**Chapter I: Once Upon A Time**

 The sharp clash of steel, the crisp morning air of the forest, the dew condensing on my face, the sun gleaming in my eyes...there were so many things going on during combat; it was truly hard to appreciate the beauty of it all at once. Today, I did battle with a group of bandits in the woods, their eyes bewildered at the fact that their numbers were no match for my own group of companions. To my left, a keen warrior with hair the color of rich chocolate swung his intricately engraved battleaxe with precision, the blade and mass of the weapon dropping two foes at once. Far off to my right, a nimble huntress loosed arrows in rapid succession, finding a sprinting bandit right in the shoulder blade, causing him to crumple to the needle-covered floor in agony. The bandit leader swung his mace towards my head, but he could not match my overwhelming agility which I used to duck under his wild swipe and strike at his abdomen where I plunged my blade deep into his flesh. He too went pale in the face and fell to the ground, his blood dirtying the otherwise pristine forest floor and whetting the thirst of my sword. It was done, six marauders lay at our feet in the still morning air, they would no longer be bothering the people of the nearby village. “Can we head back to the village now? I don’t think these guys are gonna give us any more trouble.” The panting axeman leaned on his weapon of choice, taking a cloth to the cutting edge as to keep it in top condition. “Yeah, can we? I have to get going in a bit and I don’t wanna be stuck out here in the woods,” the marksman said slinging her bow over her shoulder with a subtle motion and dislodging an arrow from the shin of a bandit. “I suppose,” I said nonchalantly as I stretched out to prevent any sort of cramping. “Alright, see you guys later,” she waved as she sprinted back the way we came, the coins she had looted jingling in their leather pouch. “Alright, Hide, see ya in a bit then,” I called out to the axe-bearing warrior, preparing to head back myself. “I thought we weren’t supposed to call each other by our real names,” he said somewhat worried about what I had just done. “It’s fine as long as Sigrid-san doesn’t know, so...uh, she doesn’t find us IRL.” He seemed to get the message just fine and lightened up a little bit, but his mood shifted a bit when he realized something. “Oh crap, I forgot I haven’t even eaten since yesterday afternoon; gotta go get some breakfast! See ya later, man!” He ran in the same direction as Sigrid, cursing to himself the whole way for forgetting to eat something for almost an entire day. I chuckled to myself as I watched him and his clunky plate armor hobble down the road towards the nearest settlement. I was alone now and decided to follow suit, just a bit slower, so that I could reach my encampment just outside the town. This was Siegstreit Online, the undisputed champion of the MMORPG industry, a monstrous beast of a world boasting over 45 million players and a map approximately the size of North America, all told. Created by Swedish developers in 2019, the game grossed around 16 million concurrent players within its first two weeks of release and quickly became the most widely played online game of all time. The game was like most every other game of that era in that it was playable via console, computer, or through a coupling of either a console or a computer with an Apollo-class chip. Naturally, the better the computer or console, the better the experience through the Apollo chip was. The added benefit of the chip was that a player could transmit their consciousness to the game itself via shortwave communication between the computer’s processor and the chip, essentially transporting the coded sensations of the game to the chip lodged in the brainstem and the movement impulses to the game from the chip and translating it into action. In order to, in effect, paralyze the body yet keep the brain awake while transmitting visual input from the game directly to the brain’s visual cortex, the chip induced a sort of pre-REM sleep in the body via mild hormone release. Much to the dismay of gamers and disgruntled parents alike, the pre-REM aspect of the artificially-induced coma meant it had none of the benefits of actual sleep, although sleep in game did. Food consumption, on the other hand, was not nourishing for the living body, although it did taste good and fill a tiny void in the stomach when the going got rough; alcohol was also quite effective at its task in game and was heavily consumed by players on a regular basis since the world of Kveljastheim revolved around the tavern. My friend, Hide, and I had preordered the game about a year before its release in order to be able to play it before it sold out instantly on the day of release, which it eventually did. It was now 2021 and the players were still pouring in by the hundreds every day; consequently, the map was getting more and more detailed and filled out every month as the developers outdid themselves again and again. It was a fantastic place, I had to admit, the colors, the sights, all the people, it was truly a sight to see. However, like every story about video games and fantasy worlds, there was a severely boring one on the other side of the screen.

It was about seven in the morning and my friends and I had been logged onto Siegstreit, or simply SSO, for a consecutive ten hours at this point. I knocked over a can of iced coffee with my hand as I realized I was beginning to doze off again and rub my face on my keyboard. The only downside to marathoning an MMORPG for a good half day or so was that there was always school at some point and the calendar on the wall next to me made sure I got the message. I slipped my phone out of my pocket and confirmed my fears: I had school in an hour. Slinking out of the chair in the morning was one of the most painful tasks I had, forcing myself to slither across the floor to my closet to grab my uniform off the hanger. Nevermind that previous thought, the most painful part of my existence was actually standing up *off* of the floor and grabbing the clothes off of the hanger. I mustered whatever strength I had left, usually the leftover caffeine from my canned coffee, and stumbled to a somewhat erect posture with which I could manage to grab the uniform. I got the idea in my head that this must be more physically intensive than ACTUALLY exercising for a couple reasons: a) I’m always out of breath whenever a do a decent three hours of gaming, b) my muscles and back are always sore after playing SSO, and c) I never put on any weight. This medical analysis of myself practically makes me a doctor by now because I do it every morning in an analytically sound yet rapid, professional fashion...then again, my more intellectual side tells me that I’m going to die before the age of 40 and that I’m severely out of shape. By the time I had thought all this out, I had begun to don my blazer and fasten its crimson tie around my neck. The smell of starch and generic detergent was probably the most depressing thing that could have possibly woken me up that morning; that, and the sudden realization that I had school that morning...and that had already happened. Stuffing a sweet bread in my mouth, I peered out the windows, parting the blinds with my index and middle finger slowly as to not blind myself when the sun rushed in and ruined the perfect gaming atmosphere. I squinted at the sudden illumination and fixated my eyes on a pair of girls from my school that were walking past my apartment. Shifting my gaze down the street as to not draw the image of being a stalker, I saw a familiar goofy figure beckoning me to join him on the sidewalk. Mochizuki Hideki or Hide, for short, who was, sadly, one of the only 3D friends I had and had gone to school with me since as far back as I could remember. It wasn’t that I exactly minded Hide being my sole friend given that we both had the same interests and I abhorred a good portion of the “average kids” at our school. Adolescence was like a cruel punishment from God, robbing children of their last few years of youth before they became matured and immune to the attractive wiles of childish enjoyment. Hide, despite his (our) status as a lonely video-gaming otaku, was nevertheless a little bit more popular than I was. Again, not that I minded that much because I wasn’t all that big of a fan of 3D girls; they always lacked that ‘something’ for me and were cruel and calculating, thinking themselves too high and mighty for a lowly otaku such as I. 3D guys weren’t exactly the picture of perfection either as they usually seemed to be just as false as the girls they hung out with, but, still, some guys were understanding like Hide, and I put up with them at least. My desktop, in the background to my depressing soliloquy, blared the message sound and interrupted my musings. I turned around and slid into my chair, inching myself towards the desk by flapping my arms given my hands were still attempting to find their way through the cuffs in my shirt. Apparently, Sigrid was messaging me given that the avatar bubble that appeared on screen was her own. “Hey, Kuraikaze-san, you up for dungeon-crawling at like 7 o’clock tonight? I need to level up my Stealth skill tree still. -Sigrid” I read the message without paying much attention as it was usually the same from Sigrid; I was planning on being online by five at latest as always anyways so I honestly questioned why she keeps bothering. It didn’t discredit the fact though that she was a good person, an upstanding member of the MMORPG community and one of the three members of my guild...including me. Hide, Sigrid, and I had all been members of the same guild since roughly three weeks after the game came out, Sigrid obviously joining at the third week as she hadn’t yet met us when the game first released. She was an upstanding Huntress-class with superior archery and stealth skills and a love for SSO as great as my own or Hide’s. Sigrid Sword-Maiden, despite her very Nordic, fantasy-like, and feminine name, was also very much likely a thirty year old man from my city who was as desperate for friends in the game community as much as Hide and I were. Besides, what female would willingly join into a guild with two men she doesn’t even know and, just as odd, why would a man join a small guild like ours when he could easily join one of the large guilds without question with the level of skill he has...unless he was stalking us. Trying to wash the thought out of my mind that a thirty year old NEET had tracked my IP address and was waiting behind my apartment with a pair of binoculars, I grabbed my bag and rushed outside into the fresh spring air to meet Hide. I was halted, however, when I noticed a different message dimming the screen of my computer; it was an error message. “Siegstreit Online has experienced an error and needs to restart.” The message wasn’t exactly ominous so I proceeded to accept it and close the game window. Then, the problem really surfaced when I saw a system error on the screen which read: “WARNING: Your system has experienced an issue with the following program: Siegstreit Online, and has detected several malware files.” This worried me as, without my operating system working properly, I would not be able to play that night. Checking my Control Center, I noticed that SSO was running a few processes which seemed to take up a good portion of my CPU’s cores. School was in fifteen minutes, though, and I didn’t want to be late to the entrance ceremony. Plus, Hide was waiting on me outside and I couldn’t just leave him out there by himself while I debugged an entire game. I resolved to go after school that day and purchase an anti-virus software to clean my PC and, rushing out the door, stepped into the outside world.

“Dude, that was so cool last night when Sigrid-san totally tackled that Cave Bear and then made it tap out!” I nodded to him, both in agreement and in an effort to waive the sleep I had lost, to show my approval of the action. “Hide, do you ever get the feeling that Sigrid-san isn’t a...you know...Sigrid-san?” He gave me a sideways look, scratching his head at the language of my question. “What’s wrong with Sigrid-san?” Deciding to brush off the line of interrogation, I elected to err on the safe side of matters and give Hide’s IP to Sigrid before he found my own. Also, I began to devise a plan of escape in case Sigrid already knew my place of residence which involved something to the effect of jumping out of the second-story window and hoping my legs weren’t broken enough by the fall so that I could limp to the nearest kouban. I gulped hard as I patted my pant leg gently, thinking about what it would feel like if I were to pursue such a course of action. Hide was still looking at me as if I were speaking an alien tongue, his hand waving slightly to get my attention. “Um...uh, Kichirou, Kichirou?” I snapped out of my daze and pulled my emergency espresso from a pouch in my schoolbag; it was undoubtedly a gamer’s best friend for a gaming hangover. “Emergency Go-Go Roast, huh? We must’ve gone hard last night,” he laughed to himself, noticing he too was equally tired. I took note of his exhausted facade and produced a second black can from my bag; it’s not like it was the first time that we had gone through this kind of situation. “Oh, thanks, Kichirou.” His tired eyes proved thankful enough as they widened visibly from the sight of the coffee drink. “No problem. Yeah, I assume we did because we cleared at least eight bandit hideouts...oh, why did we choose this life?” Hide shrugged earnestly as he began to reason out my question, “Well, at first our goal was to get girls because a lot of them were going to play the game and we pretty much...” he began toning down the excitement of his speech and processed the depressing reality, “...got no girls at all...hmmm. It’s fun?” He struggled to come up with a feasible answer as to why we poured hours of our lives into an MMORPG instead of going to karaoke or out for ramen like the other kids. “Yeah, honestly, our lives suck,” he said while taking a deep drink from his can of espresso. I sighed as I accepted our destinies as lonely gamers in an increasingly drab world. The sky was brilliant with the light of a warm and cozy sun and the air smelled of springtime cherry blossoms. All around us, boys and girls all wearing the same school uniform flocked to the local high school, their faces blushing and rife with excitement and joy as they saw friends making their way to the school gates. Then, there was Hide and I who bobbed along the way with a slightly more dampened mood and with a conversation which was a little bit less than bubbly and lighthearted. This was the start of our second year at Chosokabe Municipal Secondary School, and, as always, the courtyard leading up to the school seemed to be drenched in the blossoms of an overwhelming number of cherry trees. I remember one time when some third-year student was walking with his girlfriend and he inhaled one in the breeze and began to choke. Interestingly enough, nobody really did anything and simply stood around and watched as the boy wheezed on the silky petal for a good five minutes before a teacher came to help the poor guy out. For some reason the girl dumped him soon after. Why? I do not really know, but it further proves my point that 3D girls are not to be trusted under any circumstance. We were standing in the midst of a miniature sea of fluorescent pink petals at this point and gazed around the crowded courtyard, taking in the out-of-context conversations of returning students and picking up our fill of back-to-school gossip. The bell signaled the start of classes for the day and, simultaneously, marked the beginning of another painful year of schooling. Hide and I ascended the olive-colored linoleum stairs to the second floor of the main building where the second year classes were. Sure enough, we were both placed in class 2-B, a considerably elite class at the school, where the second-best performers on the mock exams were placed to receive “increased educational attention”. Despite our addiction to online gaming, Hide and I were not exactly dull given that our study of RNG and programming had instilled in us a great sense of mathematics and, in general, cramming useless information into our heads. At least in the higher classes, people were more fixated on schooling than tormenting the vulnerable otaku or hooking up with each other. On the other hand, these students could be much more ruthless given that they were willing to do anything to be admitted to a prestigious university. We took our seats randomly in the homeroom with Hide and I choosing our usual seats in the latter half of the classroom near the windows where we could discuss “pertinent matters” with little to no interference from the social butterflies that cluttered our class roster. The greatest invention on Earth, after the personal computer, was the even more personal laptop computer which I treasured highly for its ability to free me from the troubles of school life with the help of comfortable foot positioning on the chair in front of me and noise cancelling earbuds. At times, a light novel also afforded me the same luxury of temporary escape with its alluring portrayals of cute 2D girls and its sub-par chunks of literature in between to paint a story which took the edge off of life in the real world. “Hoho, take off the panties, Minori-chan!” I realized I said this too loud when the girl in front of me, happening to named Minori, turned around at an angle of almost 180 degrees, her face flushed with a large stripe of red and her hand clutching the white and red striped skirt between her thighs. I cringed and sank into my seat, my brain damning the pictures of the main heroine, Minori-chan, in various positions of undress. On account of the high quality of the work of the doujinshi, I was also quite impressed with the level of arousal such “literature” had brought me, and I sent a text to Sigrid, thanking...that person of unknown gender...for sending the excellent material. The real Minori-chan at this point began to run out of the room to presumably hide in the girl’s bathroom, and I had added one person to my ever growing list of people who had probably ostracized me from all social contact. The window to my immediate left was wedged open slightly and I decided to exploit the opportunity by cracking it open further in order to get a desirable breeze. When you spend a lot of time by yourself, you come to realize the importance of a spot to relax and eat lunch at school. Therefore, I had mapped out a myriad of locations in the school where I was at an atmospherical advantage or, in layman’s terms, the spots were quite pleasant to enjoy a nice lunch and a monthly ecchi magazine. Hide, if his quaint charms exceeded him, which was arguably rare at best, would sit with a number of decently popular girls in our class at lunch; if not, which usually happened to be the case, he would join me at my spot to share in the fruits of the underground doujin industry, courtesy of Sigrid. Today, however, we ate our lunch in a hurry given that the entrance ceremony was due to commence at 12 o’clock and Sigrid hadn’t delivered quite as many doujin that month as usual, making the material for the next few weeks fairly sparse. The teacher entered the room promptly at 11:55 to shepherd us out of the classroom and into the disturbingly humid gymnasium. The walk to the gym brought back nostalgic memories, or lack thereof, of walking through the halls on my first day of school here, a year ago now; I had so many hopes for my new life in Tokyo.

My name, just in case I hadn’t made it clear already, is Sugihara Kichirou. Male, age 16, 175 centimeters tall, 62 kilogr...wait, why would I need to mention my weight? Any valuable talents I have or would have had have long since been degraded by binge gaming on MMORPG’s or religiously flipping the pages of manga; however, I believe both to be great exercises for the body and mind. Oh, and just to get the message straight I’ve had three girlfriends so far in visual novels so I consider myself to be well versed in the romantic arts despite my status as a virgin. Sadly, that’s a lie. Originally, I am from Aomori, far in the Northern tip of Honshuu, a place that was mostly known as the last major train stop before Hokkaido. It was a relatively distant town in respect to the behemoth that was Tokyo, but it held its own share of charms. I sometimes missed it when I felt lonely, that quaint hometown of mine. For my first year of high school, only a year ago, my parents decided to ship me off from my countryside hometown to a school which would give me a reasonably good education with which to enter a decent university given Aomori was not exactly the intellectual center of the universe. Hide and I had already been good friends since primary school and we decided together that we would be moving to Tokyo to attend high school. His parents agreed so we were on the first train out of Aomori that winter after middle school ended; two dysfunctional otaku bound for a seemingly foreign city in the far south. The sights and sounds were all new to us as we stepped onto the platform in Tokyo, our eyes adjusting to the great volume of light and the magnitude of the number of people rushing to and fro. It was a bit disconcerting at first how the city folk glared at us as if they had never seen someone from the country before, but we got used to it. Our accents were relatively tame considering the unique dialect of the north, and we were well-versed beforehand in the laid-back Tokyo form of Japanese as to not stick out. It was snowing that first night and we emerged from the station into the serene powder without a clue as to what to do next. The neon lights surrounding us painted the snow in rich hues of pink and red while crowds of white collar workers swarmed around in an effort to return home, their bulky coats bundled around them and their briefcases dangling haphazardly from their mittened hands. For a good while, we just stood there in a lackluster sort of way, all the while glancing at our watches as if a taxi or some other kind hearted passerby would pick our sorry selves up from the curb. Apparently, no such luck existed in this godforsaken metropolis, unless, of course, we were abducted and sold on the open market. I estimated my personal value at around 100,000 ¥ and Hide’s a minute measure higher than my own at around a safe 125K. Despite my pointless musings, the snow still fell and the night began to inch its way into an unbearably cold temperature. As such, we seized the initiative and began to walk the six or so kilometers to where we were supposed to be living for the next three years. We warily edged our way down the steps into the sleet covered streets below, our suitcases tumbling down the stairs behind us as we applied our miniscule strengths to their limits. As far as the school year was going thus far, I had no qualms; of course, I was being painfully sarcastic, and the lack of feeling in my feet told me just about the same thing except sarcasm about my current situation wouldn’t save one of my limbs from being amputated should I be stuck in this cold any longer. The cars passed through the crosswalk at alarming speeds and blurred the opposite side where we were supposed to be if we should ever wish to reach the apartments. I had heard a lot of things about Tokyo before coming there; besides the subway molestations and not-so-friendly citizens, it wasn’t all necessarily *that* bad: I at least had a friend to act as a shield from either of the two. Running across the crosswalk proved a greater challenge than one would think as we waddled across the thick white lines, constricted by our winter coats and dragged down by thirty kilos of luggage apiece. Needless to say, it went from about a twenty meter sprint to what seemed like an eternal limp across several lanes of traffic. “Kichirou, uh, do you get the feeling we’re lost?” This comment struck a harsh note in my mind as I looked around to realize that the Minato-ku station was no longer directly behind us and all that was to be seen was a large cluster of human beings rushing in every which way. My otaku senses seemed to be working quite well despite the frigid temperatures and sniffed out a suitable place of shelter from the cold in the form of a maid cafe. We both flocked to the amply lit storefront where the signature promotional maid had likely gone inside for reason that skimpy maid uniforms and near-freezing temperatures were not a match made in heaven. Upon entering the cozy cafe, we had both slumped to the floor next to the coat rack and Hide held up his two fingers with as little finesse as one could imagine in an effort to signal a table for two.

I fell asleep in the warm atmosphere of the cafe, my weary eyes no longer able to stay open after the several hour train ride and running through the bustling streets of Tokyo. When I came to, I realized that Hide and I were dressed in some of the most obscene clothes I had ever laid eyes upon before: Hide donning a purple tailed coat and a red bowtie and myself wearing what seemed to be a sort of naval commander’s uniform. I checked my phone to make sure we had not ended up in the infamous red-lights district or that we had not stumbled into a cosplay convention. Neither seemed to be true but there was still the question of why Hide and I were dressed in fantasy-themed attire. Hide inspected every inch of the coat, fondling the velvet on the sleeves and the coattails gently to observe the quality of the material. Within a few minutes, one of the maids came in with a tray of assorted pastries and a lollipop sticking out of the corner of her pursed lips. “Ah, cool! You guys are awake; I thought we were gonna like have to call the police because we thought you were dead for a while there.” She giggled cutely with all the emotion that was to be expected from one of Tokyo’s famous maid waitresses. She yanked the lollipop out of her mouth and twirled it around with her thumb and index finger with an intricate sense of professionalism that resulted from what seemed like years of experience. “Um, Miss Maid-san, would you happen to know why we have these on,” I said cutting to the chase and pinching the sleeve of the pure white naval jacket I was wearing to specify my query. “Oh, well you guys were soaking wet and freezing so Rika-chan and I fixed you guys up in some of the clothes we had back in the props room.” Again, the maid had an adorable tone to her voice which made me almost forget to continue my line of interrogation. “Wait, so why exactly *do* you have these ‘props’ lying around?” Hide was slowly unsheathing his phone from his pants pocket to cleverly snap a photo of the maid who was talking to me and I shot him a glare signalling that he had better send the picture to me at some later point. I don’t believe he ever did send the picture, but I do know that it may or may not be, the former being most likely, the background to both his phone and screensaver...lucky bastard. “Ah, hehe...yeahhh, some of the regular customers enjoy roleplaying when they eat here. They say it gives them a sense of comfort and power.” My facial expression must have turned somewhat distorted at that point as the maid began to give me a puzzled look, the lollipop swishing around in her mouth as she tried to figure out what I was thinking. “Wow, your job sounds harsh,” I said with the utmost sincerity given that the poor girl must go through hell on a daily basis. She craned her neck and sighed loudly; her eyes squinted with a degree of visible irritation at my statement. “You don’t even know the half of it,” she lamented as if her troubles became worse at the realization that other people were aware of her woes. Hide, in the background of this conversation, was still slyly taking photos of the maid and likely sending them to our friends back home. “Ah, right! I’m Makoto, nice to meetcha! Um, you guys are?” At once, Hide seized his chance at greatness, “So nice to make your acquaintance as well, Makoto-tan. I’m Hide and this is my buddy, Kichirou.” I got the sense that Hide was putting a little too much effort into this pursuit given that he was never going to have a chance at such a gorgeous girl as Makoto. When I say this, I mean that she was quite literally what the anime gods had envisioned when they gifted humanity with the concept of maid cafes. With all honesty, she was well within the range of a D-cup and was filled out in the right places such that I even ran her through my checklist for 2D girls, which she passed with flying colors. Never before had I come face-to-face with a 3D girl who embodied such 2D standards as a fantastic body and a cute, moe-like face; this girl was most certainly an envy amongst women. She had coffee brown hair pulled back into twintails with a thin black satin ribbon fashioned into a bow per each tail to keep them tied perfectly. Her eyes were of a pale tea green which highlighted her softly textured face which was almost entirely void of any makeup, proving that she was indeed blessed with the gift of aesthetic beauty far beyond that of any other girl. Despite the more-than-adequate features of Makoto, I was still far from renouncing my status as a 2D-loving otaku as I had a waifu and was not so eager to readily give her up for a 3D girl any time soon. “Anyways,” Makoto interjected, interrupting my train of thought which happened to leave my eyes trained on her ample chest. “KOHUM!” I wheezed loudly as to excuse myself in the case she noticed me staring her down from point blank. “So, Kichirou-kun, Hide-kun, you aren’t from around these parts, are you?” Every fiber of my being yearned for this maiden to coddle us and to care for us over the cold night while, at the same time, the otaku portion of my brain, the remaining 90 percent of my consciousness, beat my mortal desires down with the ferocity of a rabid animal. “Eheh...nope, sadly. We’re kind of those country bumpkins who don’t even know which way is up around here.” My vocal tone was beginning to be corrupted by the ‘kittens and flowers’ language of Makoto; I could practically feel what little dignity I had left bleeding out onto the plush carpeted floor. “Hmmhmm,” she thought to herself in a sing-song voice, “I suppose I could show you guys around once my shift is up! Would you guys like some tea?” The looks on our faces must have told it all as she raised her finger up as if getting the message and fluttered out the door, a train of rainbows and overexcited small children practically trailing her as she bounded out of view. “She was hot,” Hide said without the slightest bit of restraint, a massive grin on his face. I wasn’t exactly in a position to disagree either as I too had enjoyed the subtle feminine charms of the bodacious maid probably just as much as he had. Hide was just about to utter another comment, likely about how Makoto had satisfied his three sizes plentifully, when the maid of the hour popped her head into the room, her twintails bobbing slightly and her eyes shimmering with youthful pride. “Your tea’s ready,” she exclaimed gleefully, her thumb stuck up as if we had just gotten a sticker for good behavior in kindergarten. Without a second to waste, Hide stumbled out into the cafe with the coattails on his purple suit flapping around in a carefree fashion. I likewise followed suit because, just as much as Hide but for a different reason, I longed for Makoto to serve me some tea to warm my bones which had yet to thaw from the bite of winter. Maybe I also had the desire for her to serve me for another reason, but that’s something for therapy to figure out.

I tried my best to stare the sultry maid in the eyes as she bent over to pour the contents of the teapot into my porcelain tea cup, I swear I did. If feminine wiles were dangerous, I surely would have been suffocated by that point...no pun intended. No matter how I shifted my gaze, she still seemed to get in my way, and I was almost certain that I was blushing redder than the blood dripping from my nose at that point. At last, she turned around to serve Hide who was conducting himself quite coolly in the face of most certain, yet unintentional, seduction at the hands of the brunette maid. I was convinced that I was in the clear from any potential temptation at this point so I drew the saucer close to my face as to sip from the chalice of piping hot tea. Makoto seemed to have dropped a packet of sugar for her tea or something to that effect which she proceeded to pick up from the floor before she sat. Little did I know, however, that she would be so ignorant of the uniform she was wearing as to fully bend over in the company of two adolescent boys. Diverting my gaze was not quick enough to avoid such a scene and soon my vision was clouded with white and blue striped cloth. My otaku side retaliated with surprising efficiency to the sight of a real girl’s panties and forced me to gag on my tea and spit it all over my cup and saucer. As if the spit-take wasn’t enough to punish me for laying eyes upon a 3D girl’s undergarments, I proceeded to choke on what little remained from the scalding hot herbal water in my throat. She rose from the depths of the underside of the table, the sugar packet clenched in between her delicate fingers. It must have seemed quite odd to her given the sound of my asphyxiation whilst she bent down to retrieve a mere packet of sugar, but she seemed to pay little mind to it. “Ah, Kichirou-kun, you seem to have spilt a bit of tea on yourself,” she remarked as she saw that half the cup had emptied itself all over the lower portion of my face. “Why thank you, I hadn’t noticed that,” was what I wanted to say at that point but decided against using my degrading sarcasm against this poor soul; after all, she *was* cute enough to make up for her disturbingly obvious comments. To add insult to injury, she took a linen table napkin in her hand and began to dab at the corners of my mouth in a circular motion as if the embarrassment from having spewed tea and seeing her panties was not enough. I sat with a less-than-amused facial expression for the entire two minutes that she prodded at my dampened face with the napkin, all the while having my own spirit dampening as a result and attempting to assume some sort of personal dignity. After she had finished, we were at last able to get down to the business we were to discuss in the first place. “So, since you guys aren’t from around here, I imagine you must be high school students.” I found it just a bit odd how quickly she came to that conclusion. “Well, Tokyo is um...how can I put it...a little bit tough to get adjusted to. But don’t worry! I’m sure you’ll all get used to it at some point, it’s still a great town!” We were temporarily put at ease by this generic piece of wisdom. “Makoto-san, we’re really thankful for your kindness but we don’t exactly have the time to chat when we still have no idea how to get home.” At this point, I realized that all hope I had left of having a charming side had been wiped away by long hours of being locked in my room with only a PGS and a couple eroge. Sadly, my hand didn’t reach my mouth fast enough to silence that line, nor did it allow me to slam my head against the table for ruining my last chances of assimilating into society. I looked mortified, but Makoto seemed to take no offense at my comment, looking a slight bit embarrassed yet kindly as always in response instead. “Oh my gosh, I’m really so sorry for holding you guys here. It’s just...it gets sort of lonely here on weeknights.” Naturally, eroge code would demand me to interject here with some sort of romantic outburst as Makoto, flustered as she was, squirmed around in her chair nervously with a stripe of crimson on her face from having made such a crucial blunder. “Sorry for being blunt, Makoto-san. Look, I know you’ve already done a lot for us, but do you think you could show us the way to our apartment?” I seemed to have taken the middle option in this dialogue box but it worked; maybe I still had a chance at getting a girlfriend! Ah, I do love unrealistically optimistic thinking. Her face lit up much like lights during a summer festival and seemed to brighten the drab winter mood just for a little while, giving Hide and I the coziest feeling we had been given since we left Aomori what now seemed like forever ago.

I never exactly pictured my first night in Japan’s biggest urban center would be spent in traffic in a near-stranger’s car...and I definitely didn’t picture who would be driving it at all. Inside the compact car, Hide and I occupied the back seat, our suitcases pinned to our chests, while Makoto sang (quite badly) to pop music on the radio in the driver’s seat. The music here it seemed was all bubblegum pop, the kind of stuff which makes you see neon colors even when you shut your eyes and causes blood to run from your ears when you listen to it. In Aomori, although we were just as civilized as the Southerners, we never exactly listened to the stereotypical J-pop which streamed out of Tokyo much like torrential rapids cascaded from a waterfall. We, at least my family, preferred more traditional music when we listened to the radio and were not exactly prepared for the whole new audible world we were to be exposed to on our first night in the city. However, we were not exactly in a position to complain given that, only an hour earlier, we were stuck in the cold and now, a girl we had just recently met kindly offered to drive us to our apartment. The droplets of water on the windshield of the car reflected the red brake lights of the traffic quite beautifully, illuminating the inside of the darkened car with a spectacle of shimmering crimson light. It was quite soothing and I soon saw that Hide had begun to nod off, his ears apparently having gotten used to the blaring music with a live accompanying vocal track courtesy of Makoto. She peeked slyly over the headrest to check on us, her mild green eyes scanning the backseat as if she was playing hide-and-seek with small children. Not wanting to force myself into an awkward situation of conversing with her without the emotional support of Hide, I feigned sleep and closed my eyes in an attempt to fool her. It seemed that it had worked as I opened one eye to determine if she had turned her attention to the road again, no longer finding her to be searching for any signs of life from my friend and I. Looking out the window, I laid eyes upon the beauty of such a metropolis as Tokyo: the bright neon signs, the clamoring crowds of people, the glistening water on the surface of the road, the distinct sound of a city that was very much alive in every way. I thought back to my humble home in Aomori; I missed it, sure, but I had the feeling that one day I would come to enjoy life in this new place. The warmth of the car and the caring presence of Makoto seemed to have gotten to me as the music began to fade into the background and I drifted into a comfortable realm of sleep. When I woke up the next morning, I was in what appeared to be my new apartment, my body carefully tucked under the sheets of a bed, and my suitcase and other belongings neatly placed beside it. My wet clothes were laid upon the radiator, and I was dressed in my sweatpants and a t-shirt for sleeping in. At that moment, I grew a bit emotional as I realized the true kindness of Makoto: a girl who had only recently met me offered to drive me home and then carried me into my apartment instead of waking me up. I grinned to myself thinking about how kind-hearted she had been and resolved that life from then on was indeed going to start anew for me.

I recalled of all this on my way through the hallways of my school as I proceeded to make my way to the entrance ceremony. Hide walked alongside me, his dark brown hair appearing unkempt as it always looked whenever he had just spent hours on gaming. Thinking about all this made me laugh a little to myself as I remembered the bubbly and aloof personality of Makoto and the helping hand she had given us that night. Coming down the stairs, the mob of students, including Hide and I, shuffled our way into the auditorium where countless rows of folding chairs had been set up to accommodate the large crowd that populated the school. It was ironic how people pushed and shoved to find seats especially given that this was by far the most tear-jerking (by that, I mean boring) ceremony the school had to offer to its suffering student body. Hide and I seated ourselves in the middle rows as we usually did to avoid being picked out in the crowd for using our PGS’s during the assembly which we used to alleviate some of the boredom. The principal and the student council president mounted the stage which was adorned with the Japanese flag and the Imperial emblem, papers in their hands upon which the presumably interminable speeches they were about to deliver were written. After a great amount of chatter from the audience, the noise dispersed and the principal began what seemed to be the most monotone speech ever to have graced the planet. A fellow otaku from 2-C scooted closer to me, his eyes fixating on my screen and the expression on his face melting slightly. “Thankfully, someone has some sense in this world,” he whispered with a degree of relief in his voice, “Whatcha playin’?” I was quite glad that someone shared in my despisal of such ceremonies as this so I conversed with him accordingly. “It’s *Love Doctor 3: Medical School*. I quite enjoyed the first two games, but this one is truly something else in terms of the reality of the dialogue,” I said knowing nothing at all of how to really talk to a girl, “Right now, I’m on Chiyo’s arc and I must say that she is by far my favorite character. I mean I secretly have a soft spot for red haired girls but oh does this one tug at my heartstrings. I just recently passed the scene where she was wearing a revealing nurse’s outfit and she pulled my hand towards her chest and asked me to check her breathing with the stethoscope and I just lost it!” He seemed as equally excited as I did as I flipped through the dialogue options with Chiyo-chan, getting me to the point where she pulled me into a medical supply closet after working long hours at the hospital. Knowing it would very much lead into an H-scene, I signalled to the otaku that we needed to pause the game before one of us tipped off the entire school that we were playing 18+ games during the ceremony. He understood perfectly and shifted his gaze towards the stage while passing me a thumbs up for my charitable work. Knowing that I had spent all of the playable material I had for that assembly, I began to nod off in the hopes that I would sleep clear though all the awards that were to be given out. I was halfway to the sweet caress of precious dreamland when Hide nudged me awake, his finger pointing something out to me on stage. “Look, look! It’s Kurokawa Hitomi, the smartest and hottest girl in like the entire school!” I took this always with a grain of salt as I knew that no 3D girl could ever surpass a 2D girl no matter how large her cup size or how cute her face. I had to admit, she was indeed quite attractive to the naked eye and her talents were more than decent on paper yet her personality was arguably lacking. ‘The Black-Haired Bombshell’ they called her at the school, the girl who seemed to have it all, the girl with every single boy at the school around her finger, the girl who seemed too high and mighty to have anyone go against her. She was the top of our class in every subject, scoring perfectly on the mock exams and the prized student of every teacher. In addition, she was a star in the soccer club and a fairly competent master of judo; without a doubt, she was presented to be a demi-god who proved to be flawless in everything she did. I, however, saw that which others did not see: I saw a deeply insecure and pompous girl who was merely meddling with the feeble minds of her peers in any way she saw fit. Her piercing violet eyes and cold glare seemed to tear one to pieces if they should look at her the wrong way. She surrounded herself with friends to make it seem as if she were impervious to the harsh realities of life and hurled insults at any and all who she deemed inferior to herself, which proved to be the whole of the people she encountered. Her treatment of the otaku and ‘lesser students,’ such as Hide and I, was particularly atrocious, her only interactions with me being solely to scorn my love of anime and gaming. I disliked this girl as much as any otaku or gamer at the school and sought to avoid her as much as possible as to prevent the possibility of what would likely be an intensely heated argument...likely leading to me being sent home in a pine box, but that would be a completely different story. While Hide viewed Kurokawa Hitomi upon the wooden stage with adoration as she received her top student award from the principal, I stared into her with fierce resentment, recalling all the times she ridiculed me and others for our hobbies. I was very intent on putting her into her place one day and to see the look on her face when it was I who sat on the throne, leaving the supposed black haired beauty to roll in the mud with the rest of her companions and lick at the bootheels of the ones they persecuted. As usual, Hide caught me in the middle of my devious planning after having first taken a picture of Kurokawa to hang on his wall or something like that. “Um...Kichirou? Why are you grinning and laughing to yourself? Wait, you didn’t rob Chiyo-chan of her youth yet, did you Kichirou? We were supposed to conquer that route together,” he cried softly as he imagined me virtually taking the virginity of the red-haired nurse. “No, no, Hide. Don’t worry, I saved Chiyo-chan for you. I’m just thinking of...future plans for victory.” He looked at me as if I were speaking in foreign tongues. “Future plans for victory?” I nodded, my discerning pupils once again fixating upon Kurokawa Hitomi who was still grinning and waving her hand towards the chanting crowd below. A fire burned in me that day as I watched the proud girl wear the crown on her head for the last time; I would have my revenge.

“So, Kichirou, I was thinking that we should have Sigrid-san have a more active combat role or something because it always seems that she camps in the background during skirmishes while we take lots of damage. I get the feeling that if she were next to us as we fight, we would kill enemies faster.” I thought to myself about this proposition as we were walking home after the awards ceremony towards our apartments. The blossoms seemed to subside the further we walked up the hill towards our neighborhood and the spring heat seemed to be a little more bearable. “Hmm, Sigrid-san can’t necessarily take that much damage though given she uses most of her level-up points towards her agility. I suppose we could ask her though.” It was getting reasonably hot as it usually did during the spring, and I took off my blazer knowing that continuing to wear it would only result in my eventual heatstroke going up the hill. Once at the top, the landscape levelled out, and Hide and I managed to find our way to our doorsteps, our chests heaving with the fatigue which the immense heat had bestowed upon us. Sweat running down my brow, I stumbled into the gate to my apartment and waved goodbye to Hide as he walked towards his own residence just a few houses down. “Seeya online, man!” Some of the excitement was lost from his farewell given his heavy panting, but I still got the message as it was meant to be delivered. Just then, I remembered that my computer had developed a virus that morning so, groaning loudly, I dragged myself back down the hill again to reach the electronics store just across the train tracks. When I finally reached the store, I was met by a rush of particularly cold air which was worsened by the fact that my shirt was practically soaked with sweat. “Welcome to PC Palace, can we help you with anything?” was the first thing I heard from the manager from behind the counter as soon as I stepped foot within the store. He knew me plenty well as I had sourced all of the parts for my PC here and also used it for any (and multiple) electronic needs I had while I lived in Tokyo. I waved a quick hello to him in my exhausted state and proceeded to make my way towards the software section where I would find something to remedy my computer’s problems. Picking a box up after some intense thought and contemplation, I sauntered towards the register where Mr. Sato was waiting eagerly to ring up whatever I was to purchase this time around. “Got a virus, eh? Good choice, it gets rid of any unwanted stuff you have clogging up your system. Have a disc at home myself, works like a charm. So, gotta girl yet, Kichirou-kun?” I was startled at his sudden outburst and stuttered heavily when coming up with a response. “Hehe, of course not Sato-san, of course not. I have a good graphics card on my computer for a reason,” I half-joked with him as I shot him a wink which only computer geeks would understand. “Haha, a man who knows the true pleasures of life. Ehehe, nevermind, shouldn’t have said that with my wife in the back.” He chuckled heartily but leaned down in a hushed manner to slip me something. “Newest release, only in beta-testing right now here in Japan. Over *fifty-seven* story arcs and hundreds of hours of playable content. Limited edition comes with the soundtrack and bonus outfits, enjoy.” Looking at the title of what he sent me, I determined it was some sort of eroge. “Music of the Heart: Idol Manager” was what the title read. Mr. Sato had long been my provider for limited edition and in beta testing games, his only terms being for me to provide a detailed review of the game when I finished it (usually within 48 hours) so that he could bring more customers to his store to buy the game when it came out. I gave him a quick salute as I stuffed the game into my bag and ran out the door, a bell ringing to signal my departure from the store. Running up the hill was less exhausting this time as I was invigorated by the thought of getting home to play SSO with Sigrid and Hide and possibly to raid a dungeon for a sizable amount of loot. Like any reasonably large heatwave in Japan, the warm spring day would not have been complete without a healthy rainshower which began to show itself as I I neared the summit of the hill leading up to my apartment. Luckily, I had made it just in time to the stairs leading up to my doorway given that the true torrential downpour commenced just as I ducked under it. I breathed a quick sigh of relief as I watched the droplets coat the world outside of my microcosm under the edge of the roof. “Rain makes the perfect weather for gaming,” I said to myself as I bounded up the rickety wooden stairs to the entrance to my apartment. I hummed a giddy tune as I watched the clouds dump their precipitation onto the ground below, myself being perfectly safe from any form of weather at that point. Ah, it was nice to enjoy the comforts of single life in Tokyo because the rain was never too wet, the sun was never too hot, the snow was never too chilly so long as one had an array of games waiting for them at home.

I edged into my apartment after having unlocked the door, which was usually quite finicky with how one went about turning the key, and slid my shoes off, slipping my feet into my ‘gaming shoes’ or, as the layman called them, slippers. Hanging my coat on the rack and loosening my tie, I casually walked into my room, prepared to indulge myself into the online gaming world for the next several hours or so. However, my wonderful PC was not the thing which met my gaze as I entered my sacred realm. Instead, I stared deeply into a pair of cerulean eyes belonging to a girl who was changing directly in front of me. “KYAHHH!” I was not entirely sure what hit me at that point,, but I was certain it had the potential to give me a concussion had I not screamed myself and dove onto the bed in an attempt to evade the intruder should they possess a weapon. My countless hours of self-training via short poorly made videos online were now about to have a use as I pulled the wooden practice sword I had trained with for the past year from under my bed. My battle cry and subsequent strike were very weak and failed to connect with the foe as I slammed into my office chair, rendering myself open to whatever dastardly deed the intruder wished to inflict upon me. I barrel rolled, or lack there of, from my position to near the closet where I managed to catch a glimpse of the home invader. It was a girl, surprisingly NSFW in position, sporting long crimson hair and eyes of a bright azure which were quite bewitching and otherwise beyond the description of a mere high school boy. Naturally, my own eyes were instead drawn to her ample chest and her other equally well-proportioned features which were quite a treat for the mind of the average adolescent male. However, my instinct told me to not trust such a vexing figure and to ensure that she could not do me (or my computer) any degree of harm. I was quite assured of the fact that she desired to do me harm in some form as my discerning eye travelled down her thigh to a spot where a dagger with a leather holster was strapped to her leg, the sheath almost obscured by a frilly mini-skirt which, luckily, covered her up to the point of common decency. Standing once again, I readied myself with my wooden sword in hand, aware that it was the only thing between me and becoming flayed by this daytime hussy turned assassin. Much like a graceful crane, I lunged at her with precision which I had only before witnessed in an MMO, my downward strike landing perfectly on the soft spot between her shoulder blade and her neck. “What the hell are you doing? I’m royalty!” I determined at this point that she was clearly on a disconcerting amount of illicit narcotics and retorted in order to play around with her violent drug high. “Royalty my ass!” I must admit, this was arguably the most effective comeback I’ve ever come up with; self esteem boosts aside, the perpetrator stumbled back, her left hand clamped around the welt I had left on her neck. “I don’t know where the hell I even am and you’re beating me with this wooden katana!” A common excuse from the drug-taking street scum, I would not be so easily fooled by the likes of this girl. My next strike was most definitely less successful than the first one as she parried my blow, sending me in a trajectory course with the office chair and causing me to fly back into the corner of the room. The intruder appeared quite flustered now and she began to retreat towards the door; this was my chance, I could expel her from my apartment. With one last courageous charge, I jumped up from the swivel chair and lunged at the wounded girl who was taken quite aback by my newfound courage. She took to her feet and hobbled out the door with me hot on her trail; I was indeed ready to prove my combat prowess to this woman who dared to invade the privacy of my own home. “And stay out!” I watched as she ran down the street, the rain pelting down upon her obscene-looking outfit as she attempted to put as much distance between her and I as physically possible. A small trickle of blood came from the corner of my mouth and I wiped it with my soaked shirt sleeve, the precious sanguine staining the cufflink with its vermillion hue. The rain was still coming down in quite a flurry so I regressed back into the safety of my apartment, my clothes dampened by the droplets and my hair positively soaking from standing in the rain for so long as I watched the hasty retreat of the girl. The fact that someone such as her had the audacity to not only break into my own home but to desecrate the *sanctity* of my own gaming sanctuary by stripping off her clothes in the middle of my living quarters...it was absolutely appalling that someone would have the *nerve*. This is why I could never have respect for 3D women as they lacked the mannerisms to suit my own preferences, their frollicking minds causing them to enter a state of near-madness. 2D was simply the most feasible, 3D did not stand even a chance.

I remained vigilant for the next few hours, my face leaned against the windowpane with the curtains covering the rest of my body should the girl happen to come back with an even more fearsome weapon to have her revenge on me. Although it would have seemed like a good idea at the time, I called neither the police nor Hide as I felt they would either not believe my story or that someone would get severely hurt should she be involved with a crime syndicate. The rain fell with thick drops, the precipitation pattering on my window in massive globules which contributed to an immense but simultaneously soft soundtrack to the lonely Monday evening. It appeared that this storm was on the verge of becoming a typhoon as my phone had alerted me earlier to this possibility. A fierce howling from outside the house pierced through its thin walls, telling me that the winds had picked up quite measurably. In accordance, leaves and soggy blossoms began to tumble down the road accompanied by droves of rain which came down at an almost horizontal angle. I had a mental dilemma at this point: I couldn’t just allow myself to let that girl die out there in this storm, no matter if she had intended me harm or not. Then again, she could still be potentially dangerous and be lying in wait for me to make that move, and I would simply be on the news the next morning as the dismembered John Doe who was found traveling own the river like a gory pool floatie. My conscience clearly got the better of me as I ventured out into the downpour with a puny black umbrella, a hefty navy blue raincoat which fit me almost like a dress, and a pair of fluorescent red rubber boots to trod through the mud with. I scampered down the hill with caution, all the while scanning my immediate surroundings for a girl who could either be charging at me with a knife with an intent to kill or the same girl knocked unconscious by a rogue tree branch which had flown far from its lofty perch at a surprising velocity. Either way, it was not exactly my idea of fun to be dancing about in the rain while the winds were reaching speeds of upwards of seventy kilometers per hour and there was absolutely not a soul to be seen around. It would have helped immensely should I have learned her name,, but it was not exactly my nature to acquaint myself cordially with people who had earlier broken into my house. The wind shifted in direction from a vector of South to North, causing the rain to whip at my face with surprising ferocity and nearly blinding me with its force. My otaku side must have really begun to weaken as there was no way I would search for anyone, much less a thieving girl, while Tokyo was in the midst of the biggest storm since...well, I’d only been there for a little over a year so that’s what I was assuming at the time. Regardless of history, I was still fording my way through the train crossing turned stream when the lightning came, and I was quite confident at that point of the fact that I was going to perish in this violent storm. Within a few minutes, I had almost reached Chosokabe Municipal which was the point I had predetermined as the place I was going to use as a turnback spot should I not have already found the mysterious girl. Inside the school, a number of windows were dimly lit and I could see a few heads, presumably the student council who stayed late some days, bobbling about. I had no hope of finding the girl at this point and had little desire to hole up with the student council who were most likely stuck at school for the remainder of the storm. Sighing because I had wasted so much effort, I turned back in a homeward direction, my boots shuffling in the water as I walked dejectedly back home. Why did I care so much to find this girl when she had just hours prior entered my home in a drug-impaired state and attacked me? Perhaps a good dungeon raid in SSO would take my mind off of this weird little phase I was in, maybe Sigrid still had some good ecchi left in store from last month and would be willing to scan it for me. I chortled to myself at the thought of Sigrid’s high quality material, rubbing my hands together for both warmth and dramatic effect. Just then, I heard sobbing from an alleyway next to the convenience store which had probably closed down just in time for the storm. Investigating the sound, I happened upon its source, the same crimson-haired girl curled up with her knees held to her face, her clothes and body drenched with the spring drizzle. I hid behind the corner of the store to figure out if she was a threat anymore and watched as she cried dejected tears which convinced me that this girl was sincere in mind and action. I approached with a great amount of caution, my boots splashing in the puddles as I neared her. “Umm, excuse me Miss…” I looked like the classic tsundere except in male form as I held out my hand to her, my face turned away with an expression showing my disbelief for my kindhearted nature towards this girl. I squatted down to come face-to-face with the girl, her face was covered with rain droplets and tears and looked to be the most innocent person I had ever laid eyes upon. “Come on, you can come home with me. I promise I won’t hit you with the sword again.” She giggled slightly, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand and beginning to take hold of herself emotionally again. I stood up, reaching my hand down to her which she took hold of gently, pulling herself up to her feet. I handed her the umbrella, but she appeared to be too exhausted to move much further than the end of the alleyway. I threw up a little in my mouth as I thought of what I was about to do next, but today seemed to be the wrong day to embrace my antisocial otaku side. Sighing, I folded the umbrella away and strapped it to my belt, causing it to drag slightly on the ground while I walked toward the girl. Her eyes widened in surprise as I hoisted her up onto my back, looping my arms under her thighs for support and enticing her to wrap her arms around my neck to hold on. She pressed her face close to my shoulder and breathed out as if in relief as she made herself comfortable. I felt like the sappiest hero of any shoujo manga ever written with this soft skinned girl pressed against my back in the rain,, but I wasn’t exactly in a position to just dump the girl in the middle of the street when it was raining this hard. I seriously contemplated the thought as I stood there with the girl mounted on my back but decided against it to keep my conscience straight lest I lose precious sleep over it later. Running with all the juice I had left in my tank, I managed to make it all the way up my hill and into the mudroom of my apartment where I collapsed due to the severely unfit condition of my body, my chest heaving greatly when the girl slid off my back and onto the floor next to me; she was also tired even though she had not carried sixty kilos on her back up what seemed like the tallest hill in Tokyo in the middle of a typhoon. I patted her on the head softly and thought to myself, “What the hell am I going to do now?”

The suspiciously pretty girl sat at my tea table, a green wool blanket wrapped around her like a hood and a cup of tea steaming in front of her face. “So, why exactly did you find it necessary to break into my apartment?” Her face pouted as I asked her this and her cheeks blushed considerably. “I’m telling you, I don’t know how I got here!” I laughed to myself at the blatant lying of this girl who was enjoying a hot cup of tea at my table. In the spirit of Makoto, however, I felt the obligation to help any poor soul who found themselves lost and caught in disagreeable weather. “Well, if you’re going to stay here with me until this storm lets up, you may as well as least tell me your name.” Her shining blue eyes flashed at the mention of this and she stood up dramatically with the blanket still wrapped around her like a soft cloak. “I am Victoria Stellarossa of the House of the Crimson Star, member of the Royal Bloodline of the Empire, the last civilized stronghold of demonkind in Kveljastheim!” Her arm shot out in a horizontal motion from her blanket cloak like a dramatic anime heroine. I thought about how ridiculous this girl sounded when something hit me. What this girl was saying was not just any string of nonsense, it was a legitimate royal title but it was not one from this world; rather, it was from Siegstreit Online. “Wait, Kveljastheim? You’re a member of the royal bloodline of the Empire? No way, how is this possible? How can you be from Kveljastheim?” She looked at me inquisitively, sitting back down at the table to take another sip of tea. “Well, this must be some sort of demonic colony in the Old Continent or something, right?” I looked at her with an expression of disbelief at what she had just said; either this girl was suffering from a terribly severe cause of chunibyo or she was in fact the real deal. “Um, Victoria-san, I’m afraid this is Earth. As in this world is not Kveljastheim…” She stared at me with a broken smile at this point, the color draining completely from her face as she sat trembling with the mug of tea cupped in her hands. “Fufufu, surely you jest! This must be some sort of magical illusion! Why do you speak in one of the archaic languages? Luckily I learned this one from the college and from some travelers; sorry my speaking is a bit shaky.” Archaic languages? She seemed to be speaking Japanese plenty fine for (supposedly) coming from a land with a different language. Hell, she was very good at this charade if she was lying about her identity. I pulled my smartphone from out of my pocket to show her what Earth looked like and, before I could pull up the image or even unlock my phone, she shrieked. “Wh-what the hell is that? Are you some sort of sorcerer?” The expression on my face must have said it all: I had developed the single most unamused ‘are you stupid?’ faces that I had ever made before; I was honestly quite impressed with my own performance. “This is techonology, Victoria-san. It’s a smartph…” At that moment I realized the truth of the situation, it made no sense to explain modern technology to this girl, she was truly from another realm. Then and there, Victoria fainted from shock onto the cold hardwood floor of my room as the storm outside continued to rage on. I watched in amazement as her candy red hair lay spilt around her head on the floor, her serene face appearing to be liberated from the cruel reality of her current predicament. For a moment, all was peaceful and her lips curled into a cute smile which seemed to take my mind off of the consistent drumming of the rain on the roof outside. Supplicating her with additional blankets, I crawled into my bed all the while thinking about the events which had occurred that day. I don’t remember what time I feel asleep after a good bout of contemplation, but I do know that when I woke up with a need to use the restroom during the late hours of the night, someone had climbed into my bed and proceeded to nuzzle their face into me. I thought to myself about the hell I had immersed myself into and wondered if my life was ever to be the same again. The answer: it definitely wasn’t, but it was definitely going to be one hell of a ride