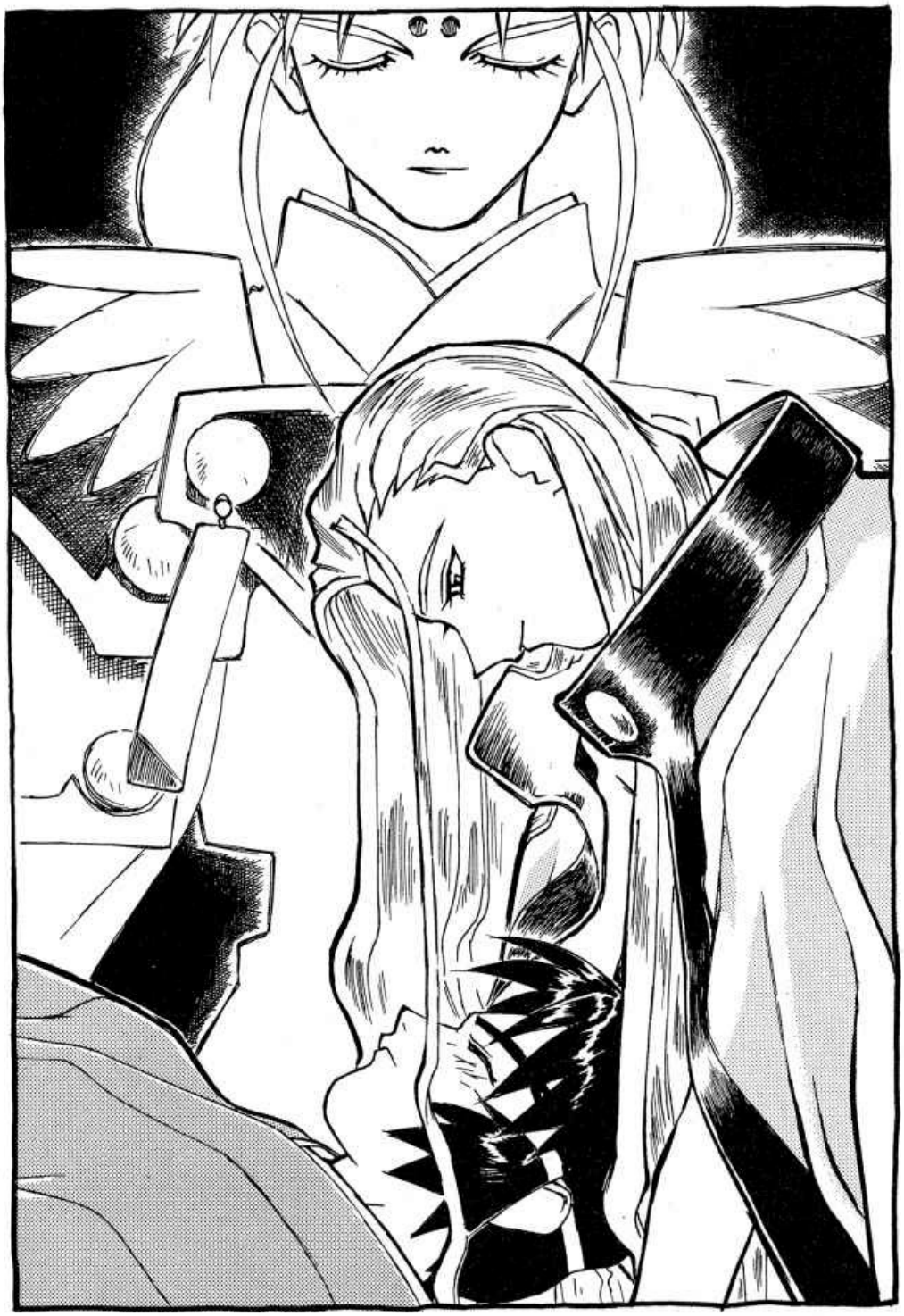
From the cathedral aboard Souja, Kagato saw Tsunami’s form, as did Azusa from Kirito’s bridge. But, almost immediately, the woman began to transform into another.

“Azusa-chan… Azusa-chan…” The woman with white hair longer than she was tall smiled at Azusa. He had not seen that slightly clouded smile in a very long time. He could never have imagined he would see her again.

“Mitsuki…” Azusa called her name, his face in sorrow.

“Azusa-chan.”

He longed for that lovely voice to embrace him forever. *If I’d met you now, I could have protected you,* he thought. *I would protect you.* Was that now an impossible reality?



A rude, hoarse voice called Azusa from his reveries and back to reality. “Are you all right, Young Master?!”

He stared silently at Jijii in front of him. This brief pause was Azusa’s meager resistance to his reality.

The dimensional rift sucked in Kirito, Souja, and Ryo-Ohki, and all three ships vanished from the area of space where they had been battling. Unbelievably, the excess energy created by Kirito’s Light Hawk Wings and Ryo-Ohki’s jewels had also vanished without a trace. The only thing left in that region was Tsunami, who had absorbed the energy. Tsunami gazed at one spot in space. Perhaps there had been something that drew her attention there, but eventually she silently closed her eyes and then seemingly melted away into space.

The progenitor of the Trees of Jurai, the Tree of Beginnings who could deploy ten Light Hawk Wings—Tsunami would, in 50 years, have her fateful meeting with Azusa’s second daughter Sasami and assimilate her. And then, 700 years later, she would save Masaki Tenchi in his battle with Kagato after Tenchi lost half of his body.

This incident also prompted Kagato, a scientist seeking a complete unified theory for all dimensions, to take interest in the ships of Jurai, particularly the Royal Trees. He would later order his servant Ryoko to steal Tsunami, the mightiest tree of Jurai. For now, he started on the repair and refit of the badly-damaged Souja.

As for Ryo-Ohki the First, whose incomplete link with Ryoko’s jewels had been unstable, the battles with Azusa’s ship Kirito, as well as with the First Generation Ship Funaho (which would belong to his son Yosho, born ten years later) dramatically shortened her life span. In 700 years, the spat between Ryoko and Ayeka would silence this Ryo-Ohki for good, eventually regenerating to evolve into Ryo-Ohki the Second.

Azusa and Kagato fought for barely three hours. No one could have guessed how much that brief encounter would affect history. Indeed, this was the moment where destiny took a turn.

Seto

Kirito had been transported near the third planet of a star system in an uncharted area of the universe. Fortunately, the damage caused by Ryo-Ohki missed vital systems and did not affect her spaceworthiness. Azusa quickly ascertained that it would take about a week to complete repairs. If anything, Azusa's physical injuries, caused by Kagato, were more serious. He was receiving treatment in a regenerator, but the wound had crushed bone and organs, and his synchronization rate with the Tree, still reeling from the aftermath of the battle, was low. Healing was taking longer than expected. He remained conscious, however, and recovered to the point where he could walk.

Azusa ordered Jijii to calculate their location and discovered that this third planet was registered as a Juraian colony. It was the planet later called "Earth."

"A Juraian colony all the way out in this remote region…" Azusa mused.

"According to the year of application, from around the foundation of Jurai, it must have been registered by one of the research ships that were not able to return. But something is odd."

"Odd?"

"Yes, sir. There's something strange about the registration. It was made so that it would register only when someone tried to survey this area of space. The application is hundreds of thousands of years old, but it was only accepted about a year ago."

Azusa stroked his chin and pondered, "Hm. Simply put, someone wanted to keep this place secret until it was discovered by someone else. But that was a year ago?"

"Some research vessel must have come by. But why register it this way?"

"So it's registered as a Juraian colony?"

“Do you know anything about it, sir?”

“Oh, there’s probably no reason…” Azusa looked away with a wry smile, as though something had occurred to him. Interest flickered in his eyes as he gazed at the image of the blue planet displayed on the forward screen. Was he interested in the beautiful planet, or…? “If it’s a Juraian colony, it might not be a bad idea to recuperate down there. Jijii, what level is it?”

Pulling up the data, Jijii blinked his mono-eye and mumbled, “Interesting…humanity in its initial stages lives here.”

“The seeds had reached this far?” queried Azusa.

“They’re the product of our prehistoric civilization from billions of years ago. There have been few records of them reaching so far.”

“I’m amazed the research vessel found this place. Where can we land?”

“Hold on, sir. I detect an energy reading.”

“That must be the research vessel that accessed it a year ago…”

“It’s using too much energy to be a research vessel,” Jijii stated. “This is irregular…”

“Can you detect a ship in the area?”

“No… They’re probably jamming signals.”

“Hm… Any possibility that their mothership malfunctioned and they crash landed here?” Azusa asked after a brief pause.

“Since there’s no distress signal, I doubt it. It would be safe to presume they’re poachers,” answered Jijii.

“I see.”

As Azusa rose, Jijii swiftly admonished, “Young master, no!”

“Now what? What’s the problem?”

“You’re planning to go vanquish them. I’m well aware of how you think, sir.”

“All right, all right.”

“Whoa…! Sir, what are you doing?!”

Azusa calmly grabbed Jijii’s sphere, shoved him into a wooden box,

and locked it for good measure. He would be in there for a good long time. Azusa transported to his quarters and changed into casual clothes, grimacing at the pain of his wounds, while gazing at the blue planet beyond his window. “These are unexpected circumstances. Not even the old bat will be able to come after me.” He felt that he had outwitted Seto and reveled in a meager sense of superiority.

Azusa set foot on Earth two hours later. While walking through the woods on a low hillside, he thought that this planet smelled similar to Jurai. Both planets were covered in abundant greenery.

I’m supposed to be enjoying my freedom, yet I feel nostalgic for home. I’m human, after all. He quickened his pace towards the energy reading. He still felt pain, but his sense of adventure overpowered it. While he was not full-blooded Juraian, there were moments when he felt he was an Imperial Family member, and if these people were as Jijii reported, he had personal reasons that drove him to keep going.

The grass around his legs was wet with dew, as if it had rained in the early morning hours. However, Azusa’s clothing stayed dry. His clothes were those of a Juraian Imperial Family warrior, deploying a nanoscopic defensive field. The field fluctuated, with darker colors signifying an increase in defense. He had been injured during his battle with Kagato even though the field was at maximum. That in itself showed how powerful Kagato was.

“I will never forget that name. Kagato…”

The bushes rustled abruptly. Azusa turned and realized from the sound that several of something was running toward his location. One was running in front, and four others were chasing it. He approached at a brisk pace, and saw between the trees a girl running desperately, and what were probably bandits chasing after her. The men were wearing clothes similar to the natives, but what looked like guns concealed by their right hips did not escape Azusa’s sharp eyes.

Pirates—I knew it. Scum. They’re the same everywhere. Azusa instantly slipped between the girl and the pirates. The girl saw his broad shoulders act as her shield and gasped; the pirates shot glares at him.

“Kidnappers?” The pirates did not bother to answer and immediately

attacked. They had to remove all obstacles; there was no need for a conversation, as they only needed to kill him. But they made the wrong decision. Even if he was wounded, even if they held guns, this was a Juraian Crown Prince. There was a fleeting shimmer of Azusa's body, and the four men fell one by one, muddied, faces writhing in agony. Azusa breathed heavily, but it was because of his wounds, not the battle.

"Um…" The girl peeked out from behind a tree upon realizing the battle was over. Still an adolescent, her black hair was tied back by her shoulders. She bowed deeply, though she was still somewhat wary of Azusa. "Th-thank you…"

"It's nothing…" Azusa was about to speak, but suddenly felt "danger" behind him. One of the pirates was pointing a stun gun they used for capture at him. "Look out!" He took a direct hit due to his delayed reaction speed and his move to protect the girl, but his warrior's outfit absorbed half the damage.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Let's go!" The girl peered down at him with concern, but he made her get up and they ran. His instincts told him not to push it any further right now. Fortunately, the pirates showed no sign of coming after them, but if they lingered any longer, it was likely their friends would show up. It was not a good idea to fight heavily armed pirates while defending the girl in his current condition. They ran for a while and saw a wide trail beyond the woods. The girl looked relieved upon seeing the familiar terrain, and Azusa was assured that she would be able to return home.

"You'll be fine now," he turned to her, and she nodded with a smile. Perhaps because her smile brought him relief, or perhaps because of the stun gun's effect on his wounds, Azusa's face stiffened even as he tried to return the smile. He might have recovered enough to walk, but a normal human being would have had to be on strict bed rest.

"Excuse me…hello!" The girl's face grew closer, and everything went out of focus and faded to darkness.

Before he lost consciousness, his last thought to himself was, *That was quite reckless, if I say so myself.*

"Azusa…chan… Azusa-chan…" The woman with the white hair

longer than she was tall smiled at Azusa. She reached out and gently stroked his cheek. A teardrop ran between her fingers. Tears were streaming from young Azusa's face. "…chan… Azusa-chan…"

He yelled and screamed and clung to her. He shook his head in the throes of a tantrum. Life drained from the woman's face, but the smile was always there. "Azusa-chan… Azusa…chan… I love you…"

"…Mitsuki!" Azusa grabbed the hand in front of him, and realized it belonged to the girl he just saved, and not the woman who kept calling him from the depths of his consciousness. *No…it's not her…*

The girl blushed and withdrew her hand, and hurriedly left the room. Azusa's mind was still in a haze, and he watched her silently. Once his head started to clear, he pushed himself up to better assess the situation. He was resting in a room. The house was old but tasteful and comfortable, and reflective of its caretaker's character. From between the sliding shoji doors the girl had left open, he saw gorgeous fall foliage.

"It's so beautiful…" Azusa had instantly fallen in love with the place. As he gazed outside, a bright red leaf from a garden maple tree fluttered down by his pillow, tossed by the breeze. He picked it up and studied it.

"You're awake. Good." He looked up to see an old man sliding the door shut behind him. He was probably the master of this house.

"I am deeply grateful for your care while I was unconscious," he bowed.

The old man shook his head, "It is I who must thank you for saving my granddaughter. However, I recommend that you leave as soon as you are well enough." His manner was gentle, but there was something about him that seemed opposed to Azusa's very being.

"You must have your reasons."

"It's not a matter worth talking about, but it's for your own good."

Azusa did not press further because he had a pretty good idea of what it was.

The old man next asked him why he had come to this village, but Azusa only said he was a traveler. It was a half-truth and a half-lie, but the

old man also did not press further. “I haven’t introduced myself. My name is Azusa.”

“Azusa-sama. My name is Asumi.”

“This is a lovely house. The view outside is wonderful.”

“It’s an empty village deep in the mountains. Its only virtue is that it’s a quiet place, good for thinking.” Asumi did not try to continue the conversation, but mentioned that he would have his granddaughter bring a meal later, stood, and slid open the door. The girl was on the other side, clearly curious about the proceedings. She saw Azusa notice her and hastily disappeared.



Azusa gazed at the closed door. *Why did I hallucinate her as Mitsuki? She doesn't look like her at all. Was I out of it?*

Asumi's granddaughter's name was Funaho. She would later become Jurai's First Queen. This was how the two met. Funaho was still fourteen years old.

At first, she avoided Azusa—or rather, she did not know how to interact with him, but she warmed up over several exchanges, and by the third day, she voluntarily came to visit Azusa. Of course, Azusa did not mind. As someone from the early stages of civilization in a remote region of space, Funaho belonged to a primitive society from Azusa's perspective. While she did not have the dazzling beauty of the women he met through his travels, she was down to earth and as pure as a clear spring.

The experience of injuries and illnesses while traveling unfamiliar lands, though with individual variation, could make one feel incredibly forlorn and helpless. While Azusa would never admit it, he was not an exception to this. It was a given that the girl tending to him would make a good impression. He was also grateful that the meals were to his taste. They were lightly seasoned and cooked to make the most of the local ingredients, which was a similar style to Jurai cuisine. It was only natural that Azusa would feel more at ease here with Funaho than while he was on Jurai.

It was the fifth morning of Azusa's stay at the Asumi household. Funaho brought his meal to his bedside again, and upon Azusa's request, ate with him.

"Um…Azusa-sama, may I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"Well…is Mitsuki-sama someone in your family?" He reflexively looked up at her face. "I'm sorry if that sounded rude. You were moaning her name when you were in pain. I thought we should contact her if she's your family… I'm sorry."

"Please don't worry about it. Did I say anything else?"

"No, no other names… Though I did hear something about an old bat," Funaho said hesitantly and averted her eyes.

Azusa's face twitched. "I-I see, ha ha ha… Don't worry about contacting my family."

"But what if they're worried about you?" She placed her chopsticks down and leaned forward ever closer.

"Funaho! You must not be so intrusive in your questions," Asumi stated unequivocally, from where he was standing beyond the open doors. Funaho involuntarily stiffened and cast her eyes downward.

"I don't mind. You've taken such good care of me, yet I caused Funaho-dono needless worry because of my inability to tell you anything," Azusa apologized to Asumi and threw Funaho a lifeline. But then…

"I apologize…" Funaho mumbled and left the room.

"Funaho-dono…"

"Azusa-sama!" Asumi stopped Azusa as he tried to rise to follow Funaho. His eyes were not those of the usually good-natured old man. "If this is to while away your time during your travels, please don't."

"…!!" Azusa realized what Asumi meant, and opened his eyes wide.

"Excuse me," Asumi said, and withdrew into the house.

Helpless, Azusa stared where he had gone for a moment, then slapped his forehead in self-deprecation. "That was careless."

Asumi had noticed that Funaho had started to have special feelings for Azusa. He had never seen the quiet girl smile so happily before. However, from Azusa's dress and demeanor, he had easily surmised that he came from nobility. He feared that his granddaughter's young love would end in disappointment.

"So careless…" Azusa realized, at Asumi's words, that he too had developed similar feelings for Funaho.

Why was Funaho so fascinating to Azusa? It was true that he liked her naiveté, her loveliness, and her kindness, but he felt more from Funaho. As he kept mulling it over, he found Funaho in the corner of the yard, staring blankly at the scenery. "Funaho-dono…" He was aware of Asumi's warning, but the moment he saw her sad face in profile, he could not help but call out

to her.

"Azusa-sama. Um, I'm sorry about earlier. I…"

"Is Asumi-dono your only family, Funaho-dono?"

"I have a little sister at my uncle's."

"And your parents?"

"My mother passed soon after she gave birth to my sister… My father left to vanquish Orochi and never returned."

"Orochi?"

"Oh, never mind…" Funaho was flustered at having let that slip.

"The people who were after you? I'm sorry I reminded you." Azusa apologized, realizing he was being rude, and amended his words. "But I believe your father is still alive." Knowing that Orochi, the mythical eight-forked serpent, was a space pirate weapon, Azusa figured that Funaho's father had merely been captured. In this day and age, androids and bioroids that appeared no different from humans cost little to build. But, perhaps as a result, enslaved intelligent lifeforms from primitive planets strictly protected by galactic law were valuable because of their scarcity. And pirates would never indiscriminately kill something of value to them.

Funaho offered a faint smile at Azusa's confident words. "I hope so…"

"It'll be all right!" Azusa said, suddenly leaning in.

"U-um, your parents… Er, I'm sorry." Funaho desperately tried to change the subject to cover her blush, then realized she had asked about the very thing that got her scolded by Asumi and bowed her head.

"It's all right. I don't mind." Trying to comfort her, Azusa started his tale in a cheery tone. He carefully changed titles and such so it would not sound strange to her and slowly started to tell her about his parents. It also served to remind himself of the distance between his world and the one inhabited by Funaho.

Azusa's father, Yotsuga Kazuki, was a Galaxy Police cadet. He met Masaki Amame, his life partner, when he took a post at the Jurai GP office. A lowly GP officer and a daughter of the Masaki family, one of the four

imperial houses of Jurai—they were Azusa's father and mother.

Jurai, a powerful military nation whose citizens were almost all combatants, would not ordinarily have need of a supplementary system of security officers, even with their equipment and information network. In reality, the Jurai GP station only employed administrative personnel and a few officers. Even so, there were more than a few in Jurai who felt some amount of humiliation that another security organization even existed within Jurai borders. This national pride eventually gave rise to a certain ceremony (some would call it hazing) for the incoming GP officers. It was a simple ritual: rescue a woman getting harassed by drunkards in town. They would pass muster if they successfully helped the woman get away. This was not an official event but a prank by the warriors. Nevertheless, the officers would not be permitted to work on Jurai if they failed to pass. Of course, in flesh and blood, they would never be a match for Jurai warriors, so this ritual only tested their mettle, not their physical strength. However, since the entire galaxy knew about how powerful the Jurai warriors were, there were few who could pass.

The day Azusa's father was supposed to participate in the ceremony, there was an accident: he came across a *real* drunkard and not the plant. Since the man was drunk, after all, Azusa's father was able to let the woman escape, but got thoroughly beat up in the process. Furthermore, since everyone around them thought it was the usual hazing ritual, nobody offered to help.

It was Azusa's mother who stepped up. She was on her way to watch the spectacle after she was invited by her friend, who had arranged this specific ceremony. Since it was at a different location, she called the friend to confirm, and discovered that this was an unplanned event. She skillfully parried the drunkards, and said to Azusa's father, his face by now covered in bruises, "Why didn't you use your gun?"

"There were bystanders," Kazuki replied, "and I didn't want to hurt the guy…"

"There's nobody on this planet idiotic enough to actually get shot by you."

"That's true, but…"

“Well, you were able to let the girl escape, so you pass,” Amame stated.

“Thank you.”

“But you should work out a little more.” Shaking her head, but acknowledging his strength of character, she later taught him Juraian martial arts as an apology.

“And that’s how their courtship began?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Azusa nodded vaguely at Funaho’s question. He actually did not know the details. His uncle, his mother’s older brother who had also left Jurai, was the one who told him how they met. Few parents would tell such details to their children. He continued, omitting some details.

When Azusa’s father finished his assignment and was to be transferred to the station on his home planet, Azusa’s mother relinquished her royal title in order to go with his father, and they were united in marriage. Such an action by the daughter of House Masaki, one of the four great Imperial Houses, would be a scandal, but it was relatively easy to relinquish the title. All one had to do was plant one’s partner Royal Tree, the symbol of royalty, in soil on Jurai. However, any descendants would only be able to return to the Imperial Family through the approval of two out of three other Imperial Houses. It did not change the fact that she abandoned the Imperial Family, so she must have agonized over the decision. Or so Azusa assumed when he was young, but while she fretted over saying farewell to the Royal Tree that was like a sibling to her, she had not wasted time worrying about relinquishing her title. Juraians, originally pirate stock, were resilient. She quickly became used to life on an unfamiliar planet and soon gave birth to her eldest son, Azusa. They led a modest but happy life.

Eight years passed. Without warning, a woman came from Jurai to see Azusa’s mother. She was Seto herself, from House Kamiki, one of the four Imperial Houses. That was when Azusa and Seto first met. Azusa’s mother had been Seto’s pupil and friend.

Seto put forward the suggestion to welcome Azusa as the next head of House Masaki. After Azusa's mother left Jurai, several circumstances had led to House Masaki being without a viable heir. His rejoining the Imperial Family was unanimously agreed on by Seto's House Kamiki, the current Emperor of Jurai's House Amaki, and House Tatsuki. However, Azusa refused to go to Jurai. It was perhaps asking too much of an eight-year-old boy to leave his parents, but his parents felt obligated to House Masaki. They tried to persuade him, but Azusa steadfastly refused. He was satisfied with his current life, and he had another significant reason: having abandoned the Imperial Family, his mother could not return to Jurai. Of course, it was possible if she got permission, as per protocol, but this time, permission to rejoin the Imperial Family was only given to Azusa and not his mother. Azusa rebelled against this.

"I hate you! Go away!!" Azusa glared and yelled at Seto.

"What a feisty one."

"Shut up. I said go home!!"

"Oh, I'm so scared," Seto giggled.

Azusa's mother, watching, sighed and mumbled, "Azusa won't be able to escape now."

"Now? If it was decided on Jurai, he can't escape anyway, can he?" his father asked.

"Seto-sama wouldn't make unilateral decisions. It probably depended on Azusa himself. But now…"

"But now?" Kazuki asked.

"Whatever Seto-sama likes, she will have. She'll ensure that it will be his idea to go to Jurai."

"She likes Azusa? He yelled at her. Isn't she angry at him?"

"She's so enjoying it. Seto-sama loves that kind of thing."

Just as she said, Seto came to see Azusa whenever her time allowed, and it was not to persuade him, but to watch Azusa pout. And Azusa would see her laughing and pout even more. There were even signs Seto was making him angry on purpose. If there was a parents' day at school, she would appear and claim to be his parent; she would sit by his bedside and

stare at him while he slept. She would try to join him in the bath, steal his snacks, tickle him, kiss him, and chase him around. She was basically a bully.

"Oh, Seto-sama…there are certain pleasures I can enjoy as a mother. Please don't take them away from me."

"Be quiet," Seto responded, "go make your next child. Azusa-chan is mine now."

Her harassment, or affections if you like, accelerated, causing Azusa's face to spend more and more time pouting. But being annoyed by something was the flip side of caring deeply about it. The young boy did not realize that Seto's influence on him was growing ever greater.

Then, one day, there was a large-scale pirate attack on the colony where Azusa lived. The colony functioned as a plant to recover resources from the asteroid belt, which the pirates came to raid. Due to the nature of the colony, it was equipped with plenty of firepower, but these pirates attacked with even greater. Despite their disadvantage, the colony army led by Azusa's parents put up a good fight but were unable to turn the tide or stop the invasion of the colony.

Azusa, ten years old at the time, was fighting the pirates separately from the colony self-defense force. The pirates were attacking the locations where ordinary citizens were taking shelter, making the force focus on the front while the pirates deployed a pincer attack from behind. Azusa actually decided to face them by himself. His parents were fighting outside the colony with the pirate fleet and could not be depended on for help.

He may have been ten years old, but his mother, a former Juraian Royal, had given Azusa elementary fighting lessons, and he was fending off the pirates. The opponents had underestimated him, and fortunately, all the time spent being chased by Seto became useful in combat. However, the pirates broke through the defenses, and Azusa was isolated completely. He did not give up until the very end, but a ten-year-old boy could do nothing against main-force units executing a pincer attack.

"How could this one brat have toyed with us like that?" Once caught, Azusa was treated harshly. At the time, fear of death was not on his mind as all he felt was remorse that he was unable to protect the colony. If he had had

more strength, he would not have let these people have their way. If he had had more strength, he would have protected everyone. Regret hurt more than the physical pain. He would never allow himself to whimper. And this attitude ended up rubbing the pirates the wrong way.

"Obnoxious brat…" Several pirates drew their guns from their holsters. The god of death put his scythe to Azusa's neck.

"This young man must not be sullied by your filthy hands," stated Kamiki Seto, suddenly transporting in front of the pirates surrounding Azusa. With an elegance that seemed unreal in combat, she walked closer to Azusa.

"Wh-what are you doing here? Run away, old bat."

"Are you worried about me?" Seto laughed happily at being called an old bat. The pirates surrounded the beautiful woman with lewd eyes. It was obvious what their intentions were. Some of them even reached for their waistbands. However, the pirates had ignored one thing: her clothes were that of the Jurai Imperial Family.

"Old bat, run!" Azusa yelled, and a pirate kicked him. Being light, he rolled a couple times and groaned with pain and chagrin.

"I told you not to touch him with those filthy hands." Seto's attitude changed. Azusa felt the powerful aura around her and got goosebumps, along with a feeling of ecstatic pleasure.

One of the pirates, reached for her bosom with a vulgar laugh. In that instant, all of them were sent flying as if there were an explosion. A split second later, the pirates close by were mowed down. At the same time, there were flashes of explosions in the sky, and the transceiver relayed screams to the pirates in front of them.

"Sails of light…that's a Juraian ship!"

"Surrender," Seto quietly stated to the several hundred pirates around her. Her words were intimidating, but none of the pirates seemed to have noticed.

"What could you possibly do by yourself?"

"Heh, if we could capture a Juraian Royal…" They all pointed their guns at Seto.

"…! Are they all idiots?!"

Azusa, feeling Seto's aura, stiffened with fear. He was the only one here who had realized the monster within her.

Seto chuckled softly. To the pirates, it looked like she had vanished into thin air. Even Azusa only saw a faint shimmer. He did not know exactly what had happened, but a few minutes later, she had knocked those hundreds of pirates unconscious. In the midst of the pile, Seto stood unruffled with nary a hair out of place, looking serenely at Azusa. "Well done."

She seemed different from usual. Azusa shivered at her powerful beauty and ferocity. It was not fear, but his Juraian blood was seething. Tears welled in his eyes. He was beyond excited that she had done exactly what he had wanted to do. "I want to be strong, too…strong enough to protect Mom and everyone else."

"If that's what you truly think, come with me." Seto extended her hand toward him. There was that same intimidation. An ordinary man would scarcely be able to stand, much less look her in the eyes, but Azusa faced it, and desperately gripped the extended hand. It meant he agreed to go to Jurai. Just as his mother had said, Seto had made Azusa go to Jurai willingly, and it was his idea to do so.



The pirate fleet had only its engines destroyed by Mikagami (Seto's Royal Ship)—unless they tried to hide behind or attack unarmored ships, upon which they were mercilessly destroyed. Mikagami, with its Light Hawk Wings, easily overpowered the pirate battleships. The difference was overwhelming. The pirates within the colony were all arrested by the Galaxy Police, and the battle was over. The colony won.

Funaho

“…And that was how I went to Jurai.”

“I see. But calling her ‘old bat’…” Funaho chuckled, yet the smile seemed sad somehow.

“Now I am on a training journey. Though not restricted by the Imperial Family, if I languished here too long, there’s no knowing what she would say to me,” Azusa joked, but gave Funaho a serious look. “I plan to leave in a few days.”

“I see…” Looking at Funaho’s face in profile, as she cast her eyes downward, wrung Azusa’s heart.

I can’t stay here forever… This is for the best, he told himself. He was forced to feel the distance between them as he spoke of his past, and he agreed with Asumi’s warning. But that was a conclusion made from logic, and the emotions locked within were resisting wildly. *This is for the best,* he told himself over and over, but then he saw Funaho’s lonesome face. He wanted to at least make her feel better.

“Here, take this…” As thanks for her care, he held out a comb, carved from a Royal Tree, with marbled purple amber jewels.

“It’s so beautiful… But I can’t accept something so expensive…”

“It’s really not much. I carved it myself, and it’s a common material where I’m from. Don’t concern yourself about it. That’s the only thing I could give as a token of my gratitude, so if it’s to your liking…” He did not try to continue further and handed the comb to Funaho. He might not be able to hold back his emotions if he kept on talking. Just looking at Funaho, clutching the comb with both hands as if it was precious to her, made him feel that way. He could imagine the old bat, laughing mockingly with a sidelong glance at his immaturity.

Just then, a white-feathered arrow whizzed through the air and struck a shrine 30 meters away. “Don’t move!” Azusa looked around, shielding Funaho, but there were no more arrows, and the village resumed its peace and quiet. Except for the shivering shoulders of Funaho staring at the arrow.

“Azusa-sama, please leave this village at once.” were Asumi’s first words to Azusa as he waited for him in the shrine office. His expression was foreboding, and Funaho looked the same as her grandfather.

“Wasn’t that arrow from the men who were assaulting her?”

“Yes. But they’re not just bandits…”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s better that you don’t know. It’s for your own good.”

“Please, tell me about it.”

Pressed by Azusa’s enthusiasm, Asumi finally and reluctantly began their tale.

In summary, Asumi’s story was thus: About a year ago, a giant eight-forked serpent appeared deep in the mountains. The bandits, its messengers, started making demands for treasures and young women. Of course the villagers resisted at first, and the village warriors sent a subjugation squad into the mountains, but they never returned. The people who feared the curse of the Orochi serpent left the village one by one. Asumi remained to protect the shrine.

Asumi lived with his son and two granddaughters, including Funaho, but his son—Funaho’s father—never returned from the quest to vanquish the serpent. Funaho’s three-year-old sister went to stay with Funaho’s aunt and uncle. Asumi admonished her to go join her, but she insisted on staying out of concern for her grandfather, and refused to go.

Once the village was devoid of people, the serpent stopped making demands, and peaceful days continued for a while. Since Funaho was attacked, Asumi had known that this day would come. The white-feathered arrow was the signal that Orochi sought the girl of that household as a sacrifice.

Pausing, Asumi quietly hugged Funaho. On the note was written that Funaho must be offered as a sacrifice that night. The time for farewells was growing ever nigh.

“All right, I shall go and vanquish this Orochi,” Azusa proposed to the grief-stricken duo. The serpent and the bandits were space pirates here to

plunder treasures and slaves from undeveloped planets. The wounds he received from Kagato were almost all healed, thanks to his Master Key's support, although Azusa liked to think that the herb tinctures Funaho brought him worked wonders.

Asumi and Funaho, since they did not know Azusa's origins, could only be shocked at his proposal. "Please don't, Azusa-sama."

"Yes, you'll be killed by the serpent!"

"I'm well versed in the martial arts. Won't you leave it to me?"

"I saw how powerful you were when you saved me. But…" Funaho looked upon him with tears in her eyes. She wanted to believe in Azusa, but more than that, she feared losing him. She was the kind of person who would rather sacrifice herself so that Azusa-sama would be saved. However, Azusa was resolute in his decision. The thought of his concern for her made her feel happy and sad at the same time.

A few hours later, the three of them ate a meal together as a sort of last supper. Azusa kept trying over and over to reassure the dejected Asumi and Funaho…but then suddenly became drowsy and toppled asleep onto the table. Asumi and Funaho had drugged his food to detain him.

"I'm so sorry, Azusa-sama…" A teardrop from Funaho's eyes fell on Azusa's cheek. Azusa felt the warmth of her hand as she wiped it away.

I feel like this has happened before… Yes… The memories were from eight years ago. He had crept into the garden to sneak out with Mitsuki, and Seto knocked him out cold. Just like with Funaho today, he heard Mitsuki's stifled sobs and felt a warm hand on his cheek. *She's just like her…*

Asumi made sure that Azusa was asleep, took the sword adorning the alcove, and looked at his beloved granddaughter. "Funaho, I will go to the serpent. Azusa-sama will wake up in about an hour. Then take him and get as far away as you can. Do you understand?"

Funaho realized that Asumi intended to die. She leapt up from Azusa's side and clung to him. "No. Please don't go, Grandfather! I should be the sacrifice. If I go, then…" Funaho did not get a chance to finish as Asumi stunned her with a blow. He held her close as she crumpled, laid her down beside Azusa, and brushed the hair from her face.

“I’m sorry, Funaho…” He looked at her a while, stood up, and said to the sleeping Azusa, “Azusa-sama, please look after my granddaughter…”

After Asumi quietly left, Azusa slowly opened his eyes. Drugs to induce sleep did not work on Juraian warriors. He pretended to be asleep because he felt grateful that the two cared about him, and because he felt that he, an outsider, should not interfere during the grandfather and granddaughter’s moment of farewell.

If I just take Funaho-dono with me, as Asumi-dono wishes.… The fleeting thought crossed his mind as he regarded Funaho sleeping beside him, but he shook it off in a hurry. *Don’t be ridiculous! Why did I leave my parents and come to Jurai? Was it because I wanted to be Emperor? No. Remember how I felt when the pirates pointed a gun at me?* Yes, the desire to become stronger to protect people he cared about. *Now, I can do that!* He leapt up, left Funaho a simple note, and went after Asumi.

He ran through game trails at superhuman speed and took out the Master Key from his inside pocket. “Jijii, can you hear me?” he said as he focused, releasing Jijii’s actual body, and a message came back.

“Young Master! What have you been…?”

“You can lecture me later.” Azusa cut Jijii off and explained the gist of the situation while he hurried on.

“I cannot believe it… Leave it to me. Kirito-dono has already broken through the jamming and detected the enemy vessel. We shall teach those scum a lesson.”

Around midnight, Asumi reached the location specified in the letter tied to the arrow. A hush fell all around, with no signs of living things. Actually, the absence of animal sounds meant something they feared was lurking close by. Just as Asumi sensed this, a number of red eyes flashed in the forest and grew slowly closer. They belonged to the eight-headed serpent. There were occasional eerie mechanical sounds, but being born in this era, Asumi had no chance of recognizing what they were. His eyes only saw the mythical monster.

The serpent spoke, the eight heads weaving in the air. “Where is the sacrifice? Where is she?”

An ordinary human being would be petrified with terror, but the

courageous man who had dared to defend the village all by himself smiled and declared, “Hah, my granddaughter has left with Azusa-sama to where you will never reach her. Too bad.” He then drew his sword and attacked.

With a roar of rage, the serpent also lunged at Asumi, who dodged the attacks with an agility that defied his age and swung at one of the serpent’s heads! A high-pitched clang of metal on metal rang out, and Asumi’s sword snapped at the hilt. It should have been able to sever living flesh, but for the price of the sword, all he got was a glimpse of dull metal behind the scales around the serpent’s neck.

“Monster!” Without a target, Asumi retreated from the serpent. Realistically speaking, a serpent would only use close-range attacks. Asumi wanted to see them coming. But the serpent’s true identity was a robot built by space pirates. It did not try to chase Asumi, but turned its head and opened its large mouth, which was fitted with a beam cannon. It locked on to its target and the beam fired!

“What the…?!” Unable to even finish his utterance, Asumi was enveloped in the beam. Or rather, the beam had dispersed. The serpent’s roar echoed as if surprised. In front of Asumi were wings of light—the Light Hawk Wings!!

“What is that light?!” yelled the leader of the pirates controlling the serpent from its cockpit.

All the pirates monitoring from the mothership in orbit were also in a panic, witnessing technology that should not exist on this undeveloped planet. “What’s going on?!” Before the pirates could figure it out, a flash of light severed one of the serpent’s heads.

The pirate leader had no idea who had done it and tried to use the sensors to find a target, to no avail. “Does he have a small jamming device?! Dammit!” When he picked up a slight reading, he focused the laser beam on it. But the effort was fruitless, as more heads were chopped off. “Am I reading the afterimage?!”

Azusa, holding the Master Key sword of light, was attacking the serpent, moving at high-speed through the forest. This was easy for him, as trees densely covered the planet of Jurai. Indeed, martial arts on Jurai showed their true essence in combat among obstacles, weaving between thick trees. Even with the serpent’s high-performance sensors, they could only detect

Azusa's afterimage due to how fast Azusa was moving.

Azusa wielded the sword of light extending from his Master Key and destroyed the serpent's heads one by one. The robot, down to one head and its body, thrashed and writhed like a real serpent, and then stopped moving.

Asumi stood and stared, stunned, and Azusa stepped before him. "A-Azusa-sama!"

"I apologize for breaking my promise, Asumi-dono," Azusa smiled.

"Who are you?"

"I'm just a traveler. Yes, that's all I am…" But the battle was not over. From deep in the woods, he heard a girl scream. Only Azusa, with the heightened perception of a Jurai warrior, could hear her. "Funaho-dono!"

"What's the matter, Azusa-sama?"

"I apologize. It seems I was thoughtless again. They've taken Funaho-dono…"

"What?!"

They saw the pirates, dressed as bandits, beside the serpent, pointing a gun at Funaho. "Come on out if you value her life!" One of them must have been using a loudspeaker, as his voice rang through the woods.

Azusa heard Funaho's muffled cries, struggling to endure her pain. "Funaho-dono!" Unable to contain himself, Azusa headed towards the pirates, but Asumi stayed him.

"You'll be killed if you go."

"No, I will protect her. If I don't do this here, there's no reason for me to have ever gone to Jurai!" Shaking Asumi off, Azusa revealed himself to the pirates.

"Azusa-sama!" Funaho cried, overcome with emotion, and Azusa smiled gently.

The pirates were flabbergasted. They had assumed a soldier in a motorized combat suit or a war machine had defeated their robot serpent. They could not believe that someone of flesh and blood could have pulled it off! Alone among them, the pirate leader calmly accepted the facts. He saw Azusa's attire and inferred that he was from Jurai. The shield used when they

first tried to kill Asumi was the Light Hawk Wings, which only the Jurai Imperial Family could use. If so, it would make sense that he could have pulled off such a feat. Looking sidelong at the frightened Funaho, he asked Azusa, “Are you someone with a connection to the Jurai Imperial Family?”

“Indeed, I am Masaki Azusa, Crown Prince of Jurai.”

The pirates were ecstatic upon hearing Azusa’s identity. If they could capture him, they could command not just an enormous ransom, but Jurai’s biggest secret, a Royal Tree. “Hah, hah, we’ve found the most wonderful treasure in this neck of the woods. Prince, how about we exchange you for this girl and the hostages we have on our ship?” One of the pirates yanked Funaho’s hair to make a display for Azusa.

Seeing Funaho grimace in pain, Azusa glowered at him. “This young lady must not be sullied by your filthy hands.” He realized after he uttered the words that this was similar to the time the pirates attacked the colony and placed him in the same predicament. Now he was playing the old bat’s role. *I was a child who could do nothing back then… Funny how people like them are always doing the same thing,* Azusa thought wryly.

“Run, Azusa-sama!” Funaho’s heart-rending cry resounded in the air.

Azusa smiled at her, just like Seto once did. “Are you worried about me? Thank you, Funaho-dono.” This time, he consciously said similar words and glowered at the pirates. He wondered if his aura was as threatening as the old bat’s. “Surrender.”

The pirates were indignant that Azusa did not understand the position he was in, and closed in, jeering at him. *They* were the ones who did not understand. The moment one of the pirates reached Azusa, the sky flashed! For a few seconds, it was as bright as day.

“Wh-what happened?!” When the leader yelled, his visual field blurred from being blinded by the bright light, he received a call on his communicator.

“Your ship has been subjugated by Kirito-dono, the esteemed ship belonging to the Crown Prince of Jurai. I recommend you surrender, according to Galactic Law…” It was Jijii’s voice. He and Kirito had subdued the orbiting pirate ship. He sent a different message through the Master Key. “Young Master, I’ve rescued Funaho-sama’s father.”

“Good…”

The pirate leader had just learned his own ship was taken over in a span of a few minutes. In a panic, he tried to use his last hostage, Funaho, as a shield. But in the brief interval when his mind was occupied by his ship, all the minions who were supposed to have had a hold of Funaho were knocked out cold, and the hostage was nowhere to be seen. “What’s going on?!” He looked around and saw Azusa and Funaho, hand in hand, with their backs to him.

“I-I’m sorry I caused trouble for you, Azusa-sama.”

“You can be surprisingly reckless, coming after us by yourself.”

“I read the note you left behind, and I couldn’t contain myself. If I were to lose both my grandfather and Azusa-sama, I…”

“I’m sorry I caused you sadness again. But please be happy; your father is safe.”

“I-Is that true?”

“There’s no doubt about it.”

“Th-thank you…Azusa-sama!” In tears, she leapt into his arms. She had become overcome by emotion at learning that her father and grandfather were alive, but for a fourteen-year-old girl in the Kamakura Period [1185-1333], she might as well have professed her love out loud. Knowing this, Azusa hesitated at her bravery but put an arm around her…

The pirate leader, stunned at the situation that seemed to have resolved itself of all danger, realized that Azusa was inattentive. Beside himself with rage, he broke into a run, transforming the serpent’s body and the last head into a giant ogre-robot. “H-how dare you!” The robot stood up and started to walk towards Azusa.

Embracing Funaho, Azusa chuckled. Just like Seto that day. The moment the robot took its next step, it fell apart, and the pirate leader riding within gasped and tumbled towards Azusa. Azusa gave the man, practically soiling himself with fear, an icy stare. He told him he spared him because Funaho-dono’s father was still alive.

The people he rescued from the pirate ship had been put into stasis, so

luckily, they lacked memories of their capture. However, to undo all the various effects of mind control, they needed treatment for a while on board the occupied ship. Azusa intended to continue his journey once they were all home safe and sound. However, after several days, he still remained at Asumi's residence.

"Young Master, we should depart soon. You know about needless contact with a primitive society…"

"I know. But I cannot leave this place until Funaho-dono's father has finished treatment."

"That's true, but…"

Azusa justified remaining on Earth, not as an excuse to give Jijii, but to rationalize it to himself. He had pretended to have gotten over her, but he could not deny his emotions. Needless to say, having embraced Funaho during the battle with the pirates made it worse.

However, he knew that he could not stay here forever. He could not separate the newly reunited family and take Funaho to Jurai. For Earthlings, who could only live for several decades, a life cycle in space was far too long. He could take Funaho to Jurai and have her receive physical enhancement and lifespan-prolonging procedures, but it was impossible to offer that to her family remaining on Earth. That meant Funaho would never see her family again.

"Mitsuki, what should I do…?" Azusa had no answers.

It was then that an incident took place.

Azusa was walking along a mountain trail alone, when a pirate soldier appeared before him. "Crown Prince of Jurai, Azusa-dono, I presume?"

"One of the remnants of the pirates? You people never learn."

"I apologize."

"Are we doing this here, now?" Azusa grasped his Master Key in his inside pocket.

"Of course not. I would be no match against the Crown Prince of Jurai. But we have taken someone precious to you."

“What?!”

“You know our demands.”

“All right… I surrender.” They continued their matter-of-fact conversation while Azusa felt profound shame. There were more pirates. He thought he had become strong enough to protect those he loved, but reality was harsh. His inexperience had been driven home to him.

The pirate approached Azusa and extended his hand. “Now, your Master Key, if you please… I know that you can use the ship’s power through it.”

Handing the Master Key over, Azusa said, “If you were able to send spies to Jurai… Are you from the Shank Guild?”

“Yes, you’re right. Now that we’ve cleared that up, can you come with me?”

It would have been simple to defeat a pirate, but he could do nothing in a hostage situation. As directed by the pirate, Azusa transported on board their shuttle, and they took off towards the pirate fleet. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Realistically, we’ll use you to negotiate with Jurai.”

“I am in training. My life or death is none of their concern right now.”

“Is that so? But they might change their mind with this kind of negotiation, don’t you think? Jurai is a society supported by blood relations. I doubt they would leave you to rot.”

“Family doesn’t mean we all get along,” Azusa replied. “There are a few I’d like to punch in the face.”

“Enough talking for now. Even without the ship’s power, you’re still enough of a threat to us.”

Under heavy guard, the pirate soldier gestured with his hand, and the gate opened to show a capsule.

“This must be the time-stasis system for captives.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t use any mind control on you. We know it won’t work on the biologically-fortified Juraian Imperial Family. Please wait in here until negotiations have finished.”

Azusa settled into the capsule without resistance. “The next time you wake up, you’ll be on Jurai. Please be patient…” The capsule shutters closed, and time stopped for Azusa. He laid prone, eyes open, looking like an exquisite work of art.

The pirates sealed the Master Key and severed the connection between Azusa and his ship. The pirates had complete control over Azusa and Kirito. “Hah hah, the invincible Crown Prince of Jurai. What could you do now?” one of the pirates spoke to the capsule. Of course, there was no reaction from Azusa. However…

Hmph… The ship where the former hostages are being treated has been left alone. They must be in high spirits, having gotten their hands on me and Kirito. Time was supposed to be standing still for Azusa, but he had maintained his consciousness in real-time. His link to Kirito still existed even without the Master Key. The Master Key was only a supplement to his link to a Royal Tree, since the contract itself was between the minds of the tree and the person. Even so, there were limitations to a link without a Master Key. With the connection severed so thoroughly, he should not have been able to establish a link. But something other than the Master Key connected Azusa to Kirito.

Azusa opened his eyes wide. “I’ll show you pirates how Juraians make their escape!” First, Azusa verified where Funaho was being held. The comb he had given her was carved from a Juraian Royal Tree. It was easy to specify her location via Kirito. Kirito immediately came back with an answer: Funaho was being kept in an adjacent pirate spaceship.

Not good… Funaho-dono is too close. The Unit with the exterior hull removed is too powerful, and she might be caught up in the attack. But if I hesitate any longer, they’ll reclaim the people we recovered.

“Heh… Shall I help you?” someone interrupted his thoughts.

Who’s there?!

“You’re running out of time, right? Come on.” At the same moment, a violent shock rocked the spaceship carrying Azusa.

The pirates received an emergency signal from the spaceship seized by Kirito and summoned all their fellows from relatively nearby star systems. A

fleet of eighteen ships were now in the solar system: numerous for pirates, but small for the Shank Guild, said to be the largest pirate force. The interim fleet commander was trembling with joy over taking possession of the Crown Prince of Jurai and a Royal Ship. There was no greater achievement. Who could blame him for falling under the illusion that status and honor within the Guild was all his?

"Hurry with that Juraian ship!" he charged, but could not wipe the smile from his face. Just then, a tremendous beam fired on the fleet.

"What's going on?!" the commander yelled on the shaking bridge, to which one of the operators answered with a status report.

"An attack from a satellite. Its origin is unknown!"

"Well, fire back! Focus fire from every ship!" Fortunately they weren't in close formation, and the ships came about at once, and opened fire. The beams sucked into space were aimed at something at a distance too far for the naked eye. The main computer on the console reported on the results of the attack.

"It's no use. All blocked by a shield!"

"Impossible! Nothing could block… Could it be?!"

"There's no energy reading of enemy shields!"

The commander knew the invisible enemy. "Light Hawk Wings! Are there other Juraian ships?! Impossible! We have the Crown Prince as hostage. Inform the attacking ship at once!!" The commander was close to screaming.

"Th-the ship the Crown Prince was held captive on…has been destroyed." The operator murmured, dumbfounded, and the commander was truly speechless.

A few hours later, something shone among the debris of the annihilated pirate fleet. It was Azusa and Funaho, enveloped in the Light Hawk Wings. This was Azusa's plan: protected by the Light Hawk Wings, he attacked the ship he was on, on purpose, and destroyed it. With Kirito's help, he transported towards the reading of the comb held by Funaho. After that, protected by the Light Hawk Wings, he simply waited with Funaho until all the ships were destroyed. It was a rather in-your-face escape maneuver, only

possible as a Juraian Warrior with Light Hawk Wings.

Azusa held Funaho close as they drifted through space. “I’m so sorry. You must’ve been so frightened.”

“No, I knew you would come rescue me…” Funaho cast her eyes down, blushing.

Since secrets could no longer be kept under these circumstances, Azusa explained everything to the best of his abilities. Funaho was very flexible in her thinking, did not panic, and accepted the facts. There were parts she could not process, but having understood to an extent, she nestled against Azusa and looked down upon Earth.

“I feel like I’m in a dream… That we’re so far beyond the clouds, and that blue sphere is where I live?”

“It’s so large that it’s hard to recognize it as a sphere while you’re standing on the surface.”

“It’s beautiful. But the moon is prettier from down there.” From where they were, the moon was merely a round rock full of craters.

“Perhaps… But I’m glad you’re safe. I would never be able to face Asumi-dono or your father if anything had happened to you.”

“Azusa-sama, all this risk-taking will make your family sad. Your parents and…Mitsuki-sama. I’ve long wanted to ask…is Mitsuki-sama… your sister? Or your wife…? But if she’s family, she must be worried about you. I think so… Don’t you?” She must have been flustered in her excitement, as she asked questions she would otherwise never have been able to.

In Funaho’s ears, Azusa’s voice rang full of sadness. “Mitsuki…is dead.”

“What…?!”

“It’s been eight years…”

“Um, I… I’m sorry.” Funaho, suddenly snapped awake, noticed that Azusa’s right eye was faintly glistening.

Azusa held her shoulder and smiled at her. “There’s still time until Jijii comes to get us. Will you listen to a little story?”

Funaho quietly nodded at Azusa’s kind words.

Mitsuki

Once Azusa decided to leave the colony where his parents lived and go to Jurai, Seto, per Azusa's mother's wishes, became his guardian and teacher. In a land that he had never set foot in, where he knew no one, Seto took on the roles of both mother and big sister.

Normally, Seto called him "Azusa-dono," but in private, she sometimes teasingly called him "Azusa-chan." Azusa *hated* it when she addressed him like that. He did not know why exactly, but he probably unconsciously rejected her treating him like a child, stemming from his desire to become strong after the pirate attack.

"We'll be leaving tomorrow. Are you ready, Azusa-chan?!"

"I'm ready. So stop calling me that!" He tried to put on a brave front, but he was definitely going to miss his parents. That night, he slept between them in their bed, where he vowed again in his heart that he would become stronger. Of course, Seto later teased him relentlessly for this.

A few days later, they reached Jurai, and Azusa received a grand welcome reception the likes of which he had never seen. It was more than another visiting head of state would receive, but justifiably so. He may have been young, but Azusa was the head of House Masaki, one of Jurai's four Imperial Houses.

Azusa was taken aback by the assembled crowd. "This is…amazing."

"Stop looking around like that. Stand properly, Azusa-chan."

"I know!" he yelled at Seto. It was not very convincing, as there was a large ribbon on Azusa's head. Seto had tied it there in his sleep as exhaustion overtook him on his first long trip away from his parents. Azusa was oblivious and looking nervous. The crowd along the route tried to stifle their laughter. They were not laughing *at* him, but rather felt sympathy and affection. Juraian custom called for men to wear ribbons as an accessory on occasion. But the one Azusa was wearing now clearly emphasized cuteness, like something a little girl would wear. Of course, every citizen knew it was

the work of Seto, beaming next to him, and they also knew she would only do this kind of thing to someone she was fond of. Hence their laughter.

Azusa started to catch on that something was odd and saw himself on the gigantic screens broadcasting the parade. His attention was drawn specifically to the fact that he was wearing a ribbon! “When did this happen?!” Red as a beet, he reached to take it off.

“Oh, but it’s so cute. Why are you taking it off, Azusa-chan?”

“H-how could you do this, you old bat?!” The moment Azusa shouted this at the top of his lungs, a hush instantly fell around them. Everyone held their breath, waiting to see Seto’s reaction to Azusa’s insult. All of Jurai, save for the youngest generation, feared Seto as “the Oni-hime of Jurai,” or “the Ogre Princess of Jurai” if you will, due to the valor and power she had demonstrated during the war against the largest pirate guild in the galaxy. Only the current Emperor of Jurai or Seto’s own husband, Utsutsumi, could call her something like “old bat” to her face.

Seto took one look at Azusa’s face, which was flushed with anger, and let loose a hearty laugh. It echoed through the silence.

“I’m going home…!!” Azusa declared and tried to get out of the vehicle. Seto, still laughing with tears in her eyes, grabbed him from behind. The crowd, finally released from their spell, started clapping, cheering, and laughing.



This was how Azusa's ordeals on Jurai began.

"H-how rude!!" exclaimed Amaki Shuzan, one of the Imperial Family assembled in the great hall to watch the broadcast. On the screen was an extreme close-up of Seto laughing and holding the struggling Azusa. Shuzan was one of those opposed to Azusa returning as an heir to the throne for House Masaki. He felt threatened by this increase in the number of heirs. "Your Majesty! I can't accept allowing someone like this to join the Imperial Family!!"

There were several who nodded in agreement and started criticizing Azusa. Meanwhile, Seto was laughing her head off on the other side of the screen, and Utsutsumi, her husband, was laughing even louder. The head of House Kamiki also seemed to have taken a liking to Azusa, just like his wife.

"Your Majesty!"

"Shuzan, put an end to this," the Emperor of Jurai said at Shuzan's protest.

"So, we shall send back that insolent…"

"No, that's not it."

"Sir, then what…"

"A young member of our very own has come home. He is our *family*. This is too stiff. Let us do without such formalities. We need to loosen up, right, Utsutsumi?"

"As you wish."

"But…o-old bat… What a riot. Ha ha ha ha!!" The Emperor of Jurai burst into laughter, unleashing what he had been holding back. Such exuberance took the wind out of the sails of the ones opposed to Azusa's rejoining the Imperial Family. Only Shuzan, who was taking the lead, remained to gnash his teeth.

"Now that this has been decided, let us go." As soon as these words were spoken, the Emperor leapt up and left the hall. Formalities be damned. Azusa's welcome party was on.

The Juraian citizens received Azusa's and Seto's performance and

triumphant return well, not to mention the Emperor's proclamation of a party. As such, Azusa was quickly given recognition. Azusa himself was embarrassed to death, but if Seto had placed that ribbon anticipating these developments, she was quite the schemer.

And then…what awaited Azusa on Jurai were endless days of training to become an Imperial Family member. He was with Seto, his guardian and teacher, around the clock. During puberty, he had a slight crush on her, but his sexual frustrations were worked off through extra hard special training that began around then. Seto herself knew how he felt, so she was using the utmost care and attention, in her own way.

One of Seto's friends who noticed Azusa's passionate glances at the time once asked her about it, and she laughed and replied, "If I didn't have a husband."

Azusa never uttered one complaint, no matter how harsh the training was in the martial arts. However, there were some things that were difficult for him, and that was his education in matters of refinement, such as traditional flower arrangement, the tea ceremony, and fine arts. Dance performances were a special sore spot, since they were selected based on Seto's biased preferences; Azusa was always trying to avoid it.

"No way. I'm *not* dressing up like a girl!" Seto was always selecting the feminine dances, and on top of it all, she wanted to put a ribbon on his head for no good reason.

"Come back here!"

"I'm not wearing that, you old bat!"

"Trying to escape is pointless, Azusa-chan!"

"Stop calling me that!!"

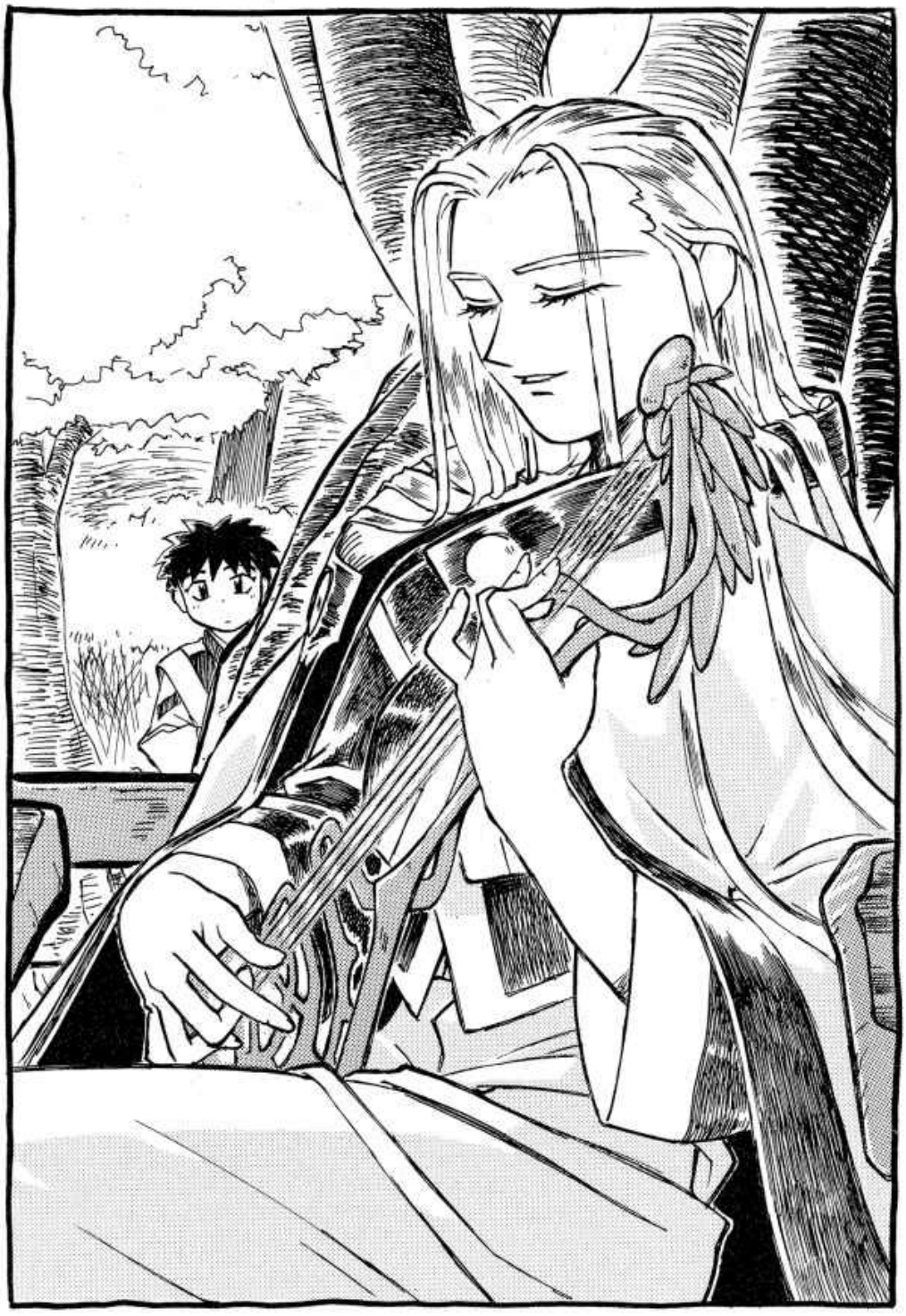
In fact, he was never able to escape her fully. But once caught, Seto would never be angry at him, since this also served as part of his training.

Three years passed since Azusa came to Jurai, and Azusa was now thirteen. That day, yet again, Azusa was running away from Seto. Recently he had learned to set a variety of traps, but Seto was always two steps ahead of him, and had turned some of those traps against him. Azusa's transport pad

trap captured him instead of Seto.

“That old bat!!” He phased out of transport mid-yell, assuming he would see Seto in front of him with her hands at her hips. But he could not see her anywhere. He looked around at a beautiful garden he had never seen before. “What’s this…?” The sounds of a Juraian lute interrupted his confusion. His interest piqued, he wandered over as if floating on air.

Azusa pushed aside the undergrowth and saw a woman playing the lute on a terrace in a discreet corner of the garden. He realized that he had come here by mistake and tried to go up to her to ask where he was, but now fascinated by the strange melody, listened transfixed instead.



How much time passed? The woman stopped plucking the strings and spoke to the boy peering through the trees, “Oh, I haven’t had a visitor in a long time. I’m happy to see you.”

Azusa came to his senses at the sound of her voice and promptly stood up.

The woman chuckled, “Seto-sama isn’t here, Azusa-dono.”

“H-how did you- I mean, greetings, my lady… Do I know you? Er, I mean, have we been introduced?”

The woman chuckled again, “You called her ‘old bat’…there’s nobody on Jurai who doesn’t know you.”

“Oh… Um, I’m sorry I interrupted you. Excuse me.” He was sick and tired of hearing about that incident, but the woman looked so delicate that he feared his very presence would disrupt this space. He bowed without another word and turned to leave.

“Azusa-dono,” she called out after him. “If you don’t mind, could you stay and talk to me a while?”

Azusa paused. “But…”

“Would that be an inconvenience for you?”

Her sorrowful eyes turned to him as she placed the lute beside her. Azusa was not so mature that he knew how to refuse those eyes. He also secretly wanted to stay. “No, that’s not at all what…”

“Oh, good…” she smiled at him.

Her name was Amaki Mitsuki. She was as beautiful as her namesake, the moon, and her pale blue hair that looked almost white was far longer than she was tall. She was about the same age as Seto. She told him she had spent most of her life in this garden, and since she was of ill health, she was not able to fulfill her royal duties. They talked about their circumstances. Azusa had gotten used to Juraian customs but felt he had not been this relaxed in a long time. But then, he could not stay forever.

“I better get going.”

“It’s so late already… I’m sorry I kept you.” Mitsuki saw the long shadows extending from the terrace and turned reluctant eyes to Azusa.

They were far apart in age, but Mitsuki seemed like an abandoned puppy. Azusa found himself saying, “I’ll be back…”

“Really?”

“I promise. I’ll run here the next time Seto-sama tries to put a ribbon on me.”

Mitsuki chuckled, “I’ll be waiting for you… Oh, Azusa-dono, don’t tell anyone you were here or that you met me. Keep it a secret.”

“Why?” Azusa saw her sadly cast her eyes downward and did not press further. “All right, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Thank you.”

He said goodbye and left. She followed him with her eyes until she could no longer see him; every time he turned around, he waved his hand heartily. It did not bother him in the least. *Heh… So her name’s Mitsuki.* He did not know if Seto had made a mistake in setting the trap, or if it was a coincidence, but he was grateful for this accident, as it made him wholeheartedly feel, for the first time, glad to have come to Jurai. After this, Azusa went to visit Mitsuki often.

It was another horrible day. In a recital to which the Imperial Family was invited, Azusa was again forced to dress like a girl and perform a feminine dance. He seethed and complained, causing Mitsuki to say to him with a chuckle, “You puff your cheeks out so much that you look like the moon, Azusa-chan.” Mitsuki called him Azusa-chan, just like Seto, whenever he acted childish. But unlike Seto’s teasing tone, Mitsuki’s was kind, and not at all insulting. Before he knew it, Azusa made a habit of pouting on purpose just so she would address him like that in her gentle way.

“Say, Azusa-chan… Oh, sorry, you don’t like to be called that way.”

“That’s not really true. I just don’t like it that Seto-sama does it to tease me.”

“Then can I keep calling you Azusa-chan?”

Azusa nodded. “…Sure.”

“Can you call me Mitsuki, too?”

“I’ll think about it…”

“Thank you, Azusa-chan. Say, it’s the full moon tonight. Let’s go out to the terrace.” The terrace, on a low hill, commanded a panoramic view of the starry sky and the land of Jurai, a veritable sea of trees. In the sky shone Jurai’s moon, a thirteenth of Jurai’s size, and its light dimly illuminated the land. A city could be seen between forests, but it was in perfect harmony with nature without detracting from the landscape. They enjoyed the view silently for a while, but then a thick fog gradually blanketed the area.

“We can’t see it anymore…”

“It’s the fog seal.”

“Fog seal?”

“It’s a folktale… Long ago, there were many gods who fell in love with the beauty of the moon goddess. But none of them could reach her in the sky. Alone among the gods, the god of water could make the moon his by reflecting her on the water’s surface. The other gods got jealous, agitated the water, and erased the reflection. The moon goddess returned to the sky, but the water god hid her with fog so the other gods would not see her. That’s why there’s often fog on the nights of a full moon, when the moon is most beautiful…”

Mitsuki’s beauty captivated Azusa as she gazed at the sky.

“So, Azusa-chan, that’s what the fog seal is…unh!”

“Mitsuki-sama?!” Azusa rushed to Mitsuki, who knelt to the ground, suddenly dizzy. “I’ll get a doctor!”

“No! Don’t do that. Or you’ll…” Mitsuki clung to Azusa with a grim expression.

“Me? But…”

“I-I’m fine. I just felt dizzy… It happens often.”

“Are you sure…?” Azusa felt relief when Mitsuki nodded, but after interacting with her up close, his heart was pounding so loudly he thought she could hear it. “Your eyes…” Seeing her face close to his, he noticed for the first time that one eye was a different color from the other. “Your eyes are different colors… Oh, sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s not a big deal.”

Azusa lent a shoulder to Mitsuki and tried to lead her toward the large bench in the indoor garden, when he heard a woman’s voice and stopped.

“Mitsuki-sama. Mitsuki-sama…” They probably had a way to monitor changes in her condition. Normally, only the Guardian Units could enter the garden outside of emergencies, but there was someone here.

Mitsuki stepped away from Azusa, worried about the impending encounter. “Oh no. Hurry!”

“But…”

“I’ll be fine. Just go…”

Reluctantly, he left her behind. He did not notice that a lady-in-waiting was watching from the shadows.

The next day, Azusa, worried about Mitsuki, blew off his morning training to go to the garden. He went through the transporter, headed to the garden terrace, and found Mitsuki sitting still on the bench. “Mitsuki-sama.”

Mitsuki turned around at his voice, but then cast her eyes downward with a sad expression.

“Are you all right now?” He thought it was because of her illness, but at the same moment, a man appeared from the trees behind him.

“Why, Azusa-dono, the head of House Masaki. Rather unexpected to see you here… Or perhaps blood will tell.” It was Amaki Shuzan, with a repulsive grin on his face.

“Shuzan-dono, good morning.”

“Good morning? Heh…that’s a good one. Hahaha!” Shuzan laughed loudly at Azusa’s oblivious greeting.

“What’s so funny?!”

“Haha. How happy-go-lucky can you be after committing such a serious crime? The head of House Masaki, bold and daring. Heh heh heh.”

“A crime?!” He looked over at Mitsuki, but she kept her eyes down.

“You don’t know? Well, this is a serious situation. We will have to

question what exactly Seto-dono's been teaching you."

"Shuzan! This is… Azusa-dono is…" Mitsuki opened her mouth for the first time to protest to Shuzan, seemingly happy contrary to his words.

"Aunt Mitsuki! No matter the reason, he is not permitted to enter this garden."

"Why not?!" Azusa asked, genuinely curious.

Shuzan scoffed, "Hmph, it's…"

"Shuzan! Please…don't…"

"Shut up, you're a disgrace to House Amaki!" he berated. Mitsuki hung her head.

Azusa stiffened. 'A disgrace? What happened to her?'

"It seems you don't know anything, Azusa-dono. All right, I'll tell you what she and the Masakis have done…" Shuzan began to tell him about Mitsuki. She had a special ability: by merging her consciousness with Tenju, the giant tree that housed the Imperial Palace, she could perceive everything happening within. It was where the Imperial Family lived and Jurai's political power was concentrated. In other words, Mitsuki was able to gather all sorts of classified information, whether public or private.

When Mitsuki was very little and had no clear notion of right and wrong, a member of House Masaki discovered her ability by chance and plotted to overthrow the then-Emperor by using inside information on House Amaki.

"After that was discovered, the only person Aunt Mitsuki was allowed to see was the Emperor of Jurai. Simply setting foot in this place is a crime, especially for those who are in line for the throne."

So that's why she insisted I don't tell anyone I was here. Now understanding the situation, Azusa looked at Mitsuki, who hung her head.

"…I can know everything happening in Tenju without setting a foot outside," Mitsuki stated. "That's how…I've been watching you. The chase between you and Seto-sama. It seemed so fun, and I wanted to talk to you, so I reprogrammed the transporters so you'd end up here…"

Azusa's heart beat faster at Mitsuki's words. She had been watching

him, even looking forward to meeting him. She had chosen *him*. It made him happy that she had needed him so much.

"You are a *voyeur*. You were locked in here with this shameful power…" Shuzan laughed derisively, looking down upon Mitsuki.

"Stop it…"

Shuzan kept ignoring Azusa. "And it wasn't enough for you, so you pulled in a *male*…"

"Stop it!!"

"Azusa-chan, no!!" Mitsuki clutched Azusa to stop him—he had put his hand on his sword.

"Azusa-dono, can I take that to mean you're challenging me to a duel?"

"Please, don't." Mitsuki's desperate pleas loosened Azusa's grip.

"Yes, that's smart. I will report that Azusa-dono was a victim here, forced against his will. Everything was this shameless whore's doing." Shuzan maliciously and deliberately taunted Azusa, knowing that it was worse for him to hear Mitsuki insulted than himself.

"Y-you bastard!!" In indignant rage, Azusa drew his sword; seeing this, Shuzan smiled, drew his own sword, and assumed a stance.

"That's what makes a Juraian man. Come…any time you're ready," Shuzan said.

"No. Don't do this, Shuzan!"

"Shut up, don't touch my sword with your filthy hands!!" Shuzan hit Mitsuki's cheek with his left hand.

"Mitsuki!" Azusa ran to the collapsed Mitsuki.

"Feh. This is a farce." Shuzan clucked his tongue and made to leave, when Azusa yelled at him.

"Don't you dare run!"

"Run? With your inexperience and lack of insight into an opponent's capabilities, you can't even tell you just escaped getting killed. If death is what you want, bring it on."

Azusa repositioned his grip on his sword and charged with the intent to kill.

“No!” Mitsuki tried to stop him but it was no use; grabbing his sleeve was the most she could do. Ironically, that was fortunate for Shuzan, who had completely underestimated Azusa. Without the minor delay from the tugged sleeve, Azusa would have killed him. Shuzan was the one who lacked insight into his opponent’s capabilities.

But now in fight mode, Shuzan was slightly more skilled at the sword. Azusa thrust with all his might, but Shuzan parried him at the last possible moment. Shuzan toyed with him with his elegant dance-like moves.

“Dammit…!”

“The head of House Masaki should not utter such vulgar language!” The sword of light struck Azusa’s body. Either could have killed the other.

“Azusa-chan!” Mitsuki ran over to the collapsed Azusa. The wound was shallow, as he’d blocked at the last second, but the shock of the plasma rendered him stunned.

“Time for the coup de grace!” Shuzan had underestimated the child, but the shock of almost being killed had agitated him beyond self-control.

“Stop! It’s over already. This is no longer a duel!” Mitsuki covered Azusa with her body to shield him.

“Stand aside!”

“Shuzan! I will not allow this to go further.”

“Why you…” Shuzan could continue no further; her aura of intimidation overwhelmed him. “Hmph…no matter. Now both House Masaki and House Amaki… heh. Haha.” Recovering his senses, he sheathed his sword and left the garden.

“Azusa-chan, are you all right?”

“Dammit, I can’t believe I lost to him. Dammit!” He remembered what happened three years ago. Fierce emotions welled in him and blasted his limbs awake. He wanted to get stronger. Strong enough to protect those he cared about. The perfect circle of the moon illuminated Mitsuki and Azusa, now left alone. The fog did not hide the moon that night.

When he came to, Azusa found himself in confinement. Shuzan had reported his visit to Mitsuki, and he was locked in the palace prison. It was carved out of a Royal Tree, and even a first-class Jurai warrior would not readily be able to escape. However, Azusa had experience through his games of chase with Seto. He remembered her words: “If you want to become close to the trees, talk to them.” And so he started talking. This communication was not through direct language, but he intuited the tree’s feelings, and got it to open the prison and managed to escape.

Azusa did not realize that this ability to communicate with trees was an important quality necessary for someone who would become Jurai’s Emperor. Seto taught him because she knew that he had it in him.

He made his escape easily, and tried to find Mitsuki, but the Imperial Family had closed the transporter he had used to go to the garden.

“I guess my plan to surprise Mitsuki one day ended up useful.” He climbed down the outer surface of Tenju’s bark. Azusa had inferred the location of the terrace from the scenery visible from it and had plotted a route that bypassed the force fields. This was only possible because he had developed the ability to communicate with the trees. He traversed the complicated path, and finally reached the garden skylight.

“Mitsuki… Wh-who’s that?!” Azusa was happy to find Mitsuki, but next to her was the most powerful man on the planet, with a long beard and penetrating, dignified eyes: the Emperor of Jurai. Azusa was breaking all sorts of rules just to come here, but if the Emperor of Jurai were to find him, his and Mitsuki’s standings would be in jeopardy. With reluctance, he remained watching them from the skylight.

“It’s all my fault. Azusa-dono is…”

“I know… But even so, I had no choice in order to protect Jurai. That is the fate of those in our position.”

“But… I have feelings, too. I-If you had only let me die…I wouldn’t have had to suffer like this. I… I’m sorry. It’s not your fault, Grandfather. But…” As she remembered her past, the normally brave Mitsuki sobbed uncontrollably.

Mitsuki... Looking down on them through the skylight, Azusa wanted

to leap in and comfort her, and he struggled to fight the urge.

As Mitsuki broke down in tears, the Emperor gently laid his hand on her. “I’m the one who should apologize. I could not have predicted that you and House Masaki would suffer so much. Forgive me… But I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

“Grandfather…” Mitsuki leaned against him and wept.

“I’ll do whatever I can. Cheer up, Mitsuki.”

“I-I’ll try…”

Shortly after the Emperor left, Azusa snuck into the garden. “Mitsuki!”

“A-Azusa-chan?! How did you get here…?”

Without answering, Azusa aggressively grabbed her hand. “Mitsuki, come escape Jurai with me!”

“What?!”

“You’re locked up in here because you’re on Tenju, right? Then just leave Jurai… I’ll protect you.”

“Azusa-chan…” Mitsuki’s eyes welled up with tears at Azusa’s sincerity.

“You said you wanted to see the outside world. Then I’ll take you. Let’s go see it together.”

“But Azusa-chan…you were finally allowed back on Jurai…”

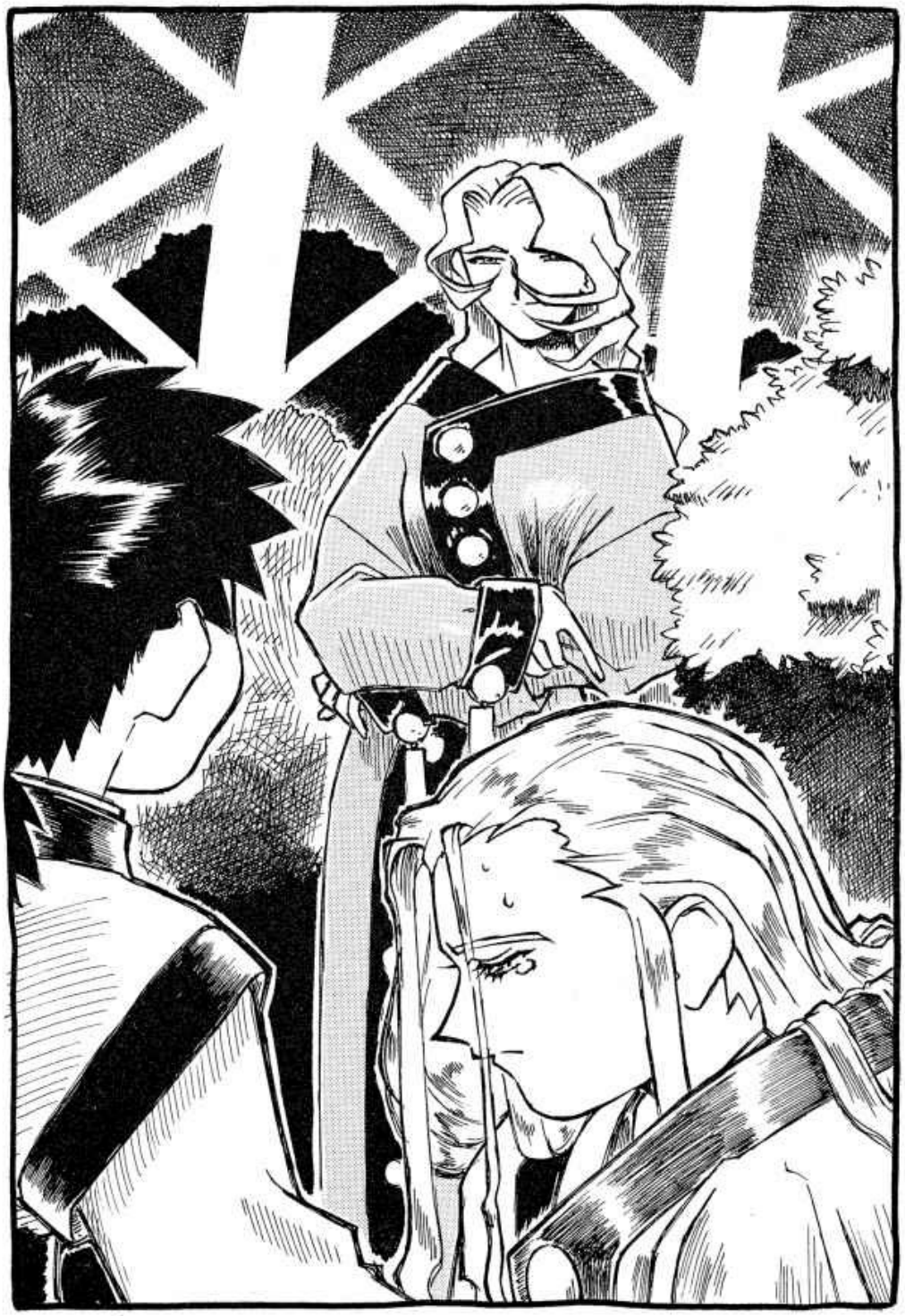
“I wanted to be stronger, strong enough to protect my mom and everyone I cared about. It wasn’t because I wanted to be in the Imperial Family or to become Emperor. I don’t care about any of that stuff!!” He spit out everything that was in his heart. He was not mature enough to clearly express his feelings for her, but those words were enough for Mitsuki. However…

“I…don’t feel I have the right,” Mitsuki was unable to acknowledge his feelings.

Suddenly, there was the sound of clapping behind him. “Who’s there?! Gack… Seto…sama.”

Seto was standing behind him. “You are the first to ever declare he

doesn’t care about Jurai, Azusa-chan.”



“D-don’t call me that, you old bat!!”

“…I guess I can’t call you that anymore,” she mumbled sadly, then turned to him with a serious face. “But you can’t take Mitsuki-dono.”

“Why not?!”

“I won’t let you.”

“…?!” In front of the bewildered Azusa, Seto’s body radiated a rush of awesome fighting spirit. Her intimidating aura far eclipsed that which he’d felt three years ago. It was evidence of her resolve. She had taught Azusa for over three years, so she knew fighting halfheartedly would not do anyone any favors.

Azusa, however, did not flinch and held his sword. “What…?!” He did not know why he did it, but he reflexively leapt towards Seto.

Seto chuckled softly with a mixture of surprise and happiness. Most people would run when faced with such an aura. But trying to escape from someone more powerful does not automatically translate to success. In this case, instead of needlessly expending energy by running, stepping forward and fighting was the best strategy for survival. Azusa swung his sword down, which Seto met with her own. Both swords sparked with fierce energy, emitting plasma. In the flashing light, Azusa thought he saw Seto smiling.

“You’ve gotten stronger,” she murmured in a voice too quiet for anyone to hear. And then Azusa lost consciousness.

When he awoke, Azusa found himself grounded and told to stay in his room. Seto kept an eye on him around the clock so he was unable to escape or see Mitsuki, and spent his days unable to think straight. When he asked her about Mitsuki, Seto would not answer and would only look Azusa in the eyes. A few days later, a deacon came to inform him that he was freed from confinement and that parliament would convene a supreme council. Even though a boy of thirteen, he was still the head of House Masaki.

There was no need to guess what the agenda would be. There was no reason for Azusa to stay on Jurai, but since he could not take Mitsuki, he must at least leave the planet and take responsibility for her crime as well. He was prepared for that.

The promised time came, and he entered the parliamentary room from the passage reserved for the head of House Masaki. Everyone except for the head of House Amaki was already seated. Seto was also seated, even though she rarely meddled in political matters. Only later did he find out that the true Supreme Council was something else entirely. Seto was a member of the Supreme Council, and they determined all important decisions and general courses of action.

A few minutes after Azusa was seated, Shuzan strode in with extreme pompousness. He glanced at Seto and Azusa, and slowly made his way to the seat for the head of House Amaki.

“Shuzan-dono, that is not the seat for you today,” Seto declared with authority as Shuzan tried to leisurely take a seat.

He was clearly discontent, but her different demeanor caused him to be overawed. As such, he stood up again. “Seto-dono, what do you mean? This seat isn’t mine, the head of House Amaki?” His tone was gentle, but his clenched fists were trembling with rage.

“You are a *proxy* of the Head of House, Shuzan-dono.”

“True… But the seat has been vacant for the past several hundred years. Then I might as well be the Head. That’s how it’s been recognized so far… Or are you saying the Head of House is coming here today?”

“Mitsuki?!” Azusa exclaimed, cutting off Shuzan’s words. Mitsuki was standing behind Shuzan. A shock went through the chamber. Most of them had known of her existence but never seen her in person before. Her arrival was a surprise, but everyone also held their breath at her beauty. Azusa was no different. Mitsuki in her official dress, with her hair tied back, looked like a different person. But Shuzan was the most in shock.

“Why is Aunt Mitsuki here? This is not a place for you. Wait in the garden for the judgment…”

“Shuzan, thank you for your long years of service representing House Amaki.”

“What?!”

Seto raised her voice, “Halt! You are in the presence of the head of House Amaki.”

“A-Aunt Mitsuki…”

Seeing Shuzan intimidated by Mitsuki’s dignified presence, Seto pressed a hand to her mouth and smiled. More murmurs rippled through the room.

Mitsuki…is the head of House Amaki? Discovering the identity of the person he had been seeing, Azusa was simply stunned.

Shuzan had no choice but to sit glumly in a spare seat. Whatever the reason, there was no denying that Mitsuki was the head of House Amaki, and any further argument would only be detrimental to him.

After everyone took their seats, the Emperor looked around and declared, “Before we get to today’s discussion, I inform you all that the case brought by House Amaki has been dismissed.”

Having his own case so easily tossed aside, Shuzan could not help but stand and shout, “Wh-what?! What do you mean?! The head of House Masaki…”

“Shuzan-dono!” The moment Seto interrupted him, a force field was established so the two of them could talk in private. These were used when individual conversations and advice were needed during the council, and time was accelerated within the field so that it only took an instant to those outside.

Inside the field, while everyone outside seemed to be standing still, Shuzan was yelling effusively at Seto. “Wh-what is the meaning of this, Seto-dono? If Aunt Mitsuki is going to use her authority as Head of House to crush my complaint, I could propose a motion of no confidence in her!!”

“What if I were to say I have evidence against the lady-in-waiting you sent…?”

“Th-that was…in case something happened… In fact, the head of House Masaki got into the garden. You’re responsible for this, too, you know.”

“You also entered the garden, did you not?”

“I went to catch them in the act. Since it was an emergency, I had no choice.”

“The rules state ‘for any reason.’”

“But…”

“Did you think the Emperor did not have any surveillance in place? He’s already aware of the intentions of Mitsuki-sama, Azusa-dono, and Shuzan-dono. But the act of personally sending someone to infiltrate…” As soon as Seto said that, the force field was broken.

“No objections…” Shuzan had no chance to win if they had knowledge of his spy, so he could do nothing but slump back into his chair.

The Emperor of Jurai began talking in a quiet but dignified voice. “Then we’ll get to the topic at hand. The reason I brought you here today is none other than Azusa, the head of House Masaki.”

Staring at Mitsuki’s face in profile, Azusa prepared for the worst. Shuzan’s case was dismissed, but it did not erase Azusa’s crime. He looked over at Shuzan, who was also looking at Azusa with lips curled in a smile. His plans may have failed, but he looked like he would at least get to depose Azusa. Azusa ignored him and looked toward the speaker.

Without changing expressions, the Emperor stated, “He may be a fledgling, but he is the head of House Masaki. Continuing without a Royal Tree of his own would set a bad example. So we will conduct the ceremony of tree selection.”

“What?!” Azusa looked at the Emperor in surprise.

“Understand, Azusa?”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty. I humbly appreciate your kind words.”

The heads of all four Houses approved the ceremony, and they decided to have it take place the next day. After the meeting was adjourned, needless to say, Shuzan sat there dumbfounded.

That night, Azusa headed to Mitsuki’s garden via his secret route. “Mitsuki… Mitsuki…” Through the trees and by the terrace, he looked for her. But the one waiting for him there was Seto.

“I knew you would come here.”

“Seto…sama. Where’s Mitsuki…?”

“You’ll be able to see her tomorrow. She’s supposed to attend your

ceremony, Azusa-dono."

"Really? She won't be punished because of me?"

"You heard the meeting today. It'll be all right."

Relieved, he left the terrace towards the garden. "The transporters are working. Climbing back up by that route will make you late." Seto, looking unusually gentle, spoke to Azusa's running back.

The next day, the Imperial Family quietly held the ceremony of tree selection. More than three witnesses were required to make it official, but the principal Imperial Family members from House Masaki, House Amaki, House Kamiki, and House Tatsuki all showed up despite there being no request for attendance. No doubt, they all wanted to see Azusa's moment of pride. Though young, he was honest to himself, and once he got something into his head, he only faced forward. This slightly willful young man was beloved by everyone.

Contrary to everyone's expectations, the boy himself was not nervous about the ceremony, but relieved to see Mitsuki among the Imperial Family. However, going up to talk to her was something he could not do. On the terrace in a hollow in Tenju, Azusa walked through the people standing around the Royal Tree, and headed to the doors to the transporter in front of him.

The Tree Selection Ceremony… it was conducted to choose the Royal Tree that would become a life partner. The ceremony itself was simple: a Tree either transported someone to it or left them on the transporter. If a Tree did not transport the candidate to itself, that person would be granted a Third Generation Tree. If a candidate was transported, they would greet the Second Generation Trees, and if one Tree in particular spoke out, it became the candidate's partner. Most of the Imperial Family received a Third Generation Tree here, as few were transported.

Now relieved that he had seen Mitsuki, Azusa stepped onto the pad without hesitation. The next moment, the view around him changed, and a Second Generation Royal Tree floated in front of him. He had been transported inside Tenju.

"Congratulations, Azusa-dono. You've at least been chosen by a

Second Generation Tree.” Azusa heard Seto’s voice from behind him. Seto, the Emperor, the head of House Tatsuki, and Mitsuki had come along as witnesses.

He stepped onto one transport pad after another, advancing while receiving the Royal Trees’ welcome.

“Stop looking around and listen to the Trees’ voices. You can talk to Mitsuki-sama at our leisure later,” Seto whispered. “Do you hear any voices calling you?”

“They’re welcoming me, but…”

“Anything about becoming your partner?”

“What does it mean that his Tree isn’t here?” asked the head of House Tatsuki, perplexed.

“It’s a fact that the Trees are welcoming him. Perhaps he heard wrong…” The Emperor brooded, and then came to a conclusion. “If not… could it be?!” He gasped and raised his eyes, and Mitsuki nodded.

“Azusa-dono. This way, please.” Mitsuki spoke to Azusa as the head of House Amaki for the first time, and stood on a transport pad a little further back.

“Isn’t that the path to the First Generation Room…?” the head of House Tatsuki mumbled in surprise. Beyond the pad was the door leading to the First Generation Room where only three had ever set foot, even among the Royal Family. *If he was welcomed, but there were no Trees ‘here’ that had chosen him… Then there is no other explanation.*

Mitsuki turned around and beckoned to Azusa. “Come, Azusa-dono.”

“But that’s…”

“It’s all right.”

Azusa felt the warmth of Mitsuki’s hand on his shoulder, believed in her words, and slowly walked forward. As they were about to pass through the pad, Seto, the Emperor, and the head of House Tatsuki saw them off without moving.

“Was this for the best?”

“I don’t know. But it was what Mitsuki-dono wanted.”

The Emperor nodded to Seto and watched Mitsuki get further away. His heart was wracked by the impulse to go after her, but he did not show it on his face, or act upon it. It was not because of his position as the Emperor of Jurai, but because he loved his granddaughter, despite her tragic fate. To grant her final wish…

And then Azusa and Mitsuki disappeared.

In front of Azusa was a Tree incomparable to a Second Generation Tree. “Wow…” For a second, he thought he had ventured outside Tenju. He saw a lake as far as the eye could see, blue skies, and five paths leading from the transport pad where he stood. At the end of the paths were the First Generation Royal Trees.

“This way, Azusa-chan.”

Mitsuki walked down to the entrance to one of the paths, and Azusa silently followed. Since it was still the middle of the ceremony, he refrained from talking to her, and remained silent until the end of the path. At the end was a First Generation Tree. “Mitsuki… sama. What’s this tree?”

“We’re alone now… Please call me Mitsuki, as usual.”

“Okay…”

Mitsuki placed her hand on the tree and turned to Azusa. “Azusa-chan, this is my Tree.”

“What? Yours? But this is a First Generation Tree, isn’t it?” It was natural for him to be surprised. While not absolute, status within the Imperial Family depended on the rank of one’s Royal Tree. If someone with a First Generation Tree so desired, they could become the next Emperor of Jurai even against the current Emperor’s wishes.

“Say, Azusa-chan…this Tree doesn’t have a name yet. Would you name it for me?”

“Name it? Do you mean…”

“Yes, I want you to take this Tree.”

“Wh-what are you saying, Mitsuki? This Tree belongs to you. Besides, I can’t hear this Tree’s voice.”

“You are hearing it.”

“What do you mean…?” Azusa looked at Mitsuki, bewildered by her cryptic words. He thought he saw Mitsuki, smiling, grow more faint, or transparent. “Mitsuki?!”

Mitsuki suddenly buckled to her knees. Azusa ran over and held her in his arms, in a panic. “Mitsuki! Hang on, Mitsuki!!”

“I’m fine.”

“You look so pale. We need a doctor… Let’s go back!”

“Wait…! I still need to talk to you… Please.” Mitsuki desperately grabbed his sleeve; life was rapidly draining from her face.

“That’s not the issue right now!”

“Please… Azusa-chan.” Mitsuki looked him in the face and clung to him.

Azusa noticed that the hand holding his sleeve was trembling slightly. He tried to spin words together in a last resistance. “But Mitsuki…”

“Please. I don’t have much time left…”

Seeing her smile, he realized her death was drawing near. He wanted to do something. For her. But if there was something she so desperately needed to tell him… He choked down his tears and sat her at the base of the Royal Tree. The fire of life within her was fading. *Why? Why?!*

He clenched his eyes closed to keep from crying, and Mitsuki held his hand. “There are so many things I have to apologize for.”

“About getting me into the garden? I don’t mind.”

“That’s not all. It’s my fault that your mother isn’t permitted to return to Jurai.”

“What?”

“What Shuzan told you isn’t the truth. Shuzan…or anyone for that matter, besides the Emperor and Seto-sama doesn’t know the truth.” She looked at the cloudless blue sky, and Mitsuki slowly began her tale.

Mitsuki’s father was foreign-born, just like Azusa’s father. Her father was an intelligence operative sent by a pirate guild in hostile relations with

Jurai, and once he discovered her ability, he gained information through her. Innocent and young, she harmonized with Tenju as he told her to, just to see him be happy.

One day, the head of state of a country friendly to Jurai was on their way to visit when a pirate fleet detected and attacked them, even though their route was supposed to be top secret. Mitsuki's ability had leaked the information to them. Fortunately, since the pirates used a large-scale attack, Seto's intelligence network detected it during maneuvers, and the closest Masaki Imperial ship averted the crisis. However, almost all ships beside the head of state's were annihilated. After this incident, Seto conducted an internal investigation, and discovered that Mitsuki's father was a spy, and that Mitsuki had an unusual ability.

"We could not make the facts public, of course," Mitsuki stated. "It would destroy the relationship of trust we have with other countries, our citizens' trust in the Emperor of Jurai, and cause the expulsion of foreigners. The information I had was capable of destroying an entire country. And even though I was young, my crime was a severe breach of trust, and deportation was inevitable… If I were in good health, that's what Grandfather would probably have done… But I could only survive *here*…" Mitsuki looked at Azusa sadly, and looked away again.

"You can only survive here?"

"I don't know if it's because of this ability… But I can't survive without power from the Royal Trees. I can't live without life support from all five First Generation Trees."

"Then if you left Jurai…"

"The man from House Masaki who saved the head of state found out," Mitsuki continued. "And for me, he took all the blame, had everything taken from him, and was banished from Jurai… He was your mother's older brother." A tear ran down her cheek. "That's not all. I was about to do irreparable damage to you… About Shuzan… everything… Yet I did nothing and thrived on everyone's misfortunes."

"That's not your fault! If you didn't have such an ability, you could've…"

"I've lived long enough. It may be short as an Imperial Family

member, but for an ordinary person…”

“But you never got to have ordinary happiness!” Azusa’s voice grew louder with unbearable emotions.

“Azusa-chan…”

“My mother and my uncle weren’t unhappy! They didn’t care about not being able to return to Jurai! The fact that I was ever mad about it is stupid. When I got mad, the old bat would laugh, and they laughed *with* her! My uncle would hear my mom’s stories and laugh about them with her. You’re the one…who got the short end of the stick!!” Azusa clung to her and cried.

How could reality be this tragic? Could someone be this unfortunate? Why did it have to be Mitsuki? She was so kind. So kind. Why did it have to be like this?!

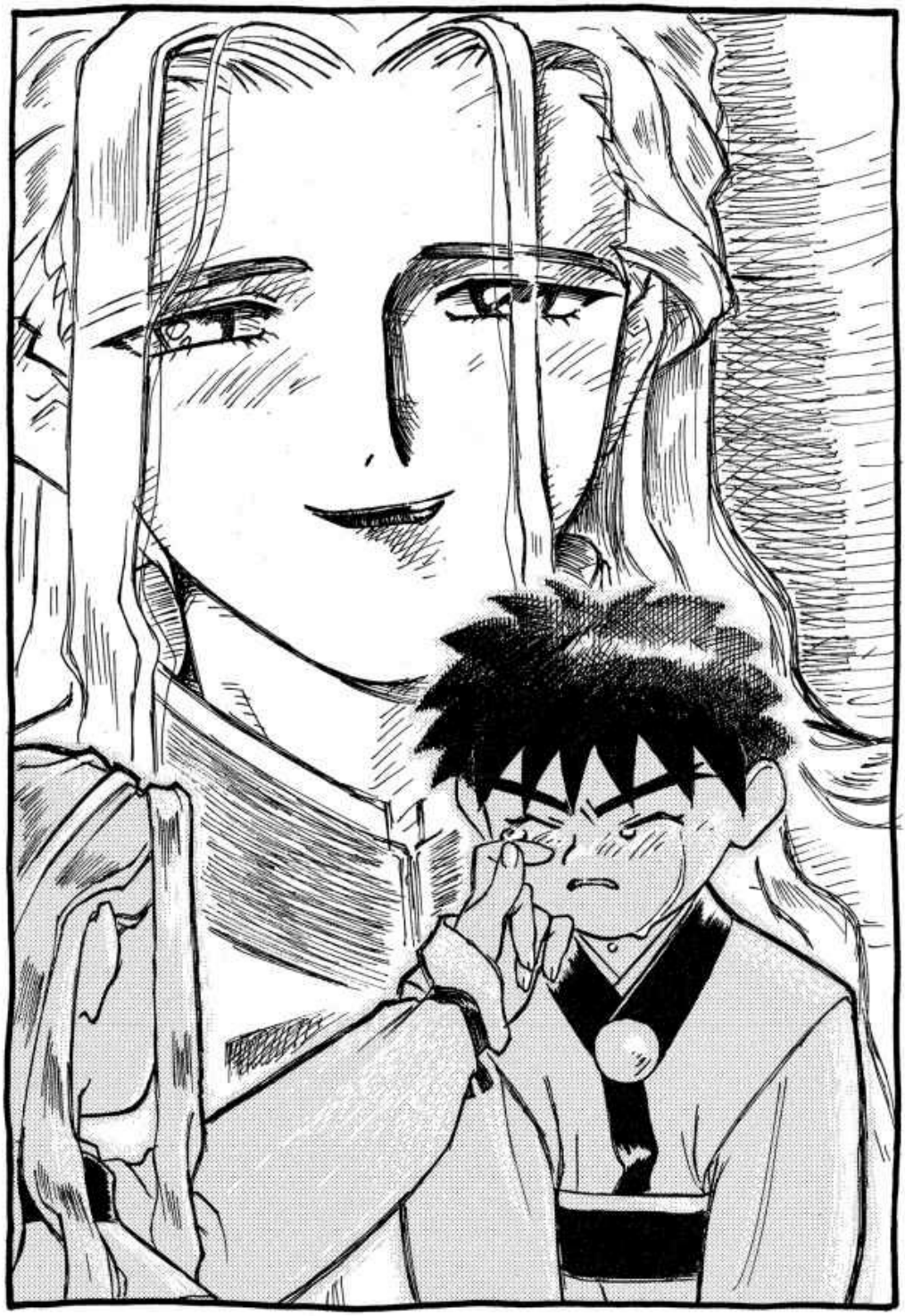
Mitsuki patted Azusa’s head as he sobbed uncontrollably. “Azusa-chan, don’t cry… I wasn’t unhappy. Grandfather and Seto-sama were very good to me, and I met you at the end. I was happy.” She hugged him gently.

“Don’t say it’s the end!”

“Azusa-chan, will you accept this Tree?”

“What are you saying? This Tree is your life. And I can’t hear its voice…”

“You *can* hear it. You *are*…” She placed her hand on his cheek and turned his head towards her. “I’ve always been watching you…since you came to Jurai.”



“Mitsuki, your eye…it’s a Royal Tree…”

Mitsuki’s right eye was a prosthetic, made of Royal Tree amber. “Yes, I’ve always… watched…” Her hand on his cheek went limp and slid down.

Azusa grabbed her hand and yelled at the top of his lungs. “Mitsuki! Hey, Mitsuki!!”

“Take me with you, Azusa-chan… You said you’d show me the outside world, didn’t you?”

“I’ll take you! Wherever you want to go, I’ll take you there!! So please…”

Mitsuki smiled happily at his words. “Azusa-chan… Azusa-chan… I love you…”

With that, she quietly closed her eyes.

“No. This isn’t real. Open your eyes. I’ll take you, I promise. So please, open your eyes. Mitsuki! Mitsuki!!” Azusa shook his head, throwing a tantrum, as if he could shake off reality.

How long had he been there, holding Mitsuki’s hand, now cold? The sun was about to set, and the bright red light of the evening sky enveloped them. His eyes, puffy from crying, were caked with dried tears. Without a will to move, he stared at her face, then twitched. A beautiful melody gently soothed his ears.

“This…is the one Mitsuki was playing…” A small sphere of light was dancing between the trees. “The Royal Trees… I see, you’re mourning, too.” Azusa leaned into the melody the Trees played and looked at the stars that started twinkling in the sky. “I’ll take you, Mitsuki… I promise. With this Tree… always.” He picked her up and entered the hollow of the tree. Inside was a pool of crystallized sap, like a small spring. He laid Mitsuki there. She quietly sank into the crystal. All his emotions melted into the Tree, along with her gentle voice and sad smile. The moment he let go of her hand and she sank completely, a single tear fell from his eyes. “Mitsuki…”

When he emerged from the hollow, it was already dark. The beautiful

full moon floating in the sky illuminated him. “The moon…the fog seal.” He looked at the moon and remembered the folk tale she told him. “Fog seal… *Kiri…to…*” he mumbled quietly. Kirito…that would be the Tree’s name. He would live his life with the Tree, with Mitsuki. It would become a ship, and he would take it everywhere with him. “Is that all right, Mitsuki?”

At that moment, a voice rang out within him. “…zusa… Azusa…” It was Kirito’s voice.

“I was a child and immature, and I could not save her…” he told Funaho, looking at the moon.

“But… I’m sure Mitsuki-sama was happy to have met you.”

“I hope so.”

“I’m sure… I know it was so!”

“Thank you…” Azusa was a little surprised at her insistence, but thanked her. He was happy for the thought that she was trying to make him feel better.

“I envy her…” Funaho mumbled.

“What? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing…” Blushing, Funaho shook her head.

Enveloped by the Light Hawk Wings and floating in space, a point of light grew closer. “Young Master, I’ve come to fetch you,” Jijii’s excited voice rang out. The point of light was Kirito, refitted with the Unit removed by the pirates.

Azusa went to the Asumi residence to deliver Funaho to Earth. Funaho spotted Asumi waiting by the entrance and ran to him to exchange a joyful embrace. “Grandfather!”

“Funaho, I’m so glad. So glad…” Asumi noticed Azusa watching from a short distance and gave a light nod while lovingly holding his granddaughter. Azusa nodded back.

“Funaho-dono, Asumi-dono. I apologize, but there’s a place I must visit. Please excuse me.”

“Where are you going?”

“It’s not a big deal. I know someone in the area, so I wanted to go pay my respects…” Azusa turned to Funaho with a smile.

“Please come back…”

“What?”

“No, nothing… Have a good trip, Azusa-sama.” Funaho swallowed all her emotions.

Azusa left the Asumi residence and returned to Kirito, and told Jijii about the mysterious voice he heard while he was trying to escape from the pirate fleet. Kirito responded by displaying on the screen that the voice came from the moon.

“I see, we should go take a look.” Kirito turned to the moon, found a decrepit spaceship that had crashed there, and landed next to it. Up close, it was clear the ship was from Jurai, but it was quite an old model, built from metal.

“Young Master, the ship’s plate shows who it belonged to.”

“Who is it?”

“Brace yourself. It belonged to Masaki-sama, the younger sister to Jurai’s first commander-in-chief.”

“I knew it. I figured as much since this planet was registered around the founding of Jurai. But I didn’t expect his younger sister…” Azusa stepped outside. The spaceship interior had mostly stopped functioning, but there was still an operational Unit in its center. This was not surprising; there had to be a functioning unit if someone had spoken out while he was in the pirate ship. Azusa’s First Generation Master Key reacted, and the Unit’s doors opened. Inside was a place of verdant green, characteristic of a Royal Tree Unit. The dome was a window to outer space, where Earth floated, beautiful and blue.

Azusa found a small tree planted in the middle of the Unit, and realized that while it was a Royal Tree, it was a graft and not the main tree. In other words, the energy blast that attacked the pirate fleet came from Kirito, and this Tree acted as a relay. “Then that voice…” Azusa asked himself, when the Master Key emitted a glow, to which the tree reacted and a spirit appeared.

“An Astral Copy…” The technique was only allowed to Imperial

Family members who possessed Second Generation Trees and above: to make a reproduction of your body, memories, spirit, and astral body. It was Masaki.

"Nice to meet you, Azusa-dono, Crown Prince of Jurai."

"You must be Masaki-sama," Azusa bowed respectfully, not knowing that he was about to be privy to her terrible and momentous fate…or not.

"Golly, it's been several thousand years since I've spoken to anyone. This place may be out of the way, but seriously, nobody came? Doesn't Jurai ever send any research vessels? What gives?"

"Well, that's…"

"Are you saying nobody cared about me? Oh okay, I see how it is. The current Imperial Family sounds heartless. I went through *allllll* that trouble to make the voyage back then and made it here at last."

"Oh, I'm sorry. But didn't you *not* want to be found?"

"Huh?"

"You rigged it so that it wouldn't appear registered as a colony until someone deliberately inquired about it."

"Well, whatever… I forgive you. Anyway, tell me what's trending in Jurai right now. While *I* was there…" Without answering Azusa's question, Masaki prattled on. All her pent-up boredom from several thousands of years gushed out, and she talked and talked to Jijii and Azusa, who were simply stumped. At first, Jijii was happy to meet this living witness to prehistory, but after five days of it, they were forced to make an escape under the pretense of overseeing the treatment of the captured villagers. Her topics were so *common* and lowbrow that they were not at all informative of history.



But perhaps it was inevitable. After all, the people she knew may have been great historical figures for Azusa and Jijii, but they were friends and family to her.

Jurai's foundational period was a history of pioneering. To expand territorial space and planets, tens of thousands of scouts were scattered outwards, with Jurai as their center. Not all of them returned. Some perished in accidents or battle, or otherwise lost their lives in the journey. Masaki was one of them… but to summarize her long-winded tale, she had escaped from her nosy and watchful parents and older brother, found this planet that she fell in love with through good luck, and spent the rest of her natural life here. Azusa felt a little sorry for the first commander-in-chief and their parents, but of course he had no idea that several decades later, his own son and daughter would do exactly the same thing.

Later, Masaki had taken the Royal Tree to Earth and planted it, coincidentally, on the island nation where Azusa just was, and settled there herself. Had Funaho's genealogy been traced back, perhaps Masaki's name would have popped up. But before she left for Earth, she had filled out its colony registration and left her Astral Copy on the moon, since it saw little fluctuation, for future Juraian descendants. Azusa suggested that she come to Jurai with him, but Masaki said she wished to gaze upon Earth for a while longer.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes…"

Azusa breathed a sigh of relief that her answer released him from her long-winded chat.

By the way, 800 years in the future, Masaki Tenchi's son will end up having to listen to her for the rest of his life. But that's another story.

When Azusa returned to Kirito, what awaited him was a pale—though since he was a machine, it was hard to tell—and panicked Jijii. "Young Master, this is serious!"

"What happened, Jijii? If Masaki-sama is calling, you go instead."

“That’s not it. Th-the Emperor of Jurai is in critical condition!”

“What?!”

The information was sent through the Royal Tree network, so there was no doubt. Jijii advised that they return to Jurai immediately. Having possession of a First Generation Tree meant absolute power on Jurai. But power alone did not run a powerful nation. It required a political upper hand and a number of conservators. Even though he was Crown Prince, his base was weak, and if he were not present on the planet when the current Emperor’s health was in danger, let alone the moment of his passing, who knew how the others would take it. If another person among the Imperial Family should gain a First Generation Tree, Azusa might find himself ousted. It was no exaggeration that politics was the element common to all worlds. Of course, on Jurai, they said such things happened less often than other countries, due to the Imperial Family’s optimistic and positive temperament, and the existence of the objective auditors that were the Royal Trees.

“Young Master, please return to Jurai at once.”

“But…” Funaho’s parting words were at the back of Azusa’s mind.

“Please come back… No, have a good trip, Azusa-sama.”

He had pretended not to have heard, but he could not ignore her wishes. He asked, “Isn’t that right?” to Mitsuki in his heart.

“Are you waffling over Funaho-dono? I did not think you were so smitten…”

“I at least want to thank her for taking care of me.”

“Young Master!”

“Please, Jijii…” Azusa ignored Jijii’s stubborn persistence and set Kirito’s course towards Earth.

He wanted to fulfill Funaho’s wishes, but he also considered going down just to look at her, and leave without saying goodbye. Talking to her would make parting worse. But his feelings for her weren’t halfhearted enough to let himself leave without seeing her. Debating internally, Azusa found Funaho as before, looking at the scenery in the corner of the yard. “Funaho-dono…” And just like before, he could not help calling out to her.

Funaho reacted in disbelief… which gradually turned into a wide smile. “Azusa-sama, w-welcome back…”

“I’m home…” he stopped himself from saying that. He could not say such a thing when he was about to leave for Jurai.

Asumi approached them as they stared at each other. “So you came back, Azusa-sama.”

“Asumi-dono…” Azusa knew that he had broken his promise to Asumi to leave before his granddaughter’s love would result in heartbreak. But Asumi was gently smiling as usual, with no trace of the bitterness he showed at the time.

“You seem to be smiling, in a complete change from yesterday. Hm, Funaho?”

“Th-that’s not true. Peace has returned to the village since the Orochi was vanquished, and I’m just happy that Father and my sister will come home and we can all live together as a family,” Funaho argued hastily.

Asumi looked at Azusa this time and said, “Azusa-sama, Funaho worried every day you’ve been gone that you might not come back.”

“Um…” Funaho’s cheeks turned beet red at Asumi’s teasing words.

“Is that so? I apologize. But…”

“But?”

“I know this is sudden, but I was just informed that my grandfather has collapsed with an illness and is in critical condition.” Azusa chose his words carefully. He called the Emperor his grandfather because he figured Asumi would be too confused if he told him the bare facts.

“I see. Then you’re returning to your home?” Asumi said gravely, and Azusa nodded.

“Oh no…” Azusa heard a slight voice and turned, and saw Funaho with her sad face cast down.

“Funaho-dono…”

“U-um… I’m going to go fetch some water.”

Azusa could not call out to Funaho as she ran off, and turned a self-deprecating smile to Asumi standing next to him. “I’m so sorry, Asumi-dono.

What you feared has come true."

But the old man's response was unexpected: "I don't think so…"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, no matter." He smiled and dodged the question, and Azusa shot him a questioning look.

'What should I do…?' Azusa stood there, resistant about leaving Funaho this way, when his Master Key reacted. He heard Jijii's voice, growing ever impatient.

"Young Master, please hurry!"

"Y-yes, that's right." Azusa could not make up his mind without somebody reminding him. He gave Asumi some parting words and started walking towards the transport pad.

He walked a while and told Asumi the send-off was enough, when Funaho's voice called to Azusa. "Azusa-sama!" She ran over, breathless.

"Funaho-dono…"

"Azusa-sama, here. Please take these to your grandfather back home." In the basket she held were persimmons, chestnuts, and mushrooms. They were all the foods Azusa liked while he was here. She must have run around the hills and fields so that Azusa could take them home. Mud and scratches covered her limbs. There were no tears on her face; only a smile.

Azusa felt in his heart her strength, kindness, rustic simplicity, and vulnerability. Her pure earnestness wormed its way into his heart. He opened his heart to her. *It's no use.* He stretched his hands out to Funaho, holding the basket out to him, then bent over and scooped her up in his arms.

"A-Azusa-sama?!"

"Will you come with me to Jurai?" He turned back to Asumi behind him. "I'm sorry, Asumi-dono!" He began to run, as if he were making off with her.

"Azusa-sama…"

"Funaho, stay with me, please."

Funaho saw his serious face, and nodded, burying her face into his neck, "Yes, please take me with you…"

Yes, he would take her, anywhere. He would protect her, no matter what happened.

He remembered his wish from when he was young, and ran, holding her with all his strength.

“Haha, I knew this would happen. Hahaha!” They heard Asumi laughing behind them, seeing them off. Azusa, Jurai Crown Prince, found his perfect life partner, to whom he would wed for life.

And then…

A little girl sat on the grounds of a small shrine. She thought she heard someone calling her name and turned around. There stood a young man who looked like a stalwart samurai and a woman who looked exactly like her, all grown up. The little girl smiled happily and ran to the woman, calling her name. The woman knelt down to the girl, who was only half her height, and told her she would not be able to see her again because she was going someplace far away, even though they had already been apart so long. The girl started crying, and the woman gave her a hand-carved comb, telling her to think of it as hers.



The girl fell asleep after the man and the woman left, and woke up at the voice of her father coming to get her. She had not seen him in so long that she leapt into his arms in joy. The father noticed the comb she was gripping and asked her about it, and she said she received it from her sister. The father, watching the girl's innocent delight at a comb, realized he would probably not be seeing his other daughter again. But oddly, looking at the comb, he felt no desolation. She was going to be happy.

"So Funaho went with him…" He smiled and looked up at the sky. From between the clouds, he saw a beautiful full moon.

Shortly after, a thick fog descended upon the entire village.

Later, people in this region would tell the folk tale about a fog seal for time immemorial.

Misaki

Thirteen days after the Emperor of Jurai became critically ill, Azusa landed on planet Jurai with Funaho. A few days later, the Emperor quietly passed away without ever regaining consciousness. With his death, the current Jurai government of several thousand years came to an end. A state funeral was held on a later date, and a plan was drawn up to hold Azusa's coronation ceremony after a period of mourning, with an announcement of the new Emperor's marriage after that. However, a controversy arose over the details of that announcement.

There would not have been a problem if the First Empress was Misaki, and the Second Empress was Funaho, but Azusa was adamant that Funaho be the First Empress. This meant a confrontation between him and Kamiki Utsutsumi, Misaki's father.

At first, Utsutsumi expressed concern and offered advice, but after many conversations failed to reach an agreement, their relationship came to a breaking point. Part of the problem was Azusa's failure to get permission to have Funaho be the First Empress from the Emperor of Jurai while he was alive. Today, the negotiations between Utsutsumi and Azusa began and ended with a quarrel once again.

"Hmph. It's like talking to a brick wall, that idiot!" Utsutsumi, Misaki's father, complained loudly as he walked down the peripheral passageway of the Jurai Palace. He was so loud that the ladies-in-waiting and guards in the vicinity turned around to stare, but he kept on stomping around. In contrast, Seto, his wife, followed a little ways behind, staying cool as a cucumber. "All he says is 'no,' what an obstinate fool. Don't you agree, Seto?!" Utsutsumi turned around to look at her, but she ignored him and looked outside. "Hey! Seto, are you even listening?!"

Using her pause to kill his momentum, Seto gave him an expressionless stare and answered, "Oh, was that you? And here I thought a *gogo* had wandered into the palace. Ho ho ho!" A *gogo* was an animal similar to a gorilla on Earth; the ladies-in-waiting and guards, who knew they were

noisy creatures, tried to stifle their laughter.

“Hmph! We’re leaving.” Utsutsumi walked off quickly, embarrassed, finally taking a hint.

Seto put on an affected laugh to add insult to injury, “Ho ho ho and a ho.”

“Did you have something to say?”

“Nothing.” Despite having said that, she was worried about the relationship between Azusa and her husband breaking down any further. She also knew that saying something would have the opposite effect and that one of them eventually had to give. Making things worse, she actually enjoyed seeing her future son-in-law challenging her husband. Seto was fond of how similar they were in their absurdity. That was why she loved both of them so much.

“Why, Utsutsumi-dono, Seto-dono.” Amaki Shuzan and Tatsuki Kotono greeted them in the passage. Seto knew that Shuzan was possessed with a lust for power, and had been the mastermind behind multiple undesirable situations in the past. Seto hated him.

The Juraian Imperial Family was composed of House Masaki, House Kamiki, House Amaki, and House Tatsuki. The Emperor was generally chosen from among these four houses, and although they had different names, they were one big family. The candidates to the throne were selected during the Emperor’s lifetime, one from each house, and they were: Utsutsumi Kamiki, Amaki Shuzan, Tatsuki Kotono, and Masaki Azusa, in that order. Shuzan was especially zealous about being the next Emperor, and though he was the second candidate, he had a fair shot.

First of all, the primary candidate, Kamiki Utsutsumi, only had a Third Generation Tree, and above all, did not much care for the throne. The one Shuzan feared the most was his wife, Seto. She was originally the matriarch of House Kamiki, whose reputation of bravery and heroism reached far and wide, and could have been the next Emperor if she so desired. But she married Utsutsumi, gave him the position, and rejected a future as Empress. At the time, the Juraian Emperor’s disappointment was palpable.

The third candidate, Kotono, had a Second Generation Tree, but was faint of heart, and was actually fearful of becoming Emperor. Shuzan

reckoned that if some kind of deal could be made, the man would iron out the differences of opinions within House Tatsuki and personally withdraw from consideration for the throne.

The fourth candidate was Azusa of House Masaki, the weakest politically.

The next Emperor of Jurai was designated by the current Emperor. Azusa may have been the Emperor's favorite, but the House Masaki was politically weak, and Shuzan knew that he could not nominate him without powerful political support.

Shuzan himself could only obtain a Third Generation Tree. On the other hand, his son was able to partner with a Second Generation Tree, so Shuzan forcibly nominated him in his stead. Even if Azusa should similarly partner with a Second Generation Tree, the next Emperor would automatically be his son, and thus Shuzan considered his power to ultimately be his own. However, Azusa ended up partnered with a First Generation Tree, of which only three past examples existed in Jurai's long history. Then Utsutsumi, who had long favored Azusa to begin with, approved of his ascension to the throne, and Shuzan's scheme crumbled.

This was the process through which Azusa was decided to be the next Emperor, but Shuzan was enjoying the fact that Azusa bringing back Funaho was causing discord between House Kamiki and House Masaki.

Shuzan, in charge of the gates to the Room of Royal Trees, claimed that Funaho could not be acknowledged as a member of the Imperial Family, since her ranking as Empress had not been settled. He denied her the Rite of Tree Selection. If he were to get careless and allow it to happen, and a First or Second Generation Tree accepted her, it would give her status as Imperial Family even without a title as First or Second Empress. But without a Tree, guaranteeing her status became Azusa's responsibility. Since he had already openly declared that he would make her First Empress, it would hurt his reputation if he did not keep his word. Even if his reputation did not suffer outright, this would compromise his political position with a lasting feud with House Kamiki. In that case, it would increase criticism of Funaho and make it more difficult to protect her, thus putting a lot of psychological pressure on Azusa… That was Shuzan's plan.

The Emperor was the star and the charismatic center of Jurai. Keeping

his promise with a young woman he brought from an alien planet and making her First Empress without succumbing to social pressure—it was all the people, and not just the Imperial Family, would talk about. It might have been their temperament as a pirate nation, but if he were to cave and make her Second Empress, he would lose his people's trust, which would not be easy to recover. If nothing else, his reign as Emperor would be prematurely shortened. Azusa and Funaho met on a frontier planet through a twist of fate and fell in love, but this caused repercussions they had not anticipated among the Imperial Family.

Feigning disinterest, Shuzan casually probed Utsutsumi. "So how are the talks going with the next Emperor?"

"It's a disaster. That idiot is always…"

"We're getting on our way, Shuzan-dono; excuse us." Seto hurried Utsutsumi along. She did not turn around, but imagining Shuzan grinning behind her, she felt unspeakable anger. Now Seto was in a huff over her husband, who so gullibly took Shuzan's bait (yet, that was also what she loved about him).

"What's wrong, Seto?"

"Hmph." Their conversation continued thusly until they opened the door to the antechamber where their daughter Misaki awaited, and found her lady-in-waiting bound and gagged on the floor.

"Not again…" Utsutsumi slapped his forehead. Misaki often outwitted her ladies-in-waiting and ran off to play. The ladies themselves were all skilled experts under orders to protect her, but Misaki had the terrifying powers to catch even them off guard and pull these pranks. She had just turned four years old.

Misaki was a witch from birth… a spontaneous mutation that arose through the strain of Jurai's long history of bio-augmentation and life-prolonging treatment through the Royal Trees. When she was an infant, her powers injured many ladies-in-waiting. It was merely a form of instinctual defense, an over-sensitive reaction against the fear the ladies felt. Fortunately for her, Utsutsumi was a stout-hearted love-blind father, and Seto an easygoing mother, and by the time she was old enough to understand, her

power no longer went out of control. And it was also because of one lady-in-waiting who did not fear her. That was Mama, the one currently bound and gagged.

"Looks like she escaped through the window."

"What if something happens to her? We must summon the guards…"

"Oh please, she's not one who would let herself get caught."

"How can you say that? Oh, my dear Misaki…" Seto laughed merrily and Utsutsumi paced in a fluster. This, at a glance, summed up how they were as a couple.

By the way, Misaki's true terror would become known to the entire galaxy several thousands of years later. Only Masaki Tenchi would be able to stop her, but that was another story.

Funaho tried to stifle her sobs. Ever since she came to Jurai, the culture shock had taken a toll on her, as well as the fact that she was kept so busy with briefings in the ways of the Imperial Family, bio-augmentation, and other preparations for her to become Empress, that she had not been able to see Azusa much. No matter how comparatively easygoing they were, they were still the *Imperial* Family, after all… Now that she was a candidate for Empress of the next Emperor, the criticism aimed at Funaho, even if Azusa was protecting her, was harsh. To be honest, Funaho was extremely homesick. Further, the animosity with House Kamiki was spurring on those who had been against Azusa to begin with, and criticism of Funaho grew louder every day. For Funaho, who had bravely endured it all for Azusa, her bed in her room was her only place of solace. And now she was making fresh stains on the pillow again as tears flowed freely down her face.

I want to go home.… She missed everything: the view from the Asumi residence, her father and little sister; they all never felt so dear to her as they did now.

"Hi, hello."

"Huh…?" She raised her head and saw a little girl peering into her face.

“Why are you crying?” The girl with her blue hair in a ponytail reminded Funaho of the little sister she had left behind.

“Who are you…?”

“So, *sniff*…why are you crying? Does your tummy hurt?” Misaki’s eyes started to brim with tears, empathetically experiencing Funaho’s feelings. Seeing this, Funaho let the kindness return to her smile. This was how Funaho and Misaki, later said to be on friendlier terms than real sisters, first met.



“I’m going to be Azusa-chan’s First Empress.” Misaki smiled, sitting on the bed next to Funaho.

“Then you must be Misaki-chan.”

“Yeah.”

“My name is Funaho. Nice to meet you.”

“I know. You’re going to be First Empress, too, right? Just like me.” First and Second… That was the source of all the problems, but to Misaki, apparently all Empresses were First Empress. Her simple way of thinking lightened Funaho’s heavy heart.

“By the way, Misaki…how did you get in here? I didn’t hear the door open.”

“Over here.” Misaki hopped off the bed and toddled to the window, and got up to stand on the windowsill.

“W-wait. Misaki?”

“Tah!” She disappeared.

“Nooo! Misaki!!” Funaho screamed and ran to the window. Funaho’s room, as Azusa’s candidate for Empress, was located close to the top of the palace. Funaho felt faint looking at the sight below.

“Over here.”

Funaho raised her face at the voice and saw Misaki poking her head out from the window above, waving. “Misaki, that’s dangerous. Don’t move, I’ll get help.”

“I’m fine,” she said as she disappeared again, appearing in front of her. “See?”

“You’re like a little monkey…”

“I’m not a monkey. Ha ha ha!” Misaki laughed innocently, and Funaho could not help but laugh as well.

A few minutes later, tipped off by the maid who heard laughing in the room, Seto showed up. “Excuse me, Funaho-dono.”

“Oh, Mother!” Misaki turned to her with joy, which Seto returned with a stern look. The stern glare was actually her resting scowl, but Funaho

stiffened, thinking that she had done something wrong.

“I’m sorry, Funaho-dono, that my daughter has disturbed you.”

“Oh, it’s all right…” Not knowing how to answer, Funaho answered vaguely.

Seto turned to Misaki and said, “You came in from the window again, didn’t you?!”

“Yeah, she said I was like a monkey.”

“Monkey…?” Seto looked at Funaho, who blushed and cast her eyes downward. Seto did not know what monkeys were, but she realized what it meant and burst out laughing. “Hahahaha!”

Funaho, seeing her laugh exuberantly with a face that looked just like Misaki’s, felt that she must be the “old bat” Azusa referred to, and felt oddly at ease.

The laugh was infectious, and Misaki was soon laughing the same way. “Hahahaha!”

“Hahaha…yeah right!” Seto suddenly turned serious and swatted Misaki on the behind. “You bound and gagged Mama, and burst into someone’s room through the window, when you had never even met before!”

“Owww that hurts, Mother.”

“U-um, Seto-sama, please don’t be so mad at her. Thanks to her, I was…”

Seto looked at Funaho, and realized the mental state she must have been in, and inferred what she wanted to say. She softly chuckled and put Misaki down. “Since Funaho-dono said so, I’ll going to let you off the hook this time.” She ignored Misaki frowning and tearing up, and spoke to Funaho. “I think this is the first time we’ve spoken to each other like this.”

“Y-yes, but I had heard about you from Azusa-sama, Seto-sama.”

“Old bat…”

“Huh…?”

“Isn’t that what Azusa-chan called me?”

“Oh, no… he may say so, but he looked so happy when he was talking

about you… Oh!” She had basically admitted that Azusa had been calling her “old bat.”

“Ha ha ha! I like your honesty!!” Seto laughed and hugged Funaho.

“I-I’m so sorry.”

“Ha ha ha ha!!” Seto laughed even louder on seeing that Funaho was so compelled to apologize.

“Mother, not fair! Me too!” Misaki thought she had been left out, and squeezed herself between Seto and Funaho.

For Funaho, it was the first time she felt at ease since coming to Jurai, outside of Azusa’s presence. Since then, Misaki came to visit Funaho often. The Empresses were becoming friends, but Azusa and Utsutsumi’s negotiations made only slow progress, with their relationship continuing to be awkward.

Then one day, there was an assassination attempt on Funaho. Her food was poisoned with a nano-robot that destroyed the body at the cellular level. The fact that it circumvented the Jurai security system showed vividly that it was an inside job, and someone high-ranking at that. Fortunately, Funaho’s bio-augmentation was more advanced than scheduled, so it did not become life-threatening. However, this incident deeply upset Funaho, increasing her desire to go back home to Earth. *Maybe I should not be here at all…*

Seto was concerned about Funaho worrying so much. She made arrangements for Misaki to come live with her under the pretense of a combined education to be Empress. Since Funaho would receive House Kamiki protection under the pretense of protecting Misaki, this completely assured Misaki’s safety.

“I’m so glad I get to stay with you, Funaho-oneechan. What should we play with today?” Misaki’s innocent smile let Funaho forget about such bitter incidents. Perhaps that, too, was Seto’s intent.

When Azusa found out about the incident, he worried whether Misaki should be given the title of First Empress in order to protect Funaho from further danger. Further concessions might be necessary, but if Funaho were Second Empress, they would have the blessing of House Kamiki, and she would be allowed to go through with the Rite of Tree Selection. Then she would be given at least a Third Generation Tree, and she would be accepted

as a member of the Imperial Family. The period of mourning for the previous Emperor was about to expire. There was not much time left for Azusa to make his decision.

"…Misaki, did you say something?" Funaho, studying as usual with Misaki, spoke to her because she suddenly thought she heard something calling her.

"No, I didn't say anything. Did *you* say anything to me?"

"No, I didn't either…"

Come… Please, come here… It was not so much a message in words, but *something* with that nuance came into Funaho and Misaki's minds. It was nothing unpleasant or coercive, but it naturally flowed into their hearts.

"Funaho-oneechan, someone's calling me…"

"Who could it be…?" The two of them left the room in search of the mysterious sensation they shared.

"It's coming from this way."

"Yes…" The two of them walked toward where the mysterious feeling grew stronger and found themselves standing before the entrance to the Room of Royal Trees. Before them appeared Shuzan, who had received a report from the security guard.

"What are you doing here? Misaki-dono and…you are the girl Azusa-dono brought, I think your name was Funaho…" Shuzan said in a contrived manner, fully knowing Funaho's circumstances. He had no reason to add the "-dono" honorific to Funaho, who was not yet accepted as Imperial Family, nor did he want to. "Beyond this point is the sacred room of Royal Trees. Misaki-dono aside, it is not a place where someone not in the Imperial Family can enter without permission. Even attempting to enter like this is a capital offense worthy of death."

"But someone called us here. Right, Misaki-chan?"

"Yeah."

Shuzan turned a malicious smile on her as Funaho desperately tried to

explain. “Do you really think such an excuse is going to fly?”

“Being summoned to the Royal Trees outside of a ceremony… I seem to recall a few cases of that happening; am I wrong, Azusa-dono?”

“No, there have been five cases in the past.” Seto and Azusa were suddenly standing next to Shuzan.

“Azusa-sama.”

“Azusa-chan!” Funaho and Misaki exclaimed at the same time.

Shuzan ground his teeth with internal vexation about why they always had to appear like this at inopportune times, but he looked at them with complete composure, “Why, Azusa-dono and Seto-dono. Thank you for your opinions, they were very helpful. But if that were the case, the door leading to the Royal Trees should…” He turned around to see the door opening by itself.

“H-how could that be…? B-but I’m responsible for security here! No matter who ordered it, I cannot bend our laws that have continued since days of antiquity!” Shuzan persisted in consternation.

Seto’s eyebrow shot up. “Silence, you cretin! The Royal Trees rule this place and the entire planet of Jurai. One cannot deny guests approved by their masters just because of a gatekeeper’s selfish opinions! Such hubris!!”

“E-excuse me, but only Misaki-dono was summoned…it’s possible that Funaho-dono is only copying her.” Though intimidated by Seto, Shuzan refused to back down.

“Only those accepted by the Trees can enter, and you know this, Shuzan-dono.” Seto dripped with sarcasm. She was alluding to the fact that the doors did not open for Shuzan during his Rite of Tree Selection.

Shuzan’s shoulders shuddered slightly, and he uttered the final words left to him, “Fine. Please pass through. But if she is rejected by the Trees, the death penalty will be inevitable. Is that all right, Funaho-dono?”

“Funa…” Azusa tried to step towards her, and Seto stopped him.

Funaho gripped Misaki’s hand tightly and said, “I’m going.”

It may have been an unexpected incident, but since there had been

precedent, Funaho and Misaki's Rite of Tree Selection was suddenly under way. Since three or more witnesses were necessary for the ceremony, Azusa, Seto—Shuzan nominated himself, but the Trees denied him—and Kotono from House Tatsuki accompanied them instead. Although witnesses were necessary, it was not absolute, because the witnesses could only enter up to the area they were able to enter during their own ceremony. If the person for whom the ceremony was for entered the area of First Generation Trees, most witnesses could not enter any further. In that case, the official witness was the partnered Tree itself.

"Let's go, Funaho-oneechan."

"Yes." The moment Funaho and Misaki entered, holding hands, they disappeared. Azusa felt relief that they had been safely transported, and followed with Seto and Kotono.

Left behind by the door was Shuzan, denied entry, and shocked by the fact that Funaho had been selected by the Trees.

Once transported from the door to the Room of Royal Trees, they were inside Tenju. Many Second Generation Trees were floating there, and the passageway to the transport pad was like a labyrinth. Funaho and Misaki opened their eyes with wonder at the sight.

"So these are the Royal Trees…"

"Wow!"

The Trees emitted light as if to welcome them, and their dance played a melody. Azusa felt like he had been reunited with Mitsuki, but seeing Seto grinning beside him and seeing right through him, he hurriedly turned his attention back to Funaho and Misaki.

Misaki frolicked about, tugging on Funaho's hand. They passed through all the transporters among the Second Generation Trees, but none had selected them.

"That's the end of the Second Generation Trees. Does that mean a First Generation Tree is calling them?" Nobody could answer Kotono's question. Everything was according to the will of the Trees. The group went to the back, the same door Azusa went through to the First Generation Trees, and the entrance opened by itself.

Azusa, transported with them, looked around quizzically.

“Is this the area for First Generation Trees?”

“No…where are we?” Azusa mumbled to answer Kotono, but mostly to himself.

Seto said, “This can’t be the area for First Generation Trees. If it were, Kotono-dono and I would not have been able to enter.”

“Then where are we…?” Kotono, timid to begin with, looked around uneasily, but his fears were needless, as the Trees here also emitted welcoming lights for Funaho and Misaki.

“They smell like Royal Trees, but they look different from the others.” As Azusa said, First Generation and Second Generation Trees may have had some differences in shape and size, but they looked similar. However, these Trees were clearly different. One had jeweled flowers of amber, one was completely submerged in water, and one was crystallized. No two were the same.

“It’s calling me…”

“Yeah, I can hear it.”

Funaho and Misaki, hearing the voices, walked towards a Tree.

Funaho stopped in front of it, and said, “You’re the one who’s been calling us.”

“Heaven’s wonder…” Azusa, Seto, and Kotono were shocked at the sight of the Tree in front of them. There were two Trees growing closely next to each other, looking like a bird with spread wings.

“Two of the same Tree… Twins…!”

The Trees that chose Funaho and Misaki were themselves Second Generation Trees. But being twins, they were completely synchronized, and their combined power was equal to that of a First Generation Tree. Each could individually form three Light Hawk Wings. It was no exaggeration that they were more powerful than a First Generation Tree.

At any rate, Funaho’s and Misaki’s Rite of Tree Selection was a resounding success. Funaho’s position took a turn for the better by gaining a Second Generation Tree, and she was accepted as the First Empress. Only

those ranking high in the Imperial Family were told, but during the genetic testing that Funaho received for her bio-augmentation, it was discovered that she was directly descended from Masaki, the younger sister to the first leader of Jurai. That probably had something to do with her quick acceptance.

The dissatisfaction of a segment of the Imperial Family did not wholly disappear, but the outright slander was no more. But then again, in some cases, discontent from various sources had taken the form of slander towards Funaho. The optimistic nature of the people of Jurai worked in their favor.

However, Utsutsumi and Azusa's relationship remained awkward, and House Kamiki, the most powerful of the Imperial Family, declared complete neutrality. It meant the biggest power in the Supreme Council transferred to House Amaki, where Shuzan resided.

In any case, when the period of mourning was over, the coronation was held, and Azusa officially made his name in the galaxy as the new Emperor of Jurai. Though his power was not truly rock solid yet, the new Emperor took his first historic step.

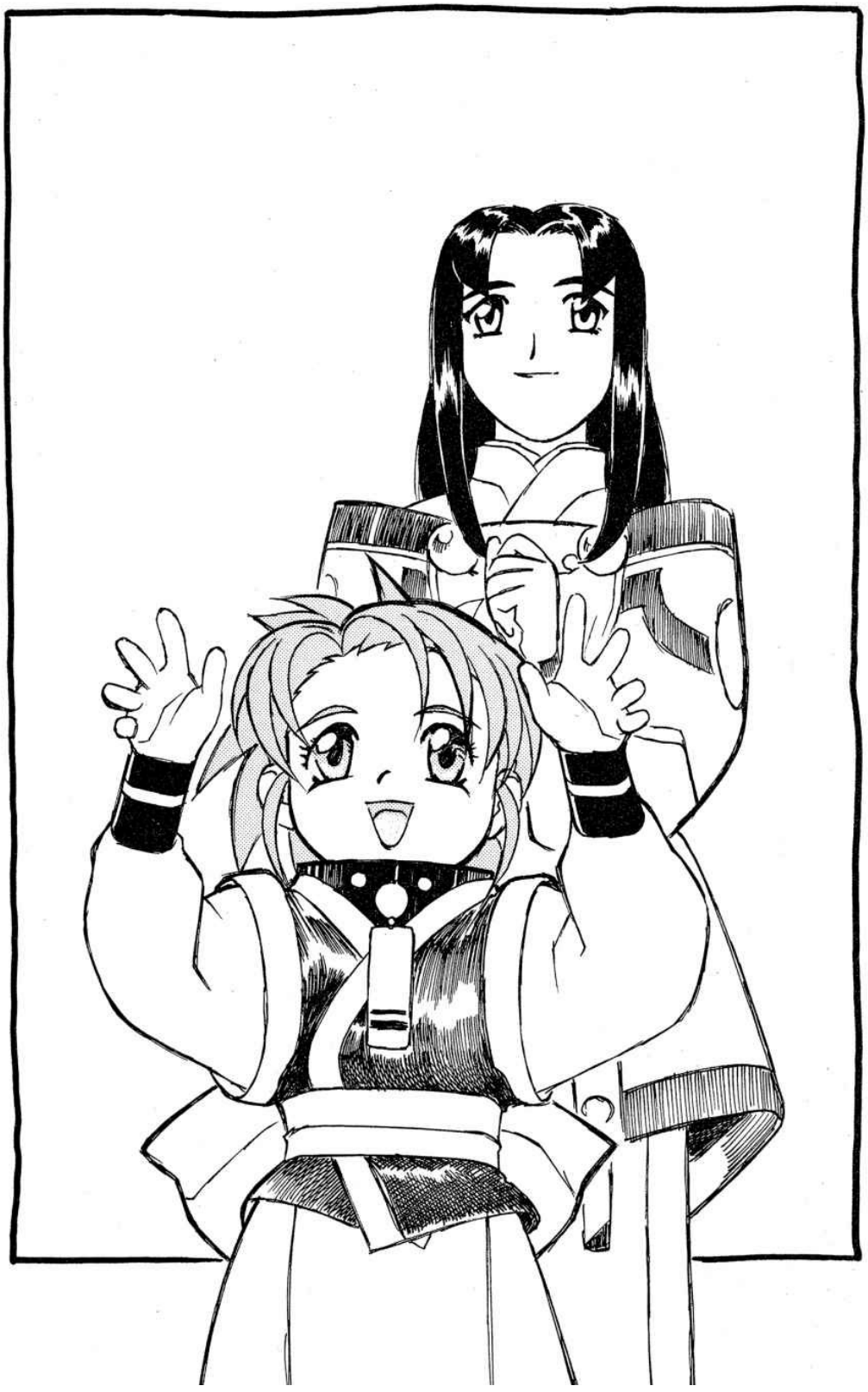
Six years later—the Emperor of Jurai and Funaho, at twenty years old, were wedded in a marriage ceremony.

A provisional ceremony was held with ten-year old Misaki, so the celebrations were luxurious ones unparalleled in recent years.

Misaki's incomparable talent in martial arts helped her sweep all sorts of championships, and with effusiveness that did not allow anyone to praise her noble birth and position, she became a national idol. All the television networks wanted to interview her, and she took every chance to say how she looked up to Funaho as a sister, so the bias of the populace was gradually removed. That bias was spun by Shuzan to begin with.

At first, there were many mean questions about Funaho, but once a reporter from a station with Shuzan's backing asked a particularly vicious question, Misaki finally broke down in tears. That TV station instantly became the villain, and her ardent fans drove the station close to shutdown. Since then, nobody asked such questions. The biggest organization among Misaki's fan clubs was run by Utsutsumi, her own father. His feats as doting parent were pretty impressive by this point.

Four years later, Funaho gave birth to the First Prince, Yosho. Producing an heir, Funaho's popularity with the people was cemented, and her status became unshakeable. Their contrasting personalities and appearances increased Funaho and Misaki's allure, and Funaho's popularity increased proportionally to Misaki's.



Five years later, Misaki married the Jurai Emperor at nineteen years old. Because of the party-loving populace, the festivities were even more spectacular than last time.

Three years later, Yosho's Rite of Selection was conducted when he was eight years old. Just like his mother, Yosho was summoned by the Royal Tree, and gained a First Generation Tree which he named Funaho. Around the same time, Misaki's first child, First Princess Ayeka was born.

Four years later, twelve-year-old Yosho and four-year-old Ayeka became engaged in a ceremony. The Emperor had agreed to Funaho and Misaki's wish to have their children marry each other, and the official engagement was held. It was a selfish action on the parent's behalf, without regard to their children's wishes, though the young Ayeka was ecstatic that she would get to marry her beloved half-brother.

Seven years later, Misaki's second child, Second Princess Sasami was born. The time of destiny was near.

And three years later, something happened to change history.

Ryoko the space pirate, the Demon of Destruction, attacked the planet Jurai along with Ryo-Ohki.

It was seven hundred years before Masaki Tenchi was born.

THE END

Afterword:
Their Big Show + One

On June 3 1997, at the AIC Tenchi studio, where things were hectic with the production of the anime *Tenchi in Tokyo*, Kajishima Masaki and Yosuke Kuroda, who had just finished writing this novel, sat down for a ten-minute interview.

By the way, this novel was created by taking the expansive plot by Kajishima Masaki, the creator of the *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki* OVA series, supplemented by scenes and dialogue by Yosuke Kuroda, the scriptwriter for OVA episodes seven through thirteen, and adapting it into a novel. The duo developed the anime scripts in the same way. What do they think of *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki* in this new format? We don't have much time, so let's begin.

Kuroda Yosuke: Well, it's finally come out. *True Tenchi Muyo!* in the style of *The Anatomy of Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki 2*.

Kajishima Masaki: Finally. (laughs)

Kuroda: Different format and publishing company, though.

Kajishima: This is a novel after all.

Kuroda: We tried to do this story that takes place in the past with the CD drama series *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Dash* put out in '95, right?

Kajishima: If we had really put it to CD, it would've been a helluva set. Like ten CDs.

Kuroda: But we've been working on this for over three years, so we've naturally added to the story over time.

Kajishima: The general gist of the story hasn't changed, but we added a lot of details. It's been so long now that there may be some parts that no longer make sense alongside the anime. (laughs)

Kuroda: That's not true. I had a rougher time than you. I worked on *Magical Girl Pretty Sammy*, but the last time I wrote for *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-*

Ohki was the side story for the PC-FX version. And it was a romantic comedy. (laughs)

Kajishima: I hadn't drawn the manga in a long time either. The plot for this novel I wrote a long time ago, also.

Kuroda: Sorry I was so slow.

Kajishima: It's all right. After I wrote the plot, I occasionally reread it, and even I thought it was interesting. (laughs)

Kuroda: Ha ha ha!

Kajishima: I read the manuscripts for novels 1 and 2 back to back. They're really good stories. (laughs)

Kuroda: That's right, everyone. The first two novels are already written.

Kajishima: Most of them are short stories, though.

Kuroda: Please stick with us for four or five books… Actually, people who are watching *Tenchi in Tokyo* on TV right now might get confused because of the differences.

Kajishima: Maybe, but the *Tenchi* OVA series is coming out on discount reprints.

Kuroda: Ooh, a subtle advertisement. (laughs)

Kajishima: Well, I just want people to read the novel and watch the anime.

Kuroda: But it's pretty daring to publish a novel of something old enough to get discount reprints, not to mention a story that takes place 750 years before the main plot.

Kajishima: These days, the period to get discount reprints is shorter. The first arc (episodes 1-7) may be fine, but the second arc (episodes 8-13) might be a tad early.

Kuroda: That makes me feel really old.

Kajishima: Ha ha ha!

Kuroda: But this novel is chock full of tidbits that are shocking to the anime fans.

Kajishima: I'm looking forward to hearing the reactions from the people who only know *Tenchi* from TV.

Kuroda: I bet they'll be okay. The first book is a story about the Emperor of Jurai and stands alone as a complete story by itself. Well, there are plenty of Easter eggs to please long-time *Tenchi* fans.

Kajishima: Once this series of novels is published, people will understand what went through my mind as I created *Tenchi*. Especially why the video called "Here Comes Jurai 2" that came after the second arc took the form it did.

Kuroda: The original *Tenchi* story was a selection of all the good parts, and it was missing a lot of anecdotes, so this novel supplements what I wasn't able to fit in… Or rather, the story of Masaki Tenchi is just one highlight of the grand world of *Tenchi*, so stories exist in the past and future, too.

Kajishima: I considered including the story of Azusa's youth when the *No Need for Tenchi!* manga was greenlit, but it had to star our main characters… So that's how it started where episode 6 left off.

Kuroda: Oh, is that right? You'd been planting seeds for this novel since that long ago?

Kajishima: Yeah.

Kuroda: Well, readers would've been confused by a manga full of characters they had never seen before, so you didn't have a choice.

Kajishima: That's why we were going to do a drama CD, but again, they were complaining that the main characters weren't in it…

Kuroda: So we suddenly had Manny Otaku appear in *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Dash*.

Kajishima: And it finally became a novel.

Kuroda: It was a long road.

Kajishima: Very long.

Kuroda: I think it was a good thing to put it in a print format. When you write, you often have multiple meanings in a single line of dialogue. Like

in episode 8 of the anime, Washu told Tenchi that she'd been watching him, but it meant that Washu was watching Tenchi through her link with Ryoko. It's all in the outline, but it's hard to put it in dialogue. People watching wouldn't really get it. (laughs)

Kajishima: Yeah, that's true. (laughs)

Kuroda: But you can write it out in print.

Kajishima: There are more serious developments in the past. In that sense, it was probably a good thing to do it in a novel.

Kuroda: It was very serious. That's why I tried to write it like a historical novel. I tried to leave the parts you wrote like commentary as much as I could.

Kajishima: It didn't seem to belong in the Fujimi Fantasia Bunko line. (laughs)

Kuroda: It's true, it's very different from *Pretty Sammy*, which I'm also writing. It's so serious throughout, and above all, Azusa is awesome!

Kajishima: Maybe too awesome. (laughs)

Kuroda: What's wrong with that? Oh, I rewatched episode 13 after I wrote this, and I saw it in a new light. How did Azusa turn into such a crotchety old man? (laughs)

Kajishima: But he just came to get his daughters back.

Kuroda: I guess fundamentally he hasn't changed.

Kajishima: I think so. You'll see by reading the novel, but the men on Jurai are all under their wives' thumbs. (laughs)

Kuroda: It's a society dominated by women. (laughs)

Kajishima: Yeah, the women are strong.

Kuroda: Some people read the afterword first, so let's avoid spoilers. So, shall we do a subtle trailer for volume 2?

Kajishima: The second volume is about Yosho, Azusa's son (Masaki Katsuhito) going to Earth, chasing after the Demon of Destruction. In that sense, it's an important story that leads into episode 1 of the anime.

Kuroda: Ryoko is a major character, so please look forward to it. The

highlight is seeing how Ryoko was like before she met Masaki Tenchi. Is it shocking?

Kajishima: Yeah. It's turning out like *Star Wars*. (laughs)

Kuroda: The *Tenchi* saga. It's like *Locke the Superman*. (laughs)

Masunari Koji: Good morning. Sorry I'm late.

Kuroda: And here Masunari Koji-san, the anime director, makes his entrance.

Kajishima: Ha ha ha!

Kuroda: We're actually doing this interview during the down time of the script meeting for the *Photon* radio drama. Masunari-san came in late.

Masunari: What are you guys doing?

Kajishima: The interview for the afterword for the *Tenchi* novel.

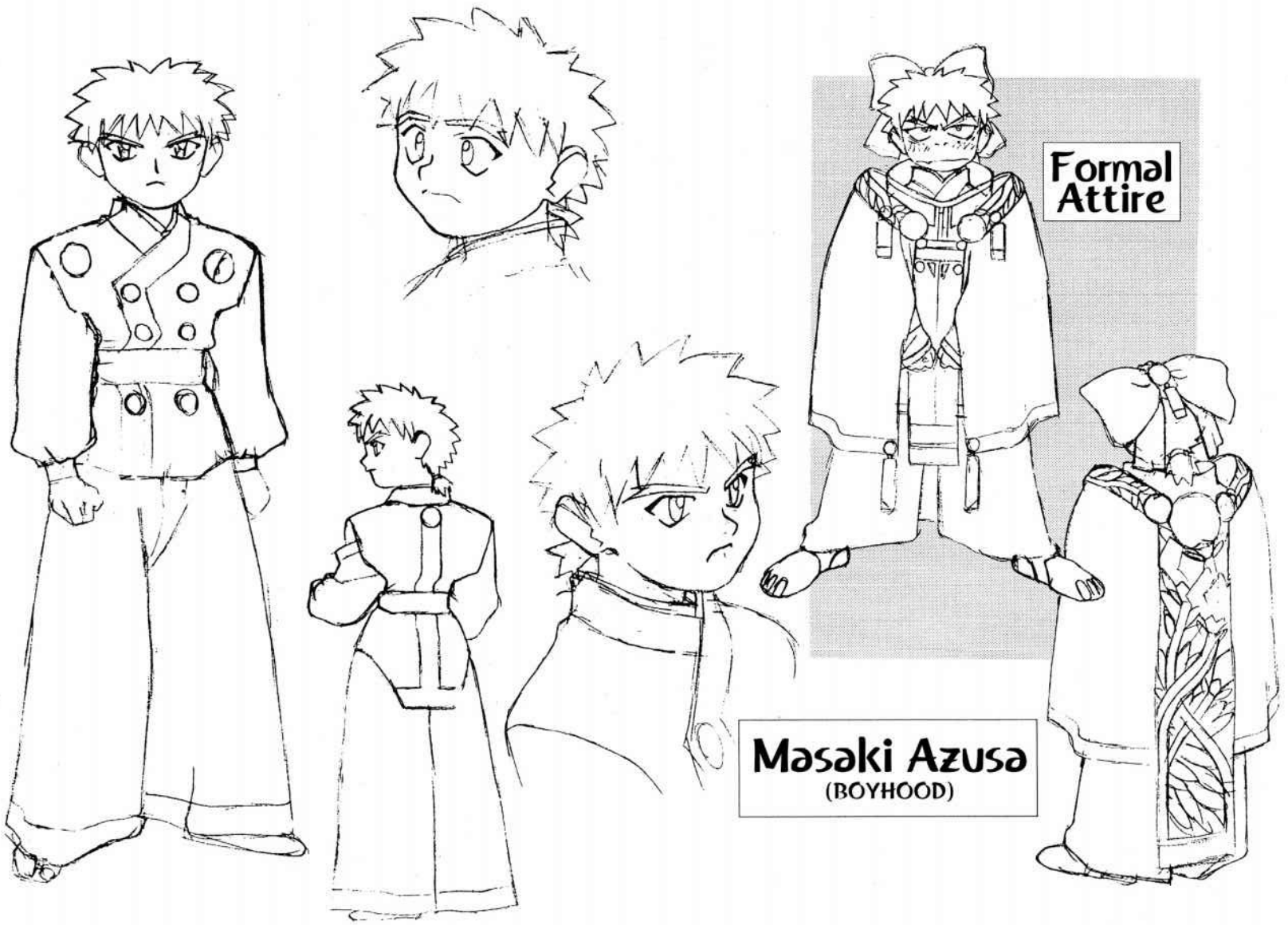
Masunari: Oh yeah? It's finally finished? Congratulations!

Kuroda: So with that message, we're returning to work mode. Please enjoy the grand *Tenchi* world only Kajishima Masaki-san can create, with all kinds of differences from the previous titles. Let's meet again at the afterword for volume 2.

True Tenchi Muyo!

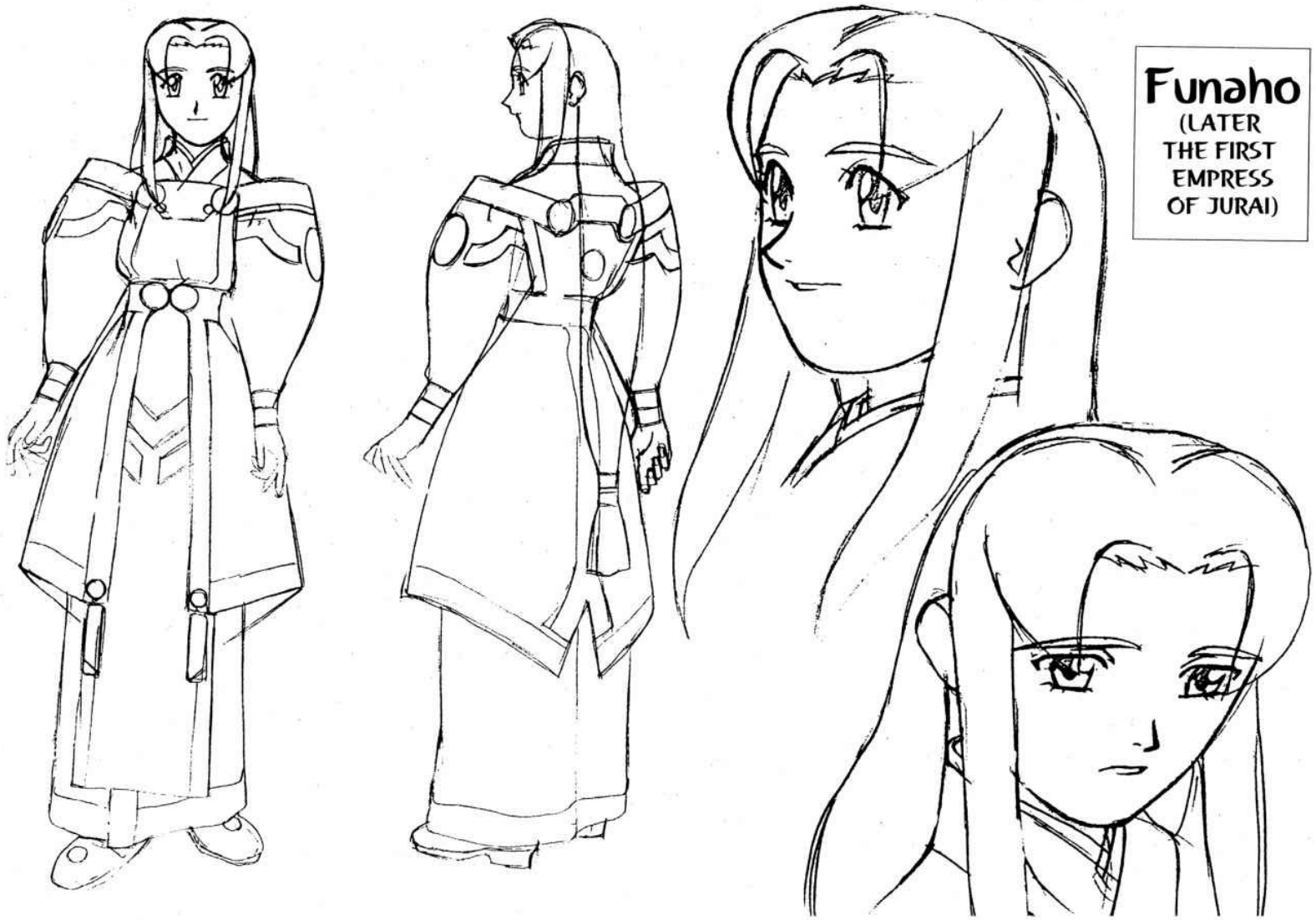
Character Sheets

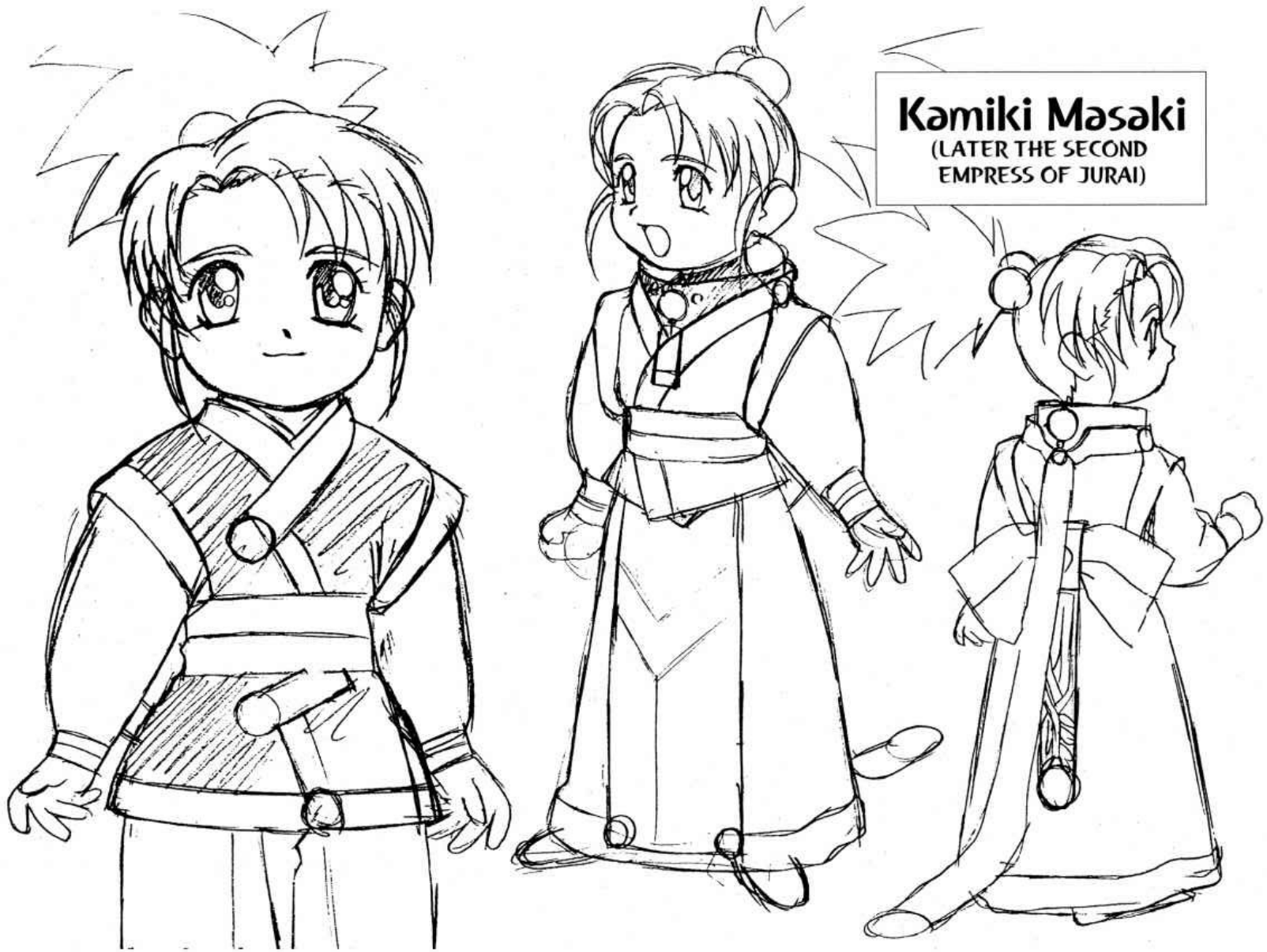
ARTWORK BY KAJISHIMA MASAKI

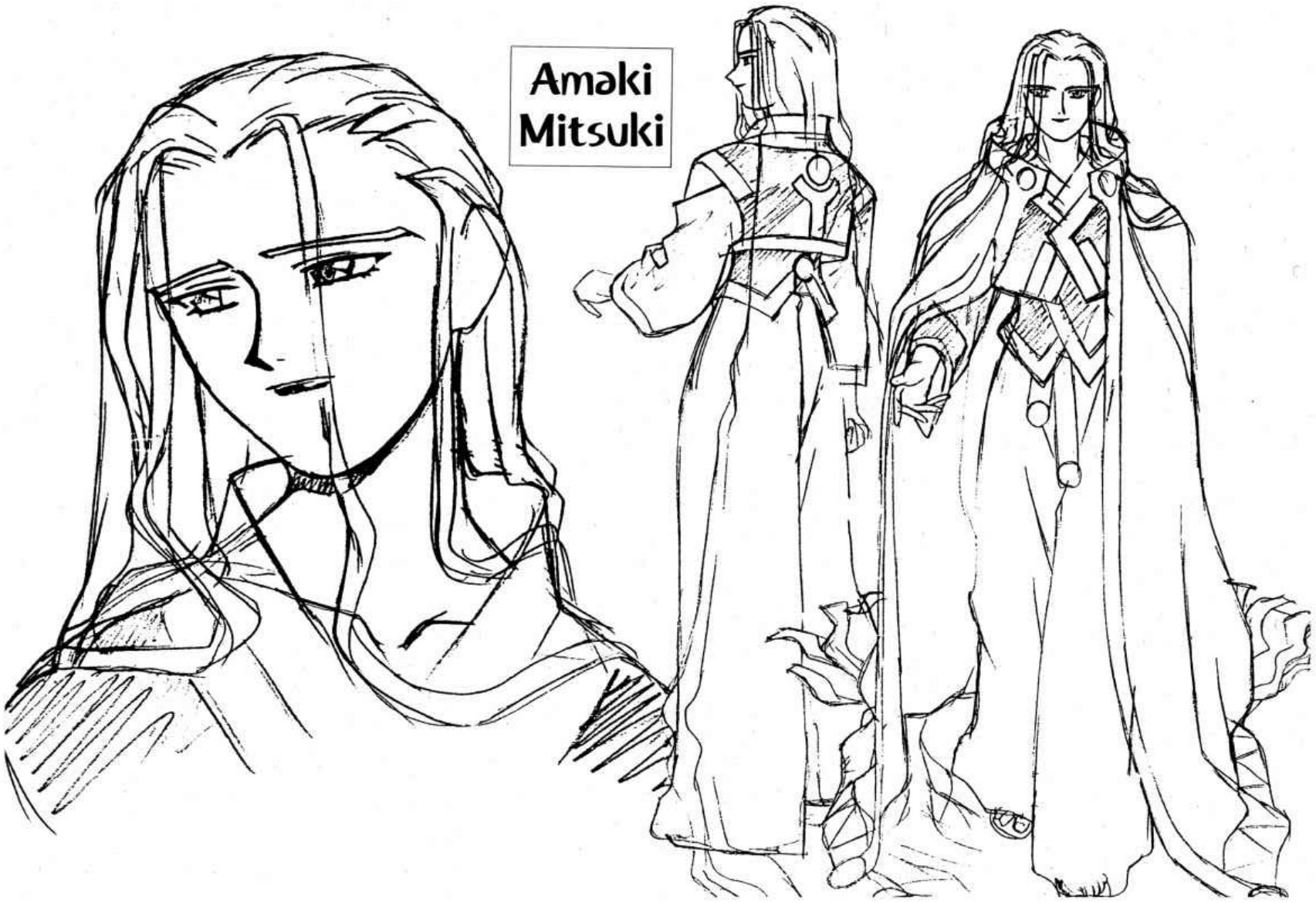

Formal Attire
Masaki Azusa
(BOYHOOD)

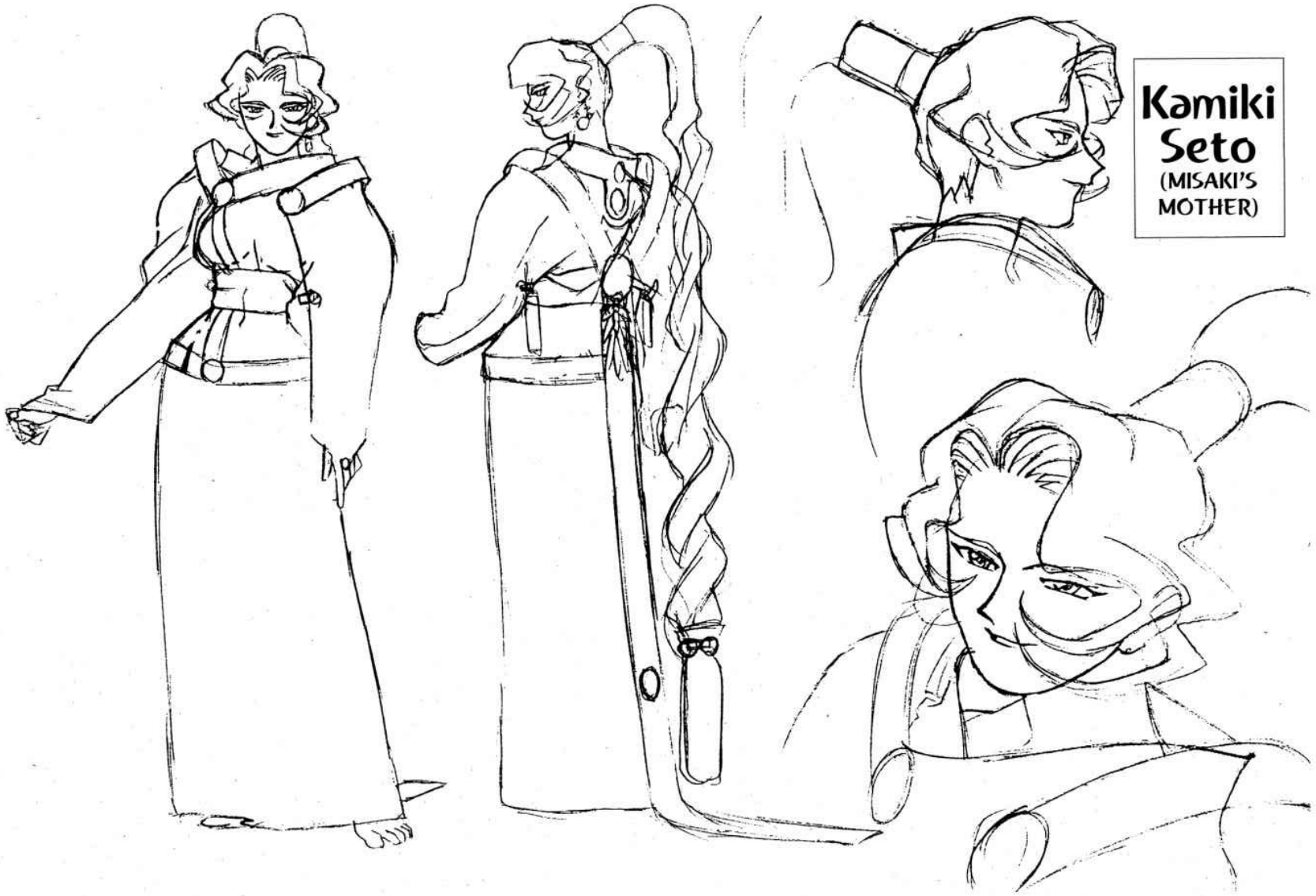


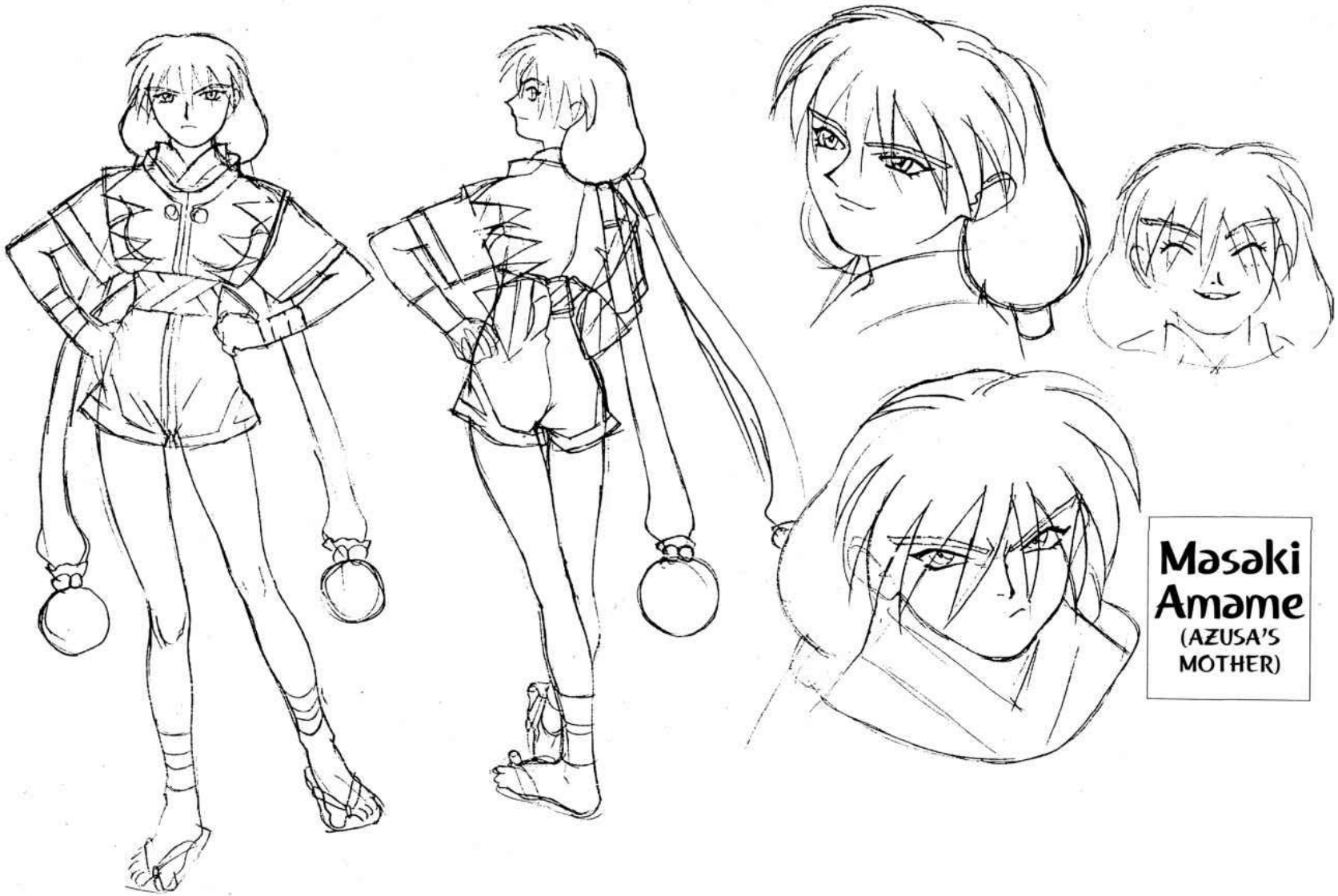
Masaki Azusa
(YOUTH)


Funaho
(LATER
THE FIRST
EMPRESS
OF JURAI)


Kamiki Masaki
(LATER THE SECOND
EMPRESS OF JURAI)

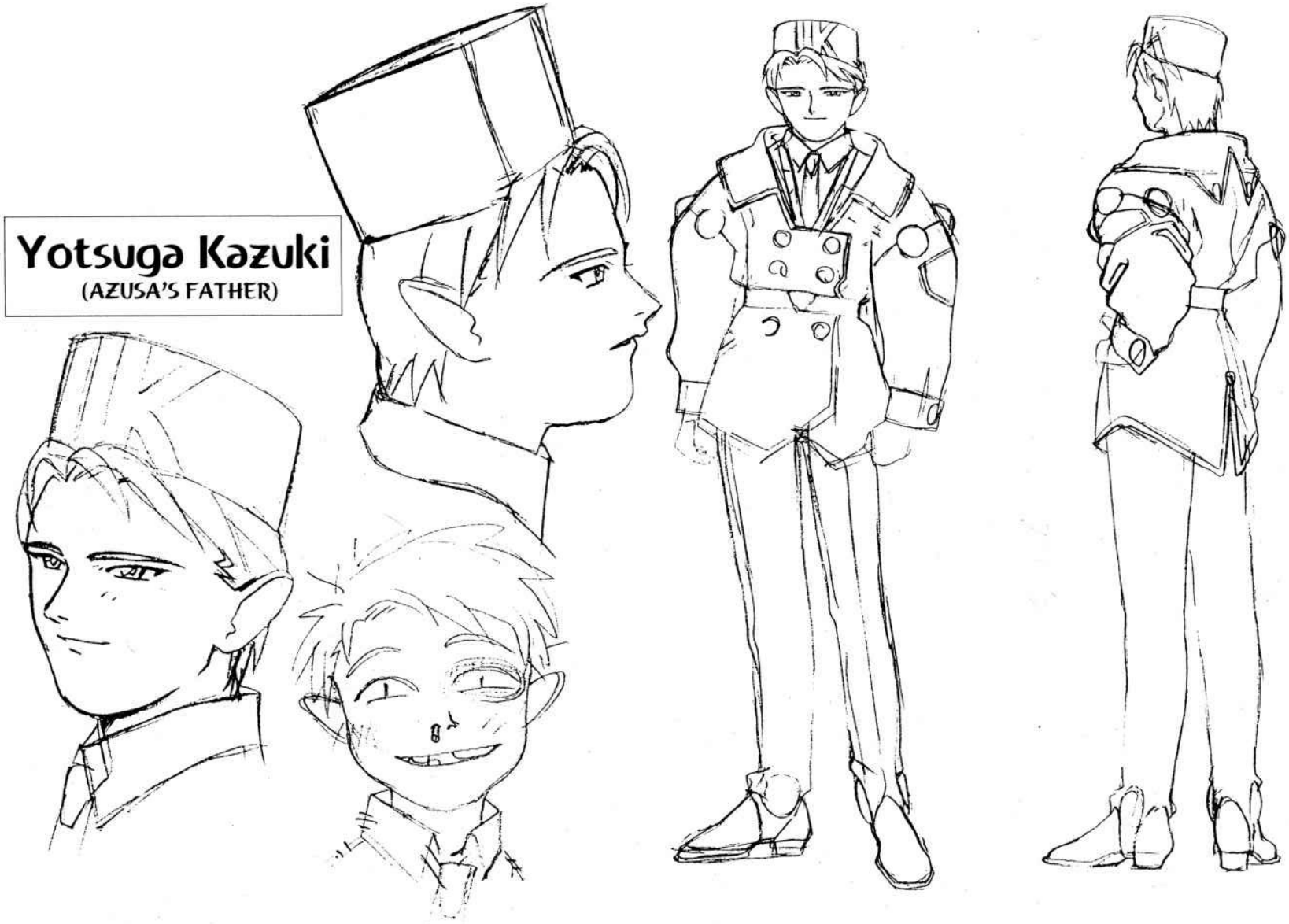

Amaki
Mitsuki

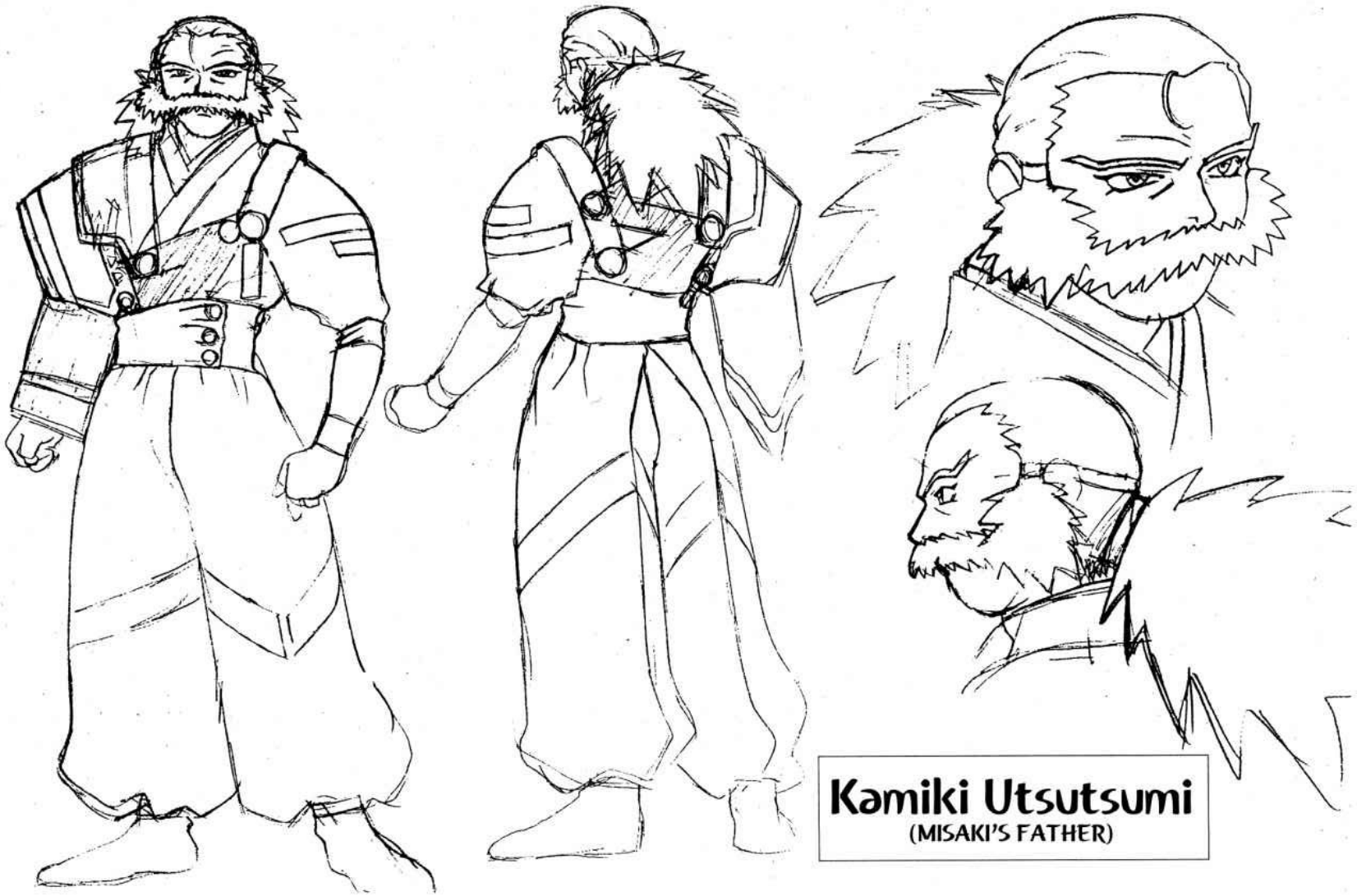

Kamiki
Seto
(MISAKI'S
MOTHER)



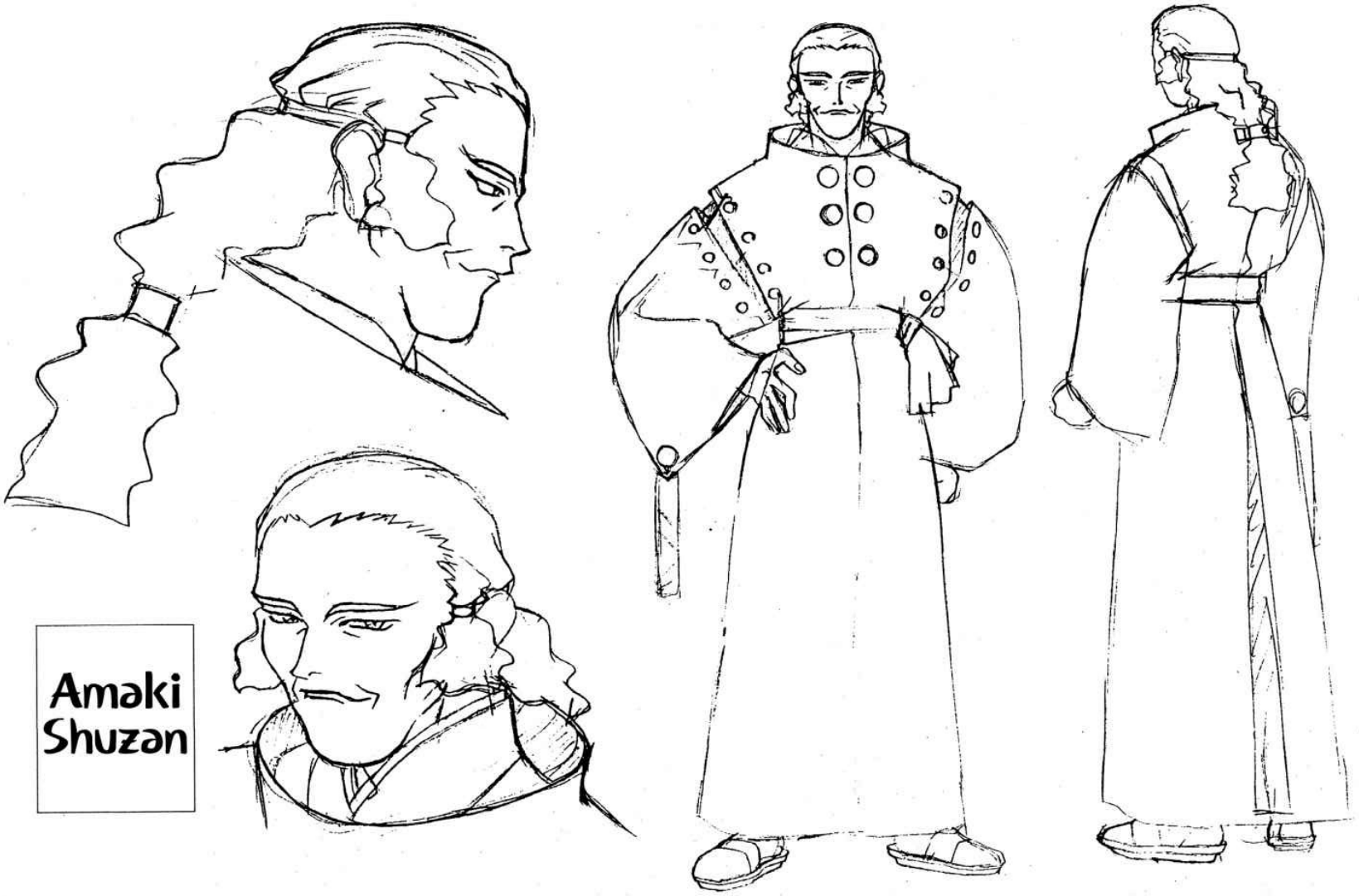
Masaki Amame
(AZUSA'S MOTHER)

Yotsuga Kazuki
(AZUSA'S FATHER)





Kamiki Utsutsumi
(MISAKI'S FATHER)


Amaki
Shuzan

THE PREVIOUS

Emperor of Jurai

