

ore no imouto ga konnani kawaii wake ga nai ④

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない

4

Tsukasa Fushimi
伏見つかさ
Illustration: かんざきひろ



Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai :
Volume 4

Written by : Tsukasa Fushimi

Illustration by : Kanzaki Hiro

English Translation by NanoDesu Translations

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Ore no imouto ga
konnani kawaii
wake ga nai

④

HOW
IS
IT?
MY
MAID
OUTFIT.
IS
IT
CUTE?

UGGGHHH!!!
HO...
HOW
DID
IT
GET
LIKE
THIS?!

... I
TOLD
YOU.
IT'S
NOT
WHAT
YOU
THINK.

I WAS INVITED TO A PARTY SAORI WAS HOLDING TO COMMEMORATE KIRINO'S CELL PHONE NOVEL GOING ON SALE... THAT'S ALL FINE AND GOOD, BUT WHY THE HELL ARE THEY ALL IN MAID OUTFITS?



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Chapter 1

Part 1

I, Kousaka Kyouusuke, think that those of you who have been patiently reading my story about my little sister up until now can pretty much understand my situation.

That is, when it comes to my sister, Kousaka Kirino, you can understand just how bad her personality is, just how unreasonable her existence is, and just how annoying of a person she is.

And I want to believe that you've come to get a feeling of exactly how strongly I hate my little sister.

Up until just a little while ago, there were probably still people who were misinterpreting my situation.

Because even though I always say that I hate my little sister and that nothing she does concerns me, whenever she falls into a predicament my attitude does a complete 180, and I run around trying to do something about it.

Honestly, I'm not a siscon, although I can't help it if people misunderstand.

But, please don't misunderstand. It really isn't like that.

If someone had such a multitalented, naturally good-looking little sister always by his side, there's no way he wouldn't get jealous, right? It's obvious he wouldn't be able to tolerate that, right?

I'd like you all to think back to the time when Kirino had collapsed from influenza and had gotten her work plagiarized.

Throughout that affair, I again came to understand a fragment of the reason why I had once just wanted to ignore her and pretend nothing was happening.

It was an extremely common, disgraceful reason. It was a pathetic line of thought.

But, perhaps precisely because they were common, these feelings were difficult to change.

Human life is fundamentally filled with things that we can do nothing about. We can do nothing about that.

I had lived for seventeen years, but even a child could understand that. Life wasn't as rosy as it was in manga. Even if you train for ten years, there are dreams that will not come true. No matter how much effort you put into something, it was nothing but a commonplace occurrence for you to be easily overtaken later.

So, from the perspective of an average person like me, I couldn't help but hate the cute little sister who just overflowed with talent.

It would be nice if someone annoying like that met with failure sometimes or got her nose smashed in.

I often thought like that, and if there exist people who sympathize with me just a bit, they might have felt the same way. Among those people are also probably those who are not fooled by her outer cuteness and have come to see her in the same light as I do.

During that plagiarism incident, I had thought something from the bottom of my heart. *Serves you right. That's exactly what you deserve.*

But... But.

It still turned out like that. You saw, right? How I pathetically burst out into tears, how Kuroneko had been trembling in frustration, and how we were ridiculed by the loud laughter of the very annoying person we had tried to protect.

We couldn't do anything about it. For us, there was nothing else we could have done.

Up until now, and from now on, nothing would change about that.

Because I'm her aniki.

Part 2

February was already more than half over, and I was studying alone in my room. Considering the university entrance exams were next year, it wasn't an unusual thing for a second-year high school student to be doing.

"Ugh... tired..."

It had only been an hour since I had turned to my desk, but my sluggishness had already reached its highest point.

Idle thoughts swirled around my brain. Maybe I should take a break and read some manga or go surf some interesting sites on the Internet? If this were a few months ago, I would have already given into those temptations. But...

"Oh well... another hour of studying, then?"

I shook my head in disbelief, and once again faced my notebook. I strongly gripped my mechanical pencil.

It's not like I'm trying to boast. This is something anybody would normally do, but it's just that I've been a tremendous slacker up until now.

Even though I always say that being normal is the best, and that an uneventful life is a good life, that doesn't mean I want to live sluggishly. Up until now, I might have been conveniently interpreting my motto as an excuse to be lazy. That wasn't good.

So, I've reflected a bit... and I've decided that, even if it was a bit out of character, I would try harder.

This slight transformation was definitely due to the influence of my sister and the people I had met these few months.

Yes, this all started in the June of last year. When I had coincidentally caught a glimpse of my hated little sister Kirino's secret hobby.

Life advice from my little sister even though our relationship had frozen over. Meeting with Saori and Kuroneko at an offline meetup.

A confrontation with my father, who disapproved of Kirino's hobby.
Participating in my first summer Comic Market.

A confrontation with my little sister's close friend, Ayase.

And then, the trouble we had just gotten past concerning cell phone novels.

These eight short months have been incredibly eventful. This was the first time in my seventeen years of life that I had gone through so much in such a short amount of time. For better or worse, it was more than enough to change a person's view on life.

This isn't like me, enough is enough! Even though I thought that from the bottom of my heart, I began to feel an increasingly great sense of attachment and fun from these decidedly un-normal days that engulfed my previously commonplace life.

Calling her sessions "life advice," my little sister would force ridiculous tasks onto my shoulders. Through those experiences, I unexpectedly changed just a bit. Even though we mutually despised each other, our relationship decidedly continued to change. And then, my new friends...

... Geez. From now on, would these types of days continue?

There was both a sense of resignation and hope mixed in my feelings about all this. And then, that day, my sister had suddenly said the following:

-

"The next time I ask for life advice will be the last."

-

A number of days had passed since then. But as of yet, my sister had not spoken of the contents of this final life advice session... to the point where I gradually began to think that I had heard her wrong.

There's no way that girl would say something as admirable as that. It's just, well... hmm. Her words just stuck in my head, like a fish bone would stick to your throat.

The last life advice session... what would it be?

Part 3

Taking a break from studying, I headed for the first floor to grab a drink from the kitchen. To get to the kitchen in our house, you had to go past the living room, but the minute I opened the door to the living room, my eyes widened. My sister was there, along with a group of girls whose faces I recognized.

It seemed that my little sister's classmates had come over.

"... Tch."

The minute she saw me, a brown-haired, refined girl wearing earrings clicked her tongue in annoyance.

It was my little sister, Kousaka Kirino. As always, she was wearing fashionable clothes and was sunk into the sofa.

"Ah, Oniisan! Good afternoon!"

The black-haired bishoujo who had cheerfully greeted me was my little sister's close friend, classmate, and modeling coworker, Aragaki Ayase. She was a second-year junior high schooler like my sister, but she had an extremely calm and composed air around her.

By the way, we were also mortal enemies. Because her friendliness was all an act, and I was positive that in reality she was thinking something like "Don't come closer, hentai. I'll kill you."

And then...

"..... Krchh..... hehe..... umm~~, good afternoooooon...."

The little brat of a girl who had started chuckling in an ill-mannered way the minute she saw my face was Kurusu Kanako.

She was small and flat-chested, her hair was styled into twin tails, and she honestly looked like an elementary school student. She had a pair of leggings on under a frilly miniskirt. She was decked from head to toe in cute-looking attire. Kanako was sitting beside Ayase on the sofa.

Oh also, when I looked at that brat, for some reason I felt a really strange sense of déjà vu. Why was that?

“Hehe, Kirino’s oniisan is staring in this direction~~. So annoying~~.”

T-This damn brat... she’s speaking loud enough for me to hear on purpose...

As usual, you’re just as bad as Kirino!!

I wanted to get out of this unpleasant place as quickly as possible, but I couldn’t just make a U-turn now that I’ve already stepped into the room. And also, why the hell do I have to defer to these people and retreat? I’m going to stay firm and go get my drink.

“... Hello.”

Having no other choice, I went with a safe greeting, and hurriedly passed through the room. Ugh, these damn brats, don’t just come over all at once! This is terrible! That atmosphere was just terrible! What the hell was up with that feeling, as if I had accidentally walked into the middle of the popular kids in class? Maybe I should go out the back door to get back to my room.

Do you think I’m pathetic for thinking like that? Well, if there are any older brothers out there who have stood in a similar position, I’m sure they would empathize with me.

Suddenly feeling a painful heaviness in my body, I opened up the refrigerator and took out a bottle of mineral water.

While I poured the water into a glass and drank it, the excited, high-pitched voices of the girls drifted in from the living room, even though I had no desire to hear what they were saying.

“Huh? Something I want? Ayase, why do you want to know that?”

“Eh? Umm... just for reference, you know? You don’t have to think too much about it... just give me an answer.”

“It’s because Kirino did well at the track tournament. So it’s congratulations for that. She wants to give you a present.”

“W-Wait a sec, Kanako! Why did you have to ruin the surprise like that?!”

“Eh~? It’s just annoying... isn’t it better if you just ask her what she wants straight on?”

From that, I could tell that Kanako couldn’t care less about this whole present business. Kirino, you really ok with this? With your friends being so blunt like that?

I should have said that, but I knew all too well how short-tempered my little sister was.

However, having heard that, Kirino replied with the same faux sweet voice she always used.

“Ahaha, it’s fine, it’s fine! Just the thought is more than enough.”

Oh right. When it came to her school friends, she was bizarrely considerate.

As if saying “See? Told you!” Kanako began to cackle.

“See~~? You heard her, Ayase, she doesn’t need a present~~. Honestly, Kanako also has clothes she wants to buy, so Kanako doesn’t want to just waste moneeey~. Why don’t we just go to a shrine and get some gravemphpphh!!¹ Wra yu durrrin, Ayasreh?! (What are you doing, Ayase)”

Turning around at the strange sound, I saw that Ayase had inserted two fingers into Kanako’s mouth² and was stretching it with a smile.³ (3)

“My my, Kanako is just full of jokes today, isn’t she? Ahaha, don’t say such lonely things~... We’re. All. Friends. Right?”

¹ Gravel is a symbol of purity in Shintoism, and in shrines were used to mark pure places. Don’t quote me on that though. If there is one aspect about Japanese culture I couldn’t care less about, it would be religion. Old Japanese history exams haunt my dreams...

² Yuri alert!

³ Nevermind.

“...?!?! (Nod nod nod nod!)”

Kanako nodded with tears in her eyes.

“Rret go! Dorr rintch kanyakohs nrrz! (Let go! Don't pinch Kanako's nose!)”

Kanako twisted her body back and forth.

Kirino hurriedly tried to intervene.

“H-Hey Ayase... you're going a bit too far!”

“Eh? Really?”

Ayase abruptly released Kanako.

Having escaped confinement, Kanako jumped away from Ayase, and angrily pointed a finger at her attacker.

“Y-You trying to kill Kanako?! Bitch~~!!”

“No, no, Kanako. There's no way I would do something as cruel as that to one of my *friends*, would I?”

Scary! How did she manage to make each and every one of her words sound like they were implying something else?!

“W-Well well, come on, you two, calm down... please? Honestly, I'm fine with anything if you want to get me a present. Let's talk about something different! Ah. Right, right, take a look at these earrings. I bought them at the usual shop in Shibuya, but don't they look pretty good?”

This was the first time I've seen Kirino in the role of the mediator. She was acting pretty docile the last time her friends came over, too... could it be that she acted this way at school too?

She was completely different here than she was when she was with her otaku friends, and she honestly seemed to have put on a thick mask of sweetness...

But even so, she seemed to be having a good time like this as well.

Part 4

“Oniisan, I need to ask you for some advice.”

Ayase had said those words to me that day in the evening, just after Kirino’s friends had all left for home. She had sent me an email asking me to meet with her.

What the hell did she want with me? C-C-Could it be, she wants to yell at me about child pornography this and child pornography that again...? Ugh. Even as these thoughts were running through my head, I did as I was told and headed for a nearby park. Ayase was waiting for me there, and those were the first words she had said to me.

“... Advice? You? From me?”

“Yes.”

Ayase nodded with a meek expression. Ever since we had quarreled that time about my sister’s hobby, she’s been under the impression that I’m a top-class incest-loving, hentai brute of an older brother. Owing to the circumstances, I also couldn’t dispel her misunderstanding, so I wanted to avoid meeting her if at all possible. She probably didn’t want to meet with me either... or so I thought, but...

Also, advice...? You learn that word from Kirino or something? Just so you know, it’s not like that’s a magic word that you can throw around and expect me to do whatever you want.

Is what I was thinking, but I honestly was troubled by what could have caused this beautiful yet horribly stubborn Ayase to come all the way to ask someone she both hated and didn’t know very well for help.

Well no, it was probably something like this...

“Is it that you want to ask me about Kirino’s present?”

“Ah, so you knew. That makes this conversation easier. To be honest... I don’t know what I can give Kirino that would make her the happiest.”

“... Even if you say that... Kirino said it right? That you can give her anything. I don't think that was a lie. If it's something you choose, she'll probably be happy no matter what it is.”

“That's... that might be true, but...”

Ayase looked downwards, seeming vaguely troubled. She looked like she wanted to say something, but was at a loss. For now, let me just offer my own viewpoint.

“Furthermore. Why exactly are you asking me? I wouldn't know what junior high school girls would want to get as a present. You're probably much more informed in that area.”

“But... even so... that's not... the thing she wants the most.”

“Hm? What?”

I could barely hear her whispering voice, and so I answered her question with a question, but this time she gave me a very loud response.

“I just thought that Kirino would be happiest if she got something for *her* hobby! That's why I came to ask oniisan!!”

Uwaah... what a menacing attitude. Kirino's hobby... could she mean...?

“Y-You... but I thought you haven't accepted Kirino's otaku hobby yet...”

“I haven't! I haven't, but... but it's a congratulations gift... and also... after that, little by little, Kirino's been talking to me about anime... not anything indecent though.”

“Oh?”

Ayase had that intolerance peculiar to junior high school girls that caused her to reject the otaku hobby. But, just like my father had done, it seemed that she had slowly been making compromises with regards to Kirino's hobby.

Family is one thing, but it was very rare to find a friend who would go that far for you. It was something to be very grateful for, I think.

“But in the end, no matter what I do it’s hopeless... we even argued a bit before this.”

“W-What kind of argument?”

“It was the time she showed me her collection of these ‘Nendoroid’ dolls⁴... and I just asked her a simple question of what the point of collecting those things was, and she got angry about it. She became really grumpy and for a while wouldn’t even answer me when I tried to talk to her... It almost made me cry.”

“Ahh.....”

What was the point of collecting those things? That was probably one of the top three things you couldn’t say to otaku. And my sister really was pretty childish for getting so angry about it that she even stopped talking to her close friend.

“So, I want to restore our relationship with this present... it’s partially a make-up present, so I wanted to give her something that had to do with her hobby. A stuffed animal from an anime, or maybe a nendoroid⁵, I was thinking something like that would be good... so I wanted to also take oniisan’s opinion into account and then think a bit about what to do... so...”

“... I see.”

She had still not acknowledged the validity of the otaku hobby. However, from the bottom of her heart, she really just wanted to give Kirino a present that would make her the happiest... so, bothered by this internal contradiction, she came to me for help despite her hatred.

I have no idea what to do... I can’t just flat out refuse her if she comes to me like this...

⁴ I wonder if Kirino has a Kirino nendoroid.

⁵ Ayase should give Kirino an Ayase nendoroid! Lol but seriously translating this section with a Kirino nendoroid on the table next to me is pretty surreal.

“I understand. I’ll do a bit of digging and see what kind of present might make her happy.”

“Really? T-Thank you very much!”

Just like the first time we met, her happy smile left me breathless.

If it were for the sake of that smile, getting my sister to tell me what she wanted was a small price to pay.

Part 5

“... Tch. Don’t tell me you want to give me a present or something? Uwaaah, so gross!”

Sorry, I failed.

The minute I got back, I went to the living room and in a roundabout way tried to get Kirino to tell me what kinds of things she wanted right now, but she saw through the act easily and responded in the way you just saw.

And what’s more, now she thought I wanted to get her a present.

Don’t make such a terrible misunderstanding!! And also...

“What the hell are you saying, you asshole? Who’s the one who made someone buy her a pair of earrings on Christmas Eve...?”

“Hmph, that was just another part of the data collection, so that doesn’t count.”

Uh-huh, I see. What the hell... you thought you were just making fun of me, and now all of a sudden you’re in a bad mood?

Kirino didn’t even try to answer my question, but just changed the subject.

“Also, you, every time I bring people over you look at them with your pervy eyes. Won’t you quit that out? It’s gross, and rude, and it really bothers me.”

“Pervy eyes?! What the hell?!”

At her completely unexpected accusation I was taken aback and denied it, but Kirino stood up lividly.

“Don’t play stupid! That one time you were ogling and fawning over Ayase... and today you were looking at Kanako with those dirty eyes!”

“Don’t be so rude! Leaving Ayase aside for now, there’s no way I couldn’t look at that midget in a weird way! I was just thinking how that damn brat resembled someone!!”

“Hmph! Yeah right! It looked like you were looking at her with pervy eyes to me!”

“Didn’t I already say that you’ve got it all wrong?! What the hell is it with you and every little thing...?! You my girlfriend or something?!”

“Wha...”

Kirino widened her eyes and seemed really shaken, but the next second, she got even more angry and came back swinging.

“I’ll kill you! That was probably the third most disgusting thing I’ve heard!”

“Owww!!! That’s not something you say to someone after you’ve slapped them! Also, why aren’t you listening to me?! It’s all a misunderstanding!!!”

“What is?! You even make that black one call you ‘niisan’ too and looked like you were getting a kick out of that! I’ve known all along how much of a siscon you are, but seriously stop it! It’s so disgusting it makes me want to throw up!”

“No. No, no, no, no! That was...! I-I didn’t make her call me anything!”

Let me explain. The “black one” that Kirino had mentioned was Kuroneko (handle name), one of her otaku friends. She could usually be seen decked from head to foot in black Gothic Lolita attire, and she was always arguing with Kirino.

Just recently, I had set out with Kuroneko to deal with a certain problem, and when we infiltrated a publishing company, we posed as siblings. After that, even after everything had been dealt with, Kuroneko had for some reason continued to call me “niisan.”

I mean, in any case, she was probably just making fun of me.

Granted, I didn't mind that she was calling me "niisan." She was like a little sister... well, actually, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but perhaps because we had dealt with that incident together and I had managed to get to know her true personality a bit better¹, it was no lie that we had developed an affinity for each other that wasn't there before. And then for some reason, it appeared that this development was one thing Kirino couldn't swallow.

"Hey... what exactly is that stuff supposed to be about? Little sister role playing? You paying her for that or something?"

"I'm not paying her anything, and it's not little sister role playing!!"

How brave would I have to be to pay my little sister's friend money to act like my little sister right in front of Kirino's eyes?!

Do you honestly think your older brother is that much of a hentai...?!

"Kuroneko is also my friend, so isn't it fine if we get along with each other?! You don't have any right to complain!!"

"Yeah, you're right! Just do whatever the hell you want!"

Pitter patter pitter patter... bang!! Kirino quickly rushed out of the living room.

Dammit. Like this, it really seemed like a lost cause for me to try to get her to tell me what she wanted...

¹ Literally, "I had touched her insides," but I dunno, for some strange reason I feel like people miiiiiight misinterpret that in English...

Part 6

“... Tch... and you started arguing because of that, so you couldn’t get her to give you an answer... You’re really clumsy, aren’t you, niisan?”

“Shut up. Also, how long are you going to keep at it with that ‘niisan’ stuff...?”

“Oh? You don’t like it?”

“That’s not true... but whenever I get along with you, Kirino gets annoyed about it.”

She would never admit it, but she probably thought that I was stealing away her precious friend.

“... Hmph. So what? If she gets annoyed about it, it serves her right.”

“Hey, hey. Put yourself in my place. I have to live with her.”

“Don’t worry. In two months I’ll start to call you something different.”

“... What’s that supposed to mean? Is something happening in two months?”

But Kuroneko didn’t answer me, instead choosing just to smile suggestively at me.

Seeing her expression, I honestly was a bit surprised. I really didn’t think there would come a time where she could smile so naturally at me. Compared to how it was when we first met, it did seem like she had opened up a bit to me. Hmm... well, hmm... it also felt like she was getting emotionally attached to me.

We were meeting inside a café located within a certain station on the Sobu Line.¹

What exactly could I give Kirino that would make her the happiest?

¹ A rail line in Tokyo and Chiba Prefectures.

If I asked the person herself, I wouldn't be able to get any useful information. And when I asked some of her otaku friends for their opinions, after all was said and done we decided to meet for a strategy meeting like this.

"... It's almost time, but Saori just sent me an email and said she's going to be late."

"I see. She seems to be quite busy all of the time... I wonder what she does from day to day?"

I considered Saori a good friend, but even now I had no idea how she spent her private life. The same went for this Kuroneko who was right in front of me.

She may call me "niisan" in an overly-familiar way, but I didn't even know her real name.

Is this what they mean by net anonymity? Even though two people might be close friends, they also might not know anything about each other. That kind of situation happened relatively frequently. It was pretty strange if you thought about it.

In regards to Saori's mysterious private life, Kuroneko made this proposal:

"... When you take into account that she has connections at a publishing company, and at that age she's doing marriage interviews²..."

"So, you think so too?"

"Yes. It's just, she probably has things she doesn't want other people to know about."

I knew what Kuroneko was trying to say. Saori hadn't told us anything herself, so we shouldn't go around getting the wrong idea about it.

"... You really are a good person, aren't you?"

² Kuroneko is here referring to a rather off-hand mention Saori made at the end of Volume 3 about a marriage interview. It's in Chapter 4-10.

“... What are you saying all of a sudden? Are you an idiot? I’ve already said it before, haven’t I? You take other people’s actions and interpret them too naively. Even in terms of what I said now, I just didn’t want to invite any unnecessary trouble, so I stopped you before that happened. Don’t misunderstand my intentions. Always and always, I’ll just do what’s convenient for me, and say what I want to say, how I want to say it.”

Honestly, whenever you complimented her, it got like this...

No matter how shy she was, she really didn’t have to try so hard to make up excuses.

“... It doesn’t look like you understand me at all...”

Seeming irritated, Kuroneko faced the other way, and sucked at the straw that was stuck into her iced coffee.

After that, the silence continued for a bit longer. I was at a loss as to what we should talk about. I’m sure Kuroneko felt the same way. Whether it was about doujinshi or Kirino or something else, there were plenty of things we could talk about, but it was just hard to break the ice. As always, when I was alone with her it became like this.

... *Sigh*. If I were with Manami instead, it wouldn’t get like this...

If this meeting were with her, even if there were a pause in the conversation it wouldn’t feel awkward at all. Just as Kuroneko had said, when you want to say something, you should just say it.

But the person I was meeting right now was not the childhood friend I had come to know very well, but rather a younger girl I had known for less than a year. There wasn’t any reason this meeting would go the same way.

“Umm...” “Hey...”

We opened our mouths at the same time.

“... Ah.” “... Oh.”

And shut them at the same time as well.

“... What? Didn’t you want to say something?”

“You too, you looked like you were about to say something.”

.....

.....

Once again, silence.

Trying not to meet each other’s gaze, we silently stared off into random directions.

.... Gyaaah..... I can’t take this...~~! Dammit... what the hell is this...

Feeling anxious, I scratched the back of my neck, when Kuroneko began to mumble with her head down.

“Hey...”

This time, our words didn’t run into each other.

“I wanted to say something about... what happened before...”

“What happened before?”

“... Yeah, that is... on the train ride back...”

“Ahh, that time?”

I knew what she was talking about. It was that time when we infiltrated the Shinjuku publishing company by pretending we were submitting an application to be published... she was probably referring to the ride back. At that time, inside the train, I recall that I said a lot to try to cheer Kuroneko up, since she was feeling pretty depressed after she had suffered harsh criticism at the hands of the editor we had met.

“It might be a bit late to say this but... I wanted to offer you my thanks.”

“Ahh, it’s fine, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t a big deal.”

I can't even remember exactly what I said to her back then.

"And in any case, I'm the one who should be thanking you. You were the one doing me a favor by coming with me. It actually bothers me that you think you need to thank me."

"... Hmph, that's unacceptable. It bothers *me* if you can't just accept my thanks."

Kuroneko lightly cleared her throat, and then said this:

"Thank you for that time."

"... No problem. Thank you too."

"..."

Kuroneko gave me a nod.

She seemed to be trying to find the right words to say, and mumbled without making eye contact with me.

"Umm... if I ever go to an editorial department again to submit something... would you come with me?"

"... Just so you know, I really don't think I'll be of any help."

"I know that..."

Having had gone to the editorial department once, I sort of knew where she was coming from. For a junior high schooler to go to a place filled with adults by herself and expect to deal with them on equal terms was a frightening thought.

I gladly consented.

"Understood. I'll go next time too."

"... Alright."

Her response sounded more sincere than usual.

I felt a sense of déjà vu. Before, something similar had happened. That's why I could so readily decide to help her and support her.

Once upon a time, I would have grumbled about how this was out of character or how it was too much trouble.

So certainly, that part of me had changed. I won't say who that change was thanks to, though.

"Wait, so you already wrote something else that you're going to submit?"

"... No, I still haven't decided what I'm going to make. There are a lot of things I want to try... I wanted to maybe try a manga or game next time instead of a novel. Not to submit right away, but first to release as a doujin..."

"Ahh... so I won't have anything to do for a while then?"

My question was tinged with a slight bit of disappointment, and Kuroneko began to speak with a gloomy tone of voice.

"Up until now, whether for games, or music, or illustrations, or manga, or novels... everything has been self-taught, and I've been doing everything on my own strength alone, to my own specifications... and I thought that was the best way to go about things. Of course, there are good parts to that method, and it does produce its own results... but lately I've revised my way of thinking."

Perhaps that was due to her experience with the editor that day. Certainly, that was a part of it.

But as Kuroneko continued talking, I realized that this experience wasn't the only factor.

"... Working with someone to make something every once in a while might not be bad either. I don't know if it will go well... but that's what I've started to think."

Now, she has friends who share her hobby.

She has people who she can call out to and go “Let’s do it together.”

And I was one of those people.

So, to my very shy friend who had a hard time saying things herself, I said this:

“That definitely would be fun. Working on something with like-minded friends.”

“That might be true.”

Raising her head, even though her expression hadn’t really changed, Kuroneko seemed happy.

And with that, the awkward atmosphere was dispelled, and just a bit, I began to chat more comfortably with Kuroneko. And just as that was happening...

“Ahhhh~~, sorry to keep you two waiting!!”

Saori vigorously waved to us, and approached.

“Yo.”

I raised a hand in greeting. Our conversation stopping, Kuroneko watched Saori with half-lidded eyes.

I’ve probably already done this a countless number of times, but let me introduce Saori.

“Saori” was the handle name of this girl decked out in prototypical otaku fashion and a pair of swirly glasses. She was taller than 180cm, and her bizarre style of speech was her specialty.

She was a very considerate and helpful person, and Kirino and I were lucky to have her as a friend.

Even if I didn’t know anything about her private life, that didn’t change a single thing.

As soon as she appeared on the scene, she raised her voice excitedly.

“Well, then, let’s set off! Fufufu, around here there’s an interesting game center that has an entrance that looks like a haunted house. Let’s head in that direction first. There’s a taxi waiting for us outside, so let’s talk about the details while we drive to the game center.”

“... Wait a second, are you sure you’re not just using this as an excuse to go to a game center? How are we going to have a present strategy meeting at a game center? My free time is limited, you know. I won’t go along with this.”

Kuroneko retorted irritably. Saori cocked her head to the side, puzzled.

“Ahh no, in the game center, there’s a crane game with a stuffed animal that I think Kiririn-shi would like. I think that would be a present that would make her happy. What’s wrong, Kuroneko-shi... are you in a bad mood?”

“... It’s nothing.”

Part 7

Leaving the station behind, we did as Saori had suggested and found ourselves browsing through game centers and anime shops in order to choose something Kirino might want (and Ayase would actually feel comfortable giving her.)

“These are just things I thought of now, but... well... what about a Meruru stuffed animal... or maybe a visual fanbook for an eroge that Kiririn-shi likes... or maybe a rare doujinshi?”

“... Hmm.”

I know Saori put a lot of thought into this, but not only did some of those things seem like things Ayase would completely flip out at, I felt like none of them really fit the category of things that Kirino would be “the most happy” to receive.

“... I don’t think any of those hit the mark.”

“That’s true. Hmm... yes, if we just buy something from a shop, it would be something that Kiririn-shi could buy herself... this becomes quite difficult if we have to choose among things that we’re sure Kiririn-shi doesn’t already have.”

“... Hmph, well if we had to pick from what Saori just listed, then the Meruru stuffed animal would be the safest option, right? It’s not sold on the market, and it matches with that girl’s hobby, and it’s not something that’s 18+.”

“But, if we’re talking about what makes her ‘the happiest,’ I’m a bit doubtful that a Meruru stuffed animal would do it.”

By the way, right now, we were strolling around while eating the ice cream we had bought from a fast food restaurant. Having finished her chocolate ice cream, Saori licked her lips.

“Well, leaving that aside. We’re all here, so why don’t we pick a few of the things among the candidates that we don’t end up selecting and buy them as presents for Kiririn-shi ourselves? We can leave the congratulations for the

track tournament up to her school friends, so why don't we plan a party for her for publishing her cell phone novel? Fufufu... to be honest, Kuroneko-shi and I have been talking about this for a while. So, I mean, I was happy that we could have this present-giving strategy meeting today."

"You guys..."

I slowly looked back and forth from Saori to Kuroneko, and I expressed my gratitude.

"You two really are very thoughtful... thank you very much."

"... Hmph. It's not like I did anything. Just like always, Saori is just being a meddler and saying whatever she wants..."

Kuroneko spoke with a snort.

Saori gave off a silly laugh with a "nin nin."

"I believe I've mentioned this before already, but meddling is something I do because I want to do it. I do it because I want to, so you don't need to thank me."

"Sure. So let me just do what I want to do as well and give you my thanks."

"Hahaha, my my. Kyousuke-shi is so stubbornly good-natured, isn't he?"

"... If you ask me, both of you are beyond hope."

To my left, Kuroneko was watching Saori and me with half-lidded eyes.

But Saori just formed her mouth into her ω shape, and gave off a wide smile.

"My my... those aren't words I want to hear from Kuroneko-shi, who's here buying a present with us for Kiririn-shi even though she constantly bashes Kiririn-shi's cell phone novel... fufufu."

"That piece of trash's popularity is going to be short-lived, so we might as well congratulate her while it lasts. After all, she's just going to be more depressed afterwards. Serves her right."

Lately, I couldn't help but find Kuroneko's abusive language a bit adorable. My jaws unconsciously slackened a bit. She was trying to speak her true feelings, but in her case, that wasn't all.

When I came to understand that, I couldn't help but start to strangely like Kuroneko's harsh words and actions. Even though I would have definitely gotten annoyed if Kirino had said the same thing to me.

"So that's why, Kyousuke-shi, today we're not just here for Ayase-dono's present, but also to select what we're going to give to Kiririn-shi as a present."

"Alright, understood. So let's get back on topic... I still haven't seen anything particularly good we can give her. What are we going to do?"

"Hmmm... so I guess the Meruru stuffed animal really is no good?"

"It's the best out of everything you suggested, but... I feel like we can do better. It just doesn't feel right... I know you thought hard about this, so I'm sorry."

"No, no, I understand where you're coming from. When it comes to your precious little sister, even if you're handing her the gift through someone else, you have to be very careful in your selection. Yup yup."

Yup yup my ass. It's not like that, dammit.

"... In summary, we need something like the stuffed animal but better, right? Something that isn't sold normally, something that that girl might want, something that isn't 18+, and something that's not easy to get."

"Yes, something like that... but is there really something like that we can get?"

"....."

Kuroneko didn't answer, but just silently pointed ahead. Following her finger, I found myself staring at the entrance to the anime shop we were facing.

On both sides of the automatic doors were pasted a number of huge posters...

“...?! T-This is...”

I was dazed and surprised after reading the announcement written on the poster Kuroneko was pointing to.

Y-Yes! That might work...!

Part 8

“... U-Umm... could you explain it one more time?”

“Kirino is a huge fan of an anime called ‘Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru.’”

The day after I had met with Kuroneko and Saori, I once again met with Ayase. The meeting was taking place on a road by the side of my house.

“I understand that. And from the DVD package you brought me, it doesn’t seem to be that sketchy.”

Ayase nodded while gazing at the Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru DVD case.

I probably shouldn’t mention to her that the elementary-school-aged heroine goes completely naked during the transformation scene.

“So, I was thinking, what if you gave her a Meruru figure that isn’t available for sale? If you gave her that, I think she would be the happiest. It’s something really difficult to get, and to people who like these things, it has quite a bit of value.”

“Hmm, I still don’t really understand what you mean, but if oniisan says that... then it probably is true.”

Sadly, as far as Ayase was concerned, I was an extreme otaku.

And that’s why she spoke as she did.

“So.... W-what do you think?”

“Alright. If that’s what I need to get... I’m fine with it.”

“I-I see.”

“It’s just, I didn’t really hear you very well when you were explaining how I can get this not-for-sale figure. Could you please explain it to me one more time?”

“Ah, sure. What I’m talking about is a figure called ‘Meruru EX Mode’ or something, and was sculpted by a famous figure sculptor. This is a specially made figure, and there’s only one in existence. Being a big fan of the anime, Kirino would desperately want this figure. Of course, you can’t get it in any normal way...”

I timidly continued.

“It’s the grand prize at a Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru cosplay tournament.”

“... And you want me to participate?”

All the light went out from Ayase’s eyes. Her shoulders trembled and she looked down at the ground.

“Ah, I mean, you’re a model... and you’re really pretty... this is like a beauty contest, right? And I think you definitely have a great shot at winning... I think... um, Ayase-san? Are you... angry?”

“O-Of course!! How exactly do you expect me to go on stage wearing t-this outfit that doesn’t look like it would cover me more than a piece of string?! You damn hentai, do you want to die or something?! I’m going to report you!!”

“C-Calm down! Hear me out! It’s not like you have to cosplay this character anyways! I mean, even if you cosplayed Meruru, you would just look really risqué and it wouldn’t fit at all, right?!”

I would really pay to see that too, and I think it would be fascinating, but I didn’t think she could win with that.

But still, just in case I had to give advice to Ayase on the matter, I had done a bit of research on this tournament.

The producers of the DVD for the anime had held one other official, very serious cosplay tournament before. For that tournament, the winner was a foreign girl who did a cosplay of Meruru’s friend and rival, Alpha Omega.

“Take a look at this magazine. This is a photo of the winner last time. If you wore Meruru’s risqué outfit, no matter how much of an enchanting performance you give, do you think you can win against this?”

“I won’t be giving this enchanting performance in the first place! What kind of revolting things are you imagining right now?!”

“D-Don’t be so rude! It’s just a simulation!”

“Isn’t it all the same?! Ecchi! G-Geez... you really are revolting...!”

Even while she flushed completely red and threw abuse at me, Ayase flipped to the page in question and looked at the magazine.

“... Ahh, she’s imitating this character...? I’ll admit that they really look similar.”

“I know right?”

This was the first time I realized this, but even from the viewpoint of an amateur, foreign cosplayers were no joke. They were realer than the real thing. It was an amazingly perfect act, almost as if the character had slipped out of the TV screen and had been transformed into real life. If this person participated in this tournament as well, she would be a terrifying competitor.

“But, that doesn’t mean you don’t have a chance. If we’re talking about just natural beauty, I think you have her beat, and after all’s said and done, you’re the professional model. You also have the know-how to put clothes on display. Depending on what costume you choose, I think you can even beat the foreigners. And, if you can successfully win this competition, you can get a present that Kirino would really want.”

“... I see. I understand. From what you’ve said, there’s a character that I resemble, right? Well, let’s take a look, oniisan. Show me the costume that you think I should wear.”

“Alright, it’s this one.”

Ayase returned the magazine to me, and after flipping through a few pages I returned it back to her.

anything, and to the very end I was just making a good suggestion out of kindness...!! What was wrong with this world?!

“A-Anyways!! I definitely won’t wear something as disgusting as this!!”

“... Then, what are you going to do about Kirino’s present? There are a few other ideas I have, but I don’t think you can say any of those things would ‘make Kirino the happiest.’”

“Ugh...”

It looked like I hit a weak point. Ayase looked as if she had been driven into a corner.

She embraced herself with one hand and her cheeks flushed red. She frustratingly bit her lower lip.

“..... Ugh..... t-this hentai.....”

This woman...! Why is she giving me a look as if I’m trying to force her to do something?!

N-No, it really isn’t like that. It might look like that I’m desperately trying to convince Ayase to wear ero cosplay, but it really isn’t like that. Honestly, all of my actions up until now have been purely out of thought for Kirino and Ayase’s friendship. Honestly. I’m not lying.

“Well, what are you going to do then? I’ve said all I have to say. Everything else is up to you.”

“... I-In summary, a victory at this cosplay tournament would be the goal, right?”

“Hmm?”

Those were words I was not expecting to come out of the cornered Ayase.



“As long as the tournament is won... and we get the prize... I don’t have to wear these clothes, right?”

“That’s certainly true... but I don’t think any other costume would win against this foreigner. It’s not enough to just look pretty.”

“No, we can win.”

Ayase made that declaration. W-Where was her confidence coming from...? Her steady glare was pretty frightening though.

Ayase looked away from me, and began to talk while looking downwards on a slant.

“In short, a cosplay tournament is just a beauty competition with a concept attached. It’s a competition to see which girl harmonizes the most with her costume, and how to execute the concept the most beautifully. In other words, this girl who looks exactly like this Alpha Omega-san... if we find a cosplay that is cuter than hers and which matches better than hers, then we can win. Right?”

“It’s exactly as you say... but is that possible?”

Just so you know, the character that you match with the most is definitely EX Thanatos.

Ayase handed back the DVD of Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru that she had still been holding onto. She began to do something on the phone she had been gripping for a while, and showed me a certain photograph.

“... I have an idea. Please take a look at this.”

“...?! T-This is...”

The DVD case and the photograph. I was dazed and surprised after comparing the two things Ayase had held out to me.

Y-Yes! We might be able to win with this...!

Part 9

In no time at all, the day of the cosplay tournament had arrived.

Carrying a huge duffle bag with the cosplay costume that Kuroneko and Saori had helped me prepare, I waited for Ayase in the meeting place we had prearranged.

Right now, I was right under the huge screens of the UDX building in Akihabara¹ that faced outwards onto the street.

By the way, as per Ayase's request, I had swept back my hair, put on a suit, and had a pair of sunglasses on. You wouldn't know it was me if you looked at me.

If you want to know what the point of this strange outfit is... ah, she's here.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! This is my classmate, Kurusu Kanako-san!"

"Nice to meet you~~. I'm Kurusu Kanako ♡. Just call me Kanakana~~."

The girl that Ayase brought, whose self-introduction was just filled completely through with her cutesy-little-girl act, was none other than Kirino's bratty classmate, Kurusu Kanako.

Her hair was tied back into twin tails just as always, and was wearing some of the childish (but stylish) clothes I had seen for sale at the 109 building during Christmas.

"Nice to meet you... Kanakana... chan. I'm Aragaki's manager, Akagi Kouhei. You really don't have to be too polite with me, alright? I might be Aragaki-san's manager, but I'm still new, so I'm more like her attendant. Feel free to act at ease around me."

After all, if she kept up with the cutesy girl act I wouldn't be able to take it anymore.

¹ <http://shotsharing.com/file/585418668/View-from-Akihabara-Station-at-the-southeast,Akihabara-UDX-Building,-Tokyo> Enjoy the photo.

Even though I was scared out of my wits, waiting for the minute I would be exposed, when I gave her my name, Kanako didn't seem to realize who I really was in the slightest. She began to fiddle with her cell phone and spoke.

"Oh, what? And I thought you were a producer or something. Alright then, I'll just act however I want then. Ahh, it was really dumb of me to try to butter you up then. Also, don't go and start calling me Kanakana like you know me, alright? It's gross."

"Sorry... Kurusu-san."

T-This damn brat...

It was just as Ayase said. To Kanako, I was nothing more than a pebble by the side of the road, so she wouldn't remember what I looked like, or what my voice sounded like.

Well then, this seems like a good time to explain the plan that Ayase had cooked up.

Ayase had firmly rejected the idea of her cosplaying as EX Thanatos in the tournament, but as another option, she would convince someone to participate in the tournament that had an even better chance of winning.

After hearing the details, I couldn't agree quickly enough. In fact, I felt like I had been hit by a flash of insight. Because...

"But also. If Kanako wins this beauty contest, Kanako was told that you would put in a good word with the head of your offiiice~. Is that trueee?"

Because I had thought that she resembled someone, and I realized that she was the damn, spitting image of Meruru.

Her personality was so bad that I hadn't noticed it... but if you take into account her face and her physical build, the more you looked at her the more the resemblance was obvious. Certainly, if we put her in a Meruru costume and she participated in the tournament, victory would be all but assured.

Back then when I compared the photograph with the Meruru DVD package, I was taken by surprise.

But the problem we had to face now was how to convince this brat to participate in the cosplay tournament. Kanako was clearly not an otaku, and she was completely unaware that Kirino was an otaku, so there was no way we could tell her that this was all so we could give Kirino a present. In any case, she wasn't such a true friend that she would do something embarrassing for Kirino all for the sake of something that she didn't care about in the first place. So I didn't think we could approach this from the front. Ayase had spoken with all the light gone from her eyes:

"I'll tell her that it's a beauty contest and bring her. And if we tell her that she'll be recommended to a modeling agency if she wins, Kanako will probably play along since she wants to be a model. To be honest, I had always been planning to introduce Kanako to our agency head, so this will be like killing two birds with one stone.

But then... won't we be exposed and won't she get angry the minute we hand her the cosplay costume?

Leave that part to me. If things don't go well... please prepare a Thanatos costume."

So if Kanako ran away, Ayase would take her place. What incredible resolve.

I'll definitely get the present that will make Kirino the happiest. No matter what I have to do.

That was the exchange we had the other day... and that brings us to where we are now.

Kanako seemed a bit suspicious of the situation. Ayase faced her and gave her a smile.

"It'll be alright, Kanako. In reality, I've already spoken to the company president for you and showed him your photos. And if you win this tournament, you'll definitely be able to produce real results, and I think you'll get featured in a magazine that is connected with this beauty contest."

That "feature" is obviously going to be in an Akiba-style magazine, isn't it? You'd make a damn fine con artist, you know.

“Really? Buuut, Kanako is a bit Loli, right? When you think about models, you think more about clunky huge women...”

Ill intent oozed between her every word (after “huge women” she probably wanted to add “like you”)... why did the conversations of junior high school students have to be so muddled like this? Just listening to this exchange made me nauseous...

“Ahaha, well, that depends on the job. But more importantly, I really felt that Kanako could win this beauty contest, so I took you with me today.”

“Ahh~~? Reaaally~~?”

Kanako seemed pleased at Ayase’s flattery. She really resembled Kirino in this area too.

In a few minutes, exactly what would happen to the smile she had on right now...? Ayase clapped her hands together.

“Well then, let’s get right to the costume, shall we?”

Part 10

So... the dreaded clothes-changing time had arrived... Kanako was not in the changing room of the cosplay hall, but rather was going to change in a car that Ayase had called to the scene. Right now, we were behind the Akihabara UDX Building, near the service entrance. I saw a car stopped in front of us, the same car I was used to seeing Ayase in while she worked.

“Sorry the car is so cramped. But Kanako will be using this type of car to change on the job from now on too, so it’s best if you get used to the feeling of doing this.”

“Ueeeh, so you change in a place like this...”

Kanako stood in front of the car with tinted windows, and her voice was filled with admiration.

Leaving aside the fact that models did indeed change inside a car like this, the reason we had brought Kanako away from the normal changing room was undoubtedly part of the plan.

If she saw all the other cosplayers, she would know that something strange was going on immediately, and then she might completely lose it. Guilt pricked at my chest, but it was definitely the correct way to do things.

“Well then, Kanako, please get in. I’ll help you change. Today you’ll be wearing a rather special outfit, and it’s hard to get on by yourself.”

“Yup. Ehehe, this feels pretty cool. It’s like Kanako’s in a movie or something.”

She’s such an idiot... be more suspicious, dammit.

The two girls entered into the car, leaving me as the only person outside.

The door slammed shut... and I could hear voices coming from inside the car.

“Alright Kanako~. Let’s take everything off, everything off~~!”

Ayase strangely seemed to be having fun. In fact, I've yet to hear her sound so happy.

"Hyah, don't touch Kanako's breasts~!"

"Sooory, my hand slipped. Ah, it slipped again. Kyah, it slipped again! And again!"

"U-Ugh! ... Also, it's really dark in here, so Kanako can't even tell where you're going to touch next... uhii!!"

"Ahah, Kanako is tickliiiiish~~."

I wonder what's going on in that car behind those tinted windows...

Finally, the doors opened with a *clank*. Out came Ayase, obviously in a good mood, along with one other.

... Not good! Not goooood.....

When I saw Kanako come out of the car, I gulped.

Kanako was the spitting image of Meruru.

Rather than saying she was cosplaying, it would really be more fitting to say that she was the real thing.

Also, was it just me, or did she look completely exhausted? Hey hey Ayase, did you just use changing clothes as an excuse to do something to her...? Maybe, for all this time, the sketchiest, most hentai person has been you...?

"Uhyaaa..."

The minute she came out of the car, Kanako went into a squat. I guess there's no helping it if she's exhausted, but if a Meruru fan saw her like this they would faint.

Ayase turned to the car's driver, and raised a hand.

"Ah, everything's fine now. Please go."

The car drove away from us.

With Kanako's change of clothes on board.

"..... S-She cut off all her escape routes..."

I mumbled to myself... Uwaaah... Ayase's actions were all perfectly executed and reliable, but I was getting more and more scared of her... and to think, this was the person I had gone against so often in the past...

"Alright! Let's head for the meeting hall!!"

Smiling as if she had accomplished something, Ayase pointed at the stairs that would lead to the cosplay hall in the UDX building. And then, seeing her own reflection in some of the door mirrors of the sedans parked around there, Kanako finally seemed to become aware of the ridiculous outfit she was wearing.

"Uwaaaah, what the hell is this?!?!?"

It was impressively almost the exact same response the protagonist of Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru had given when she first changed into a mahou shoujo in the first episode. She flew up from her squatted position, completely taken aback. Lifting up her arms, she began to anxiously inspect her outfit.

Faced with her classmate who had transformed into a mahou shoujo, Ayase spoke nonchalantly.

"Hm. That outfit really suits you, Kanako."

"Huh?!?! Su, Sususu, Su..."

"Hm? Su?"

"It doesn't suit Kanako at all!! Mmff...?!"

It seemed like she had bitten her tongue.

Tears filling her eyes, she squatted again, and sticking out her tongue which now had a set of tooth-marks engraved into it, Kanako sat there with a “Oww, oww...”

Seeing Kanako’s tragic state, Ayase put on a pleasant expression and turned to me.

“Fu, Fufu... well? Cute, right?”

“Ahh, yeah.”

Idiotically cute, you could say. She was usually an annoying brat, so seeing her go through something like this made me just want to tease her more.

“Ugh...”

Coming back to her senses, Kanako glared at Ayase. While she was squatting, though.

“What the hell are these clothes?! Kanako thought it was really cold, but this outfit is barely more than a string! And what’s this supposed to be... it looks like something from a kid’s anime or something... what the hell?!”

“Now now, calm down, Kanako. If you get too angry, you’re just going to bite your tongue again, yes?”

Ayase still had not let up her happy expression.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot to mention it. The beauty contest you’re participating is actually a cosplay tournament.”

“Cos... what? What the hell is that? Kanako thinks her older sister’s mentioned something about something like that... umm, umm...”

“It’s a beauty contest where people try to mimic anime or game characters. I think?”

Guys also participated in cosplay tournaments, so that’s a bit off. In any case, having heard Ayase’s vague explanation, Kanako flipped out, as expected. Jumping to her feet, she yelled.

“Why the hell does Kanako have to do something so stupid like that?! Kanako definitely doesn’t want tooooooo~~~!!!”

However, no matter how much Kanako was blowing up, Ayase didn’t even flinch.

“Oh? Hm, well that’s not good.”

“Huh? Not good? Don’t act so cool about it, bitch! Tch, whatever, just give Kanako her clothes back! Kanako’s going to change back! Hurry up!”

“Eh? Kanako’s clothes are riding around the highways right about now.”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat~~~?!?!?!?”

Suddenly turning towards us, Kanako yelled in terror.

It seemed that she had finally realized that the car had already gone off.

Damn, she’s slow. Seriously. She’s seriously an idiot.

“You! You tricked Kanako, didn’t you, bitch?!”

“Tehehe.”

Knocking the side of her head lightly with her fist, Ayase stuck out her tongue.

“U-Umm... what should we do? Kanako... are you going to go back to the train like that?”

This was nothing more than pure coercion!

Don’t say such terrible things while looking so cute like that! You’re seriously scary!!

Geez... when it came to Kirino, she showed absolutely no mercy.

“Oogh..... Oooooooooo...”

Looking straight at Ayase's lifeless eyes, Kanako realized just how serious Ayase was. Yes, she was quite serious, so honestly, you should give up.

The stalemate continued for a bit, until Ayase finally changed her direction of attack.

"You know, Kanako? I understand that it's embarrassing, but this is also quite a splendid modeling job too."

"Huh? Participating in a cosplay tournament while wearing this is?"

"Yes. Even some of my senpai at the agency sometimes wear special outfits when they work as promotional models... for example, at motor shows, or those kinds of events. This is the same as that! And what's more, there are even foreign participants, so this is an international tournament! If you can make a spectacular debut here, you'll definitely have a great career!"

"I-Is that right...?"

The idiot Kanako seemed on the verge of getting pulled in, but motor shows were hugely different from cosplay tournaments, weren't they? Well, granted, I'll give her that the idea of women dressing in risqué outfits in motor shows did bear a resemblance to cosplay.

"Yes, definitely! And what's more, Kanako's the only one who can do this! Someone like me would never be able to win against a foreigner! But Kanako can definitely win! She can win it all! Because, Kanako is really, really cute!"

"R-Really...? Kanako is... that cute? Ehehe, well, Kanako knew that already, but..."

"Yes yes, Kanako's reaaaally cute! Your cuteness can't possibly be matched by anyone else! Hey, hey, don't you agree?"

With that, Ayase turned to me, and I followed along vaguely.

"No kidding! You're really sexy cute! You could star in a cosplay adult video if you wanted!"

“Die!” *Bam.* “Gwah...” Ayase sent an elbow right into my throat to shut me up, and as I held my throat and writhed in pain, Ayase once again turned to Kanako and began to sing her praises.

“Here, hold this staff! Uwaah, you’re seriously cute, Kanako~! You’re going to win for sure!”

“Ehh~~~, well... when you put it like that... Kanako will do it!”

It seemed like Ayase had successfully persuaded Kanako...

I had a knee on the ground, and with a hand on my throat and coughing violently...

This dumbass, acting like this, I really hope she doesn’t get eventually taken in by some shady stuff...

Those strange worries passed through my mind.

“Umm... this is a children’s anime, right? Why is this place filled with adult men?”

“Even if you ask me that...”

That’s something that I really had a hard time answering. And exactly how many brave souls were there that could confidently answer that question anyways?

“Isn’t it just because it’s something that appeals to a diverse audience?”

“... I... see...”

It was just as she thought – the people here in the audience were mostly adult men, the so-called “old friends”², the hardcore otaku. It was obvious just from looking. Everyone was wearing the same thing (a pink hanten³ with Meruru’s face printed on it), and in perfect unison, everyone was waving multicolored pen lights around in the air. It was like we were in the middle of an army rally or a religious cult.

Also, you guys are way too happy about being here, aren’t you?! People walking around here who don’t understand the mood are severely confused, aren’t they?! What the hell is up with this stark difference?!

“Everyone~~! Thanks for comiiiiinngg~~!!”

Kurara-san waved her hand courteously in response to the cheering. There was no doubt whatsoever that she was the cause of all this crazed enthusiasm. She was wearing a white hat and a turtleneck sweater. A black skirt and boots. It was a very grounded, normal set of clothes. But for some reason, her sense of presence managed to rise higher than all the tumult being raised by the audience. Just by speaking on the stage, she caused even me to feel a bit excited. I could somewhat understand the feelings of the fans who had come here to see her.

“Alright, everyone~~. The long awaited day for the Second Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru Official Cosplay Tournament has finally come~! This year there are...

² Rough translation of “ookii na otomodachi,” which translates more literally to “big friends.” A term referring to adults who are into things that are aimed towards children.

³ A hanten is a traditional Japanese short winter coat.

twenty-three cute girls who are in the tournament! They've transformed into Meruru characters and they're about to appear on stage!! Look forward to it! And yes, this year, I, Hoshino Kurara, am very pleased to be your host again!! Hello everyone!"

WOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!! Piii~~~! Piii~~~!

KURARA! HIHIHIHI! KURARA! HIHIHIHI!

At any rate, the otaku seemed to be getting really into it. They were perfectly synchronized, to the point where I couldn't believe that they hadn't come here from an intensive choreography training camp. It was frightening how trained they seemed.

"....."

Ayase was very guardedly gazing at the otaku... when her gaze finally stopped and concentrated on one point.

"W-What's wrong?"

"Oniisan. T-that... please look over there."

Following Ayase's line of sight, I gave out a huge groan.

Because, right there was...

"Hyahooo! Ku. Ra. Ra! Ku. Ra. Ra! Haihaihaihai!"

Excitedly waving around a pen light, my little sister was standing right there. Wearing a pink hanten, she held a Meruru fan in her other hand. She completely fit into the otaku crowd.

Seeing her close friend in full otaku mode, Ayase seemed like she had seen a ghost.

"... T-T-That's... Kirino, right...? I'm not... just seeing things, right...?"

"Yeah, it is."

I responded with a natural, gentle voice. Frankly, I couldn't really even believe my eyes.

But, actually, this makes sense! We had come here to get something that she really wanted, so it's nothing strange that Kirino would be here as well! In fact, we should consider ourselves lucky that the person herself didn't dress up and participate in the tournament!

That would have been bad... this was a close call.

If Kanako and Kirino had butted heads in the contestant waiting room, this situation would have spiraled way out of control...!

We had managed to get things rolling this far already, but that girl was just bad news.

I stroked down my chest in relief, when I heard Ayase let out a simultaneously agitated and relieved sigh next to me.

"I-It's good that I didn't participate... I would just die if Kirino saw me in that sketchy outfit."

"... She really seems to be really having a great time, though."

"Did you just say something?"

"N-No, nothing..."

Right after I vaguely dodged the question, Kurara-san swiftly pointed to the ceiling.

"Alright, everyooooonnnneeee~~! Please direct your attention at the huuuuge screen behind me~! Tadaa, there you'll see today's grand prize, and trophy, the 'EX Meruru Special Figure'! There's only one in the world, and it's super extremely rare! Wow, amaaazing!"

AAAAAAAAAAAAA!! AAAAAAALaLaLaLaie!!⁴

⁴ I'm just translating the Japanese faithfully here. If you actually want to know what they're saying, you'd best go talk to the pharmaceuticals that supplied them all with their drugs in the first place.

The Meruru figure appeared blown up on the screen, and the crowd raised an excited cheer as if they were in the ancient Macedonian Army or something.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh there’s the EX Meruru! It’s there it’s there! I waaaaant itttttt!!! Dammmiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiittt!!! If I could find just *one* character I look like.....!!!!!”

Kirino was also hugely excited. As I thought, if she thought she had a chance of winning, she would have gone into the tournament herself, wouldn’t she?

Ahh, that was close. I turned towards Ayase.

“Hey, Ayase, it seems like we really weren’t wrong in picking this out as the present, were we?”

“... I suppose so.”

Ayase looked rather torn. Well, there’s no helping that, considering she’s bearing witness to just how much her beloved friend desperately wanted that doll.

... Now then.

“I’m going to go warn Kirino a bit. She’s acting like a lunatic right now because she probably doesn’t expect to see anyone she knows.”

I took a step into the crowd. Now that I’ve found Kirino here, it wouldn’t do to just leave things be. Kanako’s going to be on stage in a minute, and when that happened, if Kirino got really surprised when she was like this, there’s a possibility that Kanako would realize that Kirino was here.

“Let’s split up for the moment. If she saw us together here, it would be hard to explain away.”

“... That’s true. Well then, let’s meet up at the same place we met before, after the tournament is over.”

“Got it.”

“Here, give this to Kirino.”

Ayase took off the hat she was wearing and passed it to me. She probably meant for me to give it to Kirino, so Kirino could hide herself from Kanako. I received it gratefully, and parted from Ayase.

On the stage, Kurara-san was explaining the rules for the cosplay tournament.

“Including me, there will be five judges, and we’ll decide the winner with everyone’s vote! This cool machine over here measures the volume of your cheers, and the contestants can earn up to fifty points from that. Each judge also can award up to ten points, so there’s a total possible of a hundred points! Everyone got iiiiiit~~~?”

Yeeeeeeesss. All the otaku obediently answered. Just like a kindergarten class would do.

Meanwhile, I slowly waded my way through the huge crowd.

“Good response, everyone! Each cosplayer will have three minutes to perform for you. As long as you stay in that time, you can do anything you waaant~. You can talk, or sing, or dance, everything is completely okay! Just get us excited!! Good luck!”

Yaaaay!! Kirino gave out a huge cheer with the other otaku.

She probably didn’t even imagine that she would be seen in this full-out otaku mode by a close friend. Well, she can just deal with that later.

At that moment, I found that even though I could see my little sister’s excited face, I couldn’t reach her.

Dammit... Comiket, and this place... it was way too crowded.

Why the hell did otaku have to crowd together like this?

As I slowly inched forwards, the tournament continued.

“Well then, let’s get right to entry number one! From all the way from England, here’s Bridget-chan!”

OOOOOooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhh!!!

Upon the entry of the competition favorite, the room erupted. Bridget-chan was a beautiful, blonde Caucasian girl, and around the same age as the character she was cosplaying, Alpha Omega. In other words, she looked ten.

“Bridget-chan was the winner last time, and just like that time, she’s cosplaying Aru-chan! Cute, riiiiight~~~~? And she looks just like Aru-chan!”

Just as Kurara-san had introduced her, Bridget-chan was wearing the same thing that this “Aru-chan,” or “Alpha Omega,” wore in the series. But while Meruru’s outfit was based in pink, her costume was designed with darker colors. She wore a black cloak, and held a golden-colored long sword.

Bridget-chan had a childish-looking yet cool and mature expression, and her costume meshed really well with her straight blonde hair. It was obvious even for a novice like me. So this was the one who had won last time... she was magnificent in the flesh.

Bridget-chan walked out to the middle of the stage, and without giving any sort of greeting to the audience, suddenly began her performance.

“Behold! My sword!”

With a shout of fluent Japanese, she readied her sword with practiced motions. *Swshh!* With one hand, she thrust the sword straight forward, and fell into a pose that was honestly way too flashy to be practical. However, it was charming, and looked pretty cool.

She held her stance for a moment, and then began to flourish her blade from side to side. It was almost as if she was trying to deflect bullets that enemies had shot at her. She then took a step back, almost dancing, and crossed swords with an invisible enemy.

Swshh! Swshhh swshhh! Swwwsshhh! Her fluid movements gradually increased in speed.

“Huh?! What the hell are you saying, you molester?!”

“I’m not a molester! Dammit! Can’t you recognize the voice of your own brother?!”

The pain caused a cold sweat to break out across my forehead, and when I took off my sunglasses, Kirino finally figured out who I was. Her eyes opened wide in surprise.

“W-Why the hell are you here?!”

“... That’s a long story. I’ll explain it to you eventually, so just don’t worry about that right now.”

“Huh?”

“Just listen. I’m doing this for your good, so just hide your face with this. You don’t want your school friends to realize that you’re here, right?”

“W-Who’s here?”

Kirino pulled the hat low over her eyes, and restlessly looked around. After all the commotion with Ayase, she was probably deathly afraid of any more of her friends catching wind of her hobby.

“I won’t tell you the details, but one of the contest participants is someone you know.”

“... You’re going to explain this to me after, alright?”

As Kirino and I exchanged whispers, the electric scoreboard displayed Bridget-chan’s score. Like a certain big costume competition⁵, the score showed up as a gauge meter.

Duruduruduruduru... Complete with a rather creepy sound effect in the background, the gauge meter filled up. Everyone watched that gauge with bated breath. And finally, *Boonnnng!* With the sound of a gong, Kurara-san read out her score.

⁵ This might be a reference to the Japan Kasou Grand Prix.

“Ninety-nine poiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnntts~~~!!! Oh, too bad!!! But amazing! That’s almost a perfect score! Well, if you think about it as the judges just secretly being nice to the other contestants⁶, it really is a perfect score! This contest might already have been decided!!”

Secretly being nice, you say... I mean, I understand what you mean. Just don’t say something like that out loud, dammit.

⁶ The literal translation here is basically “When you think about the judges’ mumbling consideration.” Essentially, it would be bad if the competition were decided from the first performance, so the judges gave her a 99 instead of 100.

Part 12

And like that, the cosplay competition proceeded from contestant to contestant.

After that performance that seemed appropriate for the competition's favorite, Bridget-chan, the mood of the place had suddenly reached a climax. The succeeding cosplayers, as might be expected from people who participated in an event like this, were all cute girls. The otaku and Kirino were all ecstatic. There were also plenty of elementary school students in the competition, and I watched the charming sight side by side with my sister.

Oh right, amongst the participants, there were also those who advertised the maid café where they worked or made announcements about their cosplay photo albums while they performed.

Hmm... so people also did things like that during these competitions.

Eventually, around twenty contestants had finished their performances. But there were no scores that had beaten Bridget-chan's score, and the charged atmosphere had subsided a bit.

"Hey... who's this person that I know? Did she already perform?"

"No, not yet... I won't even have to tell you, you'll know the minute she comes out..."

But, I couldn't help but grow more and more worried. No matter how much Kanako looked like Meruru, if she acted like the damn brat she acted like before, she might just end up pissing off the Meruru fans...

Hm. I guess like this, the victory would naturally go to Bridget-chan...

As my anxiety grew, with uncanny timing, Kurara-san called the person in question out.

"Entry number twenty-one! Kanakana-chan, come on out~~~~~!!"

"Alriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiggghht~~~~~"

It was the exact same sugary voice that Meruru had. It was almost as if Kurara-san had answered herself. “Hmm~? HmMMM~?” Kurara-san herself seemed surprised.

And then, once “Kanakana-chan” herself took the stage, the entire audience was taken completely aback.

It wasn't only that the cosplayer who had now appeared on stage was the spitting image of Meruru. But when she trotted to stage center, the first thing she said put people further into shock.

“Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru STAAAAART~~~!”

Lightly holding her staff aloft, Meruru (Kanako) spun around with a *kururin*. Her words and actions were the exact same as those in the image that came on right before the anime started. It was the same as the performance Hoshino Kurara-san had given before the competition started.

And then, the music started. The Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru OP song, *Meteor ☆ Impact*, began to flow from the speakers. Meruru (Kanako) began to step with the beat of the music, and at some point had gotten a microphone in her hands. As the intro segment of the song ended, she gave the audience a quick wink.

“Meerumerumerumerumerumerume~Meerumerumerumerumerumerume~

Glittering in the sky, it's a shooting star~☆ With a magical jet, it shoots the enemy~

From a land of magic, it falls and flow through the air. Konnichiwa~

Stardust Witch Meruru~!”

“Where the hell did she learn to sing so well?!”

I yelled what I’m sure everyone was thinking at the top of my lungs.

But seriously, wasn’t this weird?! Where the hell did she learn how to sing the Meruru opening song?!

And she even looked like she had mastered the choreography!! Was she really an anime otaku?! No, from what I saw earlier, she didn’t even know what cosplay is, and she didn’t seem to recognize Meruru’s costume.

Then... then, what the hell was going on~~~?

“Shooting star~ Shooting star~ Diving into your chest with more power (sparkle! ☆) than a meteorite (sparkle! ☆)!”

I’m aiming right for. your. heart~! With all my strength~! With my magic at full power~!

Don’t run away and take the blow~♥!”

Meruru (Kanako) threw the staff up the air at the climax of the song, and began to spin on stage. She neatly caught the staff as it spun up and down and fell to the earth, and gave the crowd a wink.

There was nothing I could say at this point. Having bore witness to such an impossible sight, all I could do was stand there, dumbfounded.

In my place, the engrossed audience seemed to simultaneously come back to their senses.

“That’s so adoorable!!! What is that?! CG?! Is it a CG?! A three-dimensional projection or something?!”

Calm down, you.

“Crap, I’m getting a nosebleed!”



Putting pressure on her nose with a tissue, Kirino seemed beside herself. You're getting way too excited! Is this how a girl's supposed to act? Look in a damn mirror!

"Thaaaaank you everyooooone~~~."

Having finished her song, Kanako gave everyone a content smile and held up her staff.

Light glittered off the good sweat she had going on her forehead, her cheeks were flushed red, and she still had a childish, chuckling expression on her face. She probably just really liked it when people praised her. Call her an exhibitionist... or rather, just someone who really liked to be noticed.

Surprisingly, I would say that she might have the stuff it takes to make it as an idol for the otaku.

And then, with a bloodied tissue in one hand, Kirino asked me wonderingly.

"... When exactly is that person I know coming out?"

... Come on, just figure it out. Just realize that you were getting thrown into a frenzy by your classmate.

Part 13

Like that, the “Second Stardust ☆ Witch Meruru Official Cosplay Tournament” came to an end, and the victory was awarded to the one who had scored a magnificent 100 points, Kanakana-chan, aka Kurusu Kanako.

At the awards ceremony, Kurara-san passed Kanako the grand prize and trophy, the EX Meruru Special Figure. Kanako exchanged a firm handshake with the second-place finisher, Bridget-chan.

Both of them had on cheek-to-cheek smiles. It was a refreshing little performance to acknowledge each other’s efforts at the end of the competition.

The theme of Meruru might have been “friendship,” but even in the show, Meruru and Alpha’s relationship was probably somewhat like this.

Having successfully convinced Kirino to go home first, I managed to safely meet up with Ayase.

“See, what did I tell you?”

“Yeah... that was pretty incredible. I had thought she only resembled the character, but if that were the only thing there’s no way she would have been able to pull that off.”

When I paid that compliment to Kanako, Ayase put a hand lightly to her lips and gave me a coy chuckle.

“Ahaha, right? Kanako’s quite amazing!”

I haven’t seen her in such a great mood since the first time we met. She really did believe a lot in her friends. That’s probably precisely why she got so angry when she found out about Kirino’s hobby... honestly, it was rare to find someone like this who could have so much sincere faith in people.

“I’ll go get Kanako’s change of clothes, so please go on ahead.”

“Got it.”

I once again separated from Ayase, and finding myself in a pleasant mood, headed for the victor's waiting room, where Kanako was waiting.

Honestly, I see that brat in a new light now. To think she had such an amazing special talent lying in wait.

Wanting to give the victor my blessings, I opened the door to the waiting room.

“Ugh~~~~~ ...can't do this anymore~~~~~... what the hell is up with those damn otaku~~ ‘Kanakana-chan is so cuuute~’ ‘Meruru moeee’ and all that. Kanako really can't humor those idiots anymore, honestly.”

Meruru was in a squat, smoking a cigarette.

... I was speechless. I just stood there with my mouth opened wide.

Y-You... you.... I take everything back!

She's smoking a damn cigarette! That completely ruins the impression I had before!

What the hell happened to that bright smile you had on earlier?!

In front of this suspect Meruru stood Bridget-chan, still in her costume. Unlike the boldness of her earlier performance, she was cowering.

“K-Kanakana-chan... umm... you really... can't say things like that... everyone was supporting you... “

“Huh? What are you, a complete idiot~~~~~?”

With a puff, Kanako breathed smoke out onto Bridget-chan.

Cough, cough “Oogh...”

Tears began to overflow from Bridget-chan's eyes.

“Bueeeeeeeeeehhhhhh!! Meruru turned into a dark witch~~~?!”

Uttering what was actually quite a childish-sounding complaint, Bridget-chan flew from the room.

Watching all this happen, Kanako uttered one, cruel thing.

“Damn brat.”

“You’re the damn brat!”

Of course I had to yell at this point.

“Oh, it’s Ayase’s manager. What do you want?”

“I don’t want anything! W-What the hell are you doing?! Cut it out! Also, don’t smoke!”

“Huh? What are you talking about? This is a chocolate cigarette~~~.”

“Where the hell do they make chocolate cigarettes that let you blow out smoke?!”

“Good point you have there~~.”

She’s beyond hope. She’s just a damn brat... to the point where Kirino might even find it cute.

“Here, give me that.”

I snatched her cigarette away, and pushed it into the ashtray next to me.

“Hey, what the hell, you thief?! Also, why are you only saying that to Kanako? Isn’t that strange? Kurara-chan was also smoking earlier. Go lecture here too.”

“Shut up! Live and let live! But don’t smoke when you’re just a kid!”

“Yes, mom. But more importantly, how was Kanako’s first performance?”

She's not shy at all, is she? I scratched my head hard, but she was the one who brought the topic up, so I'll just ask what I had on my mind.

"... How exactly did you know that song? I thought you knew nothing about this anime before."

"Ahh, that?"

Exhaling the last bit of smoke that she had stored up in her lungs, Kanako gave me a cocky grin.

"Kanako does idol auditions all the time, so Kanako goes and practices at karaoke every day. It's simple to remember such an easy song like that after hearing it once. Kanako's amazing, right?"

"Ahh, yeah, amazing."

But your personality is the worst... although now that I think about it, the Meruru opening was playing on screen when we first got here. So, she could remember the lyrics just by seeing that?

"And the dance? There weren't any dances showing on screen."

"That was ad lib. Kanako also regularly gets dance lessons, so Kanako just did an arrangement of a dance to a song Kanako already knows. Pretty good for an ad-lib, yeah?"

"....."

That was completely ad-libbed? This girl really was...

Kirino had really made an outrageous set of friends.

Even if all of their personalities were...

"You... that is..."

"What?"

“You looked like you were having so much fun on stage... was that a lie? Was it all an act? You were really just sneering at everyone from the inside?”

“Nah, it was fun. Kanako likes it when people call her cute. It feels good when people get into my singing or dancing. Umm, also... that moe moe stuff, it’s pretty stupid, but... they seemed to be seriously worshipping Kanako, so that part of it was pretty cute.”

She laughed with an “ehehe.”

“... I see.”

Seeing that smile from this damn brat...

It really made me think that she might be suited to being an idol.

Although, before she could do that, no matter how well she sang or danced, she had to quit smoking.

“Hey, hand over the cigarette pack too. You’re trying to take out another one, aren’t you?”

“Hehe... you’re so annoying.”

Part 14

By the way, after that, Bridget-chan came back with the police, and Kanako was taken to the Manseibashi Police Station while still wearing her costume.

I just let things be, and saw to it that the EX Meruru Special Figure got to where it needed to be... but I heard that later, with the headline “Mahou Shoujo Arrested at Akihabara UDX,” it managed to make the news...

Kanako was subsequently questioned by the police, scolded by her parents, smacked by Ayase, and forced to quit smoking... but that’s a story for another time.



Chapter 2

Part 1

All the older brothers in this country probably are aware of the existence of an “Emergency Escape Button.”

Emergency Escape... just as the name would suggest, in times of impending crisis, you would push the button and be able to magically transport yourself out of danger.

To put things bluntly, it was a function that actually existed in some 18+ eroge.

When I was reading the instruction booklet to some eroge that Kirino had forced on me, I found a description of this “Emergency Escape Button.” My eyes went as wide as saucers and I carefully read that section of the booklet.

To high school boys who didn’t have a lock on their door but had to play eroge, this “Emergency Escape Button” would be pretty fascinating, wouldn’t it? There were a lot of scenarios in which it could be useful.

For example, just a little while ago... I was playing eroge in my room (once again, only because my sister was forcing me to), when my mother suddenly barged in without knocking.

“Kyoussukeee. Going shopping is too annoying, so you go for me~.”

“Whoaa--!”

This damn woman didn’t seem to want to listen no matter how many times I told her to knock.

But I wasn’t the kind of idiot that would keep on making the same mistake over and over again.

While I skillfully blocked the display from view with my body, I pushed the Emergency Escape Button (the Escape key).

Click

And just like that, the picture of the girl with her legs wide open vanished, to be replaced by a completely neutral image of a blue sky!

Ahhhhh~~~~ I'm super impressed! Whoever came up with this is a god!

"Oh? Did you borrow your sister's computer to look at ero sites again?"

"Ha ha ha, what are you saying, dear mother?! Just take a look at this refreshing image here! What could possibly be suspicious about that image? ... And also, how the hell did you know that I had looked at ero sites?!"

Kirino, that bastard! She ratted me out, didn't she?! Ratted out my embarrassing secret...

"Ka Biankomu Ka Biankomu Ka Biankomu...¹ I'm not too sure, but if I chant that spell like that, it seems that you'll listen to whatever I say, right? Go shopping."

"Yes ma'am! Gladly!"

Well, did you see that? I sure avoided that disaster, right?

Ha ha.... Dammit, I don't want anything to do with this family anymore! I'm going back! Right back to the Tamura's!

Half in tears, I rushed out of the house.

¹ See Footnote 2, Chapter 3-2, Volume 2.

Part 2

Like that, I ended up going to the neighborhood supermarket.

The sun was going to set soon, and the store was crowded with old ladies who had come to buy things for dinner.

“Well, let’s get this over with quickly...”

Taking a shopping cart from the store entrance, I stooped forwards a bit and went into the store.

And then, I saw someone I was not expecting to see.

“Oh? Kyou-chan?”

“O-Ohh... Manami?”

A plain-looking, bespectacled girl. Her name was Tamura Manami, and she was my childhood friend.

“Could it be that Kyou-chan is also here to buy groceries for dinner?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Hmm... it’s really strange meeting you here. Well, why don’t we shop together then?”

Her smile was so sincere that even my rotten mood was lifted. “Sure,” I responded readily. Ahh, so this is what you would call a lucky meeting.

For some reason, I felt that my own family treated me with a bit of a cold shoulder, but the Tamura family, Manami included, really treated me well. It wouldn’t even be an overstatement to say that the Tamura family was my true family. As we walked side by side and chatted, we headed for the fresh foods’ section.

“What is Kyou-chan’s family having for dinner?”

“Umm...”

I took out the shopping list my mother had passed me.

“Potatoes, carrots, onions, curry roux... whaaa, curry again? Seriously, all my mom makes is curry. If only she had half your repertoire and skills...”

“Eh? Ehhhh~~... I-I’m not that good at cooking...”

“Don’t be so modest.”

I paid her a rare honest compliment.

“When I stayed over at your house that day, the food I ate was really delicious, and you’re also really good at making sweets. Meanwhile, when I ask my mom to make me a snack, she seriously just gives me dried sardines...”

“A-Ahaha... W-Well then, I’ll cook for you next time too, alright?”

“I would like that.”

To be fair, this was nothing more than idle talk. But to me, these times were also very important.

From an outsider’s point of view, what we were doing must have seemed really boring though.

“Ahh, right. Hey hey, Kyou-chan. About the time before...”

“Hm?”

“That time Kyou-chan came to stay over at my house... we slept together at night, didn’t we?”

“Gah...! D-Don’t say it in an easily-misunderstood way like that!”

All we did was lie next to each other in the same room and sleep, right?! Also, please realize that we live in a small world... if some of the old women in the

neighborhood heard about that, they would use it as fodder for idle gossip, wouldn't they?

"Ahaha, sorry sorry... but, that time..."

If she says it looking so happy like that, does she really feel sorry about it...? Well, whatever.

Manami continued like this:

"You promised that next time, you would invite me over to your house, right? ... Do you remember?"

"I forgot. Did I really make that kind of promise?"

"Ugh... you really forgot about it, didn't you? Punpun."

Manami pouted while using her mimetic words as usual.

I forced on a smile and shrugged.

"Well, how about you come over the next holiday then?"

"Really?"

"Ahh, to be honest, my parents aren't home that day, so I was wondering what I was going to do for meals... so come and cook something from me."

"... H-Hmph... if it's like that... I guess I'll head over that day."

"Then it's decided."

Alright! Now, even if my parents aren't there, I'll have something to eat!

"Ehehee... do you have something you want to eat? I'll make anything you want."

"I'm fine with anything."

As long as it's something you make.

And like that, the day came to an end.

Part 3

And then, a few days passed. It was Sunday morning.

Just as promised, I brought Manami home with me, something that I had not done for quite a few years. We had met at the supermarket and bought things first, so we were laden with plastic bags.

“~~~~♪”

All along the way, Manami had been in really high spirits.

For example, she would spontaneously break out into rather suspicious smiles, with a little “Fufuu~” chuckle.

“Hey, hey, do you really think... do you really think our homemade manjuu¹ is a good enough present?”

She had asked that same question over and over. It was rather suspicious.

I put on a bitter smile and gave out a bewildered sigh.

“I told you already that anything’s fine. Honestly, you didn’t need to bring anything. Come on, do I bring a gift over every time I go to your house?”

“But, I mean, it’s really been a while... ehehe.”

“Also, neither of my parents are home today. So worrying about it is pointless.”

“Ah... r-really...? I guess that’s true. Your ojisan and obasan both went out today...”

While we were talking like this, we arrived at the entrance to my house.

“Alright, go on in.”

“S-Sorry to intruuude~.”

¹ Bean buns.

We took off our shoes and went up into the house, when...

Right then, we happened to come across Kirino.

“Eh...”

“Ah...”

Having just gone into the house, Manami’s eyes met with Kirino’s as Kirino came out of the living room.

Both parties had their mouths opened blankly, and their eyes widened.

Uwaaaaaaaahh!! I completely forgot! She was here! Even if my parents were gone!

I immediately went pale. A moment passed, and then...

“...?!”

Kirino’s expression completely changed. Her eyes slanted upwards, and she glared sharply at us. It wasn’t as if she was looking at garbage. It was also different from that time she found out I had been looking at ero-sites and transformed into a demon².

How do I put it... she was looking at us as if we were her arch-enemies.

I heard her grind her teeth with a *creak*.

In just a few moments, the atmosphere in the entranceway to my house had turned bizarrely awkward.

“... K-Kirino...?”

What the hell... what’s with this unpleasant attitude...? Why did she seem so pissed from the moment she appeared?

² More specifically, she transformed into an Asura, which is something in Hindu mythology.

Ah, right, was it that she hated Manami? No, that's not right... She had said something about being annoyed that I was being so lovey-dovey or something...

In any case, this was bad... No matter how you looked at it, she didn't seem like she was in a mood to play nice...

T-To think that Manami and Kirino would come face to face in a situation like this...

W-What's going to happen...? I was scared at this sudden development... which honestly was largely my fault in the first place.

"Ah, Kirino-chan. Good afternoon."

Completely oblivious to the atmosphere, Manami waved her hands, and gave a very friendly greeting.

"It sure has been a while. Do you remember me? Back in the day I often..."

"I do not remember. Who exactly are you?"

I could almost hear the sound of a sword slice as Kirino unceremoniously cut Manami down like that.

Granted, she was using polite language, but this was terrible. It was the worst way to treat a guest that her brother had brought home.

Of course, Manami didn't seem phased in the slightest. She gave Kirino a smile.

"Ahh... that's too bad. Well, there's no helping that, since we haven't seen each other in a long time. Well, let me just introduce myself again... I'm Tamura Manami. Let's get along, alright?"

"Eh? Why exactly do I have to do that?"

This bitch! Saying something a delinquent might say to disrupt class like that...

As her brother, I really should have a right to get angry at her attitude right now.

“Hey, Kirino... cut it the hell out.”

“Huh? Look who’s talking.”

Kirino grabbed hold of my collar.

“Let me borrow you for a minute.”

“Gueh. Wha-... H-hey!”

Being pulled by my sister, I was separated from Manami. I was dragged right to the middle of the living room. *<i>Slam!</i>* Kirino’s hand slammed the living room door shut. Still pulling on my collar with all her might, Kirino gave fleeting glances to the entranceway where Manami was still standing.

Her face closed in on me from the side, and she whispered to me menacingly.

“W-What the hell is this?! W-Why is that woman here?!”

“... Well... I invited her... over...”

“Haahh?!?! I never heard anything about this!”

“Well... I never said anything.”

“Tch! Just stop it! Drive her out right now!”

“As if I could do that... j-just calm down a bit.”

Trying to get my sister to calm down, I thrust out a hand and pushed her a bit away from me.

“What the hell... hm? Is it really that you just hate Manami?”

“... Not really...!”

Still grabbing onto my collar, Kirino muttered grumpily. She was obviously hiding something, but I really didn't see any reason she should dislike Manami, considering they barely have had much opportunity to interact before.

"Tch." Kirino clicked her tongue, and glared at me even more strongly.

"Anyways, I said I don't like this at all! You, why the hell did you bring a girl over specifically on a day our parents aren't home? I can't believe this... it's so gross~~!"

"I-It's not like I timed that on purpose!"

Well, no, it was on purpose, but that was for the sake of dinner! But what you're trying to say... it's absolutely not like that at all!!

"Even if that were true, it has nothing to do with you, right? You call your friends over too. You have no right to complain."

When I made the natural counterargument, Kirino's face flushed even redder.

"Huh? So... So, if I brought a boyfriend home, and we did e-e-ecchi things in the living room, you saying you're fine with that?!"

"How the hell did it get to that?! We're not doing anything like that, so that example is completely inappropriate!!"

Also, you don't even have a boyfriend, dammit! Don't run your mouth off so much with weird things!

Dammit, this is pissing me off...!!

"In any case. There's no way I can kick her out at this point. I have no idea what you're getting all twisted up over, but if you don't want to see her then you get out yourself."

"W-Why are you being so casual and trying to drive me out now?!"

"Y-You've got it all wrong, dammit!"

What the hell has this girl been saying up until now...? Ugh, I'm so beat...

Also, it seemed that the sounds of our unsightly sibling argument had carried to the entranceway.

Click. The living room door timidly opened, and Manami peeked in. She spoke in a worried tone.

"U-Umm...? You two... please don't fight~~ ...?"

"....." "....."

Together, Kirino and I looked at Manami... and together we turned our faces away.

"... Tch, so annoying."

Kirino clicked her tongue once again. She seemed incredibly annoyed.

Seriously, cut it out. No, you know what? I'm just going to tell her that!

"You..."

But although I opened my mouth, Manami cut me off. She faced Kirino and lowered her head. Her posture was impeccable, so it was quite a pretty bow.

"Sorry, Kirino-chan... for coming so suddenly today."

"....."

Jiii. I could almost hear that sound effect in my head as Kirino glared brazenly at Manami.

But Manami was resolute, and began to speak in a friendly way.

"Umm, really, all I came to do is to make dinner. That is... I heard that Kyou-chan's mom wasn't home today and he was having trouble... so all I wanted to do was to come over and take care of the chores in her place."

"... Hmph."

In response, Kirino crossed her arm in the usual way, looking like some ill-tempered madam glaring at one of the maids.

What was wrong about this picture?

But it really seemed fitting somehow. Are these two sure they weren't master and servant in some previous life?

"... Kirino-chan..... Is that alright?"

"Chores, hm...? What should I do...."

Manami was older, her senior, and also a guest of the house, but Kirino's stature and attitude were so large that it didn't seem that way at all. Having witnessed this scene from the start, it really looked more that Kirino had some kind of life-or-death power over Manami. Kirino haughtily brushed up a strand of her brown hair, and spoke in a cruel tone.

"Well then, before you make dinner, clean the living room."

"Y-You... why the hell are you ordering around a guest so cockily like that?!"

I had been reluctant to cut into this conversation between girls, but at that statement I had to interject.

But still, Manami seemed all too happy to respond to her master's order.

"Mm, just leave it to me!"

"....."

Kirino froze with a "Wha-?" Through all of this, she still had the same condescending look on her face, and still was brushing up that strand of hair.

She probably assumed Manami would get angry and fight back, but her order had been completely acknowledged, so it probably felt pretty anticlimactic to her.

"Alright, let me borrow your refrigerator for a bit."

Manami brought the plastic bags from the entranceway, and laboriously carried them off.

“.....”

Still silently staring after Manami, Kirino next looked at me, astonished. She was probably thinking something like “W-What the hell is up with this girl?” I could understand why.

... But yeah, Manami was seriously just this kind of person...

As I exchanged silent glances with my sister, Manami came back decked out in full house-maid gear, with a triangle cloth hat and a cloth apron.

And then, she promptly began her work. Clearing away a few items first, she hoisted a duster into the air and cleaned the air conditioning filter, and then wiped down the furniture... she was doing a pretty smooth job of it too.

And then, she took a look at the feet of the sofa Kirino always sat on.

“Ah, oh no... someone spilled coffee on the rug. I’ll take care of that.”

“Ah, that... uh...”

Creases formed on Kirino’s brow. I see; she was the one who had spilled that coffee.

She seemed to have tried to wipe the coffee away, but there was a stain left on the rug.

“T-That stain, you can’t get rid of it no matter how much you wipe it...”

“It’s fine, I’ll get rid of it.”

Manami laid the dust cloth on top of the stain, and put the vacuum cleaner on top of that.

And when she did that, the stain came right off.

“See?”

“... W-What? I couldn’t get rid of that stain at all...”

“When you spill things drinks or coffee on the carpet, you put the vacuum on top of it like this and you can get rid of the stain easy.”

You could say she was just brimming with old woman’s wisdom... or maybe she was like one of those people on *Itouke no Shokutaku*.³

Manami had taken out a neat little trick and got rid of the stain that Kirino had made, but Kirino didn’t thank her. In fact, Kirino just got more irritated and crossed her arms.

“Hmph, being cocky like that... Every single time...! Everything you say just sounds so incriminating... you’re so annoying...!”

After spitting that out, Kirino turned heel and left the living room.

... What the hell is wrong with her? *She* was the only annoying one here.

³ A TV show focused around giving household tips.

Part 4

With Kirino gone, I ended up helping Manami finish with the cleaning. I wondered why we had to listen to what my little sister had told us to do... but Manami seemed resolved to finish, and also reminded me that she had planned to help clean in the first place, so I just reluctantly went along with it.

“Alright, done!”

“... Looks like it.”

One hour later... our previously jumbled-up living room had been so cleaned up that it was almost unrecognizable.

It's not like my mother was negligent on her cleaning duties, but Manami had went all out, so things had been exceptionally tidied up.

When you got rid of everything on the floor like this, the room really felt more spacious.

“You really did a great job.”

“A-Ahh~... But I don't know too much about this room, so I couldn't clean it from corner to corner...”

Why exactly did she look just a bit unsatisfied with her own work?

She really did a skillful job too. This was more than enough.

“Thanks for your hard work. You really were a huge help. So, should we take a break and drink some tea?”

“Sure. Ehehe...”

When I paid her a compliment, Manami gave me a shy smile and came to my side.

“Ah, should I go make the tea?”

“It’s fine, you just sit. I can make the tea once in a while.”

“R-Really...? A-Alright.”

She tottered back to the sofa. What an obedient girl... I’m not saying I would, but if at this point I gave her any order, I have a feeling that she would gladly comply no matter how terrible it was.

... Geez.

Putting on a wry smile at my childhood friend’s completely defenseless attitude, I made tea for two people in the kitchen and returned to the living room.

I saw Manami sitting on the sofa, with her hands joined together in front of her chest, waiting for me.

“Tea that Kyou-chan made... I’m pretty excited.”

“... You’re making way too big of a deal about this.”

“No, that’s not true~~. If I can get rewarded like this, then doing my best and cleaning was worth it.”

Manami drank a sip of the tea I had put on the table.

“See, it’s delicious... I can feel all the weariness leaving my body.”

“Sure sure. Thanks.”

Shocked, I forced out a smile once again. I sat opposite my childhood friend, and took one sip of my own tea.

Zuzuu...

“Heh, it’s just normal tea.”

At some point, it seemed that the Kousaka living room had been enveloped by the atmosphere I would usually find in the Tamura living room.¹

Manami was here, we were drinking tea, and were just having a nice leisurely chat...

Yes, this was the lifestyle I had wanted.

But, this tranquil time was easily shattered by the sudden intrusion of the door opening and someone walking in.

Bam! Kirino was the one who came into the living room. Kirino took a few steps towards the kitchen, and then sent a glance in our direction.

“..... I just came down to get something to drink.”

“Ah, I see.”

And I didn't ask. Can't you just take it and leave?

“Hmph.”

Snorting, Kirino headed for the refrigerator. I stuck my tongue out at her retreating back. “Keehh.”

Once again, an unpleasant atmosphere permeated the living room.

Why is it that this little sister had to come and ruin each and every one of my restful moments? Just stay in your room like a good girl, dammit.

But Manami seemed dead set on befriending Kirino, and called out to her even though she should have just let it go.

“We just finished cleaning the room, and we're taking a break. Does Kirino-chan want to join us?”

“.....”

¹ The two words for living room are actually different. Kyouzuke's own living room is just “ribingu,” while Manami's is referred to as “ochanoma.” The latter is supposed to refer to a more traditional Japanese living room, and literally means “space for tea.”

She was completely ignored. Kirino didn't even turn around. It felt incredibly unpleasant...

Kirino left the refrigerator door ajar, and drank a half-liter bottle of black tea.

Glug glug glug... bam (That was the sound of the refrigerator door closing).

Having gulped down the black tea in one go, Kirino briskly walked back across the living room, when she suddenly stopped.

"Ah, you finished cleaning. Hmm..."

She seemed just to notice. Next, Kirino slowly drew close to one of the cupboards around there, and ran her finger along the shelf. She looked at the finger and blew on it.

"What's this? There's some dust left?"

"What kind of evil stepsister are you supposed to be?!"² (2)

I ended up yelling back.

"Hawawa, s-sorry... I'll do it over right away...!"

"Manami! You don't have to humor her, seriously!!"

Not paying me any heed, Manami began to anxiously wipe down the cupboard.

It was almost as if I were watching a scene straight out of Cinderella.

"Also! It's nice that you were so eager to clean this place, but if you tidy up everything like this, I won't be able to find anything anymore. You're an outsider, so don't overstep your boundaries. Things might have seemed random thrown around, but I knew exactly where all of my things were."

It was the typical excuse a messy kid would give to his mother.

² He actually uses "sister-in-law" instead of "stepsister." But the meaning is the same.

Also, weren't you the one who told her to clean up? So why are you just randomly telling her now to not clean things? You just want to nitpick Manami's work, don't you?

I can definitely see her in the future, terrorizing her daughter-in-law like that.

"Hey, what about all the magazines I had piled up and organized next to the sofa? Where exactly did you carry those off to?"

"T-They're right here."

She had been wiping off the cupboard, but Manami now tottered over to the television stand, and opened the glass door.

Inside the glass door, the magazines were lined up and the magazines types were organized by their back number.

"These are the fashion magazines... these are the manga magazines..."

... By the way, why exactly did Manami switch to using humble speech towards someone younger than she was?

She seriously looked like nothing but a maid.

"... Well, it's good that they're there... but, was there really a space on this television stand to line up books? Don't tell me you just threw away what was in there before? Tch, who do you think you are? Ahh, that pedicure kit was expensive too. It might have looked empty, but I could still have used it~~."

"I-I didn't throw it away. The pedekyua kit³ ... I put that together with the remote control here."

Suddenly cowering, Manami pointed to the side of the television. In a small accessory case, the remote controls for the television and the air conditioning were resting neatly, along with the pedicure kit or whatever. There were slits carved into the paper accessory case, and it was easy to see with a quick glance what things were there and where they were.

³ Pedicure is basically said in English. The implication in the text seems to be that Manami sucks at pronouncing English words, so I'm going to leave it like this.

I see. This was pretty handy.

“Ohhh...”

Kirino scrutinized the case, seemingly impressed. She was still probably pretty hell bent on nitpicking, so she was trying as hard as she could to find fault with it.

But she couldn't seem to find any major issues, so instead opted for something simple.

“... Was this accessory case here before?”

“I made it from an empty tissue box.”

“That's so cheap!”

Sorry Manami, but I sort of agreed.

But right now, everything was easier to find in the room than it had been before Manami had cleaned, and everything was efficiently arranged, so the room was really in good shape. I puffed out my chest and spoke.

“You done with your nitpicks then?”

“Oogh.....”

“Hahaha! Then go away. You're done here, right?”

I was sunk deep into the sofa, and shooed Kirino away with my hands.

“___”

For a moment, Kirino's eyes widened and she seemed at a loss for words, and then began to almost audibly grind her teeth. It almost looked like she was trying to shoot Manami and me to death with her glare alone.

“... W-What's wrong with you?”

No matter what I had said, she really shouldn't be getting this angry over this situation.

"... You just remember...! I'll make you regret this...!!"

Bang! Kirino spat out those resentful words, and left the living room.

Thud thud thud thud thud thud! I heard her ascend the stairs in irritation.

"... W-What's up with her...?"

I have noooooooooo idea~~~. Why did she just get more and more pissed off?

Part 5

After Kirino had once again left the living room, I sunk into the sofa in complete exhaustion from having gotten stuck in between Kirino and Manami.

“Ugh.....”

What the hell... why did I have to go through all this anxiety just from inviting a friend to come over? I have no idea. It was little sister VS childhood friend. If this were a galge, then this would be a pretty routine jealousy event, but when it came to Kirino and Manami, that didn't apply at all.

I mean, if it did apply, then I really wouldn't know what to do... hahaha.

Geez... this situation is just... I really still had no idea why Kirino was acting the way she was, but for now, it's probably good for me to just make sure these two never meet again. After what I just witnessed, I truly believed that.

“Ahh... I'm hungry. Hey, Manami, isn't it dinnertime soon?”

“Hmm, alright. Leave everything to me.”

Manami pat her own chest confidently and stood up. She rushed into the kitchen, and with practiced motions put on an apron. She looked like the very personification of the concept of “housewife.”

“Alright, I'm going to use your kitchen then.”

She turned in my direction and gave me a smile. Her smile just wrapped anyone who saw it in a nostalgic warmth, and a cozy atmosphere filled the air. My exhaustion, which had persisted until just a few moments ago, was extinguished from my body by its very roots.

“Yeah, use it however you want.”

Manami nodded cheerfully, and began to cook. “Humm humm ♪♪” She hummed as she worked, washing the vegetables with water, and beginning to go to work on them with the kitchen knife.

“You really seem to know what you’re doing in there.”

“E-Ehh? Really?”

I gazed at my childhood friend from behind as she briskly and happily worked away.

There really was some trouble back there, but I’m still really glad I called her over.

This should have been the first time I had seen Manami in our house’s kitchen, but for some reason it felt like she had always been there. I didn’t know a single other high school girl who looked so fit to be in the kitchen. Soon, good smells began to waft through the air. It was the smell of the special “Tamura Household Miso Soup.”

“O-Ooogh... Kyou-chan, you’ve been staring at me for a while... is something wrong?”

“Nah, I was just thinking about how much you reek of old woman.”

“T-That’s so mean! Those weren’t the words I was looking for!!”

Hahaha... ahh, this was nice.

Gradually, a feeling of contentedness filled my chest.

Honestly, I really wanted a mother like Manami.

Then, around thirty minutes later, lunch was done.

“It’s doooooone~~~. Sorry for the wait, Kyou-chan.”

I saw the apron-wearing form of Manami carrying the food to me.

“Thanks for your hard work,” I said, standing up from the dining table. I wanted to help her set the table and lay out the food.

“Ahh, it’s fine, just sit, sit.”

“No, just let me help.”

And, like that, we began to set up for the meal together.

In the middle of that, Manami glanced upwards at the clock.

“... I wonder if Kirino will come down...”

How good-natured could one person be?

Even though Kirino had been bitching so much earlier, she had made Kirino’s portion without a word of complaint.

And what’s more, her line sounded like it came right out of a newlywed bride attending to her malicious mother-in-law.

The clock read precisely noon. It was the perfect time to have lunch.

“I don’t care. Just leave her be and let’s eat alone.”

“W-We can’t do something like that.”

Manami didn’t seem to want to agree. Although, I was expecting her to respond this way anyways.

But no matter how much I didn’t like it, I took on the role of the belabored husband who had to go and pacify the fire-breathing sister-in-law.

“Whatever. I’ll go and call her down.”

“Please don’t argue with her like you did before, alright?”

“I’d like for that to be possible, but...”

We’ll see what happens. As Manami continued to worry about me, I left the living room.

I went up the stairs, and headed for my sister’s room.

Knock, knock.

“Hey Kirino... you didn’t have breakfast, right? Manami made lunch for you too. What do you want to do? Want to come down and eat with us?”

When I faced the door and called out to her, the door opened relatively soon, and Kirino’s head peeked out.

“Lunch? Ah, alright, fine fine, tell her that when I’m done on the phone I’ll come down.”

“O-Ohh... got it.”

Well, that went better than expected... I thought she was going to be much more difficult. She seemed grumpy as usual, but her attitude now was still much more preferable than what it had been before.

“You in a better mood now?”

“Hmph, not really.”

She’s in a better mood, isn’t she? So she managed to calm down in this half hour? Heh, how unusual.

... Well, granted, Kirino had obviously been the one in the wrong before, so maybe she even regretted her actions.

I conveniently interpreted Kirino’s sudden mood upturn in a way that suited me.

Even though it was pretty clear that this wasn’t the case if I just thought about it a bit more.

Well, anyways.

Descending the steps and entering the living room, Kirino might have been in a better mood, but she didn’t apologize for her actions, but rather approached the dining table silently.

“Alright, Kirino-chan. I’m not sure if these suit your tastes, but please.”

“It’s fine... ah, just a bit of rice.”

When she ate with the family, she usually was like this too. She didn't watch the television, didn't talk, but just silently ate her meal. If mother spoke to her she responded, but other than that she didn't speak during meals. In that respect, she was just like our father.

"Umm... this much?"

"... Less than that... around half of that."

"Ehh? You're really fine with that little?"

"Look, the side dishes look really high in calories, so I can't eat that much. If I ate that all then I'd get fat."

"I-I see..."

Manami glanced at her own stomach. Yup, quite fat. If this year went as every other year, then from autumn to winter, my childhood friend's waist size would get a bit larger. Maybe around 7cm more?

No, but really, don't worry about it. You shouldn't be comparing yourself to Kirino in the first place.

Also, the side dishes today might all be high in calories, but they were all things that I liked.

"Haaah~~..."

Becoming aware of her own chubbiness, Manami gave out a sigh. Watching my bespectacled childhood friend, I couldn't help but chuckle a bit. But honestly, I preferred girls who could eat a little over skin-and-bones models, even if they were a bit fat. It wasn't like I was going to say that out loud though.

But seriously, what a mismatched conversation. Putting aside whether or not they got along, they were honestly very incompatible people. Both their sense of values and personalities were completely different in every way.

"W-Well then, let's just enjoy ourselves. Itadakimasu."

“Ahh, itadakimasu.”

“... Itadakimasu.”

We began eating in a strangely heavy atmosphere.

Lined up on the dining table were plates filled with a few people’s worth of tonkatsu, ¹ cabbage, and tomatoes.

Freeze-dried tofu and hijiki ² boiled in soy sauce. A few pickled veggies. Miso soup with wakame ³ and fried tofu.

Leaving the point that these were all pretty high-calorie aside, there was nothing unusual at all about this menu.

“Mm, delicious.”

I took a bite of the crispy tonkatsu, and praised her from the bottom of my heart. I took another bite, and then a third, without waiting for a response.

“Really? ... I’m glad.”

Manami seemed relieved, and smoothed down her chest. She also seemed to be worried about how Kirino liked the food, but unfortunately, Kirino was silently moving her chopsticks and not saying a word.

This is what always happened, and if I pressed her for an opinion we would just end up fighting again, so I didn’t say anything.

“This tonkatsu, other than the meat, you put onions and shiso⁴ in it, and deep-fried it again, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Kyou-chan, you told me before you liked it that way...”

“Oh, did I...? Haha, well, it’s good, so I like it.”

¹ Fried pork cutlets.

² A type of black-ish seaweed.

³ Another type of edible seaweed.

⁴ An Asian herb, and a relative of the mint plant.

Like that, the meal progressed, until the time I had just finished drinking down my second bowl of miso soup...

With a *clang*, Kirino neatly lined up her tableware. With somewhat of a frown on her face, she faced Manami.

“Thanks for the meal. Everything was good.”

“Eh? Ah... t-thanks...”

“Well then, I’ll take my leave.”

She quickly and silently stood from her seat, and with a quick bow, went out of the living room.

Seeing Kirino off with a shocked expression, Manami looked at me for an explanation once Kirino had disappeared from view.

“She said everything was good.”

I couldn’t do much except shrug. Kirino wasn’t the kind of person to lie in situations like this.

She was probably speaking from the heart when she complimented Manami.

“Fuaaaah.....”

My message seemed to get across, and all the tension left Manami’s body. She showed me a loose smile.

She gave out a huge sigh and smoothed down her chest.

“... For some reason, I was really nervous.”

Geez... it’s like this was some sort of marriage test being given by an ill-tempered sister-in-law.

But if that were the case... did she pass or not?

At these sudden, incredibly pointless thoughts, I couldn’t help but laugh.

Part 6

As I took a break after the meal and watched some television, I saw Manami return after washing the dishes. She quietly sat down next to me, and fidgeted around.

“What’s wrong, Manami? If you need the bathroom, you go out of the living room, head straight, and it’s on the right, you know?”

“I-I don’t need to go to the bathroom! Kyou-chan needs to learn more subtlety!”

“Ah, my bad. Then in that case, what’s wrong?”

“That is... I was just thinking... t-that... I wanted to see Kyou-chan’s room.”

“Ah? I don’t mind... but it’s really nothing special.”

“Hooray! ♥”

Manami clapped her hands in front of her, and seemed really happy.

And well, because of that, I ended up inviting Manami to my room.

Leaving the living room, we went up the stairs together.

My room was on the left, right above the stairs. As we went up the stairs one by one, I suddenly had a thought.

... This was the first time a girl was coming up to my room... well, granted, even if I say “girl,” this was Manami we were talking about... but even so, I regretted not cleaning my room yesterday.

All my ero books were in a cardboard box under the bed, and the box was firmly shut with packing tape... And that little trouble generator was also shut up in her own room.

So, there really wasn’t anything that should be a problem.

“This is my room... well, come in.”

Crack. I turned the knob and opened the door, and turned my gaze to the desk right across from us...

Joa9r893(#R(*U9tdsh(#H(R;@:

Wha-...!!!

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!!!!”

I gave out a huge shout and dashed to my study desk, hugging the laptop that was there and hiding the screen from Manami’s view. With the most desperate expression on my face.

... Why, you may ask, was I again doing something so strange like this?

Because an H-scene from an eroge was showing on the screen! On the laptop screen!

And what’s more... what’s more... it was a “little sister” one, dammit!!

This... can’t be happening... right? W-W-W-Whyyyyyy was Kirino’s laptop in my room?

Why... Why did something like this...?!

Calm down. Calm down and think, Kyouzuke! How did it all fall to this? Who the hell set up such a sudden-death trap like this in my room?

No, no, no, no! I don’t even have to think about it! Right now, the only people in the house were me, Manami, and just one other person! Crap, crap, crap! Fucking Kirino!!

She had left the living room in such a bad mood, and then she seemed to be in a better mood... don’t tell me she felt better because she had set up this trap in my room!!

Why the hell did she do something like this?! This is way overboard!!

I-I'll kill her... T-T-T-That girl... I'm definitely going to kill her later...!! U-Ugh...

“W-What’s wrong... Kyou-chan...?”

Looking back with my forehead soaked in cold sweat, I saw Manami peeking in my direction near the entranceway.

At my sudden, eccentric motions, Manami stood there with her mouth opened vacantly.

E-Even if you ask me what’s wrong...

T-This... how am I supposed to explain this image of a loli little sister with her legs spread wide open and her genitals blurred out...?

“N-Nothing’s wrong at all.”

“... Even if you say... that nothing is wrong...”

I know, right?

“No! Seriously, nothing is wrong at all! It’s just that... I was suddenly attacked by the impulse to scream and run!”

Why the hell was I always so poor at making up excuses?

But this was bad... this was really bad. If you ask me what’s bad, it’s the fact that I really don’t trust myself not to jump in front of a moving train if Manami sees this... I’m going to die. I’m seriously going to die.

“.... Haaah~..... haah~~..... haaah~..... haaaah~~~.....”

With my full body and soul, I began to try and think of a way to get out of this. I used what little brains I had and tried to work out a plan.

I was hiding the eroge CG by hugging the laptop like this.

And then, Manami was standing dumbfounded behind me. How was I going to get myself out of this desperate situation?

Was there... was there anything I could do? If I couldn't come up with anything, I'm going to die, you know? Do your best! Do your best, Kyou-suke... uwoooooooooooooohhhhh..... haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!!

"K-Kyou-chan...?"

With a worried expression, Manami slowly approached from the entranceway.

There wasn't much time left... however.

Ding! I could almost hear the sound of a light bulb forming over my head.¹

"... Wait just a second! Yes...! This... this might work..."

Pushed into a corner, I turned my gaze onto the escape key at the corner of the keyboard.

Yes... it was the **EMERGENCY ESCAPE BUTTON!!**

It was the super function that would allow me to switch the full-screen, suicide-inducing ero image to something completely harmless. It was something like the airbags in a car, or maybe the emergency escape function in an airplane. It was the manifestation of the great efforts by the eroge companies to implement the desires of their customers.

And happily, *CO2*, the eroge that was active on the laptop right now, should be equipped with this emergency escape function.

Ahh... Right now, I really wanted to praise those conscientious game makers to high heaven!

And so...

Click. Just barely making it in time, I successfully pushed the emergency escape button.

¹ Literally, "I could almost here a 'Pikon!' sound over my head."

“Phew~~~...”

I separated myself from the screen I was so desperately trying to hide before. I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand.

W-With this, it should be fine... The screen should have already changed to a completely neutral, harmless image. I smoothed down my chest and turned around.

“Haha, sorry for surprising you!”

But, in the direction I threw my refreshing smile, there was...

“W-Wow... this is amazing...”

Manami was gazing at an open copy of one of Kousaka Kyouzuke’s cherished ero books.

“Wha-...?! Where the hell did you get that book?!”

Swish, swish, swish! I quickly looked around the room, when I saw that the collection that should have been hidden under my bed had been unceremoniously scattered on the floor. When I came into the room, I was so panicked about the screen that I hadn’t noticed... w-what... what’s the meaning of... she did this too?!

She did some terrible things, that little sister! She’s like a little devil...!!

“C-Confiscation...!”

“Ahh...”

I snatched away the ero book that Manami was reading in her crouched position, and crawled around on the floor like a cockroach, gathering up the rest of the collection. *Rustle, rustle, rustle.* And I did it with godly speed, too.

Completely dumbfounded, Manami blushed and said one sentence.

“... They were all wearing glasses.”



“That’s not true, damiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!!”

Well, it was true, but it wasn’t like that! U-Ugh! I’m going to burst out into tears here!

Half crying, I continued with my task, and managed to get my collection back into the cardboard box. What the hell... to think that the first girl who came into my room would find my prized collection...

And what’s more, even the books I definitely, *definitely* didn’t want her to see were...

What the hell is up with this booby trapped room?! I want to die already! ... *Sob*. B-But, now there isn’t anything to be afraid of anymore. Because there wasn’t anything in this room that I couldn’t show her beyond what she’s already seen...

There wasn’t, right? I suddenly looked in Manami’s direction...

“..... Jiiii.”²

“M-Manami-san... where perchance are you looking at now...?”

Feeling an ominous chill go down my spine, I couldn’t help but start talking strangely like that.

Because... Manami had gone pale...

As my breathing became ragged in response to this feeling, I followed Manami’s gaze, and right there was the laptop screen which *should have turned to something harmless*.

“Wha... RARERUARGH?!”

I let out a deranged cry of anguish.

That image that the screen had turned to in response to my pushing the emergency escape button...

² Onomatopeia for staring.

That image was...

A loli girl in a school swimsuit, seducing the player in a very suggestive pose. Her words were displayed in a huge font.

Oniichan doesn't want any girl other than his little sister, does he? Oniichan is such a hentai~~~.

“What the hell happened to the emergency escape?! What's with this image?!”

“... K-Kyou-chan... what's... what's this...?”

What... What was the meaning of this?! Why?! The emergency escape button worked the last time I tried! Why did this image come up?! Certainly, the users' manual had mentioned that there were a few emergency escape screens that existed... so could it be...

“The staff was playing around, and made it so that there was some chance that an ero image would pop up when you pushed the emergency escape button?!”

If that's the case... then... then... screw this damn game...!!

Who was it?! Which employee thought of this vicious trap?!

You probably thought this was just a joke... but haven't you considered the possibility that there are men in the world who entrust their lives to this emergency escape button?!

Well?! How about that, you damn game producers?!

Sob... I-I mean... this really couldn't be happening...

That's awful... betraying the pure hearts of high school men like this...

“Kyouchan... what does ‘want’ mean? Like, a bath?”³

No, not at all!

No... this isn’t the time to be bashing the game producers!

I hurriedly glanced at Manami’s expression again, when I saw that my bespectacled childhood friend was gazing fixatedly at the ecchi CG with her eyes opened wide and her face looking shocked.

“U-Ugh...”

What exactly could I say to get myself out of this one? I couldn’t just keep silent, but I couldn’t think of anything to say either. And also, even if I did say something, I have a feeling that it would be too late anyways...

Uwaaaaaaaaahh!! To think that the day would come that this event would happen to me...!!

The thing I had feared all along has finally become reality...!!

During the summer... when Kirino had her hobby exposed to her friends, she had completely blown her fuse, but I couldn’t make fun of that anymore. Now that I was in the same situation, I could see how terrible this was. I had no idea what to do. My heart was beating out my chest, and I could feel time slow down painfully around me.

As cold sweat dripped from my forehead, I couldn’t do anything except stare at my childhood friend.

“U-Umm.....”

For a little while, Manami tried to find the right words, but couldn’t and sat there with red on her cheeks.

“... I see.”

³ Yokujou, depending on how it is written in kanji, can either mean “place to take a bath” or “sexual craving.” In this case, it wasn’t written in kanji, but was written in the phonetic alphabet, so the meaning was ambiguous. Except not really.

Finally, she showed me a warm, affectionate smile.

I see...?

What do you see?!

What the hell kind of conclusion did you just reach?! I want to know, but I'm too afraid to ask...!!

.....

Well, I did have faith. I had faith that my relationship with Manami wasn't so weak that it would change because of something like this.

My beloved peaceful life would not be destroyed by a trifling bombshell like this.

So... of course, Manami had seen some ero books in my room featuring girls in glasses, and had seen an ecchi little sister CG... but just from that, she wouldn't flip out, and wouldn't say "Please don't talk to me anymore" like a certain someone.

She wouldn't. She didn't... but... this time, what would she say to me...?

It would probably be something that I would not forget for as long as I lived.

"... Umm... Kyou-chan... that is..."

Manami looked from the screen to my face and back again, and gave me a bashful smile that you would almost expect to see on a bodhisattva... and then said this:

"... From now on, should I call you oniichan?"

Right there and then, I burst out into tears.



第三章

ore no imouto ga konnani kawaii wake ga nai

Chapter 3

Part 1

Otaku Girls Heartwarming Chat Number One.

Participants:

- Saori (Admin)
- Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°)
- †Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves†¹

†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† : I told you already, that's not how you read it. How many times do I have to explain it to you for you to understand, you Neanderthal? It's written like "Chiba," but it's pronounced "Senyou." In other words, think about it as if a thousand leaves were gracefully fluttering down...

Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°): It still looks like "Chiba" to me www Fallen Saint Kuroneko of Chiba (lol) www²

†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† : ... I-if you mock me any more than that, you're going to regret it dearly.

Saori (Admin): Now now... calm down, you two. More importantly, there's something I wanted to ask Kiririn-san...

Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°): Hm?

Saori (Admin): Umm... Kiririn-san, what was the meaning of *that*?

¹ A thousand leaves is written with certain kanji that can also be read as "Chiba," which is actually the name of the city where Kirino and Kyouzuke live.

² I've mentioned this before, but www is short for "warau," which means "to laugh." It's basically a Japanese version of "lol."

Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°): Huh? *That?* What is “*that*”?

Saori (Admin): That’s pretty obvious... I’m talking about Kyouzuke-oniisama.

Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°): ???

Saori (Admin): O-Ooo, you’re playing dumb. I’m talking about when we came over to Kiririn-san’s house the other day.

Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°): ... Ahh, that? Yeah yeah yeah yeah. Geez... this is ridiculous. He was depressed by himself, and now it’s getting us down too (#°Д°)

†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† : ... Hmph, certainly, he seemed to be completely depressed... he didn’t even respond much when we talked to him. I’ve always thought he’s had a murky look in his eyes, but his eyes were more decidedly dead than usual. He looked like he had been raped.

Saori (Admin): He’s always so considerate of us, and always so cheerfully playing along with our conversations. To see Kyouzuke-oniisama in a state like that... exactly what happened?

Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°): Hehehe, weeeell... ww It’s not anything special, but...

~~~Some Parts Omitted~~~

**Saori (Admin):** ... W-Well well..... Kiririn-san... you definitely went too far.

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** Eh~? It’s not my fault at all~ ww Sure, I was the one who loaded the game on the computer and threw around all his ero books, but that last thing was completely him getting his just desserts ww I mean, he pushed the emergency escape button and screwed himself over wwwww that’s just so wwwww haha www

**†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves†** : That’s quite unpleasant, so please stop tagging on “www” to every sentence. Also, if you worked so hard

to set such an elaborate trap up, then no matter how you look at it, it's your fault.

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** Huh?! Why are you shifting the blame onto me?! You were the one who told me to set up a trap to drive the four-eyes out in the first place! On the phone!

**Saori (Admin):** Wait a second! Kuroneko-san came up with that trap?!

**†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† :** ... H-Hmph. I didn't expect you to actually do it...

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** Don't make excuses, iiiidiot! Everything was your fault! So how are you going to make this up to me?! I'm the one who has to live with that gloomy thing under the same roof!

**†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† :** D-Don't try to take advantage of the confusion and throw the blame onto someone else please. You're the one who came to me with a "There's some plain-looking woman in the house and I'm so annoyed" over the phone. Even if I were to grant you some concession in this argument and take some of the blame, it would be 20 percent at the best. Please realize that the one who did the crime is the one who must take most of the blame.

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** What the hell is that?! Stop just saying whatever the hell you want to say! It was your fault! Your fault!

**†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† :** You would be the one who's saying whatever you want. Hmph, it's your fault, your fault.

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** Nooooooooooooo~ It's your fault and that plain-looking woman's faaaaaaaaaaault~.

**Saori (Admin):** (#^ω^)

**†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† :** ^Oh... could it be... we made her angry?

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** Whaa~~?! Seriously?!

**Saori (Admin):** Y-You two! How could you treat Kyouusuke-oniisama so poorly when he's always helping you out so much?! That's quite ridiculous!

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** You know, when you say it so prissy like that, you really sound like you're lecturing us.

**†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† :** She's probably just acting like some high-class "princess" character when she's online. She deliberately changed the way she talks and even her personality. Hmph, pretty neat skill you have there.

**Saori (Admin):** T-This isn't about me... more importantly. I really do pity Kyouusuke-oniisama... I want to do something to cheer him up. Kiririn-san, Kuroneko-san, both of you are going to help me. Or rather, you're going to take the initiative!

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** W-Why do I have to do something like that...?

**Saori (Admin):** Don't play dumb, please. Kiririn-san should understand even if I don't say it. Generally, when it's come to you lately... well, granted, it's not like I can't understand your feelings, but...

**Kiririn @ Third Season of Meruru Announced (°∇°):** ... Tch, talking like you know everything..... well? What are we going to do?

**†Fallen Saint Kuroneko of a Thousand Leaves† :** My my... I guess I have no choice then.

### Part 2

That day, Saori called me out to Akihabara with an email.

“... Ugh, what the hell is it this time? Calling someone all the way out here...”

I grumbled, annoyed, as I walked through the Electric City<sup>1</sup> towards where I was instructed to go.

I was still in the worst mood. Even the dazzling sun shining down on the city streets seemed to just be mocking me. Hunched over even more than usual, I had both hands thrust in my pockets, and heavily tottered forwards. If you want to know why I had been reduced to this state, these were the still lingering effects of that trap Kirino had set up a few days ago, through which my childhood friend saw an eroge in my room.

... Ugh, I really just want to die.

I mean, it's not like Manami hates me, or anything serious like that.

Actually, I don't know if she's just being considerate or something, but ever since the incident, Manami hasn't brought up the subject a single time.

But it was so painful! You understand, right? This absolutely helpless feeling.

Aaahh, when I think back on every little incident that's happened in my life, I feel my chest filling up with painful regret...

In any case, the pain in my heart wasn't the kind that would vanish with just a week's time.

And today, I was coaxed out here by Saori, who told me excitedly to come for “Kiririn-shi's cell phone novel going-on-sale party.”

Remember, we had gone out to buy a present for Kirino before.

So we were going to hand that present over to her today.

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<sup>1</sup> Nickname for Akihabara.

This is ridiculous. Honestly, I didn't want to take a single step out of my room, and now I have to go to a party for that little devil?

But, I mean... it was none other than Saori who had asked, so...

She always was helping us out, so it really just wouldn't feel right if I didn't try to return the favor.

In other words, the reason I had come this far was not for Kirino, but for Saori.

So don't get the wrong idea.

"... So, here then?"

I suddenly stopped walking, and looked up at a completely ordinary-looking building.

Although if I had to say it, it did look somewhat suspicious.

There were a few signs hung on the building, and one of those signs read "3F: Rental Room @ Akibatto."<sup>2</sup> I compared it to what was written in the email Saori had sent me, and confirmed that this was indeed the right place.

"A rental room...? What's that...?"

I heard this later, but it was a room, sort of like a karaoke box, that you could use for meetings, and you could rent equipment for it too.

I took the elevator up. The elevator door slid open. To my immediate right there was a reception desk behind a pane of glass, and on my left there was a hallway and a few doors.

I see, each of the doors led to a separate rental room.

Just like I would at a karaoke place, I was supposed to go up to the window and ask for my room number, but even if I didn't do that it was pretty obvious to me where I was supposed to go. Right next to the door closest to

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<sup>2</sup> I tried to see if this was a real company, but I think it was something the author made up.

me, there was a signpost, the kind you might find at a formal wedding or something. Umm, you know what I mean right? A sign with “Something Something Meeting Spot” written on it or something.

In that way, the following was written on the sign:

**Kousaka Kyousuke Personal Harem Group, Party Meeting Spot**

Ha, ha, ha! I wonder who this Kousaka Kyousuke is...

Personal harem? This guy's an idiot. Is he a complete hentai or something? Does he have no shame?

“Wait, that's my full name~~~?!?!”

Who was it?! Who dares disgrace my name in public like this?!

This was probably Saori's doing. Kirino and Kuroneko would die before using a word like “harem.” There's no mistaking it; she wrote this here herself without telling the other two.

Ughh~~~... she's always a huge help so I don't want to say this but... what the hell are you doing to a guy when he's completely down, you idiot?! I'm going to cry! Seriously!

“Ah, you must be Kousaka Kyousuke-sama. Please go to room 301.”

“... Got it.”

I nodded, weak and resigned, to the receptionist, and walked to the side of the **Kousaka Kyousuke Personal Harem Group, Party Meeting Spot** sign. For some reason, there had been bells attached to this door that weren't on any other door. It was clearly an improvised decoration... it just looked unnatural.

Hmm...? These bells... A chill went down my spine and I had a sudden sense of déjà vu. I opened the door.

*Ringg. Ringg.*

“Welcome home, master!!”

Two maid-sans wearing aprons stood side by side and greeted me.

I pretended not to see anything and shut the door.

“..... W-What the hell was that just now.....?”

I mumbled as I held down the door with both hands. T-There was a huge one in there, wasn't there?! I wasn't seeing things, right?! A..... A maid.....? Was it really alright to have a maid that built??

W-W... W-W-Wait just a second. I need a second to gather my thoughts. N-No... or maybe I just didn't want to believe what I just saw... or... uhh...

“... It.... It looked like some familiar faces were wearing some... really ridiculous outfits...”

*Gulp.* I swallowed, and wiped the sweat off my forehead.

After taking a few deep breaths, I once again timidly opened the door.

*Ringg. Ringg.*

“Welcome home, mas- ugh, I seriously can't do this anymore!!”

The minute I opened the door, the brown-haired maid (the one that wasn't huge) who came to greet her master (that would be me) suddenly snapped. *Crash!* She threw her dress onto the floor and shouted vigorously.

“Whyyy do I have to cosplay a maid and come out here to welcome him?!”

“K-Kiririn-shi! Come on, please, calm down, calm down! You were fine when we practiced, but why did you get so riled up during the real thing?!”

As I suspected, the huge maid-san I had caught a glimpse of before turned out to be Saori. She might have been wearing a maid costume, but her swirly eyeglasses had not changed.

On the other side, a maid-costume-wearing Kirino had taken such a nasty attitude that if I were really her master, I would fire her in less than a second. She pointed right at her brother's face.

"It's completely different when he's right in front of me and when he's not, dammit! I'm interested in cosplay itself so this was fun, but degrading myself in front of him is something my pride can't take!!"

Well, I'm still pretty confused as to what's going on here. But if you say that, what's going to happen to my own pride?

Not even a sliver of it left, right?

"... Y-You all.... This..... What is this.....?"

Completely bewildered at this incomprehensible sight before me, I barely managed to get that question out.

But neither Kirino nor Saori paid me any mind and continued to talk to each other.

I looked around the room. It was a mostly-white, simple room.

The room was around twelve or thirteen tatami large. There was a white office table, an office chair, a whiteboard, and two 32-inch LCD monitors that were connected to a computer. On the table there were a few PSPs, which probably belonged to the girls.

... Looking at it like this, I could accept it if someone told me that this was a meeting place where people were coming together to do things and maybe play a few games.

But why were they in maid outfits? That I could not even begin to understand.

This wasn't a party to celebrate Kirino's cell phone going on sale?

A number of question marks materialized above my head, when Saori, seeming to have finished her discussion with Kirino for the moment, anxiously spoke up to me with an "Oh, crap" look on her face.

“Ahaha, well, this is just part of today’s show! This rental room also has a cosplay lending service available. Well, how is it, my maid outfit? Is it cute?”

Do I look like I want to see such a gigantic maid like that?

I really, really wanted to say that, but I barely managed to restrain myself. Yes, I can’t say what I really feel to someone who’s helped me so much in the past.

“... I-It’s... cute, I guess...?”

“Hohoh, you feel moe for me then?”

“Absolutely not.”

Crap, I shouldn’t have said that! It’s just that she looked so smug about it that I couldn’t help myself!

Having had her maid costume rejected with a straight face, Saori curled her mouth up into her usual ω shape, and mumbled with her head down.

“Nyoron~.”

Well sorry. I don’t get the reference, so I can’t respond.<sup>3</sup>

Paying no attention to my bewilderment, Saori grumbled something.

“..... Hmm, he doesn’t seem to be happy to see me like this very much... that’s strange, even though I heard that Kyouzuke-shi has a glasses fetish...”

“Why the hell do *you* know *that*?!”

On top of everything, Kirino’s been going around blabbing her brother’s secrets?!

*Ding!* I sent a glare at the suspect, but my sister shrugged her shoulders, as if saying “Don’t look at me, iiiidiot.” Dammmiiiiiiiiiiiiit... how much do you plan to run my dignity into the gutter?!

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<sup>3</sup> This is a Suzumiya reference. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGWn4cnJXU4> here you go.

I-It's not like that! It's a complete coincidence that there are a lot of girls wearing glasses in my collection! Before I knew it, that's just how it became!!

I'm not that kind of person at all!

I tried to explain that to Saori, but...

"Fufufu... so the tipoff I got about Kyouzuke-shi's glasses fetish was right... but, if that's true, what's the meaning of this? With how I am now, I should be right in the dead center of Kyouzuke-shi's strike zone..."

"I don't feel moe at that at all, I said! That wasn't a strike, that was a ball aimed right for my forehead!! ... And also... you're not wearing glasses at all! You're wearing swirly glasses! These are two completely different things! Understand, dammit?!"

"... Yes, I understand Kyouzuke-shi's enthusiasm for glasses all too well."

Before I knew it, Saori had drawn back. Why? Did I say something weird?

Well, yeah, I guess I might have said a bit too much. She had gone through all the trouble to come and welcome me like this too...

I scratched my cheek, and decided to get the conversation back on track.

"... I mean, leaving that aside for now... I can see how you wanted to surprise me. But for me to be happy... at any rate, you mixed my sister in there, so..."

I already said this to Saori, but I felt not even a shred of that otaku-ish happiness they referred to as "moe."

Hearing my response, Saori made another ω with her mouth.

"Fumumu... ah, I see, so you're saying it would have been better if she wore something more ecchi?"

"Better my ass! And what the hell do you mean by 'I see'?! I don't have a sister fetish, dammit!!"

And now she looks puzzled and she's cocking her head to the side! Just as always, it doesn't seem like Japanese can get through to her!

As I argued with Saori with all my strength, just like a certain time long ago, Kirino came and kicked me hard in the Achilles tendon. *Bam.*

"Ow...?!? Again... you... ugh... what the hell?!"

When I turned around with tears in my eyes, I saw my little sister glaring at me fiercely from point-blank range.

"Shut up! I'm standing there listening, and I'm getting fed up with your attitude! I went s-s-so far and did this for you... what are you so unhappy about?!"

"You don't know?!"

"Not at all... you're acting like an idiot, getting angry all by yourself like that... Hmph, even though I wouldn't put on something like this during a photo shoot..."

With a *hmph*, Kirino crossed her arms in her maid outfit and turned the other way.

Usually, you would expect brown hair, earrings, and a maid outfit to be a big mismatch, but maybe because of her natural good looks, Kirino somehow pulled it off. I didn't want to admit it, but based on appearance alone, she definitely looked very cute.

I gazed at my little sister in her maid outfit with a complicated state of mind, but then, Kirino glared at me with a cold sideways glance.

"..... Gross, what are you looking at?"

Didn't you wear those clothes because you wanted to be looked at in the first place?! Why the hell are you saying that when you're the one who put those clothes on?!

Geez... what the hell is up with this situation? I came here because I was told that they were throwing Kirino a party because her cell phone novel went on

sale... and then for some reason they came and welcomed me in maid outfits... and then when I responded strangely, they started to get angry... is this not the most unreasonable situation ever?

Also, they're hiding something, aren't they? I mean, there's clearly something strange about this.

"... Hm."

But, I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

At the very least, this party didn't seem to be for what I was told it was going to be for...

... I have to be on my guard. What exactly are these people planning...?

I looked around me very cautiously. And then, I realized it.

Kirino and Saori and...

One person was missing.

"Hm? Where's Kuroneko? She didn't come?"

"Ah, if you want Kuroneko-shi..."

The maid-san with the swirly glasses spun around and pointed to a corner of the room.

Right there was...

"Ah."

"....."

A nekomimi maid was quietly peeking out her head out from behind a curtain.

**Part 3**

“It’s not what you think.”

That was the first thing that came out of Kuroneko’s mouth. She gulped, almost as if she was steeling herself, and timidly came out from behind the curtain... and those were the first words out of her mouth.

“ .....

I didn’t know what to say, and just stared at the sullen, embarrassed-looking nekomimi maid right in front of me. She was wearing the same white apron dress as everyone else, but she had on a pair of black nekomimi that looked just like the real thing, and a tail was sprouting from behind... It was an insanely good match, but I had no idea what comments to make here.

Without any other options, I just stood there silently and expressionlessly.

When I did that, she seemed to take my silence to mean something, and suddenly turned the other way.

“..... It’s not what you think, I said.”

Even if you say that...

I really had no idea what I was “wrong” about, but I seemed to have offended her.

When the room began to fall into another uncomfortable silence, Saori came to everyone’s rescue.

“Ahah Kuroneko-shi! You don’t have to be that embarrassed. Those clothes really fit you! Kyouzuke-shi also thinks so, right?”

“A-Ahh... yeah, they look good on you.”

“..... Hmph, save the flattery for someone else.”

Kuroneko once again sharply turned the other way. She pretty much had her back on us at this point.

Her nekomimi shuddered, and the tail coming out of her behind swayed back and forth.

... T-They move...? ... That's amazing... costumes are getting way too real lately...

Kirino seemed to be thinking the same thing, and her eyes widened.

"... I don't want to say it but... that's pretty c-cute."

From her actions, I surmised that she hadn't known about the moving ears and tail until now.

Kirino had a very established personal philosophy on fashion, and when it came to appearances and outfits, she wasn't the kind of person to tell lies.

Even with someone who she almost always argued with, she could give sincere praise at times like this.

"Hey, won't you tell me? Where did you buy those nekomimi and that tail? You didn't get those from the costumes they had available here, I don't think."

"... These were homemade."

"You made them yourself?! Seriously?!"

"..." *Nod.*

Kuroneko let down her guard just a bit and nodded. Perhaps she was inwardly happy at how surprised Kirino was, but Kuroneko spoke a bit about cosplay with us. Broadly speaking, there are three ways of getting a cosplay outfit – rental, purchase, or self-made. Out of these three, the easiest one was rental.

After all, you didn't need to spend as much money as if you bought the outfit, and you didn't need as much skill as if you made the outfit yourself.

“... If you can make it yourself, in many cases you can keep the cost cheap. If you’re a bit clever about it, the materials won’t cost that much. Of course, if you want to make something detailed, you’ll end up spending more.”

“... Hmm... you’re relatively good at this stuff.”

Considering how contrarian Kirino usually was, it was pretty rare to hear her acknowledge Kuroneko like this. Of course, even if it was Kirino, in this situation she could do nothing but praise Kuroneko’s work. Because it really was amazing.

She was also absurdly good at games... Kuroneko sure was pretty good with her hands.

But this girl had a tendency to lash back out of shyness when she was praised, and like always, Kuroneko began to retort angrily. As her ears wiggled and her tail swished back and forth...

“... Each and every time... don’t I always tell you to stop praising yourself in a roundabout way (wobble wobble)? ... Hmph, really, you’re just implying that you’re good at these things too, aren’t you? (swish swish)”

“... Ugh... crap...! This costume, dammit...! I hate this... a girl like her...!”

Kirino covered her mouth with her hands, and seemed to be dealing with some kind of shock. Perhaps because of that, she once again let loose a set of words that she usually would never say.

“Hey... heey, next time, make some for me too... those nekomimi and that tail.”

“.....”

Being pressured by a Kirino she was completely not used to seeing, Kuroneko seemed bewildered. Her large cat-like eyes blinked with surprised, and she seemed slightly taken aback.

“... Nn.”

Right then, for some reason, Kuroneko sent her gaze in my direction.

I'm not sure at all, but was she telling me "Hey, do something about your annoying sister"?

That's probably it... nothing else would make sense here.

I shrugged my shoulders and spoke.

"Haha, why don't you just make some for her?"

"... Cover the cost of the materials then."

Kuroneko mumbled reluctantly, not even meeting Kirino's eyes as Kirino pleaded with her hands clasped in front of her.

Saori stood off to the side, just silently staring at this exchange...

And for some reason, she had a broad grin on her face.

### Part 4

And for that reason, I found myself in a rental room with these three otaku.

All four of us were sitting at the table. By the way, all the girls in the party were still in their maid outfits.

They've already done their little gag, so honestly, they should just take those things off.

To think that they would all be wearing that... even for a party, it was just doing too much.

There wasn't any rhyme or reason to our seating order; we just pulled out the roly chairs randomly and sat wherever we wanted.

There were two 32-inch displays on the table, and they seemed to be connected to game machines and computers.

"We use this space for offline meeting after-parties quite often. There are power sockets, we can use our computers and play games... it really is more useful than a karaoke box would be. Nin nin."

Saori was explaining the rental room to me. Responding vaguely with an "ahh...," I then posed the obvious question to these three.

"So..... umm, what do we do now? I thought this was a party for Kirino, but is it just me or at some point, did I become the guest of honor?"

"... It's just you."

"... You're an idiot."

Kuroneko and Kirino threw back those retorts. I looked to Saori for an explanation, but she didn't make any signs of giving me one. She's definitely hiding something...

Saori began to talk, as if trying to change the topic.

“Anyways, my turn’s up... so Kuroneko-shi is up.”

Having the conversation turned towards her, Kuroneko silently nodded. But I still had no idea what was going on.

“What? What’s the ordering for?”

“Fufufu... it’s a more practical version of the usual ‘conversation topic game,’ Kyouzuke-shi. I said that there would be a show, right? So, one by one, we’ll perform something that we prepared for Kiririn-shi.”

“I see. But, I never knew about that, so I didn’t prepare anything.”

“Haha, I don’t mind. At any rate, I have a feeling that Kyouzuke-shi’s reaction will be enough of a performance.”

Hey, what the hell does that mean?

“You are all so annoying. It’s fine... just don’t worry about the fine details.”

“It’s just as Kiririn-shi says. This is the party’s entertainment, so let’s just all have some good, cheerful fun together.”

“Hmph.”

I snorted. Honestly, I wasn’t in the mood for that, but...

“If you say so, I’ll do that.”

I shrugged while holding down a bitter smile. I mean, that’s what I had wanted to do from the beginning.

As much as Kirino annoyed me, I wouldn’t do anything that would cause the party organizer to lose face.

What I should do now is to watch these performances you three have prepared, and then to happily join in on the conversations that will follow. Rather, there really wasn’t anything else I could do. Alright, got it.

I don’t know if I can do this or not, but I’ll just make the best of it.

“Are we all ready now?”

Ready to make her presentation, Kuroneko spoke softly to us. When everyone nodded, she moved the PC mouse that was on the table, and started up a program.

“This... is what I’m presenting.”

On the screen, there was shown the front cover of what looked to be a manga.

There was a girl in a uniform standing there, frowning and with her arms crossed... and behind her, there was the face of an idiotic-looking guy.

The title was “Belphegor’s Curse.”

“... This is a manga I drew for today. Please watch my presentation.”

It seemed that this was a manga that Kuroneko had drawn for Kirino. She had shown me her art once before, but maybe she had practiced since then, since even for a novice like me it was clear that she had improved. Maybe she changed the way she drew, but the jaws weren’t that pointed anymore. Rather, they were rounded and looked impressively cute. It almost felt like the art could be in an anime.

“... You really got way better at drawing in a short time.”

“... Thank you. It puts me at ease to hear you say that.”

Kuroneko smoothed down her chest. Those words were probably her true feelings.

Just like she had said a while ago, she was probably trying hard at making manga and was practicing. And this much-improved artwork was the fruit of her labors. I mean, she was amazing at games and was really handy at making her own cosplay. So she was probably more suited for drawing manga than writing novels.

At this rate, I felt that the day when she would be able to stare triumphantly down at Kumagai-san wouldn’t be too far away.

It was great. I really thought it was great, but...

“... That’s nice. However.”

The one who had put my thoughts into words was none other than Kirino, who was standing there *frowning and with her arms crossed*.

She probably was thinking the same thing I was, and muttered with a voice that betrayed none of her feelings.

“Can I just ask you one thing?”

“Go ahead?”

“..... This character looks exactly like me, doesn’t she?”

“.....And this unfortunate looking guy for some reason really looks like me.”

“Ha ha ha, quite amazing! They certainly look just like Kiririn-shi and Kyousuke-shi!”

Following Kirino, both Saori and I made our points. Having heard what we had to say, Kuroneko nodded.

“... Fufu, if the people themselves say so, then I guess I can be a bit more confident in them then.”

In quite an unusual turn of events... Kuroneko smiled. Her smile was different from her usual expressionless face, and was more than cute enough to draw me in, but...

“You really did use me as a model!” “So you used me as a model?!”

There was absolutely no time for that. Kirino and I thrust in our comments at the same time.

“W-What are you trying to do with this...?”

“I’m not trying to do anything.”

Kuroneko wasn’t fazed by Kirino’s glare at all, and shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s just as it looks. I drew for you a manga in which I used you as a model for a character. You have a problem with that?”

“... I don’t, but for soooome reason I have a bad feeling about this.”

What a coincidence, Kirino.

Me too.

“My my, to think you would judge it before you’ve even read it, just based on a ‘feeling’... that’s so unbecoming of Rino-sensei, don’t you think? I wonder who it was that once said something like ‘you aren’t qualified to judge something until you’ve read it until the end’?”

“... Grr.”

Rino-sensei, aka Kirino, ground her teeth.

Yes, no matter how much of a bad feeling she had about it, Kirino couldn’t bash Kuroneko’s manga at this point. You could say she was a consistent person, or maybe she was just inflexible.

*Grrrrr...* Even as she ground her teeth, my sister couldn’t respond in any other way:

“... Please continue.”

“... Why thank you.”

Kuroneko sneered triumphantly. At her wicked smile, I felt the sense of impending doom in my chest intensify.

“Well then, let me begin the presentation.”

*Click.* The picture on the screen changed, and the manga began.

In the first panel, the girl who looked just like Kirino was sunk deep into the couch, reading a fashion magazine.

Kuroneko read the summary out loud.

“I’m Kirino. My face might be super round, but I’m a brilliant junior high school student who also works as a magazine model.”

“You want to die?!”

“My my my my! Kiririn-shi! Keep a hold of yourself!”

“But this... this is just straight libel!”

“No no! This isn’t Kiririn-shi, but just this character ‘Kirino’ in the manga!<sup>1</sup> She might look just like you but she’s a different person, so please keep that in mind! A-And what’s more, kuku... it just started, didn’t it?! What comes after is what you should look forward to!”

Even as she held Kirino back by the arms, Saori was smiling. She probably thought it was all pretty interesting, so she wanted to read the rest of the story. Dammit, what happened to sympathy?<sup>2</sup>

“Someone tell this girl that round faces are a status symbol!”

Who the hell believes in a crazy theory like that?!

“... Hmph, let me continue then.”

Kuroneko read the prologue out loud with a gloomy voice.

The story had just started... but it seemed that this manga “Belphegor’s Curse” was told completely from this “Kirino’s” point of view. There were a lot of monologues, so it was easy to understand what the protagonist Kirino was thinking and feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirino here is written completely in katakana, whereas Kirino’s (the real person) name is written in kanji.

<sup>2</sup> Literally, “she’s thinking as if it’s someone else’s problem.”

On the contrary, when it came to the other characters, all that the reader could see was how Kirino saw those situations. Hmm... and this protagonist seemed to interpret each and every one of everyone else's actions in a bad way, so I was getting increasingly impatient. "It's not like that, idiot!" I wanted to scream at her.

Laying out all the details would get a bit tedious, so I'll just give you the summary.

Kirino has a brother named Kyouzuke who's 3 years older than she is. But their relationship was cold as ice, and they were completely indifferent towards each other. Even if they came across each other while at home, they would have nothing to talk about, so they didn't even see each other very often at home. And the only times they talked to each other were when they were hurling insults.

There was not even a smidgen of warmth between them. They were two siblings embroiled in a cold war...

"... Hey, this setup..."

"... What? This is just a manga, remember?"

I had no choice but to shut up at that argument. I might not be Kirino, but even for me it made sense to hear a story out to the very end before passing judgment on it.

But, this preliminary setup... I might not like it, but it made me think of myself and Kirino.

Could it be that this was a manga that Kuroneko had drawn about how Kirino seemed from her viewpoint...?

W-Well, whatever. Let's get on with the summary. Umm... where were we? Ah, right, at the point where I was explaining how the siblings had a very cold relationship towards each other.

However, Kirino had a secret that she couldn't tell anybody.

For example, when Kyousuke went to take a bath... after she checked that her brother had gotten into the bathtub, Kirino would quickly slip into the changing area, and take out a single piece of clothing from the laundry hamper.

“... Haah... haah... haah... haah... my aniki’s underwear... *gulp... sniff sniff sniff...*”

**“Wait just a damn second!!”**

Kirino and I yelled out at the same time.

Having her reading interrupted, Kuroneko sent a nonchalant glance in our direction.

“What?”

“Wait wait wait wait wait! Just wait a second here...!”

As I motioned for Kuroneko to stop with the palm of my hand, I wiped the sweat from my brow and looked at my sister.

“..... Y-You..... did you really..... my underwear.....?”

“I didn’t smell your underwear! T-T-T-This is just a manga!!”

“Then why the hell are you stuttering?! You scared of something?!”

I-It seems that my idea that this was how Kuroneko saw Kirino from her perspective was completely off the mark! Or rather, please God, let it be off the mark!

“Also, you shitty cat! No matter how much you say it’s just a manga, there are just things you can do and things you can’t!”

“... Why are you taking it so seriously? My intention was to create a work of fiction, but if you react like this, it makes me start to suspect that maybe I’ve hit on the truth.”

“Y-Y-You..... Grrr..... Just continue, dammit...!!”

When it came to arguments, it seemed like Kirino was only good when there was shouting involved. Is it just me, or was she a pushover there?

“Geez. Please stop interrupting me at every little thing. If you do that, you won’t be able to appreciate the manga.”

*Click.* The page flipped, and Kuroneko continued to read aloud.

But in any case, it seemed that the Kirino in the manga, unlike the real-life Kirino, was a complete brocon.

On the outside, she acted as if she hated him, but on the inside she was lovey dovey towards her brother.

Honestly, it was a disgusting setup. Seriously, just cut me some slack here.

Having carefully satisfied herself with her brother’s underwear, Kirino withdrew from the changing room, and this time went up the stairs. Her brother’s room was on top. Her brother’s room didn’t have a lock, so Kirino could freely enter the room.

“What the hell?! This is too real! How do you know my door is unlocked?!”

“Research.”

“Now that I think about, you came over before, right?! So, don’t tell me that at that time, you were taking a look at my house’s layout and specifications?!”

“Hmph, naturally. Don’t underestimate the power of my evil eye.”

It was just a pointless skill... what the hell do you mean “evil eye,” you idiot?

W-Well, it’s not like I care if she knew that my door didn’t have a lock on it.

It wasn’t like she had intruded on my privacy, so I didn’t mind.

“... Just continue.”

“... Of course.”

*Click.* Onto the next page.

With her butt sticking out in an erotic way, Kirino was fishing for something under her brother's bed.

And what ended up popping out was none other than Kyousuke's secret ero book collection.

"... Tch, why does he only have ones with girls in glasses...? Get some little sister ones, dammit."

Right then, Kirino – by which I mean the real-life Kirino – stood up and almost looked like she was trying to hide the screen.

"I-I never said that, ok?! I've never said anything like that!"

"More importantly, why the hell does Kuroneko know where I hide my ero books?!"

"Eh? Because I told her."

"So you went into my room and fished under my bed?!"

"Wha-, why the hell are you throwing around false accusations?! Mom told me, mom did!!"

"Mom is the source of the leak?!"

Gyaaaaaaaaahh!! When it came to the women in my family, each and every damn one of them was...

Alright, fine! I should just change the hiding spot, right?! Dammit, just you remember!

I'm going to find a hiding spot that'll never be found!!

Kirino and I continued our noisy argument.

At a pause in the argument, Kuroneko sighed<sup>3</sup> and mumbled.

“... Can I continue now?”

“... Whatever, do whatever you want.”

I spat that out at Kuroneko. I was gradually getting more and more resigned, and resolved to not care no matter what came up later in the manga. Even if Kuroneko knew things that she shouldn't have known, even if the Kirino in the novel started acting in a completely strange way... I won't say anything. I won't say anything at all!

Kirino seemed to have arrived at the same state, and frowned as she sat back down with her arms on the table, her chin resting in her hands.

The rest of the manga ran a bit like this:

The closet brocon Kirino had what you could call a mortal enemy.

That mortal enemy was Kyoukue's childhood friend, Manami.

On the surface, Manami was a plain-looking, harmless girl, but in reality she was the reincarnation of the demon Belphegor, and was trying to corrupt Kyoukue's soul. Because even if Kyoukue didn't know it himself, he was the reincarnation of the fallen angel Lucifer, who had once been expelled from heaven... etc. etc.

What the hell was this?!

“..... ggg.... gggggggggggnngggg...”

I can't do this. I'm reaching my limit...! Don't lash out, Kyoukue...! Just bear it!

As my face twitched in irritation, right next to me...

“Kwaah~... kuwaah... gnnngg... aghhhh... grnghhhh...”

---

<sup>3</sup> It was literally “She mumbled as if saying ‘geez.’” But I changed it to sound better in English.

Kirino was biting her lower lip, her eyes were bloodshot, and she was trying to not go on a rampage.

She also seemed to getting incredibly annoyed at the brocon setup and the jakigan setup.

“... Kukuku. The climax is coming up.”

After that, the story devolved further into bizarro land... Kirino’s love towards her brother impressed God, and she was gifted with the Lance of Longinus by the holy angel Kuroneko and headed for the final battle with Manami’s demon avatar.

I have no idea what’s going on.

Having been pushed into a corner by Kirino’s Lance of Longinus, Manami offered her little brother as a sacrifice and made a final gamble.

In a moment, an almost indescribable amount of evil energy blew out from Manami’s body like a gale, and the human world was filled with chaos.

The pure air changed to deadly poison, and the bountiful earth was transformed into sticky meat.

It was nothing other than a reappearance of hell on Earth.

Even the Kirino character couldn’t suppress a shiver, and muttered one line in despair.

“..... No way..... Belphegor brought on the end of the world...?”

“To be continued.”

“What the hell?! What kind of ending is that when you built it up so much?!”

“You built it up and couldn’t close it out, so you just ended it like that, didn’t you?!<sup>4</sup> And also there was a lot of stuff in there that you took from Maschera and other things that already exist!! That’s why you’ll never be more than a wannabe!”

“Hmph, I just didn’t have enough time. I’m not Kishibe Rohan,<sup>5</sup> so I can’t draw that much manga in only one or two days.”

But Kuroneko’s cheeks flushed just a little bit.

“... But to think you would want a sequel that much... it really makes me happy.”

All the energy drained out of my and Kirino’s bodies, and we crumbled to the ground.

... By the way, it seemed that Saori had laughed so hard that she was in pain, and for a while now she’s been lying down over there in agony.

---

<sup>4</sup> The idiom here was, Kyouzuke first mentioned “How could you do that when you opened the cloth that wide?” To which Kirino followed up with “She opened the cloth wide but then couldn’t fold it.”

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia claims this is a reference to Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure.

**Part 5**

Geez... first Saori's maid costume, and now Kuroneko's manga...

W-What the hell is up with you people? Don't tell me that you're planning to traumatize me one by one with your presentations?

As the atmosphere of the place noticeably deflated, a finally revived Saori yelled out.

"Weeeeeell then while we're all still excited! It's time for today's main event! Kiririn-shi, if you would please!"

Today's main event? Could it be Kirino's presentation?

I took a glance at my sister's face, but she just sat there frowning and didn't respond.

"....."

It seemed that she was so annoyed by Kuroneko's presentation that she was in no mood to make hers.

Geez, even though Saori's trying so hard to make this exciting for everyone...

Well, granted, she's the guest of honor today, so I won't nitpick too much.

I thought that, but...

"..... Umm... Kiririn-shi? It's... time for the main event, you know?"

"... Stop sulking. Get on with it, you dimwit."

For some reason, both Saori and Kuroneko seemed hell-bent on getting Kirino to make her presentation.

"Tch... stop nagging. I know, dammit."

Being urged on by the other two, Kirino reluctantly reached into the bag at her feet... and then sent a glance in my direction. She looked incredibly unhappy, and deep creases were burrowed across her brow.

“OooOOoOOoooo...”

Kirino shook her head back and forth vigorously.

“Pass!”

She turned the other way and spat that out. Hey hey, how can you give so much of a lead-in and then pass like that? Why are you so reluctant to show something that you had taken the time to prepare in the first place?

I don't understand this at all. She's the one who prepared the presentation. Don't you think it's strange?

“... You are a huge idiot. What exactly is the meaning of your existence here?”

Kuroneko retorted harshly. Kuroneko was Kuroneko, so just the main guest not wanting to make a presentation was enough to get her to respond cruelly like that. Come on... it's a party, so even if you might not like her, just congratulate her a bit.

“Well well, Kuroneko-shi. You have to consider the fact that Kiririn-shi is embarrassed.”

Saori scolded Kuroneko.

... Embarrassed? Thinking also about how Saori had said this and that about this “main event,” I got the feeling that these two knew what Kirino's presentation was about.

Why was I the only person left in the dark? Was I being left out?

As if trying to dispel the smidgen of doubt that had piled up in my mind, Saori proposed something with a clear voice.

“Haha, well then. Shall we go for another round before the main event?”

“... Doesn’t seem to be any other choice, I suppose.”

Kuroneko reluctantly agreed.

“Well then, it’s my turn again, then.”

Saori cleared her throat, and stood straight up.

What kind of presentation was she intending to make this time?

“Kyouzuke-shi. Could you lie sprawled out over there for me?”

“I can... but what are you planning to do?”

“Mufufu... weeeeell, I’m going to atteeend to Kyouzuke-shi with aaaaall my heart~~.”

“Don’t say it in such a weird voice, dammit. Also... a-attend... to me?”

Having beaten a number of eroges, the sound of the word “attend” carried a rather obscene ring to it, but considering we were talking about this huge-ass swirly-glasses girl over here, it didn’t feel erotic to me at all. Attend... attend to me? What exactly did that mean, I wonder...

Even as I shivered at the thought of what was going to happen to me, I lay down on my stomach.

“... L-Like this?”

“Perfect. Well then...”

The next moment, I felt a huge pressure on my back-

*Guriguriguriguri!*<sup>1</sup>

“Agh!! W-Why the hell are you stepping on me?!”

---

<sup>1</sup> One of those onomatopoeia I stared at for like a minute and was like “Heeeeell no.”

“It’s the special maid-san stomping service! You wear a maid outfit like this, and just step step step on your back like this.”

“Service?! Liar! Don’t you mean torture?! Hnngh... too heavy too heavy too heavy!! You’re so damn heavy! I call uncle! Uncle uncle uncle uncle!”

“My my, that’s quite a rude thing to say to a young lady. Hmph, even if it’s Kyousuke-shi, I can’t let that slide.”

*Guri!*

“Gwah... get off dammit! My back can’t take it anymore!”

“Oohh, it’s giving off some nice sounds there.”

It seemed that she had finally gotten off, and the huge weight on my back vanished.

“Haaah.... haaah... haah... haah...”

“Well then... did you enjoy my heavenly massage?”

“Y... you..... you.....”

I seriously thought I was going to die! So yes, in a sense, I was about to go to heaven!

Trying to catch my breath, I sat up and spat out my grievances.

“What the hell... did you mean by service...? Where in the world is there a service where maids step on people’s backs...?”

“Well, there’s a lot of that in Akihabara.”

“Seriously?!”

That goes way beyond even my expectations! It seems that I’ve been underestimating that place!

In any case, faced with how serious I was looking, Saori finally seemed to realize that I was in physical agony, and put on a troubled expression.

“Mu mu mu... it seems you didn't enjoy it at all.”

“Hmph... as I thought, that amount of sadism is not enough to satisfy such a big masochist like him.”

Kuroneko ground one of her heels into the ground, and stressed how sharp they were.

“... If that's the case, shall I step on you? Coome now, lie down face-up for me.”

That's not a massage at all!! That's just some weird fetish!!

Lie down face-up... where the hell did this woman plan on stepping?!

Also, in that position, I would be able to see your panties, you know.

Geez... Kirino, and then Kuroneko, and then Saori... can't you people just cut it out?!

You know how depressed I've been right? Just leave me alone!

### Part 6

As I was half-going out of my mind, Saori turned to Kuroneko.

“It’s Kuroneko-shi’s turn again.”

“... Even if you tell me to... I wasn’t expecting to have to go twice... so I don’t have anything else to present.”

Kuroneko hugged her knees on top of the chair, looking like she was sitting in gym class or something.

She looked deep in thought. And unlike usual, she was wearing a miniskirt, so I really didn’t know where to look.

But Saori seemed to have expected Kuroneko’s response, and puffed out her chest.

“Fufufu... I thought this would happen, so just for today, I brought a game that just came out and also have a secret weapon.

**“A game that just came out, and a secret weapon?”**

Kirino and I voiced that question at the same time. Even Kuroneko, still hugging her knees on top of the chair, glanced in Saori’s direction, looking as if her interest had been piqued.

Seeing that she had our attention, Saori gave us a few leisurely nods.

“Indeed.”

Moving the mouse around on the table, Saori double clicked. A game loaded on the screen.

It seemed that it had already been installed.

Also, the startup screen of the game looked somewhat familiar...

“This is Siscali, isn’t it? The PC version.”

I pointed at the display. On there was displayed the familiar title of “Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse.” It was the game that had gotten Kirino hooked last summer.

“Didn’t you say this was a game that just came out?”

“Ahh, but it is. Kyousuke-shi, please direct your gaze at the area beside the title.”

“Hm? Ahh, you’re right.”

Once I got a good look at it, I saw that it was “Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse Alpha.”

“Mufufu, this is what you would call an append disk. If you feed this disk into a computer that already has Siscali installed, you unlock new features.”

“... I have no idea what you’re talking about...”

As I shook my head back and forth, right next to me, Kirino nodded in understanding.

“In short, it’s like the difference between ‘Dynasty Warriors’ and ‘Dynasty Warriors Xtreme Legends,’ right? So this is Siscali Alpha! It already came out?! I’ve been swamped since January, so I completely missed that news! Dammit... for someone like me to... ugh, what a huge slipup!”

“Fufufu, it seems like Kiririn-shi is also quite interested in this game here. It was definitely worth bringing it. Today, we also have Kuroneko-shi here, who placed in the national Siscali arcade version tournament! So why not show us some of those amazing playing skills as a presentation?!”

“I... don’t mind that, I guess...”

“Ohh, right, I forgot that had happened.”

Now I remember. Kuroneko was a master of Siscali. She had once made good use of her godly abilities to help me make some fond memories for Kirino.

“Kuroneko, you placed at the Siscali tournament?! That’s amazing!”

“... Ehh, I guess. I wasn’t able to win though.”

“I’m honestly not trying to flatter you with this, but... I seriously can’t see how you could possibly lose at that game. Was the person you were playing against really that strong?”

“Of course. Quite good for someone limited by human reflexes... I would have never thought that there would be someone who could keep up with my movements like that... hmph, every once in a while, I meet a human who breaks through the ‘wall’... I had planned to win the tournament, but it seems like even I will have to study the metagame after this. Even if that contradicts my aesthetic philosophy of always using the game’s weakest character.”

I didn’t really know what she was talking about, but in summary it seemed that her opponent at the national tournament had been really strong.

Seeing my befuddled expression, Saori’s mouth curved up into a ω.

“Haha, after all, whether it’s a shooter or a fighter, the players at the national tournaments are all amazing. For example, you have famous ones like Umehara-shi.”<sup>1</sup>

Even if you give me his name, it’s not like I know who he is.

“So, what exactly makes Siscali Alpha different from the original game? Also, what did you mean by ‘secret weapon’?”

“Patience, patience, Kiririn-shi! Allow me to explain in order. Siscali Alpha incorporates the popular system that had been implemented in the arcade version, and like you would get in an arcade, it’s possible to play with pre-made characters. Even if you don’t make your own character, you can play the game like you would any other fighter. Of course, you’re also fully able to use custom characters, just like in the original game.”

“I see. It’s as if they combined the PC and arcade versions of the game. And then? Is that all that’s different?”

“Not quite... in fact, I haven’t gotten to the main difference yet. The main difference is that the ‘little sister making system’ in the original game got a

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<sup>1</sup> Famous video game player, Daigo Umehara.

power-up. The number of parts you can use and costumes your characters can wear significantly increased, and you can also fine-tune a lot of other things, like the face, hair, skin, height, body figure, bust size, voice, motion..."

"... Umm, so in summary, what exactly can you do?"

Kirino looked bewildered after that rapid-fire explanation.

Saori lifted one finger up, and offered up a particularly easy-to-understand example.

"For example, you can make a character that looks exactly like Meruru and fight with her, and you can even use her to play through story mode."

"Seriously?!"

Hook, line, and sinker.

"Seriously. And also, as for that 'secret weapon'... well, it's probably faster if I just showed you. Ufufu, please take a look at the screen."

Saori moved the mouse some more, and chose battle mode in the game. The game read the character data, and showed close-ups of Saori's custom characters on the screen. The characters were on backgrounds of a green wire frame.

"Ah!"

Seeing the characters on display, everyone except for Saori widened their eyes.

"T-That looks exactly like me!! Come on! You did something like this too?!"

"Hahaha, everyone seemed to have been thinking of the same thing. Kuroneko-shi did it through manga, and I made someone who looks like Kiririn-shi through games."

Saori laughed merrily.

Resigned, Kirino smiled wryly. Ultimately, she didn't seem altogether displeased. In fact, she seemed a bit happy.

"I can use a character who looks exactly like me... to play Siscali?"

"Of course. This kiririn character is a custom character I designed using Kiririn-shi as a model. Take a look!"

*Click.* Saori chose the "preview" command, and the window folded up to the side, bringing the custom character kiririn into the forefront of the screen. Wearing a miniskirt uniform, Kiririn posed with her arms crossed in her lever neutral position (the position a character took when no buttons were being pushed).

Kirino had said this just a moment before... but it really looked exactly like my sister.

Amazing.

"Fufu... there's still more to come!"

*Click click click.* Manipulating the controller that was attached to the PC, Saori made the kiririn character punch, kick, and jump. And at the same time...

**"... Huh? Gross! You an idiot?! Die, siscon!"**

"Fuhahahaha! I made it so this custom character used Kiririn-shi's voice! Well, it's not like I got these recordings in a controlled environment, so the sound quality is a bit bad... but what do you think, Kyouusuke-shi?!"

It was the worst. It was terrifying that this character that looked and sounded exactly like Kirino was sending abuse my way while attacking me. And seriously, don't ask me. Because no matter how I respond to that question, my real little sister is just going to turn to me and go "...Huh? Gross! You an idiot?! Die, siscon!"

Just you watch.

“That’s pretty amazing. You did a pretty good job with it. Don’t you also think so, Kirino?”

“Huh? But it’s pretty gross that you’re getting all moe moe over a character that looks exactly like your sister.”

What did I tell you? So, what the hell am I supposed to do?! If this were an eroge, then wouldn’t this be a choice where no matter what I chose, her affection points for me would decrease?!

“But Saori, you really did a great job with this... I haven’t shown you my uniform more than once, but you got our school’s uniform down perfectly... you even got the manicure color right.”

“To be honest, for that I used a mod I made myself. Haha, doing things like this is my specialty. Why don’t you use this character and play right now?”

“Yeah, sure sure!”

Kirino nodded sincerely. When it came to times like these, she was the personification of childish innocence.

When I saw her like this, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t bring myself to hate her...

That was good. After all, today was supposed to be a celebration for her.

If Kirino wasn’t happy, then this entire event would have been a waste.

*Sigh...* I really am too soft-hearted sometimes.

Even though Saori had asked me here, to think I would actually come here to celebrate the accomplishments of someone who annoyed me to hell...

As I scratched the back of my head, I turned my gaze onto Kirino.

“L-Let me play right now!”

Being pressed by Kirino, Saori gave back a “certainly!” and passed over the controller.

“Ah, her controls and secret moves are all pretty much the same as the character Kiririn-shi usually uses. This character’s legs are longer though, so she might feel a bit different when you control her.”

“Well, that can’t be helped~, I do have beautiful, long legs after all! Ah, it’s battle mode, but the character is already at level 50?”

“Yeah, because the developers wanted you to be able to play with your friends and with a character you just finished making. By the way, you can also adjust your level by attaching a handicap to your character. Well, how about it? I also created a character for Kuroneko-shi, so why don’t you two battle each other?”

Having the conversation turned to her, Kuroneko turned towards Saori once again, all the while sitting on top of the chair hugging her knees.

“Ah, so you made a character that resembles me as well? And then... in place of making a presentation, you’re proposing that I battle her with a handicap on?”

“Exactly.”

Saori nodded happily.

“Hmph, come on, it’ll be fun!” Kirino snorted.

I mean, no matter how much of a handicap you put on Kuroneko though, the skill difference was just too huge.

Also, did such a proud person like Kirino have it in her to play someone with a handicap?

The minute that thought ran through my head, just as I thought, Kirino proposed something strange.

“In exchange, you use a level 1 character.”

That was cruel. In other words, she didn’t want to use a handicap, and she didn’t want to fight a losing battle, so instead she chose to mess up the battle

itself, and just wanted to watch a character that looked like herself throttling a character that looked like Kuroneko. Or something like that.

It definitely seemed like something my little sister would do.

Even for Kuroneko, a 49-level difference probably made winning impossible, but she readily agreed to the proposal.

“... Fine. Let’s do that. In return, I’ll pick the stage. The battle will be a single round, and in the case we end in a tie, we’ll end up in sudden death mode. Are you fine with that?”

“That’s fine... well then...”

Kirino seemed to be a bit suspicious at how quickly Kuroneko had agreed, but...

In any case, the battle started. Kuroneko had chosen the “arena” stage, a narrow coliseum-like map with nowhere to hide.

On the two displays lined side by side were displayed, respectively, the backs of a character who looked exactly like Kirino, the junior high school girl “kiririn,” and a character who looked exactly like Kuroneko, the gothic Lolita “kuroneko.”

Three... two... one...

Fight!

A cool, collected voice announced the start of the battle, and the two combatants closed the distance between them in a flash.

At this point, the difference in levels between the characters was already abundantly clear. The difference in their movement speeds was like that of Balrog and Zangief<sup>2</sup>. Of course, kiririn was faster. And what’s more, if their level differences were this severe, kiririn could whittle down kuroneko’s health with each blow even if kuroneko was guarding.

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<sup>2</sup> Street fighter reference, using the Japanese naming conventions. It is referring to Zangief and Vega (Claw).

In contrast, even if kuroneko attacked kiririn continuously for the entire sixty seconds, kuroneko wouldn't be able to deplete kiririn's life bar.

It wasn't even appropriate to call this a battle. However...

"... You asshole...! Fight with me properly, you idiot!"

"My my, what seems to be wrong? How clumsy of you."

Even though the character kuroneko was controlling had the movement speed of a level 1 character, she waved to and fro and survived kiririn's fierce assault. She saw completely through kiririn's movements, and with nothing but the smallest of motions, dodged kiririn's attacks.

"Ugh... well, how about this?!"

Kirino depleted her gauge, and let loose her ultimate attack. Her character was suddenly surrounded by lightning and she charged at her opponent, letting loose a sequence of lightning-fast kicks.

It was an attack that was impossible to avoid for the much slower kuroneko.

There's no doubt that she was planning to whittle kuroneko's life down to zero forcibly, using the immense level difference to her advantage.

Even for my sister, it was a pretty dirty way of fighting.

"Hah, just as expected."

Still sitting on top of the chair with her arms around her knees, Kuroneko clasped her controller between her knees.

And then, with all ten fingers free, Kuroneko began to hit buttons on the controller as if she were typing on a keyboard.

*Katakatakatakataaaa--gagagagagagaga--*

The sound of Kuroneko entering her commands was soon supplanted by the sound of violent blows. It was because kiririn's kick combination had driven itself into kuroneko's small figure.

“... Too bad.”

“Wha-“

And yet, kuroneko’s life points had not dropped a single point.

Taking a closer look at the screen, I could see that the Gothic-Lolita-clad kuroneko had repelled each and every one of kiririn’s attacks with a single finger she had sticking up on one hand.

It was a skill called “parrying.” With absolute perfect timing, you could block your opponents attack and take no damage no matter what type of attack it was. It was a high-level skill usually intended for blocking huge, slow attacks, but Kuroneko had used that skill to block that series of kicks that I could barely follow with my eyes...?

I couldn’t believe it.

“Fwaahh~... it’s like watching a pro gameplay video.”

Saori also seemed dumbfounded.

How should I put it... she was so good it was shocking. Exactly how many hours have you put into this game? And to think you couldn’t even win that tournament... exactly what kind of monsters were you playing?

On screen, kiririn finally stopped her barrage of kicks, and the lightning that had enveloped her body faded.

“Ugh... playing dirty like that! That can’t have just happened!”

“... The only thing ‘dirty’ right now is your face, isn’t it? Aren’t you ashamed to be getting so worked up over just a game?”

“Shut up shut up shut up! Stay in one spot, dammit! Hnggghh~!!”

Blowing steam out her nostrils like a bull, Kirino desperately handled her controller. Kiririn depleted each and every one of her gauges, and even as her attack speed dropped precipitously, she continued sending out frantic last-ditch kicks. Of course, sloppy attacks like that had no chance of connecting,

and they were either dodged or deflected. This must be what they mean by “whirlwinding around.” Pretty appropriate for kiririn.<sup>3</sup>

Hey, that was pretty clever of me. Go ahead, feel free to give me a compliment.

“... Tch! Tch tch! Gnnnghhhhh~!!”

Seeming more annoyed than I had ever seen her, Kirino continued to attack with reckless abandon.

“... Ku ku ku ku ku... the world is just filled with tragedy... right now, your soul is about to be tested...”

Mocking Kirino, Kuroneko continued her endless sequence of parrying. This sequence of events continued for a while longer.

Since the start of the fight, neither fighter’s life had dropped a single point.

Even though Kuroneko had fended off each one of Kirino’s attacks, for some reason she had yet to send off an attack of her own. Certainly, because she was level 1, any attack she sent on a level 50 character wouldn’t do much damage at all. But, even so, that didn’t amount to a reason to just not attack at all.

Leaving those doubts of mine aside, I waited as time passed moment by moment...

At last, sixty seconds had elapsed since the beginning of the battle. Time up.

Usually, the person with more life at this point would be declared the winner, but at the moment both players had full life bars.

At this point, the special rules went into effect.

“... Fufufufu... take your seats, everyone. To watch the beginning of the end...”

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<sup>3</sup> Rather untranslatable pun here. The idiom “whirlwinding around” is “kirikirimai,” which Kyousuke here is trying to make a connection to “kiririn.

“A-Ahh?!”

Looking at both screens, Kirino let out a yell. Because in a moment, both Kiririn and Kuroneko’s life bars had dropped quickly to a position very close to zero.

“Ah, pray tell, what are you so surprised about? ... This was already made clear in the beginning, yes? That when time was up, we would move to sudden death.... In other words, from now on, level differences have no meaning, and the first person to land a hit wins the match. Well now, everything has evened out. Kukukuku... you lost the minute you let the match drag on until now.”

“Hngg...”

Kirino ground her teeth in frustration.

Having watched the match up until now, Saori let out a “oh hoh” of admiration. Next, she turned to me and cocked her head to the side.

“Hm? Even if she didn’t wait until sudden death, if she had just hit Kiririn-shi once before, when time was up she would have automatically won. Why didn’t she do that?”

“It’s all for show I think. She wanted to do away with Kirino in a flashy way. With a KO.”

I answered Saori’s question. I probably wasn’t mistaken. After all...

“Kukuku... kuhahaha... ku ku ku ku...”

Just look at that sinister, little smile on Kuroneko’s face. She’s really pleased with how things are going here.

By the way, when Kuroneko had said “you lost,” it made me realize something. What, you ask? Well, I guess everyone forgot about what happens in this game, but...

It’s an 18+ eroge, remember?

“By the way. Doesn’t the losing character become naked after getting her clothes torn off?”

“.....Ah.” “.....Ahh.”

Kuroneko suddenly stopped laughing, and dropped her controller.

Kirino also turned her gaze away from the screens, and turned back with a stupefied expression.

Seriously... you two seriously didn’t realize that, did you... if you lost this battle, the character who looked exactly like you would get her clothes torn off and would go through some H stuff...

Yes, from the very beginning, this battle was that kind of battle.

It was sort of like strip mahjong... you could even call it a virtual strip battle.

And speaking of the source of all the evil in this terrible situation...

“Hahaha, now that you mention it, I guess it is like that.”

It seemed like she didn’t know. This person... she’s calling down all sorts of trouble with her air-headedness...

“Ahaah... I completely forgot about that. You don’t get your clothes torn off in the arcade version even if you lose, so I had completely gotten used to that version...”

Kirino and Kuroneko probably were probably also like that. That’s why, as the only person here who hadn’t played the arcade version, I had been the first to realize the situation.

A solid line of sweat went down Saori’s face.

“... Well, sorry about that haha... and I made both characters with elaborate detail to perfectly match the people they were based on too. I even got the three sizes down perfectly.”

That's not good at all. I mean, if one of them loses this battle, those elaborate details were going to get completely exposed, right?

As I stood there speechless, Saori puffed out her chest.

"To be honest, I'm quite proud of what I made!"

"What the hell are you saying?! You... you... you've gone way too far this time!"

Kirino retorted with all her energy, but Saori completely kept her cool.

"Hey hey, Kiririn-shi, you should keep your eyes on the screen."

"...?!?!"

Suddenly coming back to herself, Kirino turned her head to the screen.

Given that fatal gap that Kirino had left open, Kuroneko was...

"... Ah... a... ahh..."

Aren't you way too flustered by this?! You haven't even picked up the damn controller again!!

Your hands are shaking, you know. And your lips are quivering, and your face is completely red...

"Hey Kuroneko... you can't do that. This isn't the time to be getting flustered."

"..... E-Even if you tell me that..... I just can't...."

... She was just completely embarrassed.

Even though it was a game, in the end it was hard to deal with a character that looked exactly like you getting stripped naked, wasn't it? Sometimes it slipped my mind, but Kirino and Kuroneko were both still junior high school students.

At that point, Kirino raised her voice.

“What the hell, you siscon?! Whose side are you on?! You want to see your little sister naked that badly?!”

“N-N-No, absolutely not!!”

Don’t say something that sounds so wrong like that!!

... Although, when I think about it, there wasn’t a single good reason as to why I should be cheering Kuroneko on in this situation. I definitely didn’t want to see an H-scene involving a character that looked like my little sister.

“Alriiiiight Kirino! Go get her! Right now!”

“You damn pervert!”

*Bam!* Kirino turned swiftly around and hit me straight on the nose with her controller.

“Gah... seriously, you’re getting angry no matter what I say!!”

“No kidding! Ugh, and I had a good chance there too... I’ll make you pay for this later!”

Getting a firm grip back on her controller, Kirino hurriedly sent kiririn in for a suicide attack.

Even though she wasn’t to the point Kuroneko was, Kirino seemed pretty flustered too, and even though it would have been fine if she just got in a single hit, she deliberately chose a huge attack.

“Ahh..... I can’t.....”

Although she was completely driven into a corner, Kuroneko showed no sign of returning to her senses.

Even when she finally picked her controller back up, all she could do was open her eyes wide and watch the failure that was staring her in the face. It was a truly pitiful sight to behold. On the spur of the moment, I shouted out.

“J-Just do something! Push a button!”

“!”

*Click click click!* Almost as if she was a complete beginner, Kuroneko pushed buttons on her controller randomly. Well, like that, she should be able to at least get an attack out one way or another.

The fight was settled in the next second. The loser, as a reward for the winner, would have her naked body exposed in shame. Whether that was going to be Kirino or Kuroneko... in the next second, the fight would be decided. Kirino’s roundhouse kick and Kuroneko’s extended fist crossed each other...

**KO!** *Bam!* At the same time as the announcement, I felt something slam into my face.

“Aghh!! Wha...?!”

The sharp pain I felt was enough to make my vision go dark. For that reason, I had no idea who had won.

As I grimaced, I just barely managed to open one eye, when I saw the forms of Kirino and Kuroneko, holding a chair. As I held a hand to my forehead, I felt the color drain from my face while I asked.

“... W-What are you planning to do? D-Don’t tell me that you’re going to... with that chair...”

“Just a minute. Did you have a nice dream?”<sup>4</sup>

As Kuroneko muttered some words that I couldn’t make head or tails of, she raised the chair overhead.

Right then, Kirino let go of the chair, instead twisting her body and beginning to charge up. She looked just like her character kiririn did when she was preparing for her ultimate attack...

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<sup>4</sup> Getbackers reference. Kuroneko needs to watch more slice-of-life.

I knew what was going to happen before it happened.

“Die, siscoooooonnn!!”

KO! I could have sworn I heard someone announce that.

**Part 7**

A few minutes later... I sat in a chair, and was having my wounds attended to by Saori.

“A-Ow ow ow...”

“... I’ll be done in a second, so please be patient for just a while longer.”

With a worried voice, Saori applied a piece of absorbent cotton to the afflicted area. She had borrowed a first-aid kit from the reception desk.

“Dammit... this is just way too cruel. Why the hell do I have to go through something like this...?”

... I was completely depressed after what had happened, to the point where I honestly might start crying if I didn’t restrain myself...

Saori seemed to take my mutterings to heart, and spoke sadly.

“I’m very sorry Kyouzuke-shi, just because I overdid it...”

“Nah... well, sure there’s that. But I don’t think you did something that bad.”

I told Saori my true feelings. Frowning, I gave a glance at Kirino and Kuroneko.

“The people we should be blaming are the two that actually inflicted all the damage.”

As tears threatened to spill out from my eyes and I had my wounds tended to, I watched Kirino and Kuroneko talking about something in a serious manner. It seemed a bit different from their usual petty squabbling... but I couldn’t hear what they were saying so I couldn’t say for sure. Ugh, this is so annoying, this is not the time to be doing that.

“Those two... they’re really shy but also really stubborn... won’t you forgive them?”

“Even so...”

It would be nice if I could get at least one ounce of an apology out of them.

“From the beginning, it was you...”

“Tch, it was all your fault!”

What the hell was up with them? Leaving their victim over here alone and just arguing with each other...

“... Hey, you two. Come over here for a second.”

With my eyes narrowed, I called Kirino and company over. When I did that, they took a look at my face, and gave me completely different responses.

Kuroneko, albeit expressionless, looked down in shame, and vaguely looked saddened.

On the other hand, Kirino frowned and creases ran across her brow as she gave me a complicated-looking expression.

“I said to come over here.”

As I emotionlessly called out my order again, they both seemed to decide to listen to me for now, and tottered over side-by-side. They stopped right in front of me as I sat there...

“... What?”

Kirino sulkily muttered. Kuroneko stayed silent, and just looked at me with an empty expression.

I took a glance at Kuroneko, and then looked up at my sister’s sullen face.

... Tch, what should I do? I massaged the top of my nose as I mulled it over.

I honestly wanted to yell at them, but I hadn’t forgotten that this was supposed to be a celebration and this girl was the guest of honor. But as expected, I couldn’t stomach just letting this pass without saying anything. It

wasn't like I was going to ask for a proper apology from these two, but I didn't want to come to more harm later. At the very least, I just wanted to tell them to leave me alone.

To the very end, Kirino was today's guest of honor. I was just an extra here.

"... Hey?"

"W-What?"

Kirino cowered, almost as if she was nervous.

"You know, I've been really depressed these days because of you."

"....."

"But, I heard that today was a celebration for you, so I came here like this, and put aside all my grief, and was ready to celebrate with you."

"... Yeah."

"But why is it then that you two have to only do things that just make me more depressed?"

"..... That's... a misunderstanding."

Having kept silent up until then, Kuroneko spoke haltingly. But I wasn't convinced.

"Really? Well, if that's the case, then this is pretty ridiculous. And something's been on my mind from the beginning. I feel like you all have been keeping something from me. I've had this unpleasant feeling every time there's been a presentation... I mean, you're even making Kirino do one even though she's the guest of honor? Really, why exactly am I the only person who wasn't told that you were making these presentations? I would understand if you wanted to hide it from the guest of honor, but I have no idea why you would hide it from me... that's way too suspicious. Just give it to me straight and tell me what's going on... or be a bit gentler with me because I honestly can't enjoy myself like this."

“... That’s not what we had intended.”

Kuroneko’s voice grew fainter. In ordinary circumstances, I probably would have been more considerate at this moment of time, but I couldn’t spare the effort to do that now. My first priority was getting my questions answered.

“If that’s true, then just tell me what’s going on.”

“Hey, you, cut it out.”

Kirino butted in at that point. Seeming to push her own actions to the back of her mind, she spoke in a threatening tone.

“You just talk talk talk talk talk... Is it really that fun accusing my friend like that? And what’s more, you’re talking to a junior high school girl here... that’s not cool at all.”

“What did you just say?”

As usual, I had no idea why Kirino was getting all upset, so getting annoyed, I took the bait and shot back at her.

“What the hell did you just say?”

“You’re taking everything so seriously with a junior high school girl and that’s really stupid! Even that time before! What the hell... why did you get so angry?! I can’t believe you! *It’s really not that bad!*”

It’s really not that bad, she says...?

Well... during the summer, when your doujinshi got found by Ayase...

Did you just go “it’s really not that bad” to yourself?

“W-Why are you holding a grudge just because your little sister pulled a prank on you? I-it’s not like that girl hates you now or something. It’s... really... not a big deal...”

As if she was flustered with how angry I looked, Kirino only barely managed to get her final words out. But I didn't care. She had said something she really shouldn't have.

"Cut it out, dammit."

I spoke, with anger in my words. It wasn't the kind of wishy-washy tone I had kept up until now...

I was serious.

"I apologize to Saori, but I'm going home. You can play without me."

Yes. In deference to Saori, I had intended to be patient with this for as long as possible.

But I had reached my limit.

"I can't take this anymore. And it doesn't matter whether I'm here or not, right?"

I spat that out coldly, and turned heel.

"..... Ah....."

Kirino sounded like she was muttering something but I ignored her.

I was planning to just leave like this and head straight home.

No matter what, I just had no idea what the point of my going through all of this was. Sure, I considered Saori and Kuroneko to be friends. And no matter how much I might not like it, Kirino was my little sister.

But even then, it's not like they could do anything to me and I wouldn't get angry. It made it even worse since it was my friend or my sister... it just made it harder to come to terms with, so I was even more annoyed than if this had been done to me by some random stranger.

You understand, right?

“... Kyouzuke-shi, j-just listen for a second.”

Saori blocked my path to the door and faced me. And as expected, I had to stop for a moment.

Because in all the time I had known her, this was the first time I had heard her voice sounding so desperate.

Next, Kuroneko went to Saori's side and looked up at me. As if trying to buy time, she cleared her throat and steeling herself, began to talk.

“... You know, the truth is...”

“Hold on.”

Even Kirino cut in at that point, and stopped Kuroneko mid-sentence.

“... I'm... going to do this myself... so just let me do this...”

It was honestly difficult to describe my little sister's facial expression at that moment.

She seemed incredibly annoyed on the one hand, but also somewhat crestfallen on the other.

She seemed angry, but also seemed to be hiding a sense of determination.

And also, Kirino was holding a paper bag in one hand. I couldn't see the contents though.

“Move.”

I spoke angrily. Just looking at my annoying little sister made the anger well up in me again.

“Hmph. What's with the attitude...?”

A dangerous atmosphere permeated the room. Sparks flew as Kirino and I glared at each other.

“Kiririn-shi!”

“... You know what you’re doing, right?”

Saori and Kuroneko both faced Kirino and urged her on.

“I got it, I got it! It’ll all be fine if I just do it, right?!”

Kirino bobbed her head vigorously up and down and shouted. After that, she ruffled her light brown hair furiously.

“Ughhhhhhhh damiiiiiiiiittt!! Wh-why did it have to come to this...?!”

Kirino bit down on her lower lip, and huge creases formed across her brow...

“H-Here, take this!”

Almost as if she wanted to hit me, Kirino thrust out the paper bag at me.

“..... Ah?”

Staring at that paper bag with crossed eyes, I voiced my confusion. And then, maybe out of anger, Kirino flushed a deep crimson.

“C-Come on! This is yours! I’m giving it to you!”

“Come on to you too! I have no idea what’s going on!”

My true feelings came sputtering out of my mouth. I mean, this was strange, wasn’t it? Why was my furious little sister trying to pass something to me while I was also furious? I can’t accept this like this.

“Ahhhhhhh how thick are youuuuuu?!?! Ahhh, I’m so damn annoyed right now. Are you an idiot?! It’s a present, dammit!!”

“... Pre... sent...? From you... for me...?”

“Y-Yes.”

And then, Kirino bowed her head deeply.

“I’m really sorry about what happened!”

“ .....

My eyes widened and I found myself at a loss for words.

With her head still bowed, Kirino once again held out the paper bag to me.

Half unconsciously, I took the paper bag from her.

When I did that, Kirino looked up and met my gaze for just a second, and muttered.

“... Thanks for everything.”

This was just too much, and I felt my head go pure white.

I might have fainted right then and there for a few seconds.

Kirino kept her head down, and seemed to be waiting for my response.

But really, I wasn’t in any condition to give a response in this state. Not hearing a response and perhaps getting worried, my little sister once again raised her head. Feigning strength, she pushed up her bottom lip with her tongue.<sup>1</sup>

A few more seconds passed, and after that she timidly spoke up.

“Umm... did you hear me?”

“A-Ahh. I heard.”

To be perfectly honest, at this point I still couldn’t believe the words that had gone through my ears.

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<sup>1</sup> The full expression here is “pushed up her bottom lip, and made an umeboshi with her jaw.” Umeboshi are these dried, very sour plums that are popular in Japan. So she basically pulled her bottom lip up and then made a bulge near her jaw with her tongue. Impossible to translate perfectly in English, but meh.



It was completely beyond my expectations, so it took a while before I could process the situation.

Have I ever heard her say something like that to me before...?

“... A-Ahh... then that’s good...”

Hearing my response, Kirino let out a long breath in relief.

Next, she put a hand to her chest, and blushing all the while, began to breathe raggedly.

Being faced with this scene, almost as if she had just finished confessing to a boy, I suddenly became very self-conscious and felt my face heating up.

“Kyouzuke-shi. The truth is that this party was really organized to get you to cheer up. And, it also gave Kiririn-shi an opening to apologize to Kyouzuke-shi... my my, I really had intended to properly entertain you and for you to enjoy yourself, but this has become such an unpleasant experience for you instead... I really am very sorry for my failure.”

“I’m sorry.”

Saori and Kuroneko stood side by side and bowed.

“..... So it was like that.....”

Dumbfounded, I tried to digest the situation. Giving her a quick glance, I saw that Kirino was frowning with her cheeks still flushed.

“Umm... I haven’t said this very often up until now. It really didn’t seem you would know unless I said it outright, so I’ll just come out and say it this time.”

“W-What...?”

Kirino impatiently tried to grope for the right words, and she finally began to talk.

“All the things you’ve done for me up until now, I’m really thankful for. If you weren’t there, I definitely couldn’t have convinced dad to accept my hobby... and I wouldn’t have been able to make up with Ayase...”

She looked at Saori, then at Kuroneko, and continued to shyly choke out her words.

“I... wouldn’t have met these two either. I would have just gone on sadly by myself, not being able to talk to anyone about games or anime, not being able to do anything... I really don’t know what would have happened if it went on like that.”

“... Ahh.”

“So, umm, that is... it’s like that!”

She quickly turned the other way. She was... really terrible at speaking at times like this.

But, I understood.

I knew exactly how she felt.

The sound of mild applause reached my ears.

Saori and Kuroneko were clapping their hands for us. Both Saori, and even Kuroneko, had smiles on their faces... almost as if they were trying to tell me “I’m happy for you.”

Even as I came to terms with the current situation, I couldn’t believe it.

Haha... to think that Kirino would... to think that she would go so far as to give me a present.

It’s like I was dreaming.

*Sniff.*

You idiot... acting so awkwardly at a time like this...

“Ah... what the hell are you crying for?!”

“... You idiot...! I’m not crying!!”

“Come on, stop that right now! T-This isn’t some sort of teen drama you know! And I mean, is this really worth crying over?!”

Kirino was shouting something at me, but I was too distracted by the heat coursing through my eyes to hear.

All I could do was hide my face with my arm and sob.

My god... I’m such a pathetic older brother, I am.

**Part 8**

And with the end of that act... even after everyone had returned to their seats, I was blinking tears out my eyes.

“Ugh, that’s really annoying me! That’s seriously gross!”

“... Ahaha, but isn’t it nice, Kiririn-shi? That Kyouzuke-shi was so moved by you back there.”

“... Maybe. But no matter how you put it, is there really a reason to start crying just from getting a present?”

“... Although, you’re one to talk, considering how your face looks right now. Hmph, were you relieved that oniisan couldn’t see you very well back then?”

“... Shut it.”

Up until now, I had done a number of things for Kirino’s sake.

I had helped her make otaku friends. I had desperately worked to protect her otaku goods from our father. I had run around trying to clear up her misunderstanding with Ayase. I had taken a trip to a publishing company to deal with the theft of Kirino’s cell-phone novel manuscript.

But I had done none of that for Kirino’s sake; it was all for my sake, as things I did freely of my own volition. No matter how unlovable my little sister was, no matter how annoying she was, no matter how jealous I was of her talent... I was her brother, so I didn’t have a choice. I was doing the only thing I could do.

So, I didn’t need her gratitude, nor did I want it.

*Things are fine the way they are*, I had thought. And that hadn’t changed. That shouldn’t have changed.

But... why was I crying?

That was dirty... she caught me completely by surprise...

Ugh, I have to admit it. I... getting thanked by my little sister, having her expressing her gratitude to me...

It made me happy.

It made me so happy I could cry.

“... Thank you, Kirino. This present you gave me... I’ll make sure to take good care of it.”

“Yeah yeah. Also, you haven’t even opened it yet, so what are you saying?”

My little sister responded curtly. But I didn’t mind. Her feelings had already been transmitted to me, and had manifested themselves in this present I was holding.

“You’re right. Well then, can I open it now then?”

“D-Do what you want.”

“... Alright.”

Wiping my tear-stricken eyes with my sleeve, I took the paper bag I had been hugging protectively and unsealed it.

I softly took out the contents. Slowly, carefully, carefully, I began to peel off the outer wrapping.

Just the fact that my sister had given this to me made it precious, so I didn’t really care what was inside.

I would definitely be happy no matter what came out, and I would probably cry.

*Rustle rustle.* Like that, what I unearthed from beneath the wrapping paper was...

An eroge titled *Sister x Sister ~Siscon Love Story~*.

“..... Umm..... What is this?”

I muttered haltingly. I blinked number of times, thinking that maybe I had been mistaken, but the item in front of me showed no signs of going away. I quickly looked back and forth between Saori and Kuroneko, and saw that they were completely dumbfounded. It seemed that they weren't expecting this state of affairs either.

When I looked right back at my little sister, I saw her with an incredibly happy smile on her face.

“This is seriously a godly game, so you should play it!”

“This... you...”

I was so moved before too... how could you burst my bubble like that?!<sup>1</sup>

No no, it's the thought that counts... what the actual present is doesn't matter!

B-But... who would have thought that, in the midst of this emotional moment... an eroge would appear from under those wrappings...?! Trembling, I couldn't say a single word more.

But...

“Hehe... just think of that game as me, and take good care of it!”

My little sister shyly put a hand to her upper lip, and as I looked at her, I slowly felt the tension in me loosen.

Because, in my little sister's facial expression, I couldn't sense even a bit of the usual mean-spiritedness. Geez, I give up. I can really feel that her words were coming from the heart.

And she told me to think of this little sister eroge as if it were her, and to take good care of it!

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, “what kind of punchline were you adding to my state of being deeply emotionally moved?!”

“Heh... hahaha...”

I felt myself also breaking out into a smile. This situation was just too ridiculous, and I couldn't do anything but laugh.

But contrary to expectations, this was perhaps the most Kirino-like thanks she could have given me.

“What? What are you laughing about? Hmm, you really that happy?”

“Ahah, maaaybe.” *Chuckle.*

“Thanks, Kirino.”

I plopped my hand on top of her head.

Kirino blinked in surprise.

I'm sure that in a few seconds, she's just going to get angry and start yelling at me again...

But the gift she had given me, of all things, was a little sister eroge.

Geez, this must be the most ridiculous, absurd... it was a memory that would make me grimace every time I thought of it... but at the same time, it was a situation that really fit us.

But most of all, at that moment...

We really looked just like a normal brother and sister.



## Chapter 4

### Part 1

A few days had passed since that crazy party in Akihabara, and for some reason, since then, my relationship with my sister had become a bit strange.

She had apologized to me sincerely.

"Thanks for everything," she had said from the bottom of her heart, even going so far as to giving me a present (although it was an eroge).

If this were a piece of fiction, you could say that this was the point where my tsuntsun little sister became deredere, and started to develop deep feelings towards her brother (= the protagonist).

If this were a "little sister game," then that interpretation would be especially fitting. If this were an Atelier Kaguya<sup>1</sup> game, it wouldn't be strange even if the game suddenly broke out into an H-scene that night. On the contrary, it would have been completely natural for the game to do that, and that would have been a place where you would create a separate save file in order to collect the CGs (geez, that was a really otaku-ish metaphor for me to be making).

But in any case, reality didn't unfold like an eroge did. Life, and humankind... they weren't simple things. It wasn't like I could just clear an event and increase my affection points with my little sister, and it wasn't like getting those affection points above a certain threshold would change our relationship completely.

After that, just as I thought, she had quickly swept away the hand I had placed on her head, and on the train home we didn't speak one word to each other. She also didn't show any sign of changing what she called me from "you" to "oniichan." Granted, haha... if she did call me oniichan, I probably would die then and there.

Yes...

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<sup>1</sup> Visual novel company.

Through that party, my sister had given me her gratitude, and I thought we would come to understand each other just a bit more, but the honest truth was that our relationship hadn't really changed that much.

There was now this vague strangeness in the air, but the relationship was fundamentally the same.

Because, even after I had been so sincerely honored, I still really hated my little sister. I think that I've laid out some of my reasons for feeling that way multiple times already, so I won't repeat myself again.

No matter what she did, my affection points for her wouldn't go up. I know that I've used that metaphor to describe my sister's annoying attitude, but I really was the same way. So I guess I shouldn't be talking.

Adding a few small positive numbers to a huge negative number would still get you a negative number after all.

And that was the way things were.

The negatives had accumulated too much, and at this point, something like what had happened was not going to change how I felt.

Hmph, but wasn't that obvious? To think what horrible things I've gone through because of her, and to think of the nasty attitudes she had when those things were happening... you've come to see just a bit of all the nasty things she's put me through... hm? That's not all, you say?

Tch... well... sure. I know what you mean.

Because, I mean... she was my little sister, so once in a blue moon she had a cute moment.

Veeery occasionally, if she wanted to come to me for life advice... well, just as things have been happening until now, there wasn't anything I wouldn't go out of my way to help her with.... And she definitely thanked me properly... hehe...

*Ehem.* And that's how things are. You got a problem with that?

Keh, if there was going to be some further noticeable change to our relationship...

It would have to be an event comparable to the scale of what had happened nine months ago...

I would have to go and step on a huge, monstrous landmine.

And a day like that wouldn't come.

... Although, that's exactly what I had thought back then too...

**Part 2**

It was March. I would only be a second-year high school student for a month longer.

We had the day off, and it was morning.

Getting ready to eat breakfast, I stifled a yawn while descending the stairs, when I happened to come across Kirino.

Just like some time ago, in the neighborhood of the living room door, our shoulders almost collided.

“Ah...”

But I just barely managed to stop in time, and our shoulders just barely touched. I would usually expect some acidic abuse to be flung my way at this point. So I gritted my teeth and steeled myself.

“Ah, good morning.”

Instead, she gave me an incredibly normal greeting. What a let-down.

“H-Hey...”

My eyes widened as I moved aside. “Thanks,” Kirino said naturally, as she disappeared into the living room.

Did something happen? I mean, if she’s thanking me like that...

Counting that time before, this was the second time, wasn’t it? W-What in the world could be happening...?

It’s not like a nuclear missile is headed straight for us from the North... right?

Suddenly, I felt completely bewildered at my little sister’s docile attitude.

I mean, it wasn't like this up until yesterday at least. Normally, if I tried to talk to her she would just face the other direction and run off somewhere... what was happening...?

And then, these doubts I held in regards to my sister began to steadily strengthen.

At breakfast, after our family had gathered around the dining table...

"Here, otousan, okaasan."

Kirino dished out the rice for every person in the family. My mother and my father both acted like this was the most natural thing in the world, and accepted the rice bowls offered to them with a "Thank you, Kirino" and a "... Ah, thanks." They were smiling the entire time.

"....." *Gulp.*

I unconsciously gulped when faced with this really strong feeling of unease.

If this were the Tamura household, I would understand what was going on. But this was the Kousaka household, and it was the first time in my life I had witnessed such a vaguely unsettling scene.

Also, it made me sick to the stomach seeing that rock-hardened face of my father's smiling.

I shuddered, and suddenly realized that a rice bowl was being held out to me.

"What's wrong? You're spacing out. Here, your portion."

"Huh? A-Ahhhh... th-thanks..."

It goes without saying that my hand was shaking as I took the rice bowl from her.

T-This isn't poisoned, right...?

I took a good look at the rice Kirino had given me. But all I could sense was the delicious smell of the freshly steamed rice and the steam rising up off of it.

Things just kept getting stranger.

“Thanks for yesterday, okaasan, otousan.”

“Ahh, no problem, no problem. It was fun for us too. Right, otousan?”

“Hm... ah, yes. It was worth taking off for that, you could say.”

“... Could I ask what you all are talking about?”

Faced with a conversation that I didn't understand at all, I tried to figure out what was going on.

It was my mother who explained it to me.

“Ahh, well, yesterday, we went and saw Kirino while she was working. Otousan and myself.”

“..... Huh? Y-You and otousan? Went to see Kirino... while she was working?”

Wait... that was completely impossible.

I mean, after all, my father didn't exactly look too fondly on Kirino's modeling work (at least not on the outside)... so even if my mother invited him along, I can't see him agreeing to that.

But my father just continued with that sickening smile.

“... Hm, it really wasn't bad at all, Kyouzuke. It was a feast for the eyes.”

“Ugh, otousan! You sound like a pervy old man.”

Being half-jokingly scolded by his own daughter, my father looked deeply wounded.

“N-No... that’s not what I meant when I said that... I mean, anyways, seeing all that with my own eyes made me relieved. I don’t really understand all of it, but you seemed to be working pretty hard. It was quite an impressive sight.”

My father tried to forcibly save face, but my mother gave a mischievous smile.

“Fufu.. hey Kirino Kirino... your otousan, you know, he was trying to take pictures and was mistaken for a suspicious person.”

“Eh, no way!”

“Ugh... you’re saying too much...! And also, if you had just come over and explained the situation it would have never gotten that far...!”

“Eh? But I was so embarrassed. ‘N-No, this is... my daughter...! K-Kaasan! Where are you?! Get over here...!’”

“Don’t imitate me!!”

What the hell was up with this situation...?

This was strange... it was clearly strange. W-What exactly was happening in this family right now...?

Could it be... was this a dream?

I mean, this... my whole family has gotten really weird all of a sudden, you know?

“What’s wrong, Kyouusuke~?”

“W-What’s wrong, Kyouusuke?”

My mother and father stared at me suspiciously. I once again gulped, and steeling myself, asked a question.

“... W-What have you done with my real dad?”

My father suddenly reached out with his hands...

*Crack!* He gave me a forceful poke in the forehead, and I saw stars dance in front of my blurred vision.

Was he trying to crack my head open?!

“Owww!!!?”

“Idiot. Don’t spew such nonsense.”

My father faced me as I held my forehead and tears leaked out of my eyes, and spoke in a disheartened tone.

Those were words I was used to hearing from him.

“... T-This isn’t a dream... it’s all real...”

“Oh oh Kyouzuke~. Is your head alright~? Would you like to go to the hospital~?”

“Ugh... mom, there’s an insult hidden in there, isn’t there?”

In this series of familiar exchanges...

“... Heh, iiiiiidiot.”

Kirino was giving me a funny stare. Her gaze didn’t have any of the scorn it usually had.

In this series of familiar exchanges, the only thing different was how my sister was acting and how my family was acting towards her.

**Part 3**

It was shortly after we had finished eating and I had returned to my room.

*Knock knock.* I heard a knock at the door. I put the reference book I was reading down on its front, and when I went out to take a look, I saw Kirino standing there. Her hands were joined together near her skirt, and she seemed hesitant about something. She didn't say anything, but she almost looked like she really wanted to go to the bathroom.

"... What's up?"

"I want to talk about something... could you come over to my room?"

That was certainly nicer than how she usually asked me to do things.

I was thus summoned to and headed over to my sister's room. If I recall correctly, this type of situation had happened multiple times after that incident.

The first time I went into my sister's room... and we had that first life advice session... that happened around June of last year...

Has nine months seriously passed already?

So, has it come now? The last life advice session?

Staring at Kirino as she walked in front of me, I was filled with inexplicable emotions.

I've really come a long way... even though we've been living under the same roof for all this time, that's what I thought.

It's probably because I'm thinking about my mental closeness with my sister. The me of nine months ago and the me of the present are standing in different places mentally... that's what I meant by "come a long way." I really can't articulate it very well though...

At last, we found ourselves standing in front of Kirino's room.

“Come in.”

“Thanks.”

This was also the customary exchange that I had seen happen a countless number of times. As always, a sweet smell drifted about in my sister’s room. As if she had renovated the place, the room gave off a different impression than before. The curtains had turned from red to pink, and overall the amount of clutter in the room had decreased.

“Hmm, your room seems cleaner than it was before.”

“Is that right?”

She gave me a curt response. Kirino pointed to a cat-shaped floor cushion.

“Sit.”

“Ahh.”

I didn’t bother restraining myself and sat cross-legged on the cushion. Every other time I’ve found myself on this cushion, I was faced with the angry face of my sister, but maybe because she had gotten used to this situation or had just given up, she showed no signs of acting that way this time.

“So... what did you want to talk about? Is this that ‘last life advice session’ you mentioned before?”

Sitting on the bed, Kirino took a while to respond.

After searching for the right words for a few moments, she finally spoke.

“... I suppose you could put it like that.”

“...?”

It was an incredibly vague answer.

“Well, whatever. Just speak up.”

“... Hey-“

Perhaps hurt by my curt tone, Kirino frowned and started to say something, but seemed to manage to restrain herself at the last second.

“... Nevermind.... Uhh..... ummmm.....”

Kirino once again found it difficult to find the right words. What the hell? Was it something that was this difficult to say...?

Granted, she’s acting pretty strange today but it was much better than how she usually acted. If her request was something I could help with...

“I want you to buy me an eroge.”

“How could you ask something so crazy so casually like that?!”

And I was wondering what she could possibly ask while she was acting so docile like that! It was just that?! Ugh, Kirino will always be Kirino!!

It was certainly more simple than anything she’s asked me to do up until now, but for that reason I could say it straight out: I don’t want to!

“But, is that seriously what you’re going to ask me to do in the ‘last life advice session’?”

“... I guess.”

What the hell?

“Why are you giving me that look? ... You disappointed or something?”

“I mean... I guess it just seems pretty light for the final life advice session, or something...”

“Isn’t that a good thing? It should be simple.”

“It’s not really.”

Because of the pace the conversation was now proceeding at, the unease I had felt before had disappeared.

“You do know I’m 17, right?”

“So what?”

“I-It’s not ‘So what?’ If I’m not over 18, I can’t buy 18+ games, right? Use your common sense... geez.”

And then... right then, an obvious question popped into my head.

“Kirino... can I just ask how exactly *you’ve* been buying eroge up until now?”

She definitely couldn’t buy them straight from the stores no matter how I thought about it. Ordering them via mail order also came with its own set of complications...

Kirino’s answer came quickly.

“It’s a secret. I have my ways. But you don’t want to hear about those, do you?”

“I guess not. It’s not like I care. But, if that’s the case, can’t you just buy the game in the same way you’ve been buying these games up until now? I mean, there’s no good reason to deliberately get me to get the game for you, right?”

“I’m asking you because there’s a good reason... take a look at this.”

Kirino pointed to the monitor for her desktop computer. An internet browser was open, and the official homepage for a certain game company was on display.

**Notice: Midnight on the Sixth – A late night game sales session at our Akihabara flagship store!**

**From Alice+, you can buy two of their newest releases from their hugely popular series *Little Sister Maker EX* all at once!**

***I'm Definitely Not Stealing my Oniichan's Underwear!***

***3D Custom Little Sister***

**Both of these featured products have already gotten thumbs up from critics!**

**Of course, don't forget about the other game companies! We have, from the new BL game maker, MF Soft Kiraru,**

***You Came, Boiled-San!, The Familiar of Mazo Homoge Club* and others all come on the market!<sup>1</sup>**

**All the sales start at midnight! All those who want to buy and play the newly released ecchi games a step ahead of everyone else, please come!**

"... So it's like that. So... I want you to stand in line when these things go on sale and buy me 'Onipan' and 'Kasuimo.'"

Those abbreviations were just a little...

This "3D Custom Little Sister" was probably a game like Siscali in which you made a little sister to your liking, but I couldn't even begin to guess what you did in "I'm Definitely Not Stealing my Oniichan's Underwear!"

It couldn't possibly be a game in which you controlled a little sister and tried to steal your brother's underwear without him catching you... right?

.....

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing."

That was so frightening I didn't even want to think about it.

"Hmm?"

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<sup>1</sup> Obvious parodies of "Yatte Kitayo, Druid-san!," "Zero no Tsukaima," and "Eroge Bu," respectively.

“Ok... umm... so where were we? This late-night game sale?”

“Yes, the late-night game sale. At midnight on the sale date, the store is going to have a special opening and is going to sell these new releases.”

“... And you’re telling me to line up for that? Why again? Are they going to sell out so fast that I actually have to stand in line?”

“It’s not like they’re going to sell out that fast... you could probably buy them normally on the sale date too.”

“So why are you asking me to do this? Can’t you just go buy it yourself after school lets out?”

“Well, it should be obvious that I just want to get this done as soon as possible.”

She answered me immediately. Kirino puffed out her chest with pride.

“I’m planning to sleep in the evening of the day before, and when you come back with the game, I’m going to play it until the morning and clear at least one route.”

“You’re seriously a hardcore otaku, aren’t you... you’re going to go that far?”

“Hmph... of course. Are you that surprised?”

She sounded like the prototypical hero who was going off to his death. This was the very embodiment of determination.

“But, for me to go buy an eroge for you... there are still a number of problems with that.”

“Huh? What problems?”

“Well, first, there’s curfew.”

Our family’s curfew was basically set at six-thirty, and if you weren’t at the dinner table at seven when the meal started then you didn’t get to eat. Granted, my father occasionally came home late because of work, and there

were a few times that I was allowed to bend my curfew after I had called in beforehand. For example, when I had stayed over at the Manami household before, I was allowed to stay out past curfew. However...

“The sale starts at midnight in Akiba, right? So I probably won’t be able to get home until past one in the morning. No matter what excuse I feed to our parents about having to go out, when I come home at that time of the night dad is going to be really pissed. And if he found out that I had gone out to buy eroge...”

Terrifying. I didn’t even want to think about it.

“I’ll figure out how to deal with that part. Call my cell phone once you get back home. When I get your call I’ll check if our dad is awake or not, and if he’s still awake I’ll provide a diversion.”

Ah right, when we had gone to Shinjuku before, we had exchanged cell phone numbers.

... To think that we really had exchanged cell phone numbers.

Considering how we were a year ago, it was pretty unbelievable.

“So, while you’re keeping dad busy, you want me to sneak in? You really think that’s going to work?”

“It’ll be completely fine. Well? You still have a problem with this plan?”

My little sister waved her hand back and forth as I sighed and answered.

“... This might be obvious, but I haven’t ever bought an eroge before. Can I really just walk in and buy the game if I go to this late-night sale? Once again, I’m only 17 right now.”

“I don’t know, but... I mean... I really, really just want to do this as soon as possible.”

Why was she so desperate?

This is why otaku confused the hell out of me.

“Come on... this is the last time... so... please.”

Ughhhhhhhh... Although, when I thought about it, it just wouldn't do for me to let her stand in line in the middle of the night... and honestly, when you compared it to everything I've gone through up until now, this wasn't a big deal.

“... Fine, fine. I'll do it.”

“Really?”

“Men don't go back on their word.”

Ohhh, she looks really happy...

Ahh. I'm also just way too soft... or just pathetic.

Just because my sister asked me with her hands together like that... not only did I easily agree to what she asked, but when she looked so happy as a result, it even made me happy.

Her eyes sparkling, Kirino smiled and spoke firmly.

“I would like to bestow upon you a single, grand mission.”

Puffing out her chest like she was the general of an army, placing one hand on her chest, Kirino pointed at me.

“To protect the beautiful maiden, fly through enemy territory with a single plane, thirty-two kilometers. Can you do it?”<sup>2</sup>

“Beautiful maiden... is that what you're comparing the eroge to?”

I didn't like that metaphor at all. And I had no idea what her words were suppose to be a reference to.

Well, whatever. I answered sluggishly.

---

<sup>2</sup> Seems to be a reference to Toaru Hikuushi e no Tsuioku. Although the original quote seems to be “12000km”, not “32km.” 32km would take five seconds to fly through.

“Yeah yeah... roger that.”

Although... for the last life advice session, this really seemed pretty simple... or pretty light.

It's not like I was wishing for something more difficult though.

... Was she really ok with having this as her final request?

### Part 4

For that reason, that night I made up the excuse that I was going to stay at my classmate Akagi's house, and came to Akihabara. I really do seem to be ending up here quite a lot lately...

By the way, the guy I used as my excuse, Akagi Kouhei, was a member of the soccer club, and I guess I hung out enough with him that you could call us friends.

When he didn't have practice, we would often go to the arcade together. He was a lively guy, who carried himself in a way that made it no surprise that he played soccer. He also was pretty good-looking.

*"Sorry Akagi, but could you just pretend I'm staying over at your place tonight without asking questions?"*

When I had asked him that, he agreed to it pretty quickly, with a *"Ohh, it's fine, it's fine. Go do nice things with Tamura-san."* It did seem like there was a misunderstanding happening here though...

He was incredibly nosy, and he was an annoying joker on the one hand, but he was also a good person. Probably.

This was the first time I had come to Akihabara at night, but it was more crowded than I had imagined.

Going against the flow of the salarymen getting almost sucked into the train station, I went out through the ticket barrier.

*"... Damn, it's cold..."*

The minute I left the station, a cold wind blew around me. I unconsciously thrust both my hands in my coat pockets, and shivered while pulling my coat closed. It was 11PM. The electric city had its shutters closed, and only the streetlamps and a small number of shops illuminated the streets. It was quite a bleak sight.

*"It's even drizzling..."*

And I had thought it was really cold... When I glanced up at the sky, a mist of raindrops splashed on and sapped the warmth from my face. Unfortunately, I hadn't brought an umbrella.

"I really hope it doesn't start pouring..."

Leaving the station grounds, I headed towards the game shop in question.

It wasn't far. It wouldn't take but a few minutes for me to get there.

When I arrived at the store, I saw that a number of people were already lined up in front of the shutters.

Wait... there were almost fifty people here, weren't there...?

And what was more surprising was that a good number of them were girls.

I didn't know what kinds of games they were planning to buy, but...

Don't tell me that these people were all in the same category as Kirino...  
Bravo people, bravo.

As these thoughts raced through my head, I moved to the back of the line.

The store's shutters were shut, and a sign announcing the midnight sale was erected in front of the shop.

A list of the titles being sold by each company was pasted on the shutters.

**Part 5**

“ .....

Although, the guy standing in front of me... he really was wearing quite an amazing jacket.

What I would guess was a character from one of the eroge on sale tonight was printed hugely on the back of his jacket.

Don't tell me that he actually came on the train wearing that... he must have quite the burning spirit to pull that off. I can't say I'm not impressed.

Although I would never do something like that myself.

Granted, it's to be expected that the people here would all be motivated like that.

I mean, they went out of their way to come here in the dead of night, even though tomorrow (basically, roughly 11 hours later) they could just buy these games at a shop during normal hours. If they had school or work, they could also order the game by mail.

In other words, these people were all in the same league as Kirino.

I mean, to actually take the time to take the train to Akiba, and then to line up in this insufferable cold...

Even if I get it one second faster, I want to play this new game as soon as possible. I can't be patient, even if only for ten hours.

That's the gist of it, right? ... They are seriously obsessed.

I really couldn't start to understand how they felt, but...

If they were looking forward to this game that much, then that would surely make the game makers really happy as well.

After all, the game they had poured their heart and souls into was being so heavily anticipated like this.

That was something to be thankful for.

I wonder if it was because I had met people who created content when I went to the publishing company a while ago, but that's what I thought.

I stood in line and waited for a few minutes. There was still a bit of time before the shop would open.

To be honest, there was not much to do. I should have brought a paperback to read or something, but I didn't. Getting more and more bored, I casually looked in the direction of the Radio Kaikan<sup>1</sup>, and saw quite an amazing bicycle there.

Just from a glance, I could tell it was an expensive road racer bike. And just you listen...

On the back wheel was drawn a picture of an eroge character?!

Where the spokes were supposed to be was instead a disk. This is what they called a "disk wheel," right?<sup>2</sup>

On one face of the disk was drawn a smiling bishoujo. It definitely gave off a strong impression... in more ways than one.

My eyes narrowed. It wasn't just that the entire spectacle was pretty embarrassing, but the fact that this person went through so much trouble to modify an expensive bicycle like that was just wrong. The owner was seriously out of his mind.

".... Whoa!"

*Gulp...* was the person who rode here on that somewhere in this line?

---

<sup>1</sup> A building in Akihabara, [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Akihabara\\_Radio\\_Kaikan\\_1st\\_-\\_01.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Akihabara_Radio_Kaikan_1st_-_01.jpg) shown here, which actually has very little to do with radios.

<sup>2</sup>[http://pds.exblog.jp/pds/1/200808/13/26/b0085526\\_145243.jpg](http://pds.exblog.jp/pds/1/200808/13/26/b0085526_145243.jpg) Like so.

Alright, whatever, let me just try not to think too much about this...

I shook my head and tried to turn my attention somewhere else. Suddenly, a downright chilling wind blew past me. I wound both my hands in my shirt, mumbling. “F-Freezing....”

... It was really damn cold.

Everyone who was standing in this line probably felt my pain.

It was cold, so the salarymen who were passing us on the way to the station gave us cold glances as well. Jabbering OLS<sup>3</sup> also pointed at us. “What are they doing in this cold...?!” “Late-night sale! It’s a late-night sale!” “Ohhh, so this is the rumored...”

And to top it all off, a group of foreigners were there whispering and not even trying to hide their shivering.

I couldn’t really hear them very well, but I think it went something like this:

“W-W-Whatsu?”

“\*#(@\*, Hei, rooku! ... Late-night sale... hentai geemu.”

“... Ohhh... hohohoho... kureezi.....”<sup>4</sup>

Ugh! You’re all here in Akihabara like us, so can’t you just be a bit nicer about it?!

Damn it all. Even to the other people in Akihabara, we look strange right now.

“... Ughhh...”

---

<sup>3</sup> Office ladies.

<sup>4</sup> Half of this is in bad Japanese, and half of this is in Kyousuke’s rather crappy version of English.

Can't the shop open soon...? I really want to just buy it and get out of here...

I checked my cell phone, and saw that there was still more than half an hour until midnight.

*Sigh...*

I languidly leaned on the shutter, and watched as my breath condensed in front of me.

And here, I met with someone completely unexpected.

"Umm, excuse me~.... Is this where the line starts for the late-night sale?"

"Ahh, yeah it is..."

I answered casually and turned around, when...

"Uwaah-?!" "Ugyahh?!"

Both of us gave out a shout of alarm.

"Ahh... hhh..."

We stared at each other, our bodies stiffening in surprise and our eyes widening. He wasn't much taller than I was. His slightly-drooping eyes were rimmed by double-edged eyelids, and he was easily recognizable from his chestnut-colored hair. He stood out even in the dark with his orange, down jacket.

The one standing in front of me was precisely the person I had been talking to on the phone a bit before...

"A-Akagi?"

There was no mistaking it. It was Akagi Kouhei.

"K-Kousaka... is that you...?"

Akagi looked pretty cautious. I probably had a similar look on my face.

Because, I mean, just think about where we are... you understand, right?

In short, it was like that sick feeling when you bumped into a classmate in the 18+ corner of a video store. Ughhh... gaahhh... guhhh... what should I do.....?

But also, why the hell was he in such an unbecoming place like this?!

“W-Why... why are you here?”

“I want to ask you the same question...”

Both Akagi and I had already guessed why the other was here, but we just didn’t even want to think about it...

“Haha..... my, my, it is really cold today, isn’t it, Kousaka-kun.”

“... You know, you’re right, haha, Akagi-kun... hahaha.”

We were both just shameless in putting on our little acts.

“.....”

“.....”

And then we suddenly fell into silence.

*Gulp*..... What do I do now.....?

H-He’s probably here for the same reason I am, but...

And then, I realized something. I braced myself and very quickly broke the silence.

“Hey, Akagi! I definitely just asked you to pretend that I was staying over at your house, didn’t I?! And you agreed to that really quickly, so why the hell are you here at an eroge late-night sale lineup?!”

“S-Shut up Kousaka! People have these things called ‘priorities’ you know!”

“S-So you’re telling me that buying erogé took priority over your friend?! You damn otaku!!”

“Ugh... there’s a deep reason for that, alright?! I-It’s completely fine... even if your family called my house, my little sister would have taken care of it! I definitely made sure it was ok with her before I left! Also, how can you be accusing me here?! I had agreed to give you an alibi because I thought you were going off somewhere with Tamura-san and wanted it to keep it a secret from your parents! Why the hell are you in Akiba buying erogé out of all things?! I’m just so damn confused right now I have no words...!!”

“Ugh... there’s also a deep reason for that!”

In a complete turnaround from the restraint we were showing just a bit ago, we started to have a loud argument at the back of the line.

Why in the world was I arguing with one of my friends about erogé?

Now, the guy with the otaku jacket in front of us was also glancing back at us every once in a while.

If I could just calm down and think about this situation, I would have realized how embarrassing this all was.

“A deep reason? What deep reason, Kousaka? Just spit it out.”

“..... Umm.....”

It wasn’t something I could just blurt out. Just think about what would happen if I told him that my sister had asked me to come and buy “I’m Definitely Not Stealing my Oniichan’s Underwear!” for her... and I didn’t think he would believe such an outrageous statement in the first place.

I immediately countered his question with a question of my own.

“W-Well, let’s get off me for a second. What’s your reason? Tell me.”

“..... Umm.....”

Akagi looked desperate as he fumbled for words. Even though it was damn cold, sweat still managed to form on his brow.

I probably had a similar look on my face.

“.....” “.....”

We glared at each other for almost a minute. It wasn't clear which of us would be the first to break the silence...

“... W-Well, it seems that we both have our own difficult issues that we're dealing with.”

“... T-That seems to be the case...”

“... H-Hey Kousaka. It's just a suggestion, but... can we just pretend we didn't see each other here?”

“Good idea, Akagi! What a wonderful plan! Let's do that, definitely. Neither of us went to Akihabara, and neither of us ended up standing in line for a late-night sale!”

“And of course, neither of us bought any eroge!”

“Friendship is about helping each other-“

“-and expecting nothing in return!”

*Clap.* We exchanged a firm handshake.

There was definitely a deep sense of friendship between us at that moment.

With impeccable timing, *clash!* the shutter opened halfway, and a shop employee came out from under it. The employee held a megaphone in one hand.



“Ohh, it looks to be about time, comrade.”

“No no, I do believe there is some time left, comrade.”

Still shaking each other’s hands, we listened to the shop employee’s announcement.

“Ahh, we’re going to form a line starting now! Those who reserved their game beforehand, please form a line in front of each game!”

It seemed that the people who reserved the games beforehand would be able to buy them first. I (or I should say Kirino) didn’t make a reservation, but...

“Kousaka, I reserved a game beforehand. What about you?”

“No, I didn’t.”

You reserved an eroge? I thought Akagi was a really lively guy before, but I guess there was a side of him that I didn’t know about...

But I wonder what game he had come to buy.

The little sister games, probably?

But he had a little sister... if he was still buying little sister eroge of his own free will, then I really pitied his real little sister. In that case, that hentai would be a disgrace to older brothers everywhere.

As we had made a pact, I didn’t ask him what game he was going to buy, but as I thought about which games they were selling today I felt myself growing more and more confused.

Right then, the shop employee hoisted up a box of eroge, and spoke into the megaphone.

“Those who have a reservation for ‘Homoge Club’ should form a line here!”

“Ah, alright!” <- (Akagi)

“... Whaa?!?!”

*Swish!* With the coldest, most uncomfortable feeling I have ever felt running down my spine, I promptly threw away the hand that I was still shaking, which belonged to my former comrade.

Because the eroge box that the shop attendant was holding had pasted on it a drawing of a bunch of macho looking men hugging each other. Also, I swore that some of them looked a bit like me.

*Brrrrrr!* At that repulsive feeling, I couldn't stop my entire body from shaking.

“A-Akagi... y-y-y-y-you..... that... you..... you're getting that seriously ho..... d-don't tell me... you're...”

“K-Kooooousaka!! You've got it completely, completely wrong here!!”

“... I-I honestly didn't know. T-To think that... you would have a hobby like *that...*”

“N-Noooooooooo!! Just listen! We're comrades, right?! Come on, Kousaka, look me in the eye!”

“What are you looking so serious for?!”

Gross! This person was just gross! I suddenly knew exactly how Kirino felt!

“Y-You damn homo! D-Don't come close to me...! S-Sorry, but I don't swing that way...!”

“He-, Kousaka! What happened to that pact of friendship you just made with me?!”

“I don't remember ever making a pact like that with a homo!”

“I keep on trying to tell you that I'm not a homo, dammit!”

“Then why the hell did you make a reservation for a homo game?! What’s up with that drawing and that title?! No matter how I look at it, you’re a complete homo!”

“C-Certainly, I’m trying to buy a homo game right now! And it’s even a hardcore, no-holds-barred one without any artistic value otherwise! I’ll admit that! But, there’s a good reason I’m doing all this!”

It seemed that, now that he was cornered, Akagi was a bit more willing to talk about the reasons he had for doing this.

“The truth this...”

“T-The truth is?”

“The truth is that my sister was the one who asked me to buy this!”

“Ohh... so your sister...”

Well, there’s no helping it-

“Wait, how the hell is that possible?! At least try to make up a better excuse, dammit!”

I thrust my finger at Akagi, and made my retort.

“Your sister is still in junior high, isn’t she?! Where in the hell could you find a little sister who would ask her older brother to buy ero-----“

.....

“... Well, I guess it might happen every once in a while.”

“Hey! Why the hell did you suddenly start agreeing with me?!”

“... Ah, no, sorry for doubting you before. But yeah... sometimes in this world, there are just things that you can’t possibly understand...”

I muttered deeply. Well, this wasn't a big deal. I was here on my sister's orders to buy an eroge too, after all. Even if Akagi was really just making up an excuse right now, it's not like I was in a position to call him a liar. And I certainly didn't want to believe that someone I hung out normally with was a homo. Nah, I refused to believe it.

"So, Akagi... that is... your little sister... umm... she plays homo games?"

"Yeah, she's really into them."

Really into them...

Well, I also had a little sister who was really into eroge, so even if there was a little sister who was really into homo games, I shouldn't find it strange. At last, I took a look at all the girls standing in line for the homo game.

I see... so this was the reason that there were all these girls lining up at this late-night sale... Hmm...

"So they call these things... BL, was it?"

"Well, how should I put it... there's soft-core and hard-core stuff, and a number of things in between--"

"You don't have to go into detail like that!"

I didn't want to hear a lecture about homo games. A number of things, indeed. End of conversation.

"In any case, my little sister is one of those so-called 'fujoushi' types."

"Fujoushi?"

"... You probably don't know about that world, Kousaka. They're called 'fujoushi.' You take the kanji for 'wife,' which is pronounced 'fu,' and replace it with the kanji for 'stink' pronounced the same way. So they're stinking women, or fujoushi. To be honest, I don't fully understand that culture either... they don't care whether it's 2D or 3D, but they're obsessed with guys loving other guys and sex, and they're completely controlled by their disgusting lust for that kind of stuff... you understand?"

With a serious expression and tone, Akagi chose his words carefully and explained everything to me.

It seemed that this was quite an important point. But it was honestly all Greek to me.

Also, was it really alright for him to be blabbing all this about his sister's hobby to me?

Well, his situation was probably not the same as mine... but I could empathize amazingly well with his desire to grumble nonstop about unreasonable little sisters to someone who would listen. So I won't interrupt him here and I'll just listen.

"Sorry, I really don't get it... but these... fujoushi, was it? Why do you call them that again?"

"Because they're *rotten*."

Akagi answered instantly. He didn't care to explain what exactly was rotten, but his words had a forceful persuasiveness behind them. These were the words of someone who wouldn't be moved by any argument, who had already drowned himself in a helpless sea of shame.

So, even though I wanted to, I just couldn't bring myself to ask him exactly what he thought was rotting.

The only response I could give was the following:

"So it's like that..."

"Yes, it's like that. You see now?"

"No, not really."

Akagi did a faceplant. Getting back up firmly to his feet, he came at me almost desperately.

"They like homos! Couplings between anime characters! Musicals! People like Ishida Gin from the Prince of Tennis! "

“Don’t shout stuff that could be taken out of context like that!!”

Because, honestly, people around us might mistake what you said and assume you’re the one who loves Ishida Gin.

“... Hey, Kousaka. Why is it that all the fujoushi I meet love me? Is it because I’m handsome?”

“How the hell should I know?”

What an idiot.

“We’re getting off track. So, what you’re saying is... for the sake of his fujoushi little sister, Kouhei Oniichan is standing out here in Akihabara in the middle of the night buying homo games.”

“So don’t try to blame me for this one, Kousaka... I have my reasons.”

Akagi shook his head sadly.

I nodded, feeling a large well of empathy swell up within me.

“... I see.”

No, I seriously knew all too well how he felt. In fact, I felt the same way. I had my own reasons for being here too.

“.....? You know, you really were pretty quick to believe me. Honestly, I didn’t think you would believe me even if I told you the truth.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess.”

But I’m seriously surprised.

To think there was a big brother who had been put into a similar situation as I had...

And to think I would know that brother personally.

“Hey, Kousaka, I should probably mention that all the stuff I just explained to you came from my sister. I’m definitely not a homo, so don’t get the wrong idea.”

“I got it, I got it. You know, if you keep on trying to make excuses like that, it’s going to start looking pretty suspicious. It’s fine, so just ignore me and get over to that other line. The shopkeeper is looking this way and waiting for you.”

There might come a day when I could talk to this person frankly about my situation.

Indeed, I had a feeling that day would come.

“Alright, then, I’m going over to the reservations line.”

“Yeah.”

I raised a hand and waved to my classmate. Akagi gave me a bright smile, and turned the other way.

He jogged lightly over to the homo game line.

Everyone else in the line was probably a fujoushi, so he stood out like a sore thumb.

Also, those other girls standing in the homo game line probably thought Akagi was flaming gay.

Poor guy...

As I stared at his retreating back, I saw him finally reaching the back of the line, at which point he turned back to me and raised a hand.

“Kousaka! I’ll see you at school tomorrow!”

“Gah...!!”

C-Crap. People are going to start thinking I’m his boyfriend...!!!

I mean, that's what was going to happen, right?! Just look. All the fujoushi were gathering and holding a hand to their mouths, going "... gyahh BL! It's BL!"<sup>5</sup>

Ugh..... my heart sank, just like the rain that was endlessly drizzling down from the black night sky.

---

<sup>5</sup> Boy's love. You get the picture. By which I don't mean you should go get a picture. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

**Part 6**

In order to avoid any possible unfortunate misunderstandings, the line with people who were buying the homo game was partitioned off from our line.

After that, a bit more time passed, until the clock read 12:10AM. By that time, the line behind me had grown quite a bit as well. Seriously, there must have been over a hundred people in this damn line. A-All these weirdoes...

Once again, I have to say, this country is strange. I took a glance at the titles of the games on sale tonight, and that impression just grew. It was all stuff like "Custom Little Sister" or "Homoge Club," and I couldn't help but think that the demand for homo games and imouto games was just way too high.

A small distance away, some people who looked like photographers were setting up cameras and beginning to take photos.

What the hell were they planning to do with those photographs of all these otaku lining up?

At that moment, that question ran quite lightly through my head.

It would only be later when I found my face blurred out on photos posted on personal websites with captions like "Brave souls battling the lines at a late night sale," or "Anime bikes tear through the night sky." Seeing those threw me into a spiral of depression, but right now, I had no idea any of that was going to happen.

At that moment, the shopkeeper once again held up the microphone and began to make an announcement.

"The sale will begin in just a moment, so please wait just a bit longer! In addition, please listen carefully to the following list of the final trains leaving from Akihabara Station! For the Soubu Line trains heading towards Chiba, Tsudanuma, twelve thirty-two, and for the trains going towards Mitaka, twelve thirty-eight. Next, for the Yamanote Line..."

In that manner, the shopkeeper began to read out the times corresponding to the last trains.

There was certainly quite a large crowd lined up, so there might certainly be those who wouldn't be able to make it to the last train, and the shopkeeper was probably taking them into account.

“And to those of you who are able to go home by train tonight, please be careful.”

At that time, I hadn't really thought too much about the last train.

“Oh?”

When I faced the store, I heard a rustle, and saw that the shutter was being opened.

We were standing in the cold and in the dark, while the interior of the store was bright and warm.

So, when the shop interior slowly came into focus, it was quite a scene to behold.

The sight of that interior, flooded with magnificent light, reminded me of paradise.

I heard gasps of awe around me.

When my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw a mountain of eroge before me.

To otaku, you could say that this was heaven.

I looked into the shop. Only the first floor of the shop was accessible at this time. There was a mountain of eroge near the entrance, and they were then lined up around the shop in a clockwise fashion.

There were also clear markings near the register that allowed people to get out of the store quickly and efficiently after they were finished paying.

The shop employee once again shouted out to us.

“Well then, we’re pleased to announce that our late night sale starts riiiiight noooow!! We will now be letting people into the store ten at a time, starting from the front.”

Ah, I see. There were too many people gathered around here, so they wouldn’t all fit at once in the store. That would just devolve into chaos.

It made sense that they would try to let only a few people in at a time, and then periodically allow more people to go in once the store had cleared out. However...

“..... Crap.”

Unfortunately, the problem was that this way of doing things took time.

Come on, come on, hurry up. At this rate, I’m going to miss the last train.

I knew there was no point in grumbling about it, but even then I wanted to grumble.

There also was the annoying problem that I wasn’t going to be let in until all the people with reservations were already done.

If only I had lined up just a bit earlier... if I had known it was going to be this crazy...

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now.

Obviously, I still hadn’t learned my lesson from that time at summer Comiket. From now on, at otaku events, I would be sure to line up as early as I could, provided it didn’t bother the locals.

The noise around me intensified in a crescendo as I approached the store door. Finally, it was my turn to go in.

I glanced at the clock on my cell phone.

If I remember correctly, the last train was around twelve thirty, right...?

“... Crap, this is going to be close.”

If I don't do this quickly, I'm going to miss that last train! I have to get this over with and get back as soon as possible!

The mountain of eroges was disappearing before my eyes. With quite a bit of speed.

I had been waiting in line for an hour, but if I didn't hurry the things I came here to buy might honestly sell out.

Alright! Let's go!

"Ok... underwear... underwear... my Oniichan's underwear... ah, this one?!"

I pushed my way through the crowd, and desperately grabbed hold of a copy of *I'm Definitely Not Stealing my Oniichan's Underwear!* and *3D Custom Little Sister*. Both of them had been nearly sold out.

"That was close... thank God I got there in time..."

At first, I stroked down my chest and sighed in relief, but...

**Part 7**

After I bought the things I had come for and arrived at the train station, all my worst fears were realized when I saw that the last train had left. I had run the entire way from the store, but I managed to just miss it.

“Nnnnnnnnnghhhhhh.... goddammit.”

I hung my head in despair in front of the ticket gate at Akihabara Station.

The rain had not stopped falling from the dark, dreary sky, and even as I stood there the droplets of water continued to sap away my body’s warmth.

“..... What am I going to do.....?”

Walking home from here was out of the question, and it was also too far to call a taxi.

But even then, if I stood here dazed and just waited for the first train I would probably freeze to death.

I was completely out of good ideas.

I found a light pole nearby and leaned back on it. I fished my cell phone out from my pocket.

After all, I had to tell my little sister who was waiting eagerly to play these games that I wouldn’t be able to get back tonight.

I took a quick glance at the paper bag I was holding in one hand.

Ugh... this really sucks... there really was no excuse...

“Kirino... she was looking forward so much to playing these games too...”

But, there was nothing left to be done. At the end of the day, I could never do anything.

I recalled my little sister's cell phone number, which I had only learned recently.

Once upon a time, I would have stubbornly insisted that I didn't want to know her number, but now I just stared at that number with quite a few confused thoughts running through my head. I dialed the number, and a moment later...

**"You bought it?! Where are you?! Right next to the house, right?! Right?!"**

It took a single ring before she picked up.

A restless, happy sounding voice bounded from the telephone into my ears.

.... Geez... this girl.....

She must have been waiting anxiously for me to call all this time.

I thought of the movies I've seen, in which a busy father has to cancel his plans to go to his daughter's school on Parent Visitation Day, even after he had promised to go. This must have been exactly what those fathers felt like.

"..... Sorry. I'm actually still at Akiba Station....."

I let out a heavy sigh, and steeled myself before spilling the truth.

"And I missed the last train."

**"Huh? What? What do you mean? When are you getting back?"**

"I bought the game you wanted me to buy, but the game shop was really crowded... and the last train already left by the time I got out of there. Sorry... but I think I don't have any choice but to wait out the night at a family restaurant or somewhere, and I'll head back on the first train in the morning."

**"..... No way..... so... so you.... so you can't come back tonight?"**

"Yeah. Sorry. I mean, at least I managed to get the game..."

“..... No way..... that’s not.....”

Kirino spoke in a weak, sad-sounding voice.

I couldn’t believe that this same person had sounded so happy just a moment ago.

Hearing her sound like that made my chest feel like it was about to burst open. It was hard to believe that all of this was over a game.

But whether it was games or anything else, that girl was always serious.

When she was happy, or angry, or having fun, or being sad... she would always put her all into it.

It wasn’t something I could fully comprehend, but to her, this probably was something that was worthy of getting so upset over.

**” ..... Umm..... is it..... is it really impossible? Can’t you... can’t you just find a way... to get back by morning at least?”**

She didn’t know when to give up. Didn’t I already tell her that I had missed the last train?

It was only around ten hours. Just be patient. Or rather, buy the damn game yourself. Don’t make me go for you...

I didn’t think anything like that at all. Not in the least bit.

I wonder why. If this were the usual me, I would be cursing and spouting those complaints immediately.

It was just an eroge. It was just around ten hours.

However, I just couldn’t bring myself to utter the word “just.”

I had a feeling that it was just something I couldn’t say, no matter what.

After this entire ordeal was long over, I reflected on the experience.

It may very well have been that at that time, I subconsciously knew that something was being hidden from me just from my desperate sister's tone of voice. And that the reason why my sister wanted me to be back by morning meant more than she was letting on.

If I didn't, the actions I then proceeded to take and the feelings I felt at that moment would have made no sense.

Because in the end, the next words out of my mouth at that moment were not words of reproach against my stubborn little sister.

"... I'll find a way."

**"Huh? You'll find a way... what are you going to-"**

"Hmph, quiet. Just stay awake and wait a bit longer! I'll find a way to get back home!"

*Click.* I hung up, and turned my cell phone off.

"Now then..."

How am I going to get back? To be quite honest, I didn't have the slightest idea. However, the feeling that it was my greatest duty to get back as fast as possible burned in my chest.

To get a mere eroge to my annoying little sister, just a bit faster than its official release date...

Even though it was for the sake of something as trivial as that...

Haha... I have to say, I'm rather surprised with how complex a person I really am.

"Up we go."

I stopped leaning against the poll, stood back up, and dispelled the feeling of resignation I had been feeling a minute before.

First, I had to take account of my situation. It was twelve forty-seven, and my wallet didn't have much money in it. I also didn't have an ATM card. I also didn't know anyone with a car.

Hmm... ah, right. For now, I can try my chances and call out to all the people who missed the last train, and ask if anybody wanted to split a cab with me.

Or, rather, I could contact Akagi, who seemed to be in a similar situation as I was in, and explain my situation to him and ask for his help. In either case, I had to act quickly.

As I began to think hard about the ways I could get home, I exited the station and faced the main road.

At that moment, I saw it.

It was the bike.

I looked at that bike parked in front of the Radio Kaikan.

That was it. If I had that, I could get home.

I thought of that idea right away. But of course, this plan came with its own set of problems.

It might have been better than asking random strangers to split a cab even though my wallet was pretty empty, but this new plan was so insane that it normally wouldn't have even been considered.

However, that didn't matter to me. I had the sacred duty to get this eroge to my little sister, and with a firm determination that blocked out everything else from my line of sight, I momentarily forgot all about everything that was wrong with this plan.

Just like Kuroneko had once pointed out in the past, I had once again gone funny in the head, all because of my little sister.

It seemed that my inner switch had become much easier to flip as of late.

And the reason why that was true still escapes me.

So I...

I ran up to that bike with the huge anime character drawn on it, and yelled out to the bike's owner who was just about to ride off.

"Excuse me! Please lend me that bike!!"

"Huh?!"

The bike owner's reaction was natural, of course.

In his place, if some stranger yelled at me to lend him my bike, I would have definitely reacted in the same way. Even more so if my bike was a custom road racing bike like the one he owned.

Also, if he lent me his bike, he would suddenly lose his own way of getting back to his home, so no matter what, the idea was just out of the question.

However, I didn't give up!

The owner raised his eyebrows suspiciously, and I began to beg him with my hands clasped in front of me.

"Please! I have an emergency! I'll definitely give it back to you after!"

"T-That's not funny..."

That was also a natural reaction. There was no way he could just lend such an expensive bike to a complete stran-

"I have to get back as soon as I can to play the games I just bought! You think I can lend you my bike?!"

Seriously, that was the reason?

I reacted reflexively and almost shouted that out at him, the time it took me to have that reaction finally gave me a chance to get a good look at the guy. He was skinny beyond belief, with smooth, black hair and a pair of thick,

black-rimmed glasses that looked quite out of style. He looked like he was in his early twenties. And, fully understand how rude this may sound, he was the exact image you thought of when someone asked you to imagine a skinny-looking otaku.

And now that I actually got the chance to look him over, I saw that the same bishoujo anime character printed on his bicycle was printed huge on his jacket.

Wait, this is the guy who was right in front of me back in the line, wasn't he?! N-No wonder he was so hardcore about all this.

"Hm? Wait... aren't you that noisy homo that was standing behind me?"

It seemed that at that moment, he also realized who I was. It wasn't strange to think that having spent an hour lined up next to each other, he would more or less remember what I looked like and remember me.

However... even then... that didn't make this situation any better than it was.

"Ugh..."

Trying to show as much sincerity as I possibly could, I kneeled down on the ground. Knelt down on that cold asphalt, still wet from the falling rain.

"H-Hey... what are you..."

Well, that was obvious. This happened every single time, and I was beginning to get completely fed up with this pattern... but what could I do? I gripped the game Kirino asked me to buy in one hand, put the other hand firmly on the ground, and begged with my head lowered.

"Please, please, please help me! My little sister is waiting for me at home! I need that bike for my little sister, no matter what! I'll definitely... I'll absolutely give it back to you! If there's something you want from me in return, tell me! I'll do anything! So..."

"... Ugh... That's enough. Just stop it."

Before I could finish my sentence, I felt a strong tug on my arm. With strength nobody would expect could come out of someone with that thin frame, the bike owner pulled me to my feet. When I immediately looked at his face in response, I saw that he was still frowning with a troubled expression. The kind of expression that said “This is really turning into an annoying situation...”

*Sigh.* “Well, I’m not sure what it is, but it sounds like you’ve got an emergency on your hands, right? And the situation involves your little sister?”

“Y-Yes!”

“Well, then I don’t mind.”

“Huh?”

For just a moment, what he had said didn’t register in my brain, and I stood there sounding like an idiot.

“I said I don’t mind.”

He lovingly stroked the bike saddle. He then nimbly pulled back his hand, and gave the bike saddle a firm whack.

“I’ll lend her to you. Just take her and go.”

“R-Really?! I can?!”

I had been the one who asked for the bike, but even then I couldn’t believe it.

How could he so easily trust a complete stranger like this...?

As if he could sense my doubts, the bike owner turned his gaze to my hands.

“Well... hmm..... it’s just that, I caught a glimpse of what you have in that paper bag there...”

He sounded completely sincere.

“To tell you the truth, I bought the same game. I’ve been buying them since volume 1, and I’ve been looking forward to this sale for a long, long time. Fans are probably all like this, but you could even say I love this game. For the sake of today, I took off from my part-time job, even though I knew I might get fired for it. I even paid a penalty and withdrew money from a locked account of mine, and had this bike and jacket of Fana-tan custom made. I came here on the day of the sale and stood here in this line in the dead of night, and was planning on turning off my cell phone, getting home without even wasting a second, and enjoying myself to the very last moment, even if the world was ending around me. So... I believe you. If you like this game, you can’t be a bad person. I don’t know what’s going on in your life exactly, but we’re comrades. And comrades help each other out.”

He gave me an awkward smile and flashed his canines at me.

“... So just go, brother. You have something you’d also be willing to risk your life to do, don’t you?”

“... What are you going to do then?”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t see this coming at all, but even then, not all is lost.”

He plopped down and sat with his legs crossed in the road, and took a small laptop out from his rucksack, along with a matching battery. He set those things down on his lap, and gently turned the laptop on.

“I’m going to play it here.”

Wha-.....

“Why do you look so surprised? I already told you, I’m not going to waste even a second. So there’s not a problem at all. And anyways, playing eroge outside is pretty in-fashion nowadays.”

When he said there was a way out, he wasn’t talking about another way to get home?!

Amazing. There’s no doubt about it, this guy was an otaku amongst otaku.

A true man with a burning spirit.

It's seriously been a long time since I've felt this much respect for someone I had only just met.

"Thanks, man. I'll definitely pay you back for this."

"Hmph, you're still here? Just get out of here... here I go."

He already was turned away from me. In the middle of that frozen-over night, he alone sat with his back turned, diverting all his attention into installing his eroge.

It was almost as if he was doing battle with an archrival.

"....."

I faced this kind stranger, gave him a silent bow, and straddled the bike saddle.

I turned back just once before I took off.

There I saw an otaku sitting cross-legged and hunched over, busily pushing the enter key without a care in the world about any of the strange looks he might attract.

An image of that anime character he held so dear smiled out at me from the back of his thin jacket.

Smiled with a hint of pride.

"..... Alright."

My breath turned to chilled, white mist in front of me. I kicked off and began to ride.

Towards my little sister, who was waiting for me thirty-two kilometers away.

**Part 8**

*Pant... pant... pant... pant...*

After two and a half hours of pedaling with all my strength, I finally reached the front of my house.

I knew all too well that you could almost see steam rising from my body as the sweat evaporated off my skin.

I wasn't hot... rather, you could say that I was burning up. My shoulders rose and fell with my heavy breaths, and I took a ten second breather.

"Phew..... alright!!"

With a shout, I took out my cell phone and called my sister.

After all, it would be bad if my father were still awake.

**"... Why the hell was your cell phone off...?! And when the hell are you getting ba-"**

"I'm in front of the house."

"Huh?"

"I borrowed an amazing bike from a friend and got here as fast as humanly possible. Is dad still awake?"

**"..... H-hold on a second..."**

I heard a clatter on the other end. It sounded like she had gone out of her room and was going to check. **"... Looks like he's sleeping... I'll go unlock the door."**

The front door opened in front of my eyes, and I saw the pajama-wearing form of my little sister appear.

"Hey."

“..... Mm.”

Kirino looked uncharacteristically meek as she nodded, and invited me in.

“... Y-You’re sweating like crazy.... Ah, here’s a towel...”

“Ahh. Thanks.”

I wiped my face with the towel she handed out to me.

“I’ll go bring you a change of clothes... so go take a shower and come over.”

“A-Ah, yeah, I should.”

I was supposedly staying over at Akagi’s house right now, so I knew it would be bad if I made too much noise in the shower, but I really couldn’t stay like this either. So, I decided to take as quick of a shower as possible. And then, I dried off as quickly as I could, and changed into a fresh set of clothes.

Afterwards, I picked up my old clothes, my shoes, and my towel, and softly went up the stairs with my little sister.

We arrived on the second floor. Arriving at her room, Kirino turned to me and put her index finger to her lips, signaling me to be quiet as she invited me in.

It seemed that she wanted to do what we had come here to do in her room.

I nodded silently and entered my little sister’s room. Following me, Kirino came into the room and shut the door behind her.

And right then, we both were able to let out the sigh of relief we had been holding in.

In my little sister’s room, the table she usually put out when her friends were over was set up, and her laptop was turned on and set on the table. Why in the world was her laptop on when she had a desktop?

Well, putting those random, pointless thoughts aside, I handed two eroge over to my little sister.

“Here ya go. These are the right ones, right?”

“Yeah... T-Thank you... Sorry... you know, for asking that much of you.”

“Ah, nah, it’s fine... h-hey, what the hell?! Did you hit your head or something?!”

... Thank you... Sorry...

Those weren’t words I would expect would come out so readily from the mouth of that little sister of mine.

I’ve gotten opportunities to speak with my little sister over these nine months, but in that time, I could count on one hand the number of times I had heard my sister saying such admirable things. I mean, take what just happened now, or that thing that happened earlier... what exactly happened to my little sister? Was she really a doppelganger or something?

It was honestly enough of a bizarre situation that I was having thoughts like that.

Yes. There was no way... my little sister was this...

“... What are you saying? Dummy.”

Her response was so light that you couldn’t even call it an insult.

Considering the responses I’ve gotten from her up until now all went like “You’re disgusting” or “Go die,” I was just completely bewildered by this situation.

It almost felt anticlimactic.

“... I-Is there something wrong...? What happened to your usual energy? Is there still something bothering you?”

“You know...”

Kirino put her hands on her hips, and her face twisted in annoyance.

“You know, that’s some pretty annoying attitude you’re giving me. I-Is it that damn strange if I thank you and apologize?!”

“Yes, it is!”

It was as weird as if the sky and the earth switched places overnight! Just look back on how you usually act, dammit!

When I told her my true feelings, Kirino’s lips pursed into a sharp frown.

“Grr...” She turned her back on me in a flash. “O-Oh really?! Tch... what the hell...”

She sat down with a thump on her bed, obviously now in a foul mood.

Ah yes, getting into a foul mood like this, that was more like the little sister I had come to know.

“.....”

Seeming disappointed, Kirino set the two eroge boxes on her lap and began to rip off the plastic covering. Finally finishing with that, she opened the big eroge box.

“Ahah.”

The minute she saw the contents of the box, her face lit up in a sincere smile.

It was almost like she was a kid opening a gift at Christmas. Next, Kirino took out the game manual from the box, along with a clear case with the game disk inside. Holding one item in each hand, Kirino stared at the illustrations on them with a stupid grin.

“OoooOOoo~~... nice nice niiiiice... hehe... let’s get this installed right awaaay~~.”

Kirino plopped herself down in front of her table. The same table on which the laptop had been placed.

“~~♪”

Humming all the way, Kirino loaded the disk into the laptop.

Why was she using her laptop to install the game when she had a perfectly good desktop? Well, whatever.

“... Geez.”

She was honestly the spitting image of a little kid who had just gotten a new toy.

It was a cute, charming scene. It made going all the way to Akihabara, waiting in line for a late-night sale, and then biking thirty-two kilometers at top speed on that bike seem all worthwhile.

I took a look at the clock on the wall, and saw that it was already past three in the morning.

I turned heel, and took a step towards the door.

“Alright, I’m off to sleep. Tonight’s a school night. You too, try not to overdo it... you can stay up and play that game, but just don’t be late to school.”

“.....”

I heard no response. She was probably already completely immersed in installing the game.

Kirino had her back turned towards me. So I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“Hey, Kirino? You listening?”

“Eh? A-Ahh... yeah, I’m listening...”

She’s not listening, is she...? She’s obviously completely focused on her eroge, and completely inattentive to anything else.

Granted, I could empathize. It’s not like I had played many games up until now. But I still remember the times I would buy a CD I had really wanted, and the butterflies in my chest when I tore open the packaging.

“Well, whatever. G’nite.”

“Ah, w-wait a sec.”

“Hmm?”

My hand was already on the doorknob, but I stopped and turned around.

When I did, I saw Kirino purse her lips and lay a hand on her laptop.

It seemed that the installation had finished, and the startup screen for “My Oniichan’s Underwear” was showing on the display.

“Do you want to... play together? For old time’s sake.”

“ .....

No way. How the hell am I supposed to play a little sister game with my little sister? And honestly, that must be the hundredth time I’m saying that.

Also, I was exhausted. I really wanted to get to bed.

And what’s more, my parents believed I was out of the house right now, so I had to get up early and sneak out before they woke up, right? So let me just tell Kirino all that-

“... Please?”

“... W-Well... uhh... just for a little bit, alright?”

Yet that was what ended up coming out of my mouth.

This is crazy.

Indeed, tonight, I was every bit as crazy as Kirino.

**Part 9**

And so, for the first time in a long while, I found myself in the awkward situation of playing eroge with my little sister.

We were currently both seated in front of her table, facing her laptop.

And the question I had before, of why she was using her laptop... that question had an answer.

There was a reason as to why she was making a point to install all her games on her laptop instead of her desktop.

Because from the very start, she was conniving to have us play the game together like this. And yeah, if we were going to play a game together for a long time, we were going to naturally end up in this position. But...

"H-Hey... don't get so close!"

"What else can I do?! I can't see the screen!"

Ughhhh...

Why in the world did I have to be sitting here so close to my little sister, playing little sister games together...?

... And don't tell me, there are probably people out there who would envy me in this situation, right...?

Don't even joke around like that. Sure, it's incredibly embarrassing whenever we get to an H-scene, but most of all, what the hell am I supposed to do if we're playing the game and I get hard?

*"Idiot, don't get the wrong idea! This is just a wrinkle in my jeans!"* Think I should say that?

Hey hey, why are you laughing? This is serious, dammit!

Ugh..... dammit..... my sister smells pretty nice.

Don't tell me that she put on perfume even though she's about to go to bed...

"Hey, isn't your face pretty red?"

"T-That's because I just got out of the bath, alright?"

Alriiiiiiiiiight..... okaaaaaaaaaay... just like that..... calm down..... calm down, down there.....

Suddenly, I felt like I could empathize with all those movie protagonists that had to deal with hiding some unpleasant superpower...

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**Part 10**

W-Well then. I think at this point I should give a quick explanation of this game that I had bought in Akihabara in the dead of night, *I'm Definitely Not Stealing my Oniichan's Underwear!*.

This game was the newest title in the "Little Sister Maker EX," series, which included the "Loving My Little Sister" game that Kirino had been really into before. You could call it a sequel.

The game system was the usual adventure game system, and was the same one that had been used in "Loving My Little Sister."

"And so, the thing that sets this game apart from the 'Little Sister Maker EX' series is that there's only one little sister you can go after."

"A-Ahh... so... you mean... there's only one route to go through?"

Just like she had done many times before, Kirino was explaining eroge to me with a smile on her face.

"No, no, no. There's only one heroine, but there are also a lot of routes for her! And you can't see all the routes on one play through, and each time you clear the game new story options pop up, and you can get to different endings... well, it's a formula that a lot of games follow. Each of the scenarios themselves are relatively short, and they assume that you're going to play the game more than once... in that way, it's sort of like the A.D.M.S. system in YU-NO.<sup>1</sup> I still haven't played, so I don't know, but this might be a 'loop' game.<sup>2</sup> And then, there are sneaking mini-games in the middle like you see in Metal Gear,<sup>3</sup> and if you beat them you get a new item, and you have to get those to unlock the true ending, or something..."

Blabber blabber blabber blabber blabber... man, she just goes on and on... geez.....

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to an old eroge, "Kono Yo no Hate de Koi wo Utau Shoujo YU-NO," and the in-game system "Auto Diverge Mapping System" which showed the player exactly what part of what branchline in the plot he was at.

<sup>2</sup> A game in which a time loop is a prominent plot element.

<sup>3</sup> Why did I suddenly get a mental image of Solid Snake trying to steal underwear?

It just drove the point home.

This girl... she really loved these kinds of games, and she really loved talking like this about these types of games.

I couldn't care less about what she was saying, but... well, it's not like hearing her talk like this was unpleasant.

I mean, talking about otaku things with Kirino was the only time I actually felt like we were real siblings... I think. Call it a momentary truce, or a special occasion. For me, and for Kirino.

But there was still something I didn't understand. And that something was: why did she choose me?

If this were nine months ago, I would understand. At that point, she didn't have a single person with whom she could talk about eroge. I was the older brother she hated, but I was also someone she could talk to.

However, now the situation was different. Now... she had Kuroneko. She had Saori.

And, although there were a few strings attached... she also had Ayase.

She had made precious friends with whom she could speak frankly about her hobbies, and hold nothing back.

So, if she really wanted to talk about eroge, then she could just go to her friends.

My business here should have already been done.

And yet, to this very day, she was coming to me for life advice.

She came to me and asked me to play games with her.

Perhaps...

It's one chance in a million, but perhaps...

*"Thanks, Aniki"*

*"I... a-also love my aniki..."*

*"...Is that what you thought I would say? Are you seriously getting that worked up over it? You gross siscon."*

*"Thanks for everything."*

Maybe she didn't hate me as much as I thought she did.

Maybe my belief that we had always hated each other was just a figment of my imagination.

Maybe at some point, our cold war had ended.

**Part 11**

Like that, we continued to play the game with gusto. And after we saw the first ending of the game, it was already getting light outside. By the way, when we got to the H-scenes, I felt just as incredibly awkward as I had expected, but when I looked at Kirino I saw that she was still fully focused on the text. I said it myself before, but she was a girl who just wasn't bothered very much by things like H-scenes. I was incredibly bothered though.

"Oooooogh..... ugh...."

Let me sleep. Oof..... at this rate, this is going to go down as an all-nighter, isn't it...

Suddenly taking a glance at my little sister's face, I saw her eyes filled with emotion.

"Argh... this ending... it's just too sad..."

"Well, it'd be weird if they just showed you a happy ending right off the bat, right? They also want to motivate you to play the next scenario."

"I can't believe you... how can you sit there and act like everything's fine...?"

Blinking the tears from her reddened eyes, Kirino began to find fault with my composure.

As for me, I didn't know how she could have so much empathy for the game characters.

Was the game that good? Really?

Also, little sister games just didn't sit well with me, so it's not like I could judge the game fairly in the first place.

"And I mean, it's not like one of them died or something. Can't they just call each other or something?"

"Idiot! You idiot! You're a huge idiot! You don't get it at all!!"

“... W-What the hell? It’s... it’s not something to get so angry over.”

She was giving me a fierce glare and looked incredibly pissed off, so I instinctively cowered and shook.

Kirino seemed to be looking hard for the right words to say, before squeezed out a response.

“Even though you wanted to die after only three days that time. Even though you looked so pathetic, and had no idea what to do that time.”

“Ugh.....”

I really couldn’t come up with a comeback for that! Also, I’m sure not everyone gets the reference, so let me give a brief recap. What Kirino was griping about was the time I broke out into tears after not being able to meet with Manami for three days.

And certainly, at that time, just calling her wouldn’t have solved the issue.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. If you think about it like that, this really is a pretty sad ending. Got it. Ignore what I said.”

“..... Fine. As long as you understand.”

Kirino sure seemed to be in a foul mood when she muttered that.

A gloomy atmosphere permeated the room after that exchange.

... Well, this was probably a good time.

More aware than ever of the sunlight peeking through the gaps in the curtains, I briskly stood up.

“... Well, that’s a good place to stop, so I’m heading back to my room and sleeping for twenty minutes. That way, I can get out before our parents wake up.”

“W-Wait just a second!”

Kirino sounded flustered as she called me to a stop, so I looked down at her with a questioning gaze.

“What? Still got something to say?”

“L-Life advice! I... I need life advice!”

Even though our last life advice session was supposed to have already ended, my little sister said that to me.

They were the same words that she had said to me nine months past, and they would lead to a very, very similar set of events...

**Part 12**

“I need life advice.” Stopped in my tracks by those words, I gave out an exasperated sigh.

“Come on... you definitely said earlier that this was going to be the last time, and I did manage to buy that eroge for you, didn't I?”

“Who in the world said that was the last time?”

“That's just... well, fine. Whatever.”

What I wanted to ask her is exactly how many “final life advice sessions” she was planning to dump on me.

She had definitely said it was going to be the last one. And at this rate, wouldn't the same thing just happen over and over again? This is the last of the last life advice sessions! This is honestly going to be the last life advice session! Wouldn't she just say stuff like that?

*Sigh...* well, whatever. Whatever. Whaaaaaaatever.

Well, it is what it is what it is. And at any rate, we were brother and sister, so we would be living together for a long time.

It's not like I ever thought I would be able to escape from my little sister that easily.

Trying hard to prevent a sarcastic smile from appearing on my face, I urged Kirino onwards.

“So, what is it? Just spit it out.”

“..... Alright.”

Kirino nodded meekly and stood up. She walked over to her bookshelf and gripped one of the edges.

Now that I got a good look at it, I saw that her bookshelf had become rather empty. That might have been because it would have been a bother to move a heavy bookshelf every time she needed access to her secret stash, so she moved all her books elsewhere.

It had been months since I had seen this sight, but...

Kirino shifted the bookcase to the side, revealing a secret hiding place filled with eroge and other otaku goods.

If you slid the bookshelf to the side, you could find a fusuma<sup>1</sup>.

And if you split open the fusuma, you would find a countless number of otaku goods behind it.

Her collection seemed to have gotten even larger compared to the last time she showed it to me.

... She's buying too much.

I scowled and surveyed that mountain of eroge and anime DVDs... but then my attention was drawn to a certain item.

"Oh... this is..."

"Ah, yeah, that's the thing I got earlier."

Kirino responded to my reaction and picked up her EX Meruru Special Figure.

"I heard from Ayase that you were the one who picked this for me."

"... Yeah, sure."

"But seriously, I was really happy."

Kirino gave me a little chuckle.

God, what is she saying now, all of a sudden?

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese sliding screen.

“... Is that right...?” Feeling my face heat up, it took all my energy to manage to squeak out that response.

“Please thank those two for me too.”

“What? Just tell them yourself. I’m sure they’ll be glad to hear it.”

“Yeah? Mm, yeah, probably.”

Kirino put the figure back in its original position, put her hands to her chest, and took a few deep breaths.

I felt a wave of *déjà vu* wash over me at those actions. When Kirino had first told me about her hobby, she had definitely acted in a similar way.

“..... It’s been a long time since then.”

Kirino had her back turned towards me, but she looked back and gave me a bright smile.

“Do you still remember that first time?”

“Yeah, I guess. You asked me if I was going to make fun of you, and I acted really cool and told you something like ‘I definitely won’t.’”

“Yeah... so, then? After that... what did I say?”

“Hm?”

Did she say something? Kirino probably saw my puzzled expression, and she tightened her hands into fists.

“Come ooonn~, I definitely said it. That I wouldn’t show you anything past a certain point.”

“A-Ahh. Yeah, you told me that there were some embarrassing things in there. I remember that now.”

She also told me that she didn’t trust me yet, so she wouldn’t show me any more.

And I remember trembling in fear at the thought that there were things in there that were even more horrifying. I mean, considering she was bragging so proudly about “Loving My Little Sister,” I just couldn’t imagine what kinds of things would actually make her blush and hesitate.

“So , I mean... well... you’ve been keeping it a secret so far... and you haven’t made fun of me... and you’ve helped me out a few times...”

U-Umm... this... I have a feeling that I know where this is going...”

“It’s a bit embarrassing... but I’ll show you.”

Pass! Not interested!

... And I almost said that out loud too. Man, I must say, I have more restraint than I would’ve thought.

These were embarrassing things that my sister had kept hidden from me.

I had a bad feeling about all this. I mean, I had no idea what terrible, absurd things would come flying out at me. And I’m a coward. My fear of the unknown trumped my own curiosity here. You see what I’m saying?

However, it’s not like I could refuse to see what she wanted to show me. It was all part of these “life advice” sessions, after all.

“So... that means... you trust me now?”

Hearing my question, Kirino gave me a firm nod.

“Yeah..... I thought about it..... I think it’s okay for you to look at these now...”

“... Hmm.”

Is it just me, or was she implying that I actually wanted to see what she was hiding?

I honestly didn't.

"W-Well... here we go..."

Kirino sounded nervous... and she slid the fusuma... towards the opposite direction that she usually slid it in.

*Krrschhhh.*

*Plop.*

"... Hm? Something... fell down..."

Before I could get a good look at Kirino's forbidden zone, I casually picked up the thing that had fallen to the floor.

But I completely forgot. These things that were sealed in there... these were such crazy things that my little sister had been unwilling to show them to me until now.

"Ah... that one."

Kirino spoke hesitantly. But she was a step too late. I had already seen the cover illustration and the title on the box.

The cover illustration was of a cute little sister character, whose lower half was completely naked and who was sticking her ass out at us...

And the title was "Scatological \* Sisters."

Jesus... This was crazy...

Outwardly, I remained emotionless as I blinked repeatedly, and then rubbed my eyes. Afterwards, I once again looked back and forth between my little sister's face and the package. And then, I murmured quietly.

"..... You..... I-like eating poo?"

“What the hell?! Of course not!!”

The incoming Attack of Regret<sup>2</sup> bore into my face. It was such a hard slap, I could have sworn my head was going to fly off my body.

Kirino didn't calm down, and her breathing was ragged.

“W-W-W-W-What t-t-the hell..... O-Of all the damn things... what the hell did you just ask me?! You're horrible!! Horrible!!”

“But, come on!!”

Why the hell did you have something like this then?! “Scatological \* Sisters” was obviously an eroge made especially for people with certain, crazy fetishes, wasn't it?! Having evidence like this right in front of my nose made her denial about as persuasive as my own insistence that I didn't have a glasses fetish!

Well, so that's why she was embarrassed by this. To think that I would be unearthing this huge of a bomb today...

“No, no, no, you've got it all wrong, dammit!”

Seeming to sense what I was thinking, Kirino began to explain.

“I-I didn't know! That... you know... whatever that s-scato-whatever thing was, I had no idea! And then! And then! The artist who did that game, I really liked that artist, so I bought it because of that! And then I saw the back of the package after! And there was a chamber pot...”

“... Stop right there! Don't say another word! Alright? Okay?”

“No! You're still not getting it, are you?! Are you?! Come on, my dignity and image are on the line here, so listen to me through!”

As if your image could get any worse than it already was!!

After all, what kind of junior high school girl played eroge?!

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<sup>2</sup> I thought I was going crazy trying to make sense of this line, but it turns out that this was a Dragon Quest reference. It's some kind of critical strike attack in Dragon Quest.

“N-No, I got it! So it’s not like you’re into this kind of stuff. I got that, so it’s alright!”

“You’re being serious? You’re not just saying that?”

She doesn’t believe me at all, does she? Granted, I sympathized... if I were standing where she was right now, I would probably feel the same way.

“I said I understood, didn’t I? So, you bought the game because you liked the art, and it was completely not what you expected, so you haven’t touched the actual game. Sound about right?”

“W-Well, I did beat the whole thing...”

“So you did play it?!”

Even if you had to lie, just answer yes to that question! Then we could just drop the whole thing!

Why was she so bad at lying on the fly?

“I mean, I bought it, so it would be rude not to play it! A-And, let me just say, it was a world I completely didn’t understand! I wasn’t getting into it at all! A-And then, you might want to know why I just left the game here... w-well, I mean, I was a fan of the illustrator, so it’s not like I can just throw it away, and I hate selling games to used game shops. So I just sealed it up in here... alright?! Got it?!”

“... G-Got it.”

“... Really really?”

“Really really. Absolutely, absolutely... but, seriously, you’re really quite something, you know that?”

No matter how much conviction I had, I couldn’t see myself having the courage or energy to play a scat game and to actually clear it. It was crazy even for my little sister... to the point where I could almost respect her for doing it.

“I-I see. Alright, can we get on with the conversation then?”

“A-Ahh. Yeah... a-alright, let’s move on.”

Those were words meant to divert the conversation into less dangerous waters, but I didn’t realize what I had just done.

When I said “let’s move on,” it meant she would be showing me more of her forbidden collection...

“Alright. Well, really, what I’m going to show you now is what we came here for...”

What the hell did that mean? You could almost interpret that as her saying “Scatological \* Sisters? Hmph, compared to what else I have in there, that’s not a big deal at all.”

... Y-You can’t be serious.

I gulped as I watched Kirino take Pandora’s cardboard box out from her secret compartment. Kirino plopped the box down in the middle of the room.

“... Just going to ask this in advance, but what’s in the box?”

“Mm, this and that...”

As if completely oblivious to how terrified I was, Kirino quickly and casually opened the lid of the box. I felt my heart give a tremendous jump. Not in a pleasant way, of course.

And... then there were the contents. At a quick glance, there didn’t seem to be anything too horrible.

There was a mountain of doujinshi piled up, and next to that there were paper bags with anime artwork printed on them, along with eroge boxes. But my eyes were drawn to the iPod that was sitting on top of all those books.

“It’s... more ordinary than I had expected...”

No.

That wasn't it. That was definitely not it. My little sister's collection should have been anything but ordinary.

Alright, Kyouzuke. You're going to expect the worst. Think about the absolutely most horrifying thing that Kirino could bring out and show you. Alright? Ready? Okay... do you have something in mind?

Well then, let me tell you what I think.

What Kirino was about to bring out was several times worse than what you just imagined.

I've been her brother for fourteen years, so I should know.

For example, just look... that doujinshi, that one at the top... doesn't it look awfully similar to the stuff you saw back then? The characters hugging on the cover... don't they both look awfully a lot like guys? Granted, I didn't have the courage to check.

"....." *Gulp.*

And look, right under all those doujinshi... what is that really thick, big book stacked there?

It looked like an album.

I had a bad feeling about that album... what was it? We already saw homos, and scat... so next was...

I just can't... that album was probably the thing I had to watch out for the most... but it was so frightening that I couldn't ask about it.

So, having no other option, I decided to wait and see what would happen, and asked about something else.

"Hey..."

"W-What do you want...?"

"Kirino... I just wanted to know... what's in that iPod?"

If it was just music... then that might not be too bad.

“Huh? Oh, that?”

But, having been asked about the contents of that iPod, Kirino blinked with surprise and seemed flustered.

She was the one who dragged this box out, and now she’s acting like this...

There was no doubt in my mind. The music in there must be incredibly dangerous.

“Y-You want to know?”

“A-Ah... n-not really...”

“A-Ahh.... I see...”

..... She seems... relieved...? S-So... as I thought...

I was getting more and more frightened by the second. After all, all the things in this box were shady goods comparable to “Scatological \* Sisters,” right?

I can’t do this. I seriously can’t do this. This was completely beyond me.

I feel like I can understand how the Z Fighters felt when they came across the Ginyu Force<sup>3</sup>.

Kirino reached her hands deeper into the cardboard box...

“S-So! I-I wanted to show you this album next...”

Gyah!

“W-Wait just a second!”

Wasn’t that the most dangerous thing in the entire box?! Give me a break, dammit!

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<sup>3</sup> Dragonball Z reference. Argh.

“I think I get the picture! You don’t have explain any more! So... so let’s just leave it here today! Yeah, next time... just show me next time, alright?! I’m sleepy now. Too sleepy. Okay?”

I begged her just as desperately as I had begged that guy before for his bike. I got the feeling that if I saw what was in that album, it would be the end of something. And that feeling, that conviction, was all that I could think about.

“..... A-Alright.”

Kirino seemed saddened for some reason and looked down. But she seemed to recover quickly.

This time, she took out an eroge box (I think it was, at least) and held it out to me.

“Well, at least take a look at this!”

“Just this...?”

What exactly was this girl trying to accomplish by showing me this “Lovely ♥ Sister Angel” box?

I’m sure that at that moment, I looked completely confused.

“... Fine. I will.”

I had no idea what was going on, but if she went that far to ask me, then there’s no reason for me to refuse.

Kirino saw me agree.

“Okay.”

She nodded, seeming conflicted. It was strange how she didn’t look too happy, even though she was the one who had wanted to show this to me.

And then, I opened the “Lovely ♥ Sister Angel” box.

What I found inside was neither a game disk nor a game manual. What I found... umm, how should I describe it... it looked like a cookie tin? A square cookie tin. That kind of container was inside the game box. A tin with a drawing of some character painted on top of the lid.

“Hm? This wasn’t an eroge box?”

“No, it is. There used to be ‘Sister Angel’ things inside that box, but those things are being displayed somewhere else now. You saw it earlier, right? That thing that was next to the EX Meru-chan figure.”

Like I would remember something like that. Although, yeah, I seem to recall that there were a bunch of dolls and things around there.

“In other words, you used the empty box to store something else?”

It was like reusing an empty cookie container to hold other small things, for example.

“Y-Yes... alright... here I go...”

*Krrschh!* Kirino opened the lid of the box rather forcefully, and I geared myself for what was to come.

However, what I saw was nothing like the “Scatology \* Sisters” I saw before. What I saw was nothing I had expected.

There were a number of things in there, but the first thing I picked up was...

“... What’s this... a report card?”

“Yeah, one from when I was in elementary school.”

Why was something like this in here? I gave her a puzzled look, but she urged me to take a closer look, so I decided to do just that.

“There’s something in there. It’s why I started doing track.”

“.....”

As I listened to my little sister, I began to read her report card from top to bottom, starting from her first-year grades.

It was soon obvious to me which part she wanted me to look at. From her first year to her third year, Kirino's physical education marks read "Try harder." Even in her other subjects, her grades were fairly average. I would have expected Kirino's marks to all be "Outstanding," so I was pretty surprised at this information.

"Back then, I was pretty slow, you know. But... then... some reaaaally annoying things happened... and then I started practicing running."

Kirino gave me a fleeting glance.

Really annoying things... maybe she got made fun of because she was slow, or she just had some bad experiences because of it... that's what she probably meant.

I continued to read my sister's fourth-year marks.

Her physical education grade was still "Try harder."

But after that, her fifth-year mark was "Great," her sixth year mark was "Outstanding." Her marks just got better and better as the years went on.

Her training was paying off.

I also saw that her grades in things other than physical education were increasing gradually as well.

"And here. This is a badge I won from a race at a sports festival."

Kirino pointed at a badge with "Sixth Place" written on it.

Sixth Place, Sixth Place, Fifth Place, Fourth Place, Third Place, Second Place... and her ranking just slowly improved from year to year.

"I've never told this to anyone else, because I didn't think it was like me and I thought it was really dorky of me... but when I felt sad, or when I fell into a

slump, I would look in this cookie tin and just get really, really annoyed... and then, I would think, 'Don't mess with me, dammit!!!!' and yeah..."

She would remember her hopes and dreams back then. And she would use her frustration as a spring. It was probably something like that.

Perhaps... just perhaps, this was pretty similar to that same sense of spite that Kuroneko had revealed before.

Don't mess with me, dammit!!!!

And those early hopes and dreams, those early hopes and dreams held by the track star Kousaka Kirino, were much more crude than what people might expect from her now. They were incredibly normal, and maybe even incredibly human.

"That's pretty incredible."

"Eh?"

Kirino raised her head at my unconscious muttering.

My eyes met hers.

I didn't know what to say. It honestly would annoy me a bit if I just praised her outright, but there was no helping the fact that I was genuinely moved. I stayed silent for a while and looked for the right words...

"I guess I wouldn't be able to beat you in a race anymore."

And in the end, I settled on spitting out something entirely ordinary and boring.

At those words, Kirino's eyes widened for a moment, and she laughed lightheartedly.

"Hah... isn't that obvious? Who the hell do you think I am?"

She puffed out her chest, filled from head to toe with confidence.

Looking at her now, there wasn't even a trace of the unathletic Kirino of the past. It didn't matter what her motives were for getting started; she spent over six years and, with her own strength, earned herself the confidence she could now show.

Being an average guy myself, I could appreciate how incredible that was. Ahh, she definitely had a reason to be cocky. A reason to look at me and go "Who the hell do you think I am?"

I had always wanted to spend my days peacefully and comfortably.

Even now, that was still true. That had definitely not changed.

However, I have to admit, I would be lying if I said that that was my only wish. And I have to admit that part of the blame lay with the fact that I had been imposing on Manami and her family, and using them as an excuse for my laziness.

The one who had made me realize that was Kirino. That was the one thing I had to thank her for.

Well, whatever. Enough talk about my life and my future.

I had no idea why my little sister had decided to show me these things.

Kirino carefully tucked that important report card back into the cookie tin, and shut the lid on tightly.

*Sigh.* "... Well then..."

Next, she gestured towards the cardboard box and her hidden compartment, and spoke in a sincere tone.

"Hey... this... all of this... it's really important to me."

"I know."

What the hell is she saying all of a sudden?

Come on, I was the one who had protected your collection from our father.

And I was the one who cared enough about your feelings to go and faceoff with Ayase, remember?

Kirino seemed to be pretty worried as she chose her next words.

"I... said it back then, right? That I wanted your help to protect my collection."

"Yeah."

"So... from here on out... I still want that to be true."

"No shit, you idiot."

What the hell was she saying? I had gone through so much pain and misfortune to protect her things, so how did it make sense to stop now?

I'm annoyed. Even if our life advice sessions came to an end, of course I would at least take care of her collection.

At any rate, there would probably be many more "last life advice sessions" after this one anyways.

"I'm your brother, after all. So, I mean, how could I refuse to do that?"

"I see. Yeah, that's true."

"Exactly. Geez, what did I get myself into..."

I gave her a smile.

"So? That 'last life advice session' or whatever... is that it?"

"Yeah."

What the hell? She made me go buy eroges for her, she made me play games with her, and then she showed me a part of her forbidden collection...

This last life advice session was pretty similar to our first, except this time there was nothing else to do from here.



The first time I had gotten stopped by Kirino about life advice, I could tell that what she really wanted was to make friends, because she didn't have anyone to talk to about her hobby, and that's why I could bring myself to run myself ragged for her sake. But this time, I still hadn't gotten a good grasp on what the point of her life advice was.

So that's why. That's why I felt a bit uncomfortable with all this.

It's just as if... just as if I had *picked the wrong choice at a decision point*.

... Maybe I really should've just looked at her album. Judging from what happened, it probably wasn't something that weird. Well, whatever.

"You know, I haven't really done anything. Are you really alright with that?"

"Yeah... it's fine."

She really did seem pretty satisfied.

She looked just the same now as she did when I had protected her collection from our father, or when she had been able to make up with Ayase. Even though I really hadn't done anything impressive this time.

Well, I have no idea then. Maybe I really did do something for her, even though I had no idea what it could be.

Kirino had been nodding the entire time, but now she smiled, standing there while keeping a strange distance away from me.

"I really feel relieved."

Her teasing smile gave me a strange sense of nostalgia.

... Ah, right. When she was younger, she would laugh like this.

"I see."

Once again, I turned heel, and left the room, giving her a wave of goodbye.

"Yeah. Good night."

“Mmm.”

Right before I closed the door, I heard my sister utter some last words.

“... Goodbye, aniki.”

After that, my little sister vanished.

**Part 13**

After school on that day, I was in my room working hard and studying for my exams...

“Ugh...”

As if.

I had been staying up pretty late these days, so I had suddenly dozed off and was sleeping collapsed on my desk.

Although, I think I only lost consciousness for a few minutes.

When I woke up, I raised my head up suddenly with a “Gah!” and started mumbling nonsense. “... A-Ahh... yea... rrrgghh...”

“Fuahhh.... Aahhhh.... Alright... back to it... ugh.”

I felt like I had seen a strange dream. A dream... a dream of a time a loooong time ago, when I was still a child.

And even though I could barely make out what had happened in the dream when I woke up, as I regained consciousness fully, even that vague recollection was lost.

“... Nn.”

It’s just, well...

I could feel this sad, nostalgic warmth lingering near my chest.

But I realized I was thirsty, so like always, I headed for the living room. On the way, I saw the front door open, and saw my mother enter the house, probably on the way back from shopping.

“I’m home~~... Ahh? What’s wrong, Kyouzuke? Came all the way down here to welcome me back?”

“Not really. Was just a coincidence. Here, I’ll take those bags for you.”

I took her shopping bags all the way to the refrigerator, and put all the food in the fridge.

While I was doing that, I had the sudden urge to ask my mother a question.

“So where’s Kirino? I don’t think she’s back yet. Is she at club or work or something?”

My mother answered.

“Huh? What are you saying?”

What was I saying? That’s what I should be asking you. I mean, it’s not like I wanted to know where Kirino was that much. I was just trying to make conversation with my mother... well, whatever.

I dropped the subject.

But then, curfew came and went, and Kirino still didn’t return.

I would expect someone like her, who respected our family’s rules so much, to at least give our parents a call if she expected to be out so late.

She wasn’t the kind of person who would stay out late with friends and break curfew deliberately, so she was probably still at work or club. Well, it’s not like I was worried about her.

At dinner, I once again brought it up casually. Trust me, it was casual; I didn’t care at all.

“So where’s Kirino? Training camp again?”

“You... what in the world are you saying?”

My father looked puzzled.

“What do you mean?”

“..... Hmm, I see. Kirino said she was going to tell you herself though...”

“Seriously, what do you-“

“Kirino’s gone.”

“Huh?”

“She left for America today. She’s going to be trained by a famous track coach there, and so she enrolled in a high school overseas and she’s going to live there.”

“W-What the hell is...”

My father gave a *Hmph*.

“When she went to the training camp last time, she caught the eye of one of the foreign coaches who had come to scout, and she got an invite to go overseas if she wanted to. Getting used to the language and getting experience with international competition would be really important for Kirino’s future, he said... honestly, doesn’t it all sound like crap nonsense to you?”<sup>1</sup>

“.....”

“I told her over and over that she should at least graduate from junior high before she went. She even met quite a few times with track advisors and talked about high school scholarship programs and studying abroad. But when it comes to these school sports, it seems that being even a year late would be a pretty big handicap. And she also told me that this was a big chance for her.”

My father looked pretty discouraged as he spoke in an extremely matter-of-fact tone.

It was almost as if he was trying to prevent himself from exploding in anger. So I didn’t try to interrupt him in the middle.

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<sup>1</sup> Honestly, there is a good measure of ridiculousness in the thought that a US coach would be looking in Japan for prospective track athletes. Japan is pretty conventionally horrible at track and field -\_- .

“Kirino’s mind was really made up too, and she was telling me how she wanted to push herself to be the best she could be. Of course, she was going to go without applying to scholarship or study-abroad programs, so she paid for it herself. Five million yen a year. *I told her I wouldn’t pay.* Because this is no joking matter. No matter how much she says she wants to go, she’s still a fourteen-year-old girl, and how the hell do you expect me to let her go off to some place far off, where I can’t even reach her anymore?! What if something happens? It’s not like I can just leave and head there... and it’s not like she speaks the language that well either...”

My father seemed seriously depressed.

“..... But... you ended up giving her permission, didn’t you?”

“Hmph, that girl’s stubbornness is just legendary. At any rate, the minute I told her I was definitely not going to pay, she sprung her bank account on me, which had the five million yen. ‘This is what I earned from modeling and book royalties, so just use this. No more complaints, right?’ is what she told me... and what could I say to that? ... I don’t think anything I could have said would have helped...”

He was exactly right. Once that girl decided to do something, there was nothing that could sway her from that decision.

“..... I see.”

Kirino was no longer in this house.

I think I sort of understood what was going on. Sort of.

“And so it’s like that.”

With that, my father wrapped up his story, and began to eat in silence. Out of all of us, he was probably the one who felt the most lonely from Kirino’s absence.

So, I didn’t push him for more details.

Also, no matter what my father told me, it was all second-hand information, so it's not like I would be able to understand that much more.

At any rate, I really didn't notice anything was going on, did I? Even though the person herself had been right in front of me, I hadn't noticed anything.

This was how she had planned to use her book royalties. This was something she wanted to do so much that she stopped writing cell phone novels.

This was why she had been acting strangely as of late. And then... *what was the point of that last life advice session?*

Why did she stand there and smile at me and look so satisfied, even as I was left there with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach?

Why did she leave without saying a word to me?

But it was already too late to ask those questions. And I didn't even want to think about them.

She just made the decision completely by herself, and just pushed forward by herself.

It had always been like that. And I had known that all along.

I wasn't annoyed. I wasn't even that surprised. Perhaps somewhere deep in my heart, I already knew that it would somehow end in a way like this.

**Part 14**

Finishing my dinner without tasting any of it, I began to walk back to my room.

Feeling a sudden urge, I opened the door to my sister's room.

It wasn't locked. The lights were off, and it was dark.

It was the same as the last time I was here. Everything was neatly organized.

The same bookshelf, now mostly devoid of books.

The same bed, but now empty.

The same desktop, left behind and deserted.

And I would never be beckoned to this room and forced to play eroge ever again.

"... Phew, what a relief."

I muttered that to the empty room.

I went back to my own room, and collapsed onto my bed.

I stared at the ceiling for a bit, and then rolled heavily onto my side.

I found myself gazing at a wall. It was a thin wall, and if I yelled hard enough you could hear me on the other side. I had always felt this wall was pretty inconvenient.

However, I didn't need to worry about that anymore. And I didn't need to worry about loud music or chitter-chatter coming through from the other side either. And I didn't need to worry about someone stealing into my room in the middle of night and straddling me while I slept. And I didn't need to worry about annoying friends being brought to our house.

I honestly felt relieved. With this, I could feel peace and quiet finally seeping back into my life.

The last life advice session was honestly the last one.

So... what was I going to do after this?

I had been released from my sister's hold, and I didn't have to worry about going through bizarre experiences anymore. Just as I was envisioning, I could probably return to those peaceful days I was living nine months ago.

But I also felt that this wasn't really the case. This might seem like I'm contradicting what I said before, so I don't really know how to put it best, but I really didn't think that was completely the case.

Because what I had inherited from my sister was not just the secret collection that rested behind that bookshelf. What I had inherited from my sister were not just tangible, material things.

For example, there was the otaku knowledge that she had imparted onto me.

For example, there were the memories that came with the various experiences I had gone through with her.

For example, there were the new friends I had gotten to know through my sister.

Those things would be there, whether Kirino was here or not.

They would remain by my side, whether she was here or not.

What had just been bizarre experiences had been irrevocably intertwined with my new present life, and I couldn't just wish them away. That was probably why Kirino had been nodding and looking so satisfied back then, wasn't it?

"Yeah... it's fine," she had said.

In other words...

Her last life advice session was still ongoing.

Her last life advice session would continue on and on, forever.

Ugh, to the very last moment, that girl was just not a cute little sister at all.

Just make sure you do your damn best over there, you little brat.

### Part 15

My name is Kousaka Kyouusuke. I'm eighteen years old, and I attend a local high school.

This is probably a strange thing for someone to say about themselves, but I'm an incredibly average male high school student. I don't belong to any clubs, and I don't have any hobbies that are worth mentioning. Well, I do play some of the popular eroge coming out, and I do buy a few doujinshi here and there, but I'm not into those things enough that you could call them hobbies.

After school, I usually just strolled about town and chattered with friends, or I studied with my childhood friend, or I went straight home and prepared for exams.

And then occasionally... well, occasionally I went to events as well.

That's what normal high school students generally did, right? It might sound funny, but everyone thinks of themselves as "normal," while they fear and reject anything that was different.

So being "normal" meant keeping pace with those around you, and living with your feet firmly planted on the ground.

If you could just do that, then no matter how much your surroundings changed or you changed, "normal" would stay "normal."

And there would be nothing to be afraid about.

**Part 16**

The season was spring. The sakura blossoms were in full bloom on the trees lining the road to school.

I had ascended another grade in school, and was now a third year.

I saw girls, probably first years, wearing brand new uniforms, going up the sloped road while feeling both excited and nervous at the same time. There was a time when I had been in their shoes too.

And Kirino was over on the other side of the world, walking with a similar expression, right?

“What’s wrong, Kyou-chan?”

“Ahh, nothing at all.”

I gave that answer to my childhood friend, and casually shouldered my schoolbag.

“... Hey, wouldn’t it be nice if we get to be in the same class again this year?”

“Ahh, yeah it would.”

Manami energetically nodded her agreement, but then put on a puzzled expression.

“What’s wrong?”

“Fufufu... Kyou-chan, I think you’ve changed a bit recently.”

“Ohh? In what way?”

“Hmm, well... I think you’ve become kinder than before.”

“Hyah.”

I lightly karate chopped her forehead.

“Stop it with the nonsense.”

“O-Oooo... so I guess I really have to call you oniichan?”

“Whatever you do, just don’t do that!!”

It was precisely at that moment when I caught sight of her.

A new student, wearing a uniform and walking towards school.

But from the back, her form seemed all too familiar to me.

Not even thinking about the possibility that I might be mistaking her from someone else, I ran up to her and took a good look at her face.

“... Wha-“

And what I found was...

“Good morning, *senpai*.”



### **Afterword. (Please note that this Afterword contains spoilers for the current volume)**

This is Fushimi Tsukasa. Thank you for acquiring a copy of the fourth volume of “Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai.” As I had said in the previous afterword, there was a much larger emphasis on comedy in this volume when compared to the previous volumes.

How was it? If what I wrote made you laugh even once, then that is enough to make me happy.

Let me just speak a bit about each chapter.

#### **Chapter 1**

This is a chapter where I wanted to reintroduce characters that had come out in the second and third volumes, but had never gotten much time in the spotlight.

There are still mountains of material that were cut and never included, or minor subplots that were withdrawn from the series. I still want to get them into the novel in one form or another.

#### **Chapter 2**

This was originally an episode that was included in the second chapter of the third volume. There was also a version of this with serious parts, but those were cut from the current volume.

I remember how difficult it was to mold the first encounter between Manami and Kirino into a comedy without changing any of the basic elements of that scene.

#### **Chapter 3**

From the second half of chapter three, I began to depict an entirely different version of Kirino. It was incredibly difficult to get the hang of making this change, and I had to rewrite this part many, many times before the book went to the publishers. I have nothing but the deepest thanks for those two

patient editors who stuck with me through this process and offered me advice. It really is quite difficult to try to change a character who already has quite a well-defined personality.

By the way, there were a few game titles that showed up in both the third and the fourth chapters. My editors Kobara-san and Miki-san both worked very, very hard to think of names of eroge for me to use.

### Chapter 4

The incident where Kyouusuke's picture from when he went to buy eroge was posted online was a personal experience of mine as well. I found a clear picture of myself standing in a line at a late-night sale and reading a book.

I really do apologize to the person wearing the jacket with a picture of Princess Feena<sup>1</sup> and the owner of the anime-themed bicycle for using them as references for this episode.

And also, to those who sent me fan letters.

To Gachapin no Midori-sama from Tokyo: Besides your thoughts, to think you would even send me a message addressed to Kyouusuke and Kirino, and to include a drawing too! Amazing! Earlier, I told someone with great pride that I had gotten a fan letter from an elementary schooler.

To K Shima-sama from Saitama: Thank you so very much for pointing out what you did. I gratefully used it as a reference.

To N Shima-sama from Fukuoka: Please continue to support me this year as well... sorry for replying so late.

To O Ta-sama from Okayama: Those were pretty cute pictures. And your autograph definitely looks better than mine!

To Akari-sama from Kagoshima: It surprised me to receive a letter from an otaku junior high schooler, and one who is a little sister like Kirino. Your brother is twenty-one, right? He's still really young. He's not a grandpa at all.

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<sup>1</sup> A character from *Yoake Mae yori Ruriiro na*, an eroge.

To H Shiro-sama from Tottori: There are definitely authors who are twenty-eight and still sink their royalties into light novels and games, so don't worry!

To O Ta-sama from Nara: I'm glad you found the book easy to read. But I don't think it's quite right to say Kirino is tsundere.

And to all those others who sent me their impressions by mail or sent me a message through mixi<sup>2</sup> :

All the letters that I received from everyone were a constant source of support for me.

I am sorry I can't respond properly to each and every one.

It may seem fast, but this series will soon reach its fifth volume. This is untested waters for me. I hadn't the faintest idea that this series would turn into such a long series.

For me to be able to make it this far, I have to thank the two editors, the illustrator, and most of all, everyone who reads this. This is all because of those of you who have been cheering me on.

I might be repeating myself quite a lot, but thank you all very, very much.

Thank you. Please continue to support me from here on out.

### **Notice**

At this time, the public website for "Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai" is opened.

Please go to the following URL to access the site: [oreimo.dengeki.com](http://oreimo.dengeki.com)

June 2009, Fushimi Tsukasa.

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<sup>2</sup> A Japanese social networking site.

### Translator's Afterword

(Beware of Slight Spoilers)

NanoDesu here.

It's been quite a wild few months, with school starting and moving to a new place. Things are just beginning to settle down, but before I knew it, it had been a good half year since I've finished a volume. But now that I have a bit more of a foothold in school and a bit more of a grasp as to what direction I'm going in, I should be back into the swing of things before you know it. And to start it all off, I happily present the English translation for volume 4 of *Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii wake ga Nai*.

The novels are definitely shifting in tone at this point; the heavier, drama-filled arcs that naturally accompany the exposition are being increasingly replaced by more light-hearted comedy. The characters themselves are also changing; we're seeing softer sides of Kirino (for better or worse) and the next volume promises to be quite different as other characters are shoved more into the spotlight. I am looking forward to reading it and translating it for you, and I hope you will continue our support for our translation.

Most of all, as always, I wanted to extend my gratitude to our Oreimo team. Our editors meh, Wildkaiser, and Saki have done wonders and have caught some quite embarrassing errors for me to fix. I am very thankful for their help with this project, and very glad that they have continued to be excellent even as my own schedule fluctuates and I drop in and out of existence periodically. Their edits will be incredibly important in the months to come, and I know I can count on them to deliver.

Also a special thanks to victorrama for converting this volume to PDF, and WildKaiser and Kira0802 for helping keep the sites oiled and updated. You guys are awesome.

The Volume 5 translation is already underway, so please look forward to it!

-NanoDesu

Project Leader and Translator : NanoDesu

Editor : Meh

Editor : WildKaiser

Editor : Saki

Translation Supervisor : Kira0802

Administrative Supervisor : WildKaiser

Typesetter : Victorrana



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