

## Akihiro's Night Out



The elf warrior leapt up and came down with his blade slicing a crescent across the orc's chest. The creature fell to its knees at first and, after a few more beats from its failing heart, died. Its shape faded into the ground, as if it had never existed at all. No corpse or blood marked its final resting place.

It had been the last of the foul creatures and Hana-bi, the elf warrior, turned to his companion Tajira to celebrate their latest victory. Tajira was a human but the difference in their race, and the prejudice from others, had never stopped them from being together.

"Damn, only 300 experience points for this lot," complained Hana-bi, as he sheathed his weapon.

"Don't worry, you'll level up tomorrow," replied Tajira, "we've done enough hunting for today."

"Are you going to bed already?"

"Yes, I have that algebra exam tomorrow, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. I'll stay a while and go kill some bats in the Sinister Cave. See you tomorrow then."

"See you tomorrow, my love."

Hana-bi waited in the forest clearing for her to disappear but she just stood there motionless.

"Are you still here or am I lagging?" he asked.

"Still here."

"Want to come with me to the cave?"

"No, I have to sleep for tomorrow, but there's something I want to ask you first."

"What?" he replied, his heart clenching and adrenaline rushing in the night's tensest moment. He could tell this was something more important than killing creatures and collecting treasure.

"We have..." she paused, "this thing we have here. But do you ever think we could be something outside this?"

"Something? Like boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"Why not? We like each other, right?"

"Right! Thanks, Hana-bi. I knew I could count on you. I wish we could be together

one of these days. Really together.”

“Hold hands and all that. I wish I had seen your face, Tajira.”

“I’ve sent you a picture. You got it in the mail?”

“Yes, but it’s different meeting somebody in person.”

“Yes, it’s different. Well, maybe one of these days I’ll surprise you.”

“Better go to sleep, my dear. Remember the exam.”

“I’ll think of you when I close my eyes,” and with that, she vanished like the orc had done before, although Hana-bi could still imagine her there.

He pondered what to do for a few seconds before calling up the menu and pressing Quit Game. Akihiro stood back from the monitor: no more being Hana-bi for tonight. He got up from his desk and went to the shelves on the opposite wall of his bedroom. His feet dodged, kicked, tripped over, dragged and squashed dirty laundry, empty or near-empty take-away boxes, soda cans, DVD and CD cases with games, music and movies both original and pirated, dust balls, burnt and useless or outdated and rejected computer parts as well as cables of all sorts that connected the machinery in the room: phone, computer, games console, television and monitor. He reached for a large white envelope he had crammed between a few books on the shelves.

The envelope was decorated on the outside with hand-drawn bunnies, hearts and other kawaii nonsense in various shades of pink and red. The return address was for one Yukio Machita, Tajira’s real name. There was a single letter inside with more of the same drawings, a clumsy love poem that Akihiro thought idiotic and a picture of a beautiful Japanese teenage girl on the bottom with her signature over it. He spent some time, almost every day, looking at that picture. He wished that was really Yukio, but deep down he knew that finding love on the internet was for romantic fools. He had read many stories of other players being scammed in online games. They were sweet-talked by another male player posing as a girl in real life, and gave away all their gold and magic items. Never did it cross Akihiro’s mind that such valuables were worthless outside the game, for he had been playing Hana-bi non-stop for three years in order to achieve his status. Yukio, or Tajira as he more often remembered her, had never asked him for anything, but Akihiro kept his guard up. Also, the picture in the letter looked too professional to belong to a teenage girl. All those doubts had kept Akihiro from going after Yukio in real life, but there was more.

Akihiro had been his whole life in his parents’ apartment in suburban Tokyo. He had never been an outgoing child or a teenager who made a lot of friends, but this was the most isolated he had ever been. Pressured from the beginning of his academic life to succeed by his overachieving family, he had botched his college entry exams. Such failure was unacceptable to both him and his parents, and he applied again the following year. He did the best possible preparation: private tutoring, full-time studying and no distractions from his goal. Yet, psychologically he was weak. His confidence, never exemplary, suffered from the previous year’s setback and he got even worse grades this second time. Faced with his family’s disappointment he had retreated from life and its difficulties.

Now, he never left the house, why should he? Contact with the world was only through the internet as he had not left any friends outside. He would be in his room all the time, leaving only to use the toilet or take the occasional shower. His mother would put a plate of food at his door and, after knocking, leave it there. He had not heard his own voice in months, and the last time he had said anything was to

shout back through the door that he was ok in there.

He knew he was not alone in this. Thousands of other young men had retreated in the same way. He had met some online in the game he played and their number was growing. So far he had never heard (or in Akihiro's case read) of anybody going from isolation to a more conventional life, and Akihiro was far from a trailblazer. The outside world was full of assured frustrations and challenges which he fancied too demanding for him.

Yukio was another one of those. She was an entry exam in her own way: a test to determine if he was ready for an adult relationship. Devoid of any self-confidence or courage, Akihiro had let things run their course. Like she had done tonight, Yukio had asked him what he thought of meeting in person many times. He avoided a definite answer out of fear. If he agreed it was a sure disaster as she surely would be disgusted by him. If he refused outright to meet her then he risked losing her to another more courageous man.

He restored the letter to its place and opened the door to get his food but the carpet was bare. He thought it weird although it hadn't been the first time. Maybe it was his mom's way of making him feel uncomfortable. Month after month for the past year she had become more neglectful. She would let the dirty laundry gather in bigger piles inside his room. She would cut the power from his room in the fuse box at random times. She would fail to clean his room until the stench of rotten food was unbearable in the rest of the house. It always failed to make him react. He would rather endure the siege in his castle than come out to either fight or run away.

He crossed the corridor and reached the kitchen. Everything was hushed and dark. As usual he made his presence as stealthy as possible; not turning any lights on his path and keeping to himself. A plastic cat face magnet held a note on the fridge: "Dear son, we are visiting your grandparents in Sapporo for the rest of the week. Sorry but I forgot to stock the fridge before leaving. There is money in the counter if you want to go out and grab something to eat. Love, Mom."

She had gone too far this time but his apathy stymied his anger. He would deny her the win though: he would not go outside like she wanted. Retiring to his room with the money, he ordered a pizza by e-mail to avoid any unnecessary conversation on the phone and went back to leveling up.

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It was true that big cities like Tokyo never truly slept, but at this late hour most of the apartment lights were off and the streets were devoid of traffic sounds. Akihiro's bedroom light was also off with only the shifting polychromatic glow of the screen shining off his glasses. For a soundtrack, Akihiro had the game's heroic music and gory sound effects as well as the computer's unrelenting asthmatic fan.

With each click of the mouse button another bat was dispatched. Only a few more and Hana-bi would be level 23: this had been Akihiro's goal for the past two months. The doorbell was almost lost in his blood-frenzy but he caught it.

Empty-bellied and moody because of it, he paused the game and rushed to the door. For the second time this night there was no food but a surprise. No pizza of

any kind, but instead a 12-year old girl called Yukio standing in his doorway.

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They sat in his room, she on the bed and he at the desk facing her instead of the monitor. The irony of it didn't escape him: at long last he had gotten a girl in his room with his parents out of town but she is too young. She sat motionless reminding him of a life-sized love doll. Hands folded on her lap, a breathing that is no more than a slight flaring of the nostrils and the schoolgirl uniform so popular amongst most lonely men.

Meanwhile the pizza had arrived, but Akihiro was the only one eating it. She studied him, trying to visualize Hana-bi and Akihiro as the same person.

It was obvious she wasn't going to say anything so Akihiro started. "I should have guessed you weren't the one in the picture." She looked down at her hands.

"Why did you trick me?" he asked with a voice that, out of practice, didn't carry any discernible emotion.

"I was afraid you wouldn't like me if you knew I was only 12," she replied, "so I lied. But I only did it because I like you."

"Is Yukio your real name?"

She nodded.

"Okay, Yukio. Why did you come here tonight?"

"I have that exam tomorrow, and, no matter how much I practice I can't solve any of the problems."

"So you came here? Why?"

"If I don't get a good grade I will fail 7th grade, and I'm not going to get a good grade. My parents are going to kill me when they find out I failed."

"What can I do for you? I can't take the exam in your place."

"I know, but..." she paused like Tajira did when she spoke in the game, "how about if I don't take the exam? Can't I stay here with you from now on?"

"What?"

"Live with you here."

"You're a kid. I can't take care of you."

"Akihiro, it wouldn't be like taking care of a kid. I'd be like your girlfriend, living together with you."

"Yukio, that's crazy. You have to go home. Your parents are going to be looking for you."

"They are asleep. They won't know that I'm gone."

"Ok, but they are going to notice tomorrow. We have to take you home."

"No, I can't go home!"

"You're going home."

"But Akihiro, I'll fail the exam."

"7th grade Algebra is easy. You'll pass the exam."

"Easy for you maybe. You're a college student."

Yukio hadn't been the only one lying online. Akihiro had always talked about himself as a college student with good grades who also had time to be part of the campus baseball team and grab the attention of all the popular and desirable girls. In person Akihiro was an overweight, bespectacled, long-haired mess, but Yukio's

youth and naiveté shielded her idealistic expectations.

Akihiro felt guilty for tricking her. She couldn't stay. Who knows what the authorities would think when they found her here. They'd call him a kidnapper or worse! He wished his mother hadn't left him alone for the week. She would solve this problem for him, as she had always done. "Dear, lovely mother, I have a problem", and she would come back from Sapporo and do what had to be done. Akihiro smiled and excused himself.

He held the phone with one hand and the notebook that had grandma's number with the other. While dialing the number he noticed on the phone's digital display that it was 3 in the morning. He hung up the phone before it could ring in Sapporo. This situation had woken a sense of pride that had almost been suppressed out of existence. He would solve this by himself and would not disturb anybody else. With each step back to his bedroom he shed a piece of the childhood that still clung on to him.

"Yukio, we have two problems," he was clearly enjoying this new role as the sensible adult, "one is that you need to pass the Algebra exam tomorrow. The other is that we have to get you home and I lied about having either money or a car."

There was no turning back to the old lies now. She had exposed herself by coming here and he wanted to do the same for her. Instead of apologizing he would pay her back with total honesty and the help she needed.

"For the Algebra exam I can be your private tutor," he said while pulling some sheets of paper from his printer and scavenging the floor for a pen "so tell me what you have problems with. I may have flunked my college entrance exams, but 7th grade should not be too hard."

He placed the keyboard and mouse over the monitor to make room on his desk for the lesson. She sat next to him for the next couple of hours and, when all the exercises were done, she felt confident about her chances in the exam. Akihiro had gotten something out of this as well: he felt useful.

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Akihiro had decided that they should walk back to her apartment. She had taken a taxi to his house, but now neither of them had any money for the ride back. It was a quiet and pleasant night and her flat was only about an hour's walk away but still Akihiro insisted on escorting her.

They had just left his neighborhood and were waiting at a traffic light when her hand reached for his. She looked up at him.

"You said you wanted to hold my hand."

Akihiro was too surprised to react.

"Don't worry. If people see us they'll think we're father and daughter."

She giggled and Akihiro couldn't help but do the same.

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With their problems solved, they had both relaxed. They walked and talked like Hana-bi and Tajira did in the game. Akihiro's lies and Yukio's age were both forgotten for the moment. Upon reaching her building they were surprised to find their hands still together.

"Here you are," he said, "now go take a shower, get dressed and make me proud of you in that exam."

"I will do so, my dear teacher".

He moved to kiss her forehead as he would do to a younger sister, but she kissed him on the lips instead. The silence lasted only a few brief seconds until Akihiro broke it.

"Goodbye Yukio."

"Akihiro, will we still see each other again after tonight?"

"Yes, of course" he replied almost instantly, but they both knew he was talking about their alter egos in the game.

"I mean in real life."

"Do you want to see me again?"

"Yes, I already said I like you."

"But I am not who I said I was."

"I like you more than any elf or arrogant college kid."

"Then we'll see each other again."

"I know I'm too young to be your girl, but I can be your friend. You've told me you haven't got many."

"I don't. It's a deal then. Good luck for the exam. Don't forget to tell me tonight how it went."

He left her there with a smile on her face. He didn't go to his apartment though. There was something he had wanted to do for a long time and today was perfect for it.

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The sunrise was still in its early stages. Yet the orange glow in the horizon was a novelty for Akihiro who waited for it. In the streets and buildings below this lookout, some people were getting out of bed, others having breakfast and a few were already on their way to work. For those people the day was filled with moments of stress, moments of rest, happiness, disappointment, fulfillment, arguments, displays of affection and all kinds of other events both good and bad. Not one of them knew what this particular day had in store, yet they were willing to face it. There was no shame in being afraid of what could happen, there was only shame in not allowing anything to happen.

He had taken his sneakers and socks off and ran his toes through the smooth, wet grass. It was different from the carpet in his room. It felt alive.