

### Chapter 3: *I'm okay.*

"I'm okay."

Kasumi Tomonari said those words to himself as he drove his scooter through the night.

Kasumi had just clocked out of his part time job, said goodbye to his boss, and made his way out of the arcade.

His apartment was two train stops away from his work.

It had been two years since he left his hometown of Kanegawa.

He was good enough at his current part time job that he had just been offered a full time position.

However, Kasumi politely declined.

He had a dream.

A dream of joining CC Corp and becoming a game creator.

Once upon a time, Kasumi played a character in The World called Sieg.

Back then, he was obsessed with surpassing the charismatic legendary player Balmung, known as a Descendant of Fianna. However, eight years ago, during 2010's Second Network Crisis, Kasumi fell unconscious while playing the game and became a Lost One.

*This isn't the role I wanted.*

When he woke up in the hospital, that was what he thought.

He wanted to become stronger. He wanted to be a hero. To others, he always wanted to be viewed as the protagonist. And, suddenly, seven years later, that wish was granted. Or at least, he considered it granted.

As a candidate to be an Epitaph User, he was invited to Project G.U. by CC Corp and given the character Kuhn.

Project G.U. was a group tasked with aiding system administrators to protect The World--not exactly a game creator position, but just the fact that he was part of the company that developed The World brought Kasumi great joy.

And, he could feel the potential that Kuhn would surpass Sieg and become a hero.

But... that's all. G.U. was disbanded last year.

Naturally, Kasumi was dismissed.

It was a shock, to say the least--Kuhn still hadn't become anything of a hero.

It had been a year since then. He had been struggling to make ends meet in Tokyo, still unsatisfied.

His dream had still been unfulfilled. And, beyond his dream, he still clung to the short-haired girl that lived in his memories: Mai Minase, a classmate from his high school days.

Kasumi had accidentally gotten her involved in the incident of 2010. It was because of her own investigations that he was able to recover from his coma.

*I want to meet her again--but with what excuse, what reason? I don't want her to see the uninteresting person I've become. I want to be good enough for her--I want her to be proud of me.*

She was everything to him. She was the reason he wanted to become a hero.

He felt like he was riding out a big wave, and he didn't know where it was heading. He certainly didn't feel good about it.

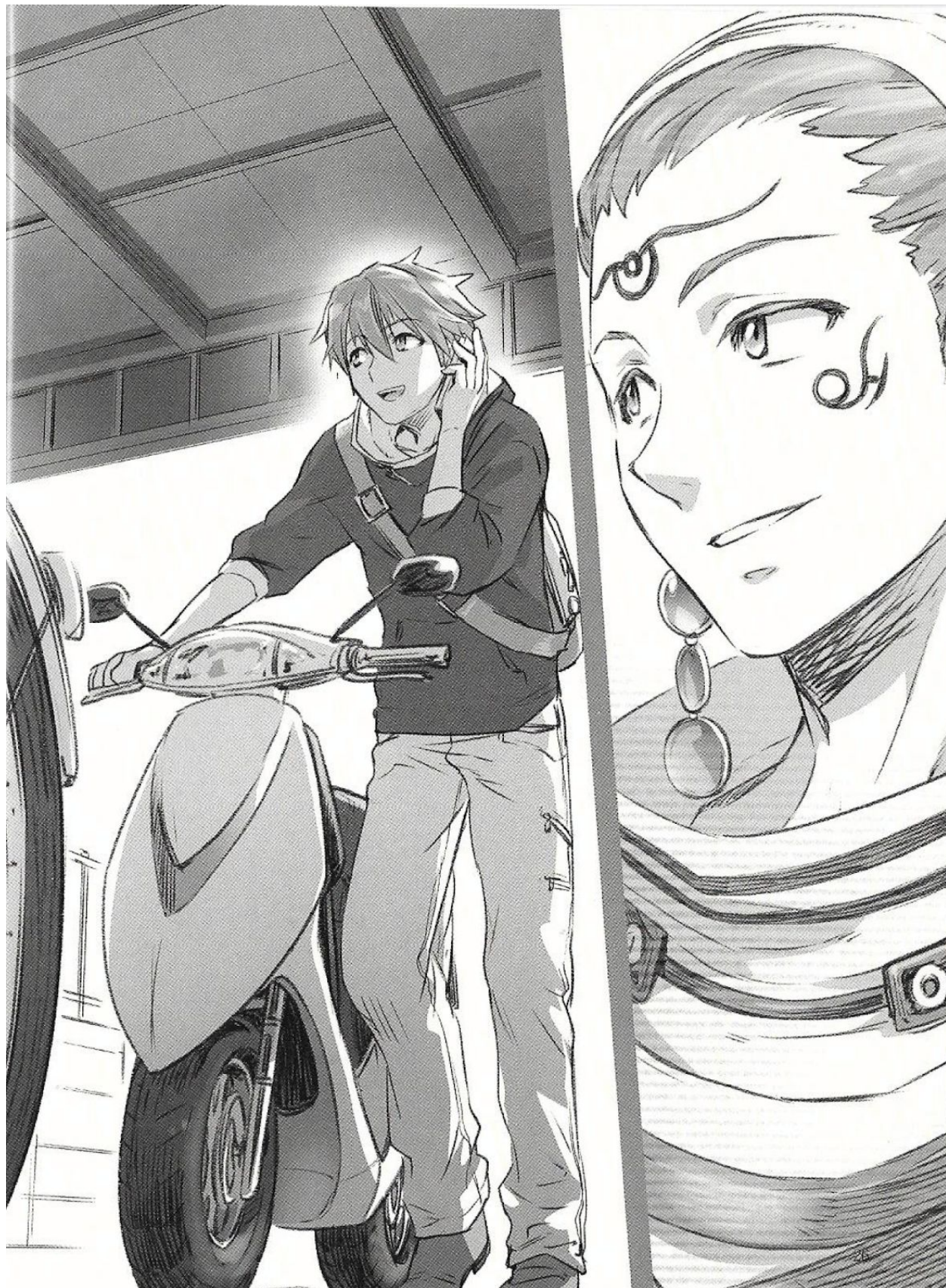
He had just been interviewed at CC Corp the other day.

He had passed all the tests and had his resume approved, and finally made it to the interview stage. He spoke passionately about his love for CC Corp and The World. He felt like he had been able to move the interviewer's heart. The fact that he had once been part of Project G.U. gave him confidence that it put him ahead of the other applicants.

He approached his apartment. As he parked his scooter in the lot, the cell phone in his pocket went off. A friend he never really cared for from his high school days had gotten a hold of his number and called. Looks like he was organizing a reunion and wanted Kasumi to help out. After discussing the particulars of the reunion next month, their conversation devolved into small talk.

"It's been what--seven, eight years since we graduated? Do you think people have changed?"

"The guys are basically the same," his friend said.



"But the girls are totally different. You'll be surprised--they're all adults. Plenty are married, some have kids."

"Seriously? That's crazy." Kasumi filled the air with remarks like this while he fumbled for his keys.

"Yeah. Let me think... Sugita, Furukawa, and Sato definitely got married recently... Oh, and Minase too."

Kasumi froze. What his friend just said didn't process. Or, it was more like his brain had rejected the statement entirely.

He could only respond with one word.

"...Huh?"