BTW

Baka-Trio Webzine

VIsual Novel Character Design

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Special Feature
BTW's EVN Character
Hall of Fame

Serial Fiction
- Super Network Wars
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Character She
- Name: Alyssa
- Age: 11
- Likes:
  1.
  2.
  3. A day

Designing the "Best" Characters

What should my character look like? What should be my character's gender? Age? Personality type? These are the typical questions that an EVN developer must answer in the process of character design. There are countless suggested approaches, each of them with their own advocates and precedents. Thus, it has been a topic of long-standing in the EVN world. A question with no true correct answer that surfaces and resurfaces from time-to-time as new faces and trends hit the English Visual Novel community: "What is the best method of character design?"

Obviously, there is none. We could just end it at that with no further discussion, but for this topic, we shall qualify our contention. There is no best method of character design because the effectiveness of the approach used depends on the individual, the type of story, the motivations of the author and a host of other factors. Succinctly, what works in one instance will not necessarily work in other circumstances. A highly technical person may advocate a scientific method of determining desirable character traits that have the best chance of working for a given story; a creative individual will just tell you to make them as you please; a cautious developer will get as much input as possible and build their characters with the safest, audience-friendly personality and physical attributes in mind. So which of them is correct?

Even in a community as young and small as the Lemmasoft Forums, there can be no general consensus on this subject matter. In relation to this, consider this excerpt from an article in Britannica:

"Oppenheimer was the man who built the atomic bomb; Einstein's theories explained how such a vast release of energy was possible. Both were acclaimed as geniuses of the highest order. Yet they were dissimilar in numerous respects. Einstein was solitary, kind, self-assured and even stubborn; Oppenheimer was gregarious, witty, sometimes sarcastic and cruel, and at some level deeply insecure."

Or these lines from Michael Tumelty in an article comparing Bach and Handel:

"Both were master craftsmen. Both were geniuses. Yet in numerous respects they were utterly unlike each other. They lived in completely different environments and worked in comprehensively different conditions and circumstances. "

If these geniuses in their fields did not work with the same principles, it comes as no surprise then that the distinct personalities operating in the EVN community will never truly come to an agreement as to which is the best method of character design. And why should they? It is clear that any chosen method can produce desirable results. It logically follows that all but the most absurd of character design methodologies will be able to give life to the end-product: the characters.

While we firmly propound that there is no best method of character design, we, the active staffers and editorial board of BTW, strongly urge current and prospective EVN developers to avoid one thing, "The Hammer Method," as we have coined it. This is the creation of soulless characters built from bits and pieces of anime/manga and visual novel archetypes who never grow out of their base personalities. This method is akin to hammering down and nailing together five pieces of wood to make a table; a structural and robotic approach that can quickly turn the character creation process into a tedious, unsavory chore. Before you make any mental accusations or rebuttals along the lines of "Just because they were built that way, it doesn't make them instantly soulless," let it be known that we are not saying that. What we are saying is that the Hammer Method encourages the creation of soulless characters because it is rigid and structural in nature. We are not condemning any current or future characters created through this method into a limbo of soulless existence.

In conclusion, we urge you to create your characters at your own pace and with the method that works best for you, but just keep in mind: avoid that hammer. It hurts the poor characters when you pound them with it.

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FEATURES

REGULARS

Special Feature: The BTW EVN Character Hall of Fame

BTW's special feature for this month is based on our theme, "EVN Character Design." We've compiled a list of our top picks from the current batch of completed EVN games based on which characters appealed to us the most. Featuring chibi character art by Hime, our choices range from characters from established community favorites and a few from lesser-known titles. Did your favorites make it to the list?
The results might come as surprise for some. *Page 8*

Original concept by Red "KiRa_YaMaTo" Mendoza
Written by Benedict "Moonlight Bomber" Villariaza

Episode 1.5: Chronicles of the Past Struggle that Lead to the Philippine Calm

(**Author's Note**: *Ever since I've introduced the Super Network Wars saga to our non-Filipino readers via the Baka-Trio Webzine, I was swarmed with complaints from them, all focusing on one thing: they couldn't comprehend what was going on. After all, I didn't start the saga; -KiRa-YaMaTo- did. And so to put things into place, I've been demanded to create an extra episode focusing on how the various characters introduced in the past two episodes set foot into the Philippines, Pearl of the Orient Seas. Plus, because I've said before that SNW is a sequel to To Heart: After Remembering the Memories, I'll also include a brief summary of it here. Hope this helps.*)

I am Maria Makiling.

The half-nymph, half-sylph womanly transcendent being fondly remembered in traditional Philippine lore.

For hundreds of years, many people have searched for me and my abode, situated within the confines of Mount Makiling in the province of Laguna, in hopes of finding the love I could not even return. Even the most-recognized hero of this nation, Jose Rizal, was one of them. I did not dare show myself to all of them... because of a failed promise of love brought about by political circumstances.

But as the years pass, the condition of the entire Filipino nation was becoming worse. Colonization continued, a terrible war was raged, restoration efforts failed despite their intended purposes, and political bickerings multiplied and worsened.

The negative energy brought about by negative events in Philippine history was transplanted into the hearts of Filipinos without them knowing it. Thus, as time passes and the motions of modernization are moving the world at a steady pace, the people could not use themselves as a collective engine for progress. Instead, they cling to the glory of a past long gone, still apply antiquated mindsets to modern times, resort to solutions which heavily rely on emotion and raw passion rather than reason and intellect, and refuse to break free from the zone of smallness. Therefore, the conditions were ripe to give birth to a nefarious being from the abyss of Philippine negativity: the Trapo Rune.

As a transcendent being myself, I was horrified by his power from the time of his birth. But because of his manipulative nature, he successfully hid his true colors by disguising as a human, a politician who served in the Commission on Higher Education: Melficio Victorialuna.

As a human, he abhors all ideas which are not Filipino in nature. He showed this trait when he interfered with the arrival of thirteen Japanese youths on Philippine soil because he insisted they were all terrorists. Then, two Filipinos, both teen celebrities, tried to stop him, but were killed in the process. The Japanese were then exiled to Basilan, an island province far south, in the region of Mindanao, awaiting execution.

The act was heavily condemned by many Filipinos, even though the country was ripped apart by an electoral scandal involving the President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Victorialuna, sensing the unity the Filipinos have shown in the condemnation of his act, decided upon himself that he shall rain political pestilence on the entire nation by casting an evil spell -- the spell of ultimate hatred -- to silence his many, many enemies -- and to establish a national junta wherein he is the only supreme ruler.

Fortunately, there were two brave souls -- a Filipino male and a Korean female who were brought together by the same TV reality show that catapulted them to stardom -- who want to restore the decrepit state of the Philippines by rescuing the Japanese hostages and banding with them to unify the Filipinos against Victorialuna.

The quest of the two was a painful, albeit fulfilling process; but in the end -- even in the bitter end, wherein the despot almost has his plans to rule the nation with an iron fist completed -- the seventeen valiants -- the thirteen Japanese, the Filipino-Korean couple, even the two killed celebrities who came back as spirits to guide their peers -- ruined the despot's grand scheme and eliminated him with the help of the Filipinos' prayers. The struggle they waged was called The EDSA War.

The seventeen led a new age -- an age wherein national progress is prominent and signs of political bickering and other negative Filipino traits tainted the Filipinos no more -- an age called the Philippine Calm.

The Trapo Rune obviously never manifested its power during the Calm because of its only defeat as Melficio Victorialuna.

As I watched those developments from my abode, I was pleased with the prowess the collective Filipino populace had shown in the face of a metaphysical evil.

And so was the seer from another world, another universe -- Leknaat the Blind Seer.

Knowing that the world she came from is enjoying an era of general peace because of non-interference of the True Runes that goverened the very nature of it, she came to Planet Earth, Continent of Asia, Republic of the Philippines -- on a covert mission.

She had set up her base in another Philippine sacred mountain -- Mount Apo, in the region of Mindanao, and handpicked me as her right-hand woman.

Her mission is to see that the rune outside her world -- the Trapo Rune -- would never manifest its power for all eternity, because she predicted that it would someday re-awaken.

The both of us will oversee the people's destiny in the age of the Philippine Calm that may end abruptly.

Because we both believe in the power of many, we

have handpicked one hundred and eight stars of destiny -- all from differing countries, differing worlds, differing universes, differing dimensions -- that will be led by two ordinary childhood friends.

At the moment we started, they are separated; but various circumstances, both physical and metaphysical, will unite them and the nation once more to finally put an end to the true menace.

May what we will do will serve as an example to the citizens of the Planet Earth that "unity in diversity to face destiny" will always endure forevermore.

Stars Introduced So Far

None

Super Network Wars Continues in BTW #5

Maria Makiling Image © Dragonbite (Taken from Wikimedia)

IMAGINARY REALM
- Alternate Memory -

Orem:
Huaaaaa~~
What is it? It's still so early......

Dornick:
Prince Orem.......

Orem is the Prince of Demons. One day, he was sent to earn some money in the Human World to rebuild their castle by Dornick. In the Human World, he was invited to be a cook by a mysterious girl, Rosey. Your task is to help Orem cook the best meal to please the customers.

Homepage: http://zeiva.net
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Nitarou and Mirage

They Are Alive
By lordcloudx

Designing characters is generally considered a crucial process in visual novel development. As used in this article, "character design" involves choosing the physical, mental and psychological attributes of the character as well as accessories and biography. Just think of the character creation process in a typical Dungeons & Dragons-style RPG. As can be observed in the short history of the English Visual Novel community, developers utilize varied techniques in designing their characters. The different methods of character design employed by the colorful individuals in the EVN community reflect their personalities as well as the genre and mood of the stories that their characters frequent. Those blessed with artistic talent typically sketch out and accessorize their characters, building their personalities and biographies from the appearance of the sketches. More pragmatic developers will do basic surveys on the appeal of a character archetype and proceed to build their characters from conventions coupled with input from the target audience. Idealistic writers, myself and a few contemporaries from this magazine's staff included, like to think of the characters as real individuals who are given life through the words in our stories.

Hime, for example, uses a "discovery" method. To quote:

"I feel like I'm discovering things and not choosing them, in a way. All I need to "discover" the characters like this is, well, time. It usually takes a while to shape the character to his/her final shape."

My personal approach to character design is rather unorthodox. While some may argue that this methodis unproven and ill-recommended for prospective visual novel developers, I can speak for myself when I say that it has worked well enough for me and that I find it enjoyable, spontaneous and satisfying. If that's not good enough for you, you might as well stop reading at this point as I go into the specific details.

When I design my characters, I never actually "build" them from particular elements nor do I scroll through a checklist of known personality types. I first write the story, or at least the concept or the basic skeleton outline of the story that I want to feature my characters in. Slightly similar to Hime, once I have an idea of how I want the story to play out, the characters that should be featured inside it just naturally present themselves.

At this point, the characters are just faceless clay models with innate tendencies towards certain personality traits. Thus, the next step is to flesh out their personalities through their deeds and experiences in the story. In order to create a character that conforms to my personal standards of feasibility and cathartic quality, I draw from personal experience. What this means is that the superhuman tyrant ninja assassin who exudes a cold, ruthless exterior around an inwardly bleeding heart is not a glorified tsundere character. Rather, his outward actions and reactions are based on how I believe a decidedly cold individual acts based on personal experience, and his innate reflections are based on my own feelings when I imagine myself in the shoes of that character. The same is true for the naive princess in a schoolgirl outfit and the investigative journalist with selective amnesia. All my characters are a fusion of inner role-playing and personal experience.

Now the character has a soul to go with the mold. The next step is the most enjoyable part; giving the character a face, a name and accessories. I usually use a rough sketch with some notes on certain details that I don't want to forget. For this example, I'll use Phaedra from my game, "The Princess of Fire."

Now the character is complete. The final part is all too familiar for me. I just grab my pen and think of her. She is a sentient being with a physical appearance and a soul. She is alive, her hair is flaming red, her arms are covered with countless burn marks. She is just 16, but her fate will be cruel and bittersweet. Today, she is here to tell me her story. I just need to close my eyes and listen to her voice. The rest is just transcription.

The Divided Girl

By mikey

Emi is in a dilemma. Should she run to catch the train or help an old lady up the stairs and miss her connection, ultimately coming late to her date? An angel and a devil appear on either one of her shoulders. "Forget the old lady," says the devil, "she can manage by herself. What you really want is the boy." "But you should really be nice," counters the angel, "it can't feel right to just let the lady be..."

Being presented with these options, our heroine thinks and, ultimately, decides. It does not really matter what she has chosen. What matters is how the choices were presented. The devil and the angel both represent a singled-out aspect of her personality. The devil is the one watching her own interests, the angel, her social feeling and sense of responsibility. They do not really exist separately, but they help visualize the problem our heroine has right now and even make it... entertaining.

Of course, being a normal girl and not a made-up character in a dating sim or anime, her personality is significantly more complex than just being made of her ego and social awareness. She is sometimes aggressive, then melancholic, often optimistic. Depending on the situation, she can be direct, shy in front of a crowd, unhappy about her current family relationships... and these all change, evolve and become more or less intense with time, age and circumstances. In fact, everyone is like this - capable of a full range of emotions and experiences, while having a basic personality that is not too much in conflict with the society they live in.

And it's often (and maybe even almost always) the case, that in a dating sim or anime - in essence, everywhere where the aim is to entertain or cater to people's tastes (by wanting to reach the broadest possible audience) - where they tell you, that some Misaki is the shy one, that some Akari is the lively one and some Yuka is the mature one, I very often see Emi in them - a "divided" Emi.

I see Misaki and she is Emi's shy side, I see Akari as the happy side of Emi, and Yuka feels like when Emi is in a thinking mood. The people selling me the game want to tell me that I am seeing it wrong, that all of the girls are "full characters", and that they have their deeper personalities. Specifically that they are not just some archetypes - the shy girl also has a lively side, it is revealed, after all. But it just doesn't seem like that at all, because compared to the real Emi, even the most deeply explored ones are flat and shallow.

It's nothing that one could criticize or even compare - it often takes a lifetime to truly understand a single person's personality, which on top of everything is dynamic, evolving. Even a 100-hour game would simply have no space to do it, and if it claims to depict "realistic" characters, what it really does is present characters in such a way that encourages the reader to treat them as real people, assuming depth as he knows it from real people.

But then, it's not even the job of these games to be realistic - these games need to primarily be entertaining, and so, coming back to the initial example with the angel and the devil, they simplify and break down the complexity of a real person. A dating sim like that will take a personality of one normal person like Emi, separate parts of it and magnify them, practically forming a character from each one. To add depth, single out other aspects of Emi's personality and attach them (this time with less dominance) to the existing major "personality traits".

But this is not being sarcastic, the truth is the average person does not show his traits nearly as significantly as characters in entertainment shows or products, especially in everyday situations. In fact, most people are really similar - just like our Emi, they can be loving, annoying, mean, optimistic and thousands of different things, yet, for most of the time, they behave neutrally.

Similarly, when we are angry at them, or criticize, for most of the time, we simplify and single out a part of their personalities as well. Your boss is obviously unfair and mean. The lady who complained on the bus is just bitter. And your adored singer is perfect. Much like Akari from the dating sim, who you know would make the ideal wife for you, because she never complains about your low income.

You subconsciously know however, that the real Emi in fact would be complaining at times, especially if your financial situation wouldn't be good. But you love her, plus there are a million other factors and history which make up the experience of every moment you are with her - such a relationship is of course always complex.

So a need to simplify is natural - your energy is limited, and to deal with this, you typically are only truly considering all complexities of people and circumstances when they concern your family and friends. Within the complexities of everyday life, simplification is soothing, it's relaxing. This is why it works so well in entertainment. If you simplify and split up, you are able to enjoy what you like about Emi, separated from other aspects of

her personality - when you watch Emi sleep, for instance, there is a certain magic about the moment, a simplicity in a good sense - so much of her personality is now hidden, blocked, that you inevitably end up appreciating the momentary prominence of just the one thing that is left - all you see now is Emi, the love of your life.

And this makes really good sense for me, since somehow, I could never really make friends with the term "character design". The thing was, it's only ever been presented to me as something that one "creates". A writer creates a personality, for example. From scratch. He makes up people, he designs characters. It all somehow feels like a really wrong way to describe what is actually happening. It's only when I think of this process as "splitting up, simplifying and exaggerating from reality", that it all feels more logical and natural, more fitting a description of what is being done.

And so, next time you play or see a dating sim like this, rather than looking at all its characters individually, try to look at them combined - and I'm sure more often than not there will be no duplicate traits - no two timid girls, no two alcoholics and no two childhood friends. It's really just one normal girl - but she has been divided, her emotions split and exaggerated, her experiences and roles separated and evenly distributed on the whole cast. A clear sign of "character design" at work.

> **In fact, most people are really similar – just like our Emi, they can be loving, annoying, mean, optimistic and thousands of different things, yet, for most of the time, they behave neutrally.**

THE BTW EVN CHARACTER HALL OF FAME
chibi sprites by Hime

This month, BTW brings you our picks for the top EVN characters of all time. This list is composed of our choices for the most memorable EVN characters from the games that the staff and editorial board have played. Needless to say, some games might have been left out since not all of us play every EVN ever released. That said, it's time to introduce the recipients of BTW's EVN hall of fame award for best characters.

Honorable Mentions
While these characters couldn't quite outrank BTW's top pick, we feel that they deserve recognition for being unique, well-developed or otherwise memorable personalities in their own right.

Cindy
Game: The Sight of Autumn
Cindy is portrayed as a frail, blind and seemingly helpless girl in The Sight of Autumn. Certainly not the type of person that you'd fancy as a guidance counselor. Nevertheless, she has a demure, silent strength that manifests itself in her interactions with the protagonist-narrator. Having a similar ailment to the main character creates a peculiar bond between them that is subtly made apparent in the story.

Mary
Game: Moonlight Walks
Who can forget the heroine of the first-ever Ren'Py game made by PyTom himself? Still, Mary certainly didn't get her spot here just because she's the first ever Ren'Py EVN heroine. Despite its length, Moonlight Walks really portrays a captivating character in her even before the upgraded art by Mugenjohncel, scourge of loli moe girls, replaced the original Mary design in version 2. A girl who appears once every full moon seeking love might seem cliché for some, but Moonlight Walks is nicely delivered and doesn't disappoint from beginning to end.

Lucy
Games: Early Ren'py Demo, Lucy's Revenge
While the original Lucy was merely a filler character for one of the features of the early Ren'Py demo, her character was brought to life by the twisted imaginings of none other than Mugenjohncel (once again). The fan-game Lucy's Revenge shows us that a demure character can be made into a vengeance-seeking, berserk one with lots of twisted imagination. It's just plain funny to see her pissed off all the time, and it actually works for a parody character.

Tohko
Game: Elven Relations
While her being a pseudo-tsundere easily wins her a place in the hearts of many, one can view Tohko as a capable girl that you could easily relate with. She has always walked down her own path without regret, to say the least.

Azasuke
Game: Gakuen Redux
Azasuke is arguably one of the most well-developed characters in the EVN scene. As the faceless narrator of Gakuen Redux, he takes the reader along on the coming-of-age journey of a 28 year-old man who, by some twist of fate, somehow finds himself reliving his days as a High School student. Azasuke's interactions with his classmates, his pivotal decisions throughout the story and his realizations and reflections on his new life makes his character truly unforgettable and all without him being ever shown on-screen.

**Melissa**
Game: Songs of Araiah
One of the more prominent characters in the EVN scene. Melissa's popularity is not unearned. Her character art is professional-level, and her story does not fall short. Melissa earns her spot here not because of her obviously tsundere ways, but because we found her solid reasons to resist a dictatorship appealing and the fact that she could not resist alone. Melissa's inner frailties despite her seemingly strong exterior makes her a truly appealing person.

Fuu, Anna & Mimi
Game: Project Nattsu
These girls exhibit a friendship that is deep enough to be considered sibling love. It's uncommon to find girls that are not fighting over the same love interest. These three characters share a spot here because it's hard to take them separately since they are more of an entity, completely inseparable.

Rosetta and Marliene
Game: Winter Shard
Both of the main girls in Winter Shard share not only tragic stories, but also inner strength and resolution that can only be admired. As characters, they are depicted in such a beautiful and humane way, it is no wonder that they can even melt the heart of the Frozen Lich.
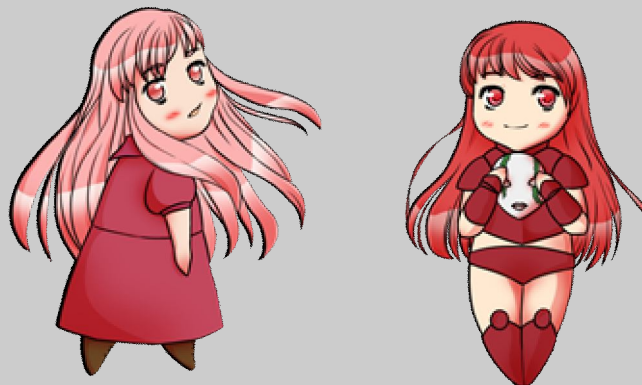
...and the BTW award for best EVN character goes to...

Frederone
Game: Winter Shard

It's none other than Frederone, the main protagonist of Winter Shard. You can either love him or hate him, but you can't deny his overwhelming presence. The story/ stories of Winter Shard really fleshes out his character extremely well throughout the different paths available in the game. He's got it all, and he's been through it all: a dark past, betrayal, death, life beyond the grave. The best part is that his character is portrayed with so many emotional vulnerabilities despite his super-human undead powers that you can't help but feel for him no matter which path you took. Of course, Frederone's character really shines when you discover all the different "shards" of his personality scattered throughout the different paths you can take by playing and replaying the game. Frederone can act noble, heartless, evil, indecisive, gentle or tragically good depending on the choices you make. Despite these "what-ifs," Frederone's personality is so distinct that you can still say "This is Frederone" no matter what you choose to make him do.
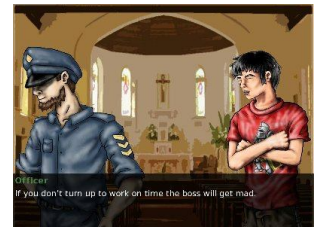
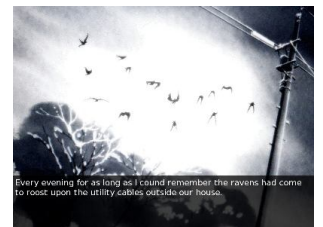EVN List is not comprehensive. Check http://www.renpy.org/wiki/renpy/Ren%27Py_Games for more.

Look at the clock...

Drift off into sleep...

When you awaken...

You will not have seven days to live...

But ...

One Week of
Eternity

For the first time since I'd left the hospital, I felt excited. I couldn't sleep just thinking of all the fun we'd have tomorrow.

I sighed unhappily as I stared out of the window from my room. A cloudy day – it was kinda sad, really. I was hoping that it wouldn't rain later on. If it did, I wouldn't be able to take Rin-Rin out to meet Kyrie and the others. I know very well that I'd collapse and just cause trouble for my friends if I somehow got wet in the rain. I was feverish again today, but I suppose it was normal.

The weather was cool and kinda dark. There was something familiar and strangely comforting about it… I'm not really sure why I felt that way, I just know that I did.

In a darkened, secluded corner of the room, I watched the little ball of pink fur all curled up inside a straw basket that I'd commandeered from the kitchen yesterday. Rin-Rin slept contentedly on top of the soft pieces of torn linen I'd fashioned as a bed for her in the basket, totally oblivious to the world around her.

RING! RING!

My phone's ringing startled Rin-Rin. She crept out of the basket and began to stretch her legs lazily. I took a quick glance at her injured leg. Good, the bandage was still on I'd had mom help me do it properly as soon as I got home yesterday.

"Yes, hello? This is Alyssa speaking."

"Oh! You're awake. Hope I didn't disturb you. Anyway, everyone's meeting up at Freddy's in about an hour. Can you come?"

"Yeah sure, Bryan. Thanks for calling …oh, and I'm bringing along a friend."

"Friend? Someone you met in the hospital?" Bryan asked, perplexed.

"Haha! You might say that."

"Umm…. okay. So I'll see you in an hour. Everyone was worried about you, you know."

I hung up quickly. I wish he hadn't said that. I wanted as little reminders as possible of my condition. I suppose I couldn't blame Bryan. He had no idea how sick I really was.

Rin-Rin had climbed up onto my bed. I petted her gently, and she responded with some contented purring. It felt really good to have a pet. It made me feel wanted and needed. I checked my desk clock. It was 8:30 AM. I gave the cat a ball of yarn to play around with and went downstairs to find mom preparing breakfast in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Alyssa. Breakfast will be ready in a moment," she said with her usual smile.

"Good morning, mom. Where's dad?"

The question was a routine one. It seemed so natural at that time, but mom's reaction somehow told me that I probably shouldn't have asked. I saw her smile waver for a moment. It was just a split-second, but I'd known her for too long for me to be mistaken.

"Oh, he had breakfast early. Business matters," she said cheerfully; even adding a little wink for effect.

I wanted to tell her that she didn't have to put on that act, but it felt even more wrong to reject her kindness. Still, it kinda bothered me. Just what has dad been doing since yesterday anyway?

"Okay," I said nonchalantly.

I tried to focus my thoughts on the day ahead as I ate. I couldn't let anything ruin this day for me. Every moment is precious.

"Oh, by the way, mom. I'll be going out after breakfast."

"Certainly, dear. Just don't push yourself too hard."

I didn't tell her, but I was planning to buy tickets for the entire family to the local amusement park. I'd invite her and dad in the evening. They couldn't possibly refuse me. They allowed pets inside, so bringing Rin-Rin along wouldn't be a problem. I yawned lazily. I hadn't gotten much sleep in my excitement. I'd been planning how I was going to spend the entire day in my head since yesterday. I even dug up my savings from my secret jewelry box in preparation.

After breakfast, I asked mom to feed Rin-Rin while I got dressed. I stole another quick glance at my window while I was dressing. It was still a bit dark, but luckily, it didn't look like it was going to rain anytime soon. Perfect.

With Rin-Rin in my arms, we said our goodbyes to mom, and we were off to Freddy's to meet my friends.

Meyooooowr!

"Hahahaha! So this is the 'friend' you were bringing along."

"Man, you had our hopes up for nothing, Alyssa," complained Peter.

"Indeed," said a disinterested Derek.

Apparently, Bryan had told them about me bringing a friend along. I guess they didn't expect it to be a little fluffball.

"So, Alyssa. How are you feeling? Are you sure you shouldn't be resting up right now?"

I waved off Kyrie's concern with a sheepish smile.

"I'm just fine, Kyrie. It's not like I have a terminal illness or anything."

I'm a liar.

"Alyssa…"

"Yes, Kyrie?"

"I never said anything about a terminal illness…"

I slipped up.

"Oooh! Aha..aha…ahahaha! Yeah," I pretended to knock my head with my fist, "sorry about that, Kyrie. I'm a bit out of it, today."

"Excuse me, miss," an adult-sounding voice came from behind me.

I turned my head to find some obnoxious looking guy in a suit looking down at me. His necklace ID read, 'Branch Manager.'

"I'm sorry, but pets aren't allowed in here. I'm going to have to ask you and your friends to leave discreetly through the back exit once you're done with your orders."

"Uh…I…um…uh…"

I couldn't speak. I was paralyzed with fear. It's something that I hadn't really overcome. I was afraid of being confronted by people in authority. On top of that, I was sweating buckets and probably turning red with embarrassment.

"We understand your position, sir. We're sorry for any trouble we caused but we really didn't mean any harm. We'll leave as soon as possible."

Bryan was quick to take charge of the situation and speak for the group.

The disgruntled manager grumbled something unintelligible and walked off.

"Alyssa, are you okay? You're all red," asked Derek.

At that moment, I didn't really feel very well. It's bad enough when I'm confronted with that situation normally; having to deal with it in my condition just made me feel extremely nauseated. I shook off the sensation. I was determined not to let anything ruin this day. Besides, if I made a scene there, then Bryan's quick-response to save face for us would have been for naught.

"I'm just fine, Derek. Geez, stop treating me like I was your kid sister," I said with a scowl.

The act worked. Nobody seemed any wiser. (Sorry, everyone. I have to deceive you just this one time.) I wasn't feeling any better, but I could still go on as long as we didn't do anything too physical for the rest of the day.

Having finished our orders, we left quietly through the back exit as the manager instructed. We took Rin-Rin to the park after buying a few toys for her at the pet shop. I had enough money to buy them all myself, but Bryan insisted that we all chip in.

The sky was still a bit cloudy when we reached the park. The wind was cold and came in tiny gusts. They felt like icicles on my back.

"Here, Rin-Rin. C'mon! Chase it!"

Peter was having fun making Rin-Rin chase after the cat charmer we'd bought. Unfortunately, he was taking advantage of the fact that one of her legs was injured and making her run around in circles after the fabric tail.

"Stop that!"

Bryan stole the cat charmer from him.

"What? You're such a busybody, Bryan. I was just having some fun with Alyssa's cat."

"Idiot. You'll tire her out if you do it like that. It's

not healthy for a kitten to get stressed out."

"Oh, I didn't kno... hey! Wait a minute! What makes you such an authority on cats anyway, Bryan?"

Peter should have known better than that.

"I read about it in the library, fool. Oh, don't bother looking it up. It's an advanced biology book. I doubt you'd understand half of what's written in anyway," Bryan replied with a self-satisfied smirk.

"You take that back, Bryan!"

"Or what?"

"Hahaha!"

I couldn't help laughing. These two were so predictable that I saw that conversation coming from a mile away.

"See, Bryan? Alyssa thinks you're making a fool of yourself."

"What? Alyssa?"

Bryan turned to me. I just gave him a wide grin in reply. He looked down at his feet like a boy who had just been scolded for doing something wrong. It was refreshing to see him show some vulnerability. Bryan always does everything so well that it's good to see that he gets confused sometimes, too.

Meyoooowr!

"Here, Rin-Rin. Let those bad boys fight by themselves. I'll play with you."

Kyrie was using a Mylar Ball to try and get Rin-Rin's attention, but she seemed to be more interested in Bryan and Peter's impromptu comedy act.

Well, at least Rin-Rin looked happy. I was too weak to join them. So I took shelter underneath a huge tree where I could watch my friends play. Kyrie looked as if she was going to say something again, so I shook my head and gave her my best cheerful smile. She nodded and didn't say a word.

I sifted through my mental checklist of stuff to do for the day. After lunch, I'd buy the amusement park tickets for tonight and head home for a short nap before I invite my parents. Dad should be home by then, and I really needed a good rest.

"Ah!"

Somebody tapped my shoulder from behind. It made my heart jump right out in front of me. Normally, I would have screamed loud enough for people two blocks away to hear me, but all that escaped my lips at that time was a faint, inaudible yelp of surprise. Kyrie and the others didn't even notice it.

I turned around to see who it was, but as soon as I did, an overwhelming feeling of drowsiness en-

gulfed my whole body. My eyes began to blur, and my eyelids felt heavier and heavier no matter how hard I tried to keep awake.

"Alyssa... it's time."

The last thing I remember seeing was the figure of the kind lady whom I met at the hospital... her hands, her voice, her kindness - yes, it had to be her. I couldn't remember what happened after that. I didn't know why, but her presence felt very reassuring for me. It wasn't like the kind of security I felt in mom's arms. It was different... special. As if she was trying to tell me that everything would be all right without saying a single word.

I woke up inside my room a few hours later. A glance at my desk clock told me that it was too late for the amusement park. Besides, I hadn't bought the tickets and I'd probably passed out. I doubt that my parents would allow me to do anything more strenuous today.

Purrr...

"Huh?"

I pulled up my blanket to find that Rin-Rin had snuggled up to me. I caressed her gently. Well, I suppose this was fine.

"Alyssa!"

Dad suddenly burst into my room giving me a major headache. Rin-Rin jumped and hid behind my pillow.
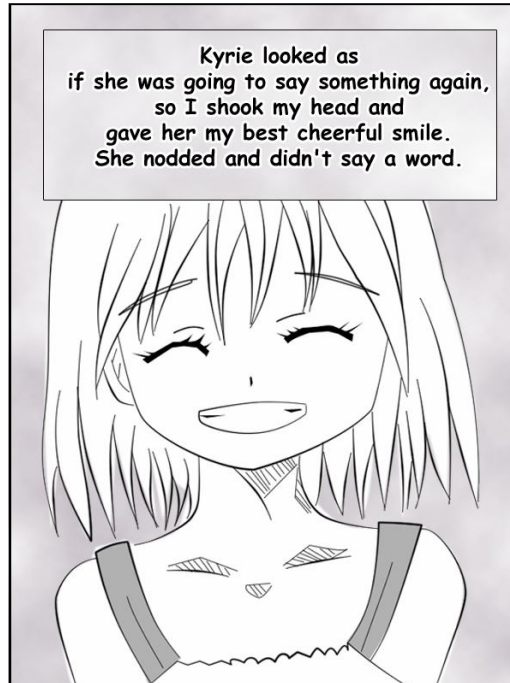
"Dad! Don't just go into a girl's room without permission... even if I am your daughter."

"Sorry, dear. Listen, you have to get dressed right away."

"Why? What's the rush?" I scratched my eyes and replied sleepily.

"We're going to Germany... you're going to get better."

Watch out for the penultimate chapter of Alyssa's story in BTW #5

Kyrie looked as if she was going to say something again, so I shook my head and gave her my best cheerful smile. She nodded and didn't say a word.

EXILE GEAR
RAYNAR

START
LOAD
OPTIONS

QUIT

Kuni
"Hmm? There's something else here. An email from someone?"

Crewman
"We just added a second seat beside the first one in Raynar's normal cockpit."

A young woman named Kuni's dream of becoming a robot pilot comes true when she's invited to the base home to the world's most pow- erful robot, Raynar. This is a throwback to Super Robot anime from the '70s, the pro- tagonists are good and brightly co- loured, the antag- onists are evil and dark, and the heros yell out all the names of their robot's attack.

KIKIRIN WANTS YOU
TO SEND US FEEDBACK

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Kikirin Character Art by Yvanc